

## BUCKING THE SUN

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That first season the dredging operation, now the wellspring of progress on the dam, sat for its photo virtually every day. Thus someone managed to click a shutter at the exact moment during the launch of the dredge *Missouri* when its long wall of hull displaced the riverwater in a rolling shove of wave, and the five Fort Peck workers named Duff were posed aboard with their arms around each other like a file of sailors. Aligned on the deck behind the hedgerow of water, left to right: Neil and Bruce in paired grins, dubious Hugh, Darius bemused, Owen with an anchoring grip on the structurework, riding the fourth and final dredge down the ways to its namesake river.

*No, though. Who would want to go it alone in life if they had any choice? The four of us who made ourselves Duffs by marrying Duffs—and now there's this extra one from Scotland into the bargain—we're as bad as they are for pairing off, choosing up sides, getting each other's nose out of joint, patching it up until the next time. This family seems to live on next times. That's something else that needs written.*

The sheriff stood in wait, his Marlin .12-gauge shotgun resting in the umbrella stand he had dragged over next to him.

*Shouldn't be long now*, he figured, and took another peek out front.

Keeson's gray head moved nervously, there behind the store counter. The sheriff could see where the wire earpieces of Keeson's glasses hooked down between cartilage of the ears and pompadoured gray hair. He never had understood why jewelers didn't go entirely blind, squinting at all the little stuff they did.

"Hand tight, Floyd," he said softly. "This is what it takes, with these types."

"Remember, God darn it, Carl, I get to clear out of here."

"I've allowed for that, don't worry."

The owl-like shiftings of Floyd Keeson's head did not seem to signify any less worry. The sheriff pursed his lips and settled himself again against the backroom wall of the Glasgow jewelry store. Once in a great while the telephone was a wonderful thing, Carl Kinnick reflected. It had been nothing much to pay attention to, routine adjacent-counties report, when the store in Havre got knocked off during the noonhour; fool kid of a clerk, for leaving the dressed-up guy who flashed a wad of cash and asked to see the high-priced stuff perfectly at leisure to scoop out the display case while the clerk was in back fiddling with the safe. But then an hour and a half later, just the time it took to drive from Havre to Malta, the next sizable town east on Highway 2, the jeweler

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1 there got knocked off and knocked out as well, coldcocked when he bent  
2 down to reach something out of the display case for Mr. Jewel Bandit.  
3 Next it was only an hour from Malta to Glasgow, and when the guy  
4 started to pull his stunt again in Keeson's Jewelry he was going to be in  
5 for a major surprise. Zipping along the High Line like he was picking  
6 berries, huh; we'll just see, the sheriff told himself. He glanced down at  
7 the Marlin shotgun waiting handy. Put Marlene to working on him, and  
8 the prospect of her load of lead would get his attention in a hurry.

9 "Carl, here—" he heard Keeson let out between clenched teeth.

10 "Shut up, Floyd," he whispered back, then heard the store door  
11 whisk open.

12 The sheriff listened hard. Really not much of a spiel the guy had.  
13 *Special girl . . . necklace'd be nice . . . something with quite a stone . . .* It  
14 evidently didn't take a hell of a lot to be a jewel bandit.

15 "—appropriate item for you in the back room," Keeson was saying,  
16 and in the next instant swept through the doorway curtain and past Carl  
17 Kinnick with never a glance and kept on going, out the wide-open back  
18 door as the sheriff had instructed him to.

19 The guy already had the display case jimmied open and was arm  
20 deep among the wedding rings when the sheriff stepped out with the  
21 shotgun leveled.

22 Neither of them said word one as the sheriff moved around to the  
23 same side of the counter as the jewel heister.

24 The guy, though. The sheriff stared at him with growing disbelief.  
25 The guy was like a super dressed-up mannequin of the sheriff himself.  
26 Not the clothes, that wasn't it. The body structure, the bantamweight  
27 frame, the same doll-delicate bones. The guy was damn near a complete  
28 physical replica of him, Kinnick saw; small man's swift raccoon hands,  
29 and their diminutive handtooled footwear would have fit one another.  
30 there in the jewelry store, two little locketts of men.

31 Then the jewel bandit grinned about how they matched.

32 The sheriff lowered the shotgun halfway. Utterly furious, he said in  
33 case Floyd Keeson or anyone else was within hearing: "That's a move you  
34 don't want to make," and simultaneously fired both barrels into the of-  
35 fender's legs.

36  
37 Bruce was speculating out loud that Charlene would be the mayor of  
38 Wheeler, next. Charlene was assuring him his hours were numbered if  
that ever happened.

The A-1 Beauty Shop stood two doors down from the Blue Eagle



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Tavern. The shop name offered itself discreetly on the front window. What could be read the length of Wheeler's main street, and then some, was the resounding black block lettering across the top of the storefront:

PERMANENTS  
\$3.<sup>50</sup> \$5.<sup>00</sup> \$6.<sup>50</sup>

The Duffs stayed grouped outside the new shop, admiring the screaming sign and Charlene's sales philosophy behind it: that the wholly outlandish top price of \$6.50 made the \$3.50 hairdo sound like a bargain, and that when a woman felt like splurging, there in the middle beckoned the \$5.00 job that sounded like a relatively good deal.

"Ownie, I'm going to borrow her to do the arithmetic on the truck payments," Neil acclaimed.

One thing puzzled Darius. "'Permanent,' though—why's this spasmodic hairfixing called that?"

"If you think I'm going to advertise that I'm selling 'spasms,' Darius, you have another think coming," Charlene handled that and the expression of mischief plastered on Rosellen at the same time. *Grin all you want, but this isn't Toston warmed over.* The eye contact sobered her kid sister at least temporarily, and Charlene announced with a proprietary clap of her hands that the refreshments were waiting inside.

Owen handed around the bottles of beer while Charlene showed off the A-1's fittings, from shampoo sink to cash register. Meg applied herself to Hugh's drinking arm, Neil and Bruce clicked bottles and chorused *Here's looking at you*, Darius kept to himself his opinion that American beer tasted as if it came straight from the horse.

Without letting on that she would keep watch on something of this sort, Meg watched them come and go in the vicinity of Kate. The Duff men all, even Hugh by now, were taken with Kate, like stags acquiring a taste for a lick of salt.

Bruce meanwhile had not been able to resist adding to Charlene's agenda: "You get any rich widows in here, be sure and chalk them on the back for Darius."

Darius managed as loud a laugh at that as any of the rest of them and kept to his nominated role as bachelor curio, saying he'd found it the safest policy to tip his cap only to himself. Interesting it'd have been, though, wouldn't it, to tell them about Fiona and his years of connubial

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1 imitation with her. After all, wasn't matrimony but a sort of friendship  
2 recognized by the police? But his and Fiona's arrangement did have an  
3 eventual drawback, too; in the end, Fiona had pranced off with a Span-  
4 ish anarchist.

5 No, news of Fiona would not help his situation with Meg any,  
6 would it.

7  
8 "Owen," Meg stage-whispered during Charlene's demonstration of the  
9 croquignole permanent wave machine, whose dozen metal headrods and  
10 snake nest of electrical cords were holding the Duff men in appalled fas-  
11 cination. He stepped back out of the group and joined her at the front  
12 of the store.

13 "Owen," she said with intensity, "what times are available yet with  
14 Charlene?"

15 "Mother, I imagine they all are. Let's have a see." He turned the pages  
16 of Charlene's daybook for appointments. "Blank as Orphan Annie, so  
17 far. If you want, when Charlene finishes up horrifying us males, you can  
18 get together with her for sometime—"

19 "A regular time, is what I want. Right after work, every other Friday.  
20 Put me down for then, pretty please, Owen."

21 He picked up the appointment pencil as directed. "Paydays, yeah,  
22 those are always popular," he left the matter at, but glanced from his  
23 mother to his father. At the edge of the clan over by the croquignole ma-  
24 chine, Hugh stood like a man with something on his mind, or, worse,  
25 like a man trying not to have that something on his mind.

26  
27 Kate and Rosellen conferred while setting out the covered dishes of  
28 potluck supper.

29 "At least it's a better name for the place than our mother's was,"  
30 Rosellen said reflectively. "TOSTON CURLY CUES." She shook her head.

31 Kate sampled a meatball in tomato sauce and licked her fingers.  
32 "Talk about a family gathering. Now we're bringing them in all the way  
33 from Scotland."

34 "Nnhnn. He's kind of like Hugh with the bark off, isn't he." Rosellen  
35 studied across the room at Darius, who was looking rapt as Charlene ex-  
36 plained the principle of the marcelling iron. Beyond him, Bruce un-  
37 corked a wicked wink which Rosellen at first thought was directed at her,  
38 but realized it was for Kate, of course.

39 "You two," she kidded Kate in the woman-of-the-world tone they al-  
40 ways used when the topic of mad pash came up. "In a beauty shop, yet."

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Kate couldn't help herself from wearing a goofy expression. "Guess what," she murmured back to Rosellen. "The family is on the increase, in more ways than just Scotch uncles."

"Katy, really?" Rosellen instantly had her by both forearms. "Oh, good, when? Have you picked out names yet? Aren't you going to tell the rest of the—?"

"Rosellen, if I cut in on Charlene's party with that news, you know I'll never get a decent hairdo out of her again."

The sisters dealt with each other before starting on their plates of supper.

Charlene said under her breath, "It's on the tip of your tongue."

Rosellen grinned recklessly. "It's all over you an inch thick."

"What if I did say—"

"A million or so times."

"—you'd never catch me sliding around in—"

"Skating; you used to say, 'skating around in'."

"—skating around in hair the way they did." Charlene tartly checked Rosellen for any further grinning. "There, does that satisfy you?"

"Some."

"You're certainly awfully interested in what I do, all of a sudden," Charlene let fall. "Are you by any chance jealous?"

Rosellen's eyes widened in a way that Charlene still did not know how to read. "Can't I be just curious?"

"What happened was, the Swede called me a bunch of choice names," Neil was saying across the tableful of potluck to Kate, "all of it over the best way to nail in a crossbrace . . ."

"I wouldn't want that responsibility," Meg was saying to Rosellen, "of having to hit the right typewriter key time after . . ."

"Are you characters about to get my pump boat done?" Owen was saying to Bruce and Darius. "Or am I about to have to bail out the core pool with a teaspoon?"

Darius said nothing, rather than say that the forty-foot pump boat would have been about twenty minutes' work on the Clydeside. Bruce, though, let Owen have:

"If you'd quit squirting water on your dam, Ownie, you wouldn't have that big puddle of water in the middle of it."

Owen managed to laugh, and the table talk moved on. But Owen, overseer by habit, was studying Bruce. Whatever canary Bruce had lately swallowed, he couldn't keep the feathers from flying out tonight. *Ah,*

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1 *well, hell. Maybe it's that peppy home cooking Kate gives him.* Owen him-  
 2 self had been hot with pride all evening, watching Charlene, taking plea-  
 3 sure from her intrepid battleplans on the tresses of Wheeler. *Watch out*  
 4 *now, world.* Once again he ran his eyes over her. Certainly she was her  
 5 own best advertisement. Darius, he saw, evidently thought so, too. The  
 6 two of them were in thoroughgoing conversation.

7 "Hugh and I are the type they used to try to keep out of parlors," Dar-  
 8 ius was confiding to her. "Now here we find ourselves, in a beauty one."

9 "You're not the only one surprised at you," he heard right back from  
 10 Charlene. The woman was harder than dental enamel. "None of them  
 11 can get over it, you know, you with us this way. Fort Peck isn't an easy  
 12 jump from anywhere. You must have really wanted a change of scenery,  
 13 to come here just like that."

14 "I suppose sometimes we want change and sometimes change wants  
 15 us," he resorted to. "What of yourself, though? Where was it you derived  
 16 from before here, dear?"

17 Charlene gave him a look, a substitute for the real reamer she wanted  
 18 to unloose down the table toward Rosellen. Had the little snip been  
 19 blabbing about Toston and the footsteps in the hair-strewn shop back  
 20 there? Charlene had tossed Toston out of her chosen picture once and  
 21 could again.

22 "Bozeman," she bit out.

23 "Yoze-mite, ah!" Darius exclaimed with vast feigned interest. "Seen  
 24 pictures of it! Great towering cliffs there, haven't they, and some moun-  
 25 tain thingy split half in two? I can see why you'd miss so grand a place."

26  
 27 "That uncle of yours is a strange duck," Charlene softly told Owen after  
 28 they had taken their celebration home to bed.

29 "What's a family without at least one cracked uncle?" he responded,  
 30 nuzzling her in a couple of favorite places. He wondered, though, how  
 31 many Duffs at Fort Peck it took to amount to too many.

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 35 "You do have to hope to Christ they don't erode a hole in it by  
 36 staring at it," Sangster said tiredly.

37 Owen only nodded, abstracted. By now he hardly even noticed the  
 38 tides of workers from elsewhere on the dam, tunnel muckers and shovel  
 39 runners and carpenters and ~~hatskinners~~ and all the rest trooping up onto  
 40 the levee edges of the fill at lunch hour or change of shift to stare and

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tell one another it beat anything they'd ever seen, a lake sitting on top of a dam.

The core pool—there was no getting around it: Owen Duff's unruly core pool—was phenomenal no matter how you looked at it. The dredged material that was being spewed in to form the core of the dam needed time to settle, needed to have the water drained off it at a judicious pace, needed in other words this artificial basin in the top of the damfill. On a blueprint it could not have looked more clever and neat, a settlement pond that gradually worked itself out of existence as more and more fill jelled in it. In reality, which was to say here under the noses of Owen and Sangster, the core pool was a wind-whipped, sloshing, leaky, fickle body of water half a mile long, up in the middle of the pile of earth which was supposed to become Fort Peck Dam.

"We have got to get—"

"—that sonofabitching pump boat up here," Sangster chorused in with Owen. "I agree, you know. This isn't any too much fun, trying to sluice out just as much water as you keep pouring in." Sangster's current specialty, a sluiceway to drain off excess water from the core pool, was busy draining all the time and still not quite doing the job. The water level kept creeping up, the three times a day a sounding was taken. Owen hated even to think about what would happen if the water backed up enough to breach the levee of the core pool. He had both this worry of a flood *above* the river washing a goodly portion of the dam down into the river, and one all his own; his dredged material was staying soupy, taking longer to consolidate into firm fill at the bottom of the core pool than it was supposed to. He simply and utterly needed a way to regulate this mass of water on the roof of the dam more exactly.

The object of his and Sangster's irritation could be seen in the boatyard, most of a mile away: the white speck of pump boat which Medwick kept telling them was being built as fast as it could, which wasn't anywhere near fast enough for them.

"You've tried, I've tried," Owen mused. "I think let's ~~sic~~ Major Santee on Medwick."

"Oh, you bet. Why don't you toss a spitwad at Medwick from up here and do about as much good," Sangster expelled.

"I figured I'd sic the colonel on the major first."

Sangster chewed that over. "Go in to the colonel and piss and moan about not being able to meet your schedule the way things are, you mean?"

"That's what I had in mind, yeah."

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1 "Only problem with that is, you don't want to get them believing  
2 you're in too much trouble on the schedule."

3 "Max," Owen said tightly, "it's about half true."  
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5 Darius went up onto the east bluff to watch the pump boat be moved to  
6 the core pool. He had asked Owen how they were going to get this fa-  
7 mous vessel up the considerable slope of the earthfill and into the core  
8 pool. "We're gonna walk it," Owen had replied absently. And be damned  
9 if that wasn't precisely what they were doing. Fourteen bulldozers, the  
10 big crawlers called Caterpillars, were hitched by cables to the square bow  
11 and now the pump boat, the size of a respectable hotel, was going up the  
12 road behind its column of clanking Cats as pretty as you please. He  
13 shook his head. Americans seemed to operate on the principle that they  
14 could solve anything if they could get enough traction.

15 "Making it sail on dry land, aren't they." The unexpected voice made  
16 Darius spill a bit of the tea he was pouring from his thermos.

17 "Neil, sunbeam, I didn't know you were anywhere about."

18 "Had to come see what they're up to at Ownie's lake." The younger  
19 man helped himself to the other half of the little shale cutbank Darius  
20 was sitting on. "You too, huh?"

21 "The craft, there"—Darius nodded toward the pump boat still ad-  
22 vancing up the side of the damfill in a cloud of dust and clatter—"does  
23 bear my tool marks, you know." *Crude a tub as it is. But there was no*  
24 *bringing the Clydeside and the true ships with me, was there.* He glanced  
25 aside at Neil, who had not been a boatyard participant but was the one  
26 who showed up to witness this odd crosscountry launching. "Bruce's  
27 thumbprints on the bonny boat, too, of course."

28 "Mmm hmm." Neil had opened his black lunchbox and was doing  
29 fast damage to a peanut butter and honey sandwich. The sandwich was  
30 fine—product of the cookhouse of Jaarala and his mother, it was better  
31 than that—but Neil wished he was having for lunch what Bruce usually  
32 had. Rosellen's noonhour at the Ad Building, though, and his on the  
33 dredgeline trestle gang didn't quite work out right for getting together.

34 Taking his tea sip by sip, Darius mulled the Neils and Bruces, the  
35 young men working here by the thousands. Empires, armies, crusades  
36 had been built on lads such as these. A willing set of hands, durability,  
37 availability—those were the pegs history made use of, if Darius knew  
38 anything about it.

Short 39 "What was it like," he was suddenly brought to by the sound of  
ormal 40 Neil's voice again, "being brothers back in Scotland?"



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"In what respect do you mean?"

His nephew swallowed away on the last of a second sandwich before specifying:

"Fight much?"

"Mostly around the tonsils," Darius mused. "Your father likes a good argument. And I suppose I'm not averse to one either, now and again."

It seemed to be Neil's turn to muse. "If you're kind of alike in that, how come you turned out so different? Him, over in this country, and Mother and us and all, and you staying the way you were?"

"Well, your mother hadn't a sister," Darius smoothed past that with his instantaneous smile, "and so I evidently was cut out to be bachelor uncle to the world."

Sudden quiet at the core pool made them turn their heads in that direction. The Caterpillars had been throttled down to lowest idle, a barely audible diesel throb. The pump boat was afloat in Owen's lake.

"How you doing?" Rosellen always felt like an awed delegate to a maharani when she visited Kate these days.

"Pretty pukey," Kate reported. "I don't see why they call it just *morning* sickness."

"Nhn. When you say 'pukey,' though, is that sort of an all-over feeling you have or more of a stomach thing?"

"Both. Why? You taking a census on ways to throw up?"

"Hey, I don't even need to ask if an owly mood is one of the symptoms too, do I."

"Speaks for itself, I guess," Kate relented. "So does my middle."

"You're not showing much yet."

"On me, it doesn't take much."

Rosellen mildly pooh-poohed that, her mind obviously racing for ways to find out all about child-bearing from the resident expert, peaked-looking Kate. "When do you start being a lady of leisure?"

"End of this week." Although what the Rondola's customers were going to do without her there to joke with about being bitten by a trouser worm or finding a surprise in the oven, she didn't know.

"Oh, already?" Rosellen let out without thinking.

"Listen, I don't care how they do it in China, I'm not." The part in *The Good Earth* where the woman worked in a rice field all day until it was time to pop into the house and have a baby was, according to Rosellen, certainly interesting. That was one word for it, Kate thought. She stated from experience thus far, "Getting started on a kid is no picnic."

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1 "At least you've managed to," Rosellen flared.

2 Kate drew up in surprise. *Who's the owly one now?* "If Bruce were here,  
3 he'd tell you it's just a matter of doing it until you get it right."

4 That only reddened up Rosellen even more. Quickly they changed  
5 the subject, and their squall passed. But Kate still wished she could take  
6 that back about practice making perfect in a family way.

7  
8 The day already had been about a week's worth of contentious hair. In  
9 came a naturally curly, not too bad to start on although too much curl  
10 will fight the set, and Charlene managed to push in enough wave, with  
11 liberal use of the marcel iron, to make the woman's head of hair stay rea-  
12 sonably calmed down. But then in walked two women together whose  
13 hair behaved like porcupine quills. It dawned on Charlene that these had  
14 to be Cactus Flat residents, showing the effects of the sulphury wellwater  
15 in that particular shantytown; and worse, the duo inevitably wanted  
16 only a wash and a wave. She forbore from informing them that the only  
17 hope for doing anything at all with the broomstraw condition of their  
18 hair was to chemical the bejesus out of it, and instead put it that they  
19 were in luck, the A-1 was offering bargain permanents today.

20 Watching the pair of them, happily permed, go out the door several  
21 hours later, Charlene wondered what follicles she was going to en-  
22 counter next. By now it was interesting, though, what she could tell by  
23 her customers' hair. Who used rainwater to wash in at home. Who was  
24 sickly even if they otherwise didn't look it. Who had seen the latest Jean  
25 Harlow movie and who held on to the creed that Theda Bara's was the  
26 hairstyle forever.

27 She hadn't even started on Meg yet.

28 Their two faces stared at each other from the oval captivity of Char-  
29 lene's wall mirror. Meg spoke up first:

30 "Anything short of a scalping, please, Charlene."

31 "Meg, as it is, you always look . . . nicely put together." As she was  
32 saying so, Charlene's fingers exploratorily lifted a tendril of her mother-  
33 in-law's sunned-brown hair. Plenty of life to it, if not much snazz in how  
34 it was worn. "Do you want to keep it that way, with just a wash and a  
35 wave? Or—"

36 "I want this," Meg stated with what seemed to be some difficulty, "to  
37 be a, a kind of treat for myself."

38 Charlene came around the chair. Directly in front of Meg, she put  
her hands on her knees and leaned down and in, looking in Meg's eyes

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and then around the verges of her face and the waiting frontier of hair. Halfway through her inspection, Charlene began to grow excited. "Meg," she blurted. "Let me give you the works."

"Whatever are . . . those?"

"This is going to sound like the dog's dinner, but it'll all fit together on you, I just know it will." Rapidly Charlene outlined the plan of attack. First, a croquignole permanent. Building on that, a marcel wave swooping to one brow. For a finale, antoine pincurls down the side and back. "Meg, I guarantee you'll scarcely know yourself."

Meg peered past Charlene to the mirror again, as if to give her reflection a last say in this. After a bit, she announced: "Bang away, Charlene."

She confronted herself again in that mirror when Charlene was fussily finishing up with the pincurls. Under Charlene's ministration her hair now looked like fine-carved teak, its scrolls of perfect wave and curl making the little nock in her chin fit right in, sculpturally. If she did say so herself, Margaret Milne Duff looked like a new woman, royal make.

Charlene couldn't hold back a giggle at the thought. "Hugh is going to be thrown for a loop when you walk in that door tonight."

"No, he won't."

"Well, whyever not? Meg, take it from me, you look absolutely—"

"It's his time of the month," Meg said caustically.

Charlene's hands halted. After a moment, she went on with fixing Meg's hair, determined not to be dragged in to Duff family matters any farther.

"So, business lady, how you doing?" Owen greeted her when she at last managed to close up shop and deposit herself home.

"Busy says it."

"What you wanted, right?"

"Mmmhmm." She went directly over to the easy chair where he was tallying daily dredging timesheets, sat on the chair arm and hugged the crown of him to her chest while telling him, "This is the head I was wishing for all day."

"Hey, you do know some pretty interesting things to apply on hair," he answered comfortably as his head inclined there between her breasts. Charlene bit her lip, and did not tell him that his father was off on a binge again.

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1 "Hnnfp? What're you—don't, mmpf—"

2 "Shh," came a soothing whisper, at odds with the hand clamped force-  
3 fully over Darius's mouth. "Don't wanna wake up the whole menagerie."

4 The figure sitting on the edge of his bed seemed so dedicated to not  
5 disturbing the peace of the darkened barracks that Darius made himself  
6 lie there soundless. When the hand eased up a millimeter, he wrestled  
7 free from it and got his own heartfelt grip on the visitor. "Hugh, what to  
8 Hell?" he furiously whispered. "What's this about?"

9 "Wanna give you a treat. Take you out on the town."

10 "I've already *been* somewhat on the town." The couple of payday  
11 beers Darius had downed after work seemed to have taken place innu-  
12 merable hours ago, and the blackness outside the barracks windows  
13 didn't scale down that estimate. "Entrails of Judas, man, what time is it?"

14 "Friday or Saturday."

15 "Hugh, listen, now." Darius tried to make himself sound more pa-  
16 tient than gritted. "You've had one too many. What you need to do is  
17 merely go home and find your own tender bed and—"

18 "No. Gonna take my brother out on the town, if I have to skid you  
19 there."

20 In the abrupt stillness after that, they could hear the breathing of  
21 each other.

22 "That shouldn't quite be necessary," Darius answered at last. "Re-  
23 move yourself from the bedcovers, though, please, so I can at least put  
24 some clothes on."

25  
26 Whatever the calendar said, payday always hung a full moon over  
27 Wheeler.

28 Traffic, afoot as well as automotive, was thick enough to be a hazard  
29 to the two men as they dodged across the main street. Evidently the  
30 clientele was beyond local. Up from chasing sturgeon in the dredge cuts,  
31 a fat fisherman in chest-high waders arrived at one of the saloons in front  
32 of them and stood, massive rubber bulge filling the doorway, for a mo-  
33 ment. The flavor of Wheeler seemed familiar even if he had never tasted  
34 the town before, and he exultantly clopped on in.

35 Good grief, Darius thought to himself, does the drink run so deep  
36 here they're prepared to wade in it?

37 He did not yet know his way around town thoroughly, but Hugh  
38 could have guided the blind through his accustomed route. With much  
39 regret he was avoiding the Blue Eagle these nights, because Tom Harry  
40 had shown a tendency to waylay him while Owen or Neil or sometimes

## BUCKING THE SUN

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even Bruce was sent for. Thus Hugh's current port of call during a binge was the Wheeler Inn, which met the two Duffs with a noise level that would have taken the skin off lesser men.

No sooner were they inside the door, Darius already somewhat uneasy in the press of flesh, then a hawknosed little man popped from the crowd, piping out in a high squawk, "Hey, Hugh! And, uh, Hugh's brother! Need a lifesaver? I got extras." He reached down to the large sidepockets of his bib overalls, where the necks of several beer bottles protruded, and drew out two.

"Church key, too, Birdie?" Hugh inquired, as if topping off the transaction.

"You betcha. Never go without." Birdie Hinch found the bottle opener in another pocket and pried the caps off the beers for them.

"Here's mud in your eye," Hugh began to thank him with a toast, but Birdie was already veering out the door, clanking glassily as he went.

"These'll maybe hold us until we can fight our way to the bar anyway," Hugh evaluated, taking a healthy swig and starting to writhe his way through the crowd, Darius more or less in his wake. Nobody took exception to their progress, elbows evidently a part of the commerce here, and Darius managed to put some attention to the sprinkle of taxidancers and their partners carouseling within the general mob. He and Hugh passed within an inch of one couple so snugly together he would have sworn they were lodged in each other. Next came two women dancing together while they awaited customers; Hugh and therefore he resolutely ignored their wisecracks about being in the market for a tall matched set, and passed on by. As to the Wheeler Inn's other item of business, Darius had seen savage drinking in his time, at least by fabled Glaswegian standards, but this was bacchanalia.

When they were finally at the bar, Hugh had forged a spot and was finishing his beer by the time Darius squeezed a place to put both feet down.

"Cozy pub, this," Darius tried to enter the common mood.

Hugh seemed intent elsewhere. He unpocketed a silver dollar and tapped it indicatively on the bar until a bartender put up two more beers in front of him. Positioning one of the bottles squarely in front of his brother, Hugh with tipsy dignity insisted: "Here, have another lift of this."

*Crawfurd, that fool Crawfurd*, spun up unexpectedly in Darius from those words. Something like sickness filled him as he stared at the dark glass shape. *Whyever did he . . .*

"Darius?"

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1 He was summoned back by Hugh's swooping tone of curiosity. "Are  
2 you going to drink that," he heard the prod sharpen in Hugh's voice, "or  
3 admire it to death?"

4 "Sorry, drifted a bit, there." He grabbed up the bottle, rattled off a  
5 toast of "Confusion to our enemies," and tipped a sizable quantity of  
6 beer into himself, while Hugh blinked. Within himself Darius raced for  
7 the safety of a conversational topic.

8 "None the neverless," he brought out sonorously. "Hugh, do you re-  
9 member and how can you not?"

10 Hugh laughed so helplessly beer went up his nose.

11 "The great pulpiter! The unstillable Reverend Milne!" The High  
12 Street church in Inverley, not to mention the extent of the town within  
13 his vocal range, had famously resounded with the reverend's paragraphic  
14 alternations of "Nonetheless" and "Nevertheless" until the inevitable  
15 Sunday when the phrases amalgamated.

16 "And the time," Darius was in fine roar now, "he caught you and  
17 Meg in the darkened room and you claimed to him, 'This isn't what you  
18 think it is' and he drew himself up and said, 'It's going to continue not  
19 to be what I think it is, too.'"

20 They both had to set down their bottles in this quake of laughter,  
21 Darius managing to chortle out as a finale: "The man could have put in  
22 a patent on jabberwocky!"

23 "Eh," Hugh said after they ran out of snorts of mirth. "I miss the old  
24 goat."

25 "Your Owen," Darius hazarded, "resembles him. Facially."

26 "As long as that's all." Hugh was lurching a little, but seemed reflective.  
27 "Oh well, our Owen. I must have been reading Greek the night before."

28 Darius stood patiently to see if there would be more, and Hugh pro-  
29 vided it. "Brains by the pound, Owen has. The ration of sense in him is  
30 another matter."

31 "He's on his way to being a worldbeater," Darius decided to con-  
32 tribute, "at this dam."

33 "He's always been on his way to five places at once." *And that Char-*  
34 *lene wife of his has twice as many in mind for him.* Hugh, confused,  
35 stopped to sort out what he'd said aloud and hadn't.

36 "They're quite a set," he heard Darius offering, "your flock of sons."

37 "Neil, now," Hugh seemed to be counting carefully from a list, "he'd  
38 have held our name to the farm. Whereas Bruce—"

Short 39 "That one bears watching, Hugh, or he'll die facing the monument."

ormal 40 With sharp puzzlement, Hugh stared at Darius. Then the saying



came back to him, from Inverley. It had to do with the instructive way public hangings, when there were such, were performed in the town square, with the miscreant facing the statue of Queen Victoria, and it tripped readily off an Inverley tongue any time anyone was observed behaving like a scamp.

"He's young and full of himself, is all," Hugh claimed, although there were times when he himself wanted to read the riot act to Bruce. Determinedly he turned the matter, along with a fresh bottle of beer, toward Darius. "And when are you ever going to get yourself some posterity?"

"I'm still apprenticing at it," Darius joked smoothly, and Hugh had to laugh. As quickly as he could recover, though, he gibed:

"Palmistry, at your age?"

"Now, now. Doing the nasty by oneself isn't necessarily in the picture around here, is it," Darius amplified, making reference to the Wheeler Inn's commercial tinctures of blonde, brunette, redhead, and jet-black, although truth be known his own gambits had been in the straightforward brothels of Happy Hollow. Next he intoned, "As the Bible says, 'Better to put your seed in the belly of a whore than to spill it on the ground.'"

Hugh took a deep thinking drink. "Where exactly does it say that?"

Darius gave a shrug. "On the flyleaf?"

Hugh roared a laugh. "That's where your mind has always been at, all right, your fly!"

*Do I owe him this much of a listen?* wondered Darius. *Do I owe him a damned thing?*

"Hugh, do you suppose we could find some other burning topic than my—"

"Serious, though," Hugh plunged on to. "There's much to be said for the married state. You ought to give it consideration sometime. For one thing, being married saves on all the beforehand—" Hugh woozily searched for the word he wanted "—kitchy-coo. And it holds up well. The fucky part, if you take my meaning. Darius, you know, they say even a mouse grows tired of going in and out of the same hole. *But I never have.*"

In the hard moment that followed, the contempt that swelled up in Darius stoppered him from saying anything. His huge first impulse was to smash Hugh, which he fought down to an urge to hurl something viciously vulgar in return; but finally, swallowing with difficulty, he made himself confine to:

"That's maybe enough of your bedroom secrets for one night. Thanks

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1 ever so much for the pond of beer and now if you don't mind, I'll head  
2 back—"

3 "Drew your attention, didn't it."

4 Hugh's tone made Darius swing around and take a fresh look at him.  
5 He appeared appreciably less drunk than half a minute before.

6 "I wondered if you couldn't stand some reminding," he was going  
7 on, "that we're man and woman, myself and Meg, and not the spring  
8 greens you were nibbling at in Inverley."

9 As Darius eyed him, Hugh put a hand on the bar and pushed him-  
10 self a bit straighter.

11 "Darius, this isn't then. It hasn't been some interlude you can whistle  
12 just like that, since I cleared out of Scotland with Meg. I've done con-  
13 siderable, and maybe failed at more. Hard to keep count, when some-  
14 thing of this sort"—he gestured in a way to indicate the saloon, Wheeler,  
15 the dam project—"comes down on you. But I made a place. I made  
16 crops. I made three sons. Meg and I, we made our life, out of not much  
17 more than a boat ticket. And I won't have you parading over here to  
18 undo that, if that's what you have in mind."

19 *Bottled courage*, Darius registered, *or is it more?*

20 In the paynight millrace of the Wheeler Inn, the brothers faced each  
21 other closely, one putting his huff to strongest use, the other waiting for  
22 him to abate. Tactics. Always the great question, those.

23 "I'm not out to, Hugh," Darius gustily refuted *undo*. "The same  
24 years have gone by for me as for you, there's a pile of life I've had since  
25 Inverley. My matrimony was with the Clydeside, my work there. You've  
26 never credited that in me, have you, how much I loved those bloody be-  
27 damned ships." He paused. "Everything I was—involved in there went  
28 on its back like a beetle. But I still had a brother, didn't I. You're what's  
29 left." He chose to pivot the matter on that. "We both know there was a  
30 moment when I'd have gone around the world on my knees to gain Meg.  
31 No sense denying that. But she went with you, didn't she. So, you won,  
32 then and there."

33 "Went with?" Hugh seemed to be tasting the words. "She was my  
34 wife. She *is* my wife."

35 "I can grasp that," Darius concluded levelly. "If our parents raised a  
36 dim child, it wasn't on my side of the mirror."

37  
38 Owen had not much more than come home from work and closed the  
39 door when there was a strenuous rapping on it.

40 He opened it to Bruce.

"Didn't hear you roar in," Owen said, taking a peek past Bruce toward the street. "Where's your motor-sickle?"

"Kate made me give it up," Bruce reported sheepishly. "She says if I'm going to be a father, I can't go around with bug smushes on my incisors."

"Cramps your style, all right, I can see that." Owen made a pretense of inspecting Bruce's mouth area. "Well, now that you're afoot, better come in and rest."

Inside the house, though, Bruce stayed on the balls of his feet, rambling from one side of the living room to the other as if he was there to visit the walls.

"Bruce, not to put too fine a point on this or anything—but what in pluperfect hell is on your mind now?"

"Ownie, I've got a shot at being the government diver."

"No fooling." Owen's tone escalated as he grew sure that his chronically fooling-around kid brother for once wasn't. "That's pretty good going, buddy. It really is. Congratu—"

"First I need to buy Bonestiel's outfit." Bruce came up close to Owen. "See, Ownie, the diver has to have his own equipment. The government furnishes the, uh, air."

"What are we looking at here then, just a diving suit, right?"

"And the air hose."

"Well, sure, otherwise you'd have to practice holding your breath for some long time, wouldn't you."

"And the beltweights and the diving shoes and the telephone gear and the lifelines and the underwater lamps and the helmet."

"Bruce. Let's hear the total."

Bruce named the figure as coolly as he could, but his Adam's apple bobbed significantly afterward.

Owen also did a gulp.

"About as much as a Ford Triple A Truck happens to cost, you're telling me."

"Ownie, I hate like blazes to have to ask you for it. I'd—" Bruce fidgeted but kept his eyes straight into those of Owen "—I'd rather take a beating. But with the kid coming and everything, I can't swing this myself. You'll get it all back, I guarandamntee you. You have my word and you can have my hide after that, if you want. See, though, it takes money to make money, don't they say? So if you'll back me on this, then the quicker I can start diving, the faster you can get re—"

"Don't hemorrhage yourself trying to convince me here," Owen shut

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down that spate. *The strength of conviction. Hard labor or a sizable sum, said the judge.* Owen had already visited his choices in this, turn this hitherto harum-scarum brother down or give him a possible leg up. He was not sure how it would have come out if this were a case of Bruce solo, but with Kate and the impending baby in the picture too, that wasn't nearly the question, was it.

"All right. You win. I'll put up the do-re-mi, and we'll work out how you fork it back to me."

Bruce all but tattooed his thanks onto Owen, then left. In the quiet house, Owen did a very rare thing, pulling down from the canned goods cabinet the pint of Four Roses that he and Charlene kept on hand for a hot toddy whenever one of them had a cold, and pouring himself a short swift drink.

He could already hear it with Charlene. *Owen, how long can you keep laying out money to them this way?*

*Nothing I intend to make a habit of,* he'd say.

*Then why do you keep doing it,* she'd say.

And she'd be right.

"Something new has been added. You look like glory in its Sunday best."

Meg spun around at the sound of him. The cookhouse kitchen, empty at this time of night except for her, and now him, suddenly seemed central to everything.

"Aren't those pretty words." She caught her breath a little. "You always could embroider with your tongue."

"It is pretty hair, to go with the rest of you," Darius said as if sincerely explaining. "My compliments to the Imaginative Charlene." By now he had covered most of the length of the kitchen and was lounging against a meatblock not far from her. "Not that my imagination has ever needed any adding to, Meggie, where you're concerned."

Now that this had come, after all the years, she found she still did not know her own mind. Or did she. At first she said nothing. Then:

"Darius, I have to scoot on home."

"On payday night? When the rest of the citizenry is on the town?"

"I only dropped back by because I'd forgotten to take these for Kate."

Meg showed him the Mason jar and couldn't help smiling a bit. "She's at

Short 39

Normal 40

the stage of crazy cravings, and nothing compares with Mr. Jaarala's pickled crab apples."

Darius's own smile came on instantly, and the half laugh that was the same as Hugh's. "We'll hope her tyke isn't born puckered up."

Meg was looking steadily at him. "And why are you in this particular vicinity, Darius, this particular night?"

"I was hanging about, is all. And am rewarded with this wonderful coincidence."

"Really," she held to her decision. "I have to be going home."

"And what's there for you?" he asked, all reason. He had been storing up for this since the standoff with Hugh the previous payday. *"It holds up well," does it. So does what I feel for her, you drifting tosspot.* "Unless I miss my guess, Hugh beetled downtown as soon as he was off shift. He'll be some while yet, drinking the town dry."

"I'm surprised you're not at it with him."

"I'm surprised that you don't see Hugh's only my brother, while you're you."

"Darius, we're not those peppered-up youngsters any more."

"We're not down in our graves yet, either."

"We may be if Hugh ever finds us like this."

"He's elsewhere, though, isn't he. Meg, heart, let's look at this matter afresh. We don't have an ocean and the family you were raising and considerations of any other sort between us now."

"That's your idea of a fresh look? Going back to the bind we were in, before Hugh and I left Scotland?"

The noise of the door in the dining room made them both jump. Whoever had come in was still out of sight around the corner from the serving window.

Meg looked wildly around. The next thing she knew, Darius's arm was around her and they were ducking into the pantry, out of the wide-open area of the kitchen.

She had to listen over the drum of her heart for the sounds out in the kitchen. Meanwhile Darius's arm had not gone away.

There was some clumping, which came nearer and nearer, then stopped.

Then she could hear the almost soundless whistling, the blown air of the only tune Jaarala seemed to know.

"It's the cook," she let Darius know in the barest whisper, unsure whether to feel relieved or twice as alarmed.

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Darius speculatively kissed her forehead.

Jaarala rummaged in the breadbox. Next he could be heard slicing, twice.

By now Darius had moved his hands under her arms and around onto her back and, having met resistance at her lips, was kissing through the neighborhood of her hairline along the side of her head, occasionally ranging his tongue into the delicate grooves of her ear. She tried not to think about how many other teases he could employ on her. She could feel the most definite one at the front of him.

Pasteboard carton being opened, gummier slicing. Velveeta cheese.

Jar lid coming off, tink of knife against its mouth. Slathered with mayonnaise.

She willed Jaarala to go eat his sandwich snack somewhere else, but no. He could be heard chewing, and he was a thorough chewer. That meant they had to be utterly still in the pantry, and Meg hung there in Darius's clasp of arms, cheek to cheek and much else to much else.

At last came the sounds of Jaarala washing up his plate and bread-knife, then the whump of the dining room door as he went out. Meg put her hands flat on Darius's chest and pushed herself back far enough to see squarely into his face. She thought she felt commendably calm, considering.

"That was unfair," she said when she had the breath for it.

"I wonder if it was." He put the tip of a finger into one of the curls coiling at the corner of neck and ear.

Meg surprised him. She put her own index finger against his breastbone like a small but substantial pointer and pushed herself away more effectively.

"If I ever do walk off from Hugh," she said, "it will have to be in the open." She gave him that look as if she were taking God's inventory. "Not, Darius, in the pantry."

She wished she knew how much the names mattered. It was a harder part than she had thought, making those up. But if she were to call the woman 'Blondina' and him . . .

*Call them Ishmael, Heathcliff, Hester Prynne, Swann and the Duchess de Guermantes, Huck and Tom, Antonia Shimerda, Molly Bloom, Puck, Hamlet, Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, Flem Snopes, Lord Jim, Anna Karenina, Eugene Gant, Mrs. Dalloway: they answer, faultlessly, each time by making us a gift of all their wordly possessions.*

*Flaubert sends notes tinkling from Emma Bovary's piano and at the other*



end of the village the bailiff's clerk, "passing along the highroad, bareheaded and in list slippers, stopped to listen, his sheet of paper in his hand" and we listen there with him ever after.

Cather prompts an anxious young Santa Fe seminarian to say, "One does not die of a cold," and the Archbishop in the winter of age responds, "I shall not die of a cold, my son, I shall die of having lived," and we accept that as true for us, too.

Mayakovsky, Russia's cloud in trousers, jots to Lili Brik from his Crimean tour, "Lilik, I go off in all the directions there are!" and from London she postcards to him "Volosik, I kiss you right in the Parliament!" and we believe with them, there in those everlasting fevers of correspondence, their creed that love is the heart of everything.

Writers and the written, they haunt us as we most want to be haunted, in fogs of ink.

Rosellen knew little enough of this, yet she was on an updraft of it all. Her writing hand agonized, and cherished the agony. Time escaped, and she minded not at all.

It first came to her in the Ad Building, one of the times when she was turning out those reams of paychecks. *The names, all these. If a person could know . . .* She had sat up even straighter in her typing chair, posture of the thoughts suddenly pushing at her. *And what the money will let them do, make them do . . .* The idea went home with her and produced a tablet and a pencil, and she had been slaving away in stints ever since. Searching her imagination for grist. Lately she had been reading *Now in November*, and she thought Josephine W. Johnson had it ever so right: "Words and days and things seen that lie in the mind like stone."

This was an evening when Neil's trucking run had been only to Glasgow and back, and so when she came out of her haze of concentration over her pages and heard him cut the engine, she thought now was as good a time as any to let him in on her endeavor.

"Writing? You mean—like what, that penmanship they made us do in school?"

"No, stories. The kind in magazines."

"No kidding? You been doing that? Let's see one."

Heart knocking on her breastbone, she handed him the little set of pages.

Neil slowly read of the people named Blondina and Merritt. He wasn't sure whether he had heard the precise story before or not, but it was the type that practically stood in the air at Fort Peck: a High Line farm

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1 couple who had been grasshoppered out, the man desperately going  
2 halfway across the state the next spring to a wage job on a road project,  
3 the woman having to do the farming on her own, climbing off the tractor  
4 after each round of the field to go over to the pickup and check on  
5 their baby in a fruitbox cradle on the seat; the story ended as soon as they  
6 heard there was hiring at a place where a great dam was to be built.

7 "‘Shod in Weary Leather.’ You thought that up yourself, huh?"

8 "Nhn."

9 "Well, I think it’s the greatest thing ever. You got any more?"

10 "I will have, the next time you’re away."

11 She saw a look on Neil which said *Is that what it takes?* and hurriedly  
12 told him, "I fill the time with it when you’re off trucking, is all, Neilie.  
13 When you’re here, so much the better. The writing can go hang, then."

14 "Okay, sure, you seem to be going strong on it."

15 "It’s hard, though. I keep wishing I knew more about, oh, situations.  
16 People’s behavior and all that, the times when I can’t be around them to  
17 see."

18 "Well, you watch when you can and use your imagination a little,  
19 and don’t you get to know more?"

20 "I don’t just mean more, Neil. Everything, I guess you’d have to call it."

21 "Rosellen, honey, I’m all for you on this writing of yours. But you  
22 maybe don’t want to set our sights *that* high."

23 "No, no. I won’t, I promise. I knew even while that was coming out  
24 of my mouth it was going to sound batty." And that made twice, already,  
25 tonight. Her tongue needed to hear from her, she resolved. "What I  
26 meant was, trying to do these stories makes me think things over, in a  
27 way that I didn’t even know things *had* to be figured out before I put  
28 them down on—oh, fudge, Neil, that’s right back to batty in a hurry,  
29 isn’t it. But don’t you ever have that?" She put her hand on top of his,  
30 hoping he would follow suit. "Wanting to see on through the everyday  
31 run of stuff?"

32 To her relief, after a moment his broad hand came up and rested on  
33 hers. She chuckled and rapidly put her other on top of his. "Sure," she  
34 heard him say as they grinned at each other and slappily piled hand on  
35 hand, "a hundred percent of the time."

36  
37 Hugh and Birdie were on the dredgeline drain traps now, transferred  
38 there by some Ad Building wiseacre whose initials Hugh was quite sure  
39 were O-w-e-n. The drain traps were mucky work, digging out cuds of

clay and other obstructions, but Hugh Duff had dug into Missouri River earth plenty of times before, and Birdie came to each of these openable pockets of the pipeline with the interest of a weasel approaching a nest of eggs. Some of the damndest items were being dredged up from the bottom of the river. They'd opened one trap to find it clogged with rusted barrel hoops and a very battered chamber pot, and lately there had been a chunk of the nameplate off the old sunken steamboat *Far West*. And fairly often the pipeline still would cough out a buffalo skull. Hugh cleaned those up and Birdie lugged them into Glasgow and peddled them. Hugh tucked away his share of the split as drinking money, while Birdie untucked his along with his dress shirt with the horseshoe embroidered on the back in Wheeler's temples of temptation.

"Tell you, Hugh," Birdie was confiding at high pitch as they unbolted the next drain trap, "I've done it with all nationalities and some from Texas, but this blonde number last night, she just makes you want to die and leave it in there forever. You know the one I mean? That kind of milk-haired one, there in the Blue Eagle—"

"Snow White there in the Wheeler Inn, you mean," Hugh responded, grunting as he opened the catchment in the pipeline and began breaking out the clay clog with a shovel. "I've laid eyes on her, yes." Birdie's bedtime history had to contend for attention with his own, lately. After the night there in the saloon where he had told Darius in no uncertain terms how things stood, he felt he had better do his part at home, too. He'd made up with Meg, and cozied her under the covers these nights in a kind of second honeymoon. Strut in here from Scotland as though he were God's gift to Meg, did Darius think. Hugh Duff would show him, how a man and a woman weathered the little jangles between them. "Eyes only, mind you, Birdie," he went on in this new spirit of things. "I'm severely married, you know."

"Uh uh, not that Snow White one, this's another—what's those there, Hugh?"

Both men got down on their knees on the muddy riverbank.

Hugh meticulously scooped the small round objects out of the scum of sediment in the trap bottom, spat on them and rubbed them between his palm and his fingers. Tiny planets of glassy blue.

"Beads." Hugh fondled them, thinking. "From the fort, wouldn't you think? When they were trading with the Indians here?"

Birdie too was looking speculative. "Wonder if they'll work on that blonde number."

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"The duded-up one is Plimpton, the newspaper guy," Jaarala whispered to Darius as people milled into Plentywood's clapboard Temple of Labor. Darius mentally marked the plumpish editor, in a pearl-gray suit and vest, there at the end of the front row. From issues slipped to him by Jaarala in the barracks, Darius knew that *The Producers News* was a wordslinging fiesta, even by radical standards. "He gets against somebody in that newspaper of his and he tears them a new asshole," Jaarala favorably critiqued Plimpton's journalism now. "Him and Mott have worked together a long time."

The crowd grew, and Jaarala kept on naming off the ones he knew, abundantly Scandinavian from the sound of it, as Darius tried to make himself at home in the Red Corner of Montana.

*Clydesiders were said to spoon the politics of the left into themselves along with their oatmeal, and the young riveter Darius Duff hungrily sat up to that table. His first feast there was the rent strike, when the city streets boiled with marching people; Scotland had found its feet at last, Darius exulted. The columns from the factories and the shipyards poured into Glasgow, passing a column of soldiers embarking for the war in France. "Down your tools, boys!" shouted the civilian army to the uniformed one.*

*Then Darius, tall in the human swell, could see the lines of the tenement women who had fomented the strike, and the great crowd that packed the streets around the Sheriff's Court. Faces by the thousands and thousands, a maw of mouths and eyes for the powers that be to look out upon, festival and class war feeding each other as they disbelievingly watched.*

*Each new minute of the massing forces brought a bolt of excitement to Darius. By then he had been in attendance at a hundred meetings, a dozen committees, a thousand arguments over Georges Sorel's doctrine of the general strike ("to render the maintenance of socialism compatible with the minimum of brutality," Darius could reel off by heart) versus parliamentary gradualism ("Having been preyed on does not entitle one to prey back," Ramsay MacDonald kept scolding them from Westminster). And now here it was, exactly as Sorel, in the densest of the arguing Bibles of the left, had prophesied: mass belief, passion, mania, whatever you cared to term it, the ingredient that forged the early Christians against the Romans and that turned Paris upside down street by street in the French Revolution was working in this epic strike of 1915. Chapter and verse, the workers triumphing with the weight of their numbers.*

## BUCKING THE SUN

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*Waken Darius Duff from a coma at the age of one hundred and he still would remember the taking of Glasgow, those few high hours. In street after street, bobbing atop rafts of posterboard, "Red Willie" Gallacher and other speakers held forth, held the moment, held poised the human mass that could pull down the city stone by stone if it took the notion. The ruling powers buckled. The Sheriff's Court session was called off, the government in London promised a law against rent-gouging.*

*But from that day, Darius was to see more and like it less. Periodically the Clydeside would writhe and rise, and nothing lasting would come of it. Like a stick driven into the beach of history, the rent strike marked a high tide of worker power. The next two tries at a major strike were met with barrings and arrests, and when the "forty-hour strike" was called in 1919, machine-gun nests were waiting at Glasgow's strategic street corners.*

*So, were you Darius, you learned to await the next chance, and the one after that.*

As if having saved the most for last, Jaarala inclined his head toward front and center of the meeting room and said:

"The highpockets one, that's Mott."

Darius and Jaarala both were tallish men. Mott overtopped them and everyone else in sight by at least six inches.

At first Darius thought Lawrence Mott was the most awkward specimen he had ever seen. Hands the size of stallion hooves, big flat feet, that towering body as knobby as if made up out of pipe fittings; the face, otherwise uneventful, shocking for its eyeglasses, lensed thick as milkbottle bottoms. Mott's world, as a boy, had amounted to an un-edged blur and he had been put into a school for the blind until it was discovered he was hardskulled enough to get by in life, blurred or not. Ultimately a grinder of optical lenses was reached in Germany who could accomplish the thick goggles Mott's eyes required, and with what weakness corrected he behaved as if no other was conceivable. Mott's term as sheriff of Sheridan County, along with the slate of other barely concealed radicals he pulled along with him into other offices, was rough-and-tumble even by Montana political standards. According to widespread whisper, he had funded his left-wing political machine on the gratitude of bootleggers whom he let traverse his jurisdiction into the liquid riches of Canada.

If Mott as a tactician sounded promising, on a speaking platform the man was an absolute revelation, Darius now found. Mott was an unerring picker at society's scabs. In a pitiless brass voice, one you would not

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1 want to hear if you had your hand in the cookie jar, he gave the audience  
2 the faces and figures of their enemies.

3 The Wall Streeters, as fatuous as they were fat.

4 The copper kings of Butte, the muscle-mined wealth of Montana en-  
5 gorged in them as unmistakably as a pig going through a python.

6 The lumber barons—

7 Abruptly Jaarala was up out of his chair beside Darius.

8 “In the woods during the war, the goddamn bastards wouldn’t even  
9 let us have living conditions the same as what was called for in prisoner-  
10 of-war camps.”

11 It was the longest sentence anyone had heard out of Jaarala.

12 Darius stared at his companion traveler, realizing that Jaarala hated  
13 the world’s bosses all the way down to bedrock. Hard to think of Timmo  
14 Jaarala ever having been young, or of the century’s issues not rolling off  
15 his round shoulders, but the lumberjack camps of his early years had  
16 turned many, like him, into fervents of the Industrial Workers of the  
17 World, the argufying street-fighting song-writing Wobblies, the I-Won’t-  
18 Work agitators who preached one big union and the downfall of capi-  
19 talist bosses that would flow from that. Usually silent Jaarala putting  
20 himself up for political adoption of this sort? Bedbugs, lice, maggoty  
21 bacon, murderously indifferent new machinery, unstable wages and  
22 hours, and long evenings in drafty bunkhouses to talk it over might do  
23 that to a person.

24 Jaarala sat down, looking shy and mute again. Mott gave him a long,  
25 slow, dramatic approving nod, then tore on into the rest of his list of op-  
26 pressors, the grain cartel, the railroad nabobs, the whole Rockefeller  
27 Morganatic gang. A few minutes of Mott at his hottest and you could  
28 absolutely see into their mansions, viciously luxurious.

29 And this audience did at least half his work for him, Darius saw. As  
30 they listened to Mott, their faces wore the hard set of righteousness: of  
31 those who worked the land and could not understand why they had to  
32 sell a truckload of wheat to be able to buy a barrel of gasoline. Work your  
33 fields and yourself and your family until all were played out, and then  
34 some gut-robber took the gains? And grasshopper infestations on top of  
35 that? And blizzards of dust on top of those? Things shouldn’t add up that  
36 way, it wasn’t right, this audience of seared-out farm people said with  
37 their set faces.

38 The New Deal was a raw deal too, Mott thundered to them next.  
39 There could be no true new deal under capitalism, any honest shuffle of  
40 the deck had to have some of the reforms that the Wall Street ruling class

spacing



yipped about as socialism. And that's where he, Lawrence Mott, and the Fusion ticket came in. Fusion, taking ideas from the left but holding to the pocketbook interests of workers and farmers, was the only sane route, he told them as if giving directions to Eden. *The man knows how to play these people like the pipes*, Darius marveled at the audience's raptness and his own. Roosevelt was not going far enough, Mott now reached. None of them in Washington or Helena or for that matter the county courthouse right next door here in Plentywood, by Mott's unsparing lefthanded yardstick not a one of them was going far enough.

Darius stayed at Jaarala's elbow afterward, waiting for their chance at Mott. As the crowd filed by to shake hands with the peering bone-rack figure, Darius put the thought of the moment out loud:

"The man is as clever with his tongue as a hummingbird, Tim. How the devil did he ever lose office?"

"They pattycked him in '32," Jaarala stated, elaborating that the Democrats had not run candidates for a number of county offices in exchange for the Republicans not putting up anyone for sheriff, the combined voting strength of both parties against Mott and his slate. "But those buggers don't trust each other enough to cut that kind of deal every time."

"Mister Jaarala," Mott greeted when the others were gone, clapping him on the shoulder with a hand that whopped like a skillet. The gargantuan eyeglasses found Darius's face and took it in, whether in sheriff style or comradely appraisal Darius wasn't sure. "And you've brought us help from across the pond, you say."

Plentywood Temple of Labor or not, this was oddly like a tea-time visit, Darius being ceremoniously introduced to Aagot Mott next and then their bright-eyed eight-year-old son, Harald, who had sat quietly next to his mother in the front row while ~~Boshevism~~ rolled over him like Sunday school scripture. It could not hurt the cause, Darius thought, that Lawrence Mott had married into this community of Danes and Norwegians; the word *socialism* was not likely to scare these Scandinavians into a tizzy. Darius knew he still had to feel his way in America, but so far so good, here. A sharp-toothed newspaper. The golden mouth of Mott. A following fed up with half measures. They had the apparatus, here.

Mott's hand cradled the lad's head against his leg as he talked with Darius and Jaarala of timing and tactics. "Next year is election year again," Mott led to, as if telling them the grain would be gold. He leaned

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back beside a windowframe shorter than he was and goggled down at Darius. "Mister Duff, are you a veteran of election battles?" Mott somehow crooned it with the unspoken but resonant note of *too*?

"I have nothing against elections," Darius said, "so long as we win them."

"That's the stunt," Mott agreed, grimacing. "That winning." Then, as if it was all part and parcel, he asked Darius the outlook for organizing on the quiet among the damworkers. The Communist Party of the U.S.A., a perfectly legal organization but frowned upon when it worked in the open, would be keenly interested in anything that could be done with a workforce such as Fort Peck's, Mott hardly had to tell him.

"Right now it would be worse than herding cats," Darius estimated. *Nor do I dare take on that sort of attention to myself just yet, do I. Thanks to Crawford. I've pitched in with the Bolshies times before, they won their scars along with us on the Clydeside, but thanks to damnable Crawford I need time before—*"Wouldn't you say so, Tim, Fort Peck is not ripe quite yet and the best we can do for the cause is to stay available?" Jaarala provided a sad affirming bob of his head. "Everyone at the dam is in one kind of a scamper or another," Darius elaborated. "They're up nights, trying to spend their wages fast enough."

Mott looked both unsurprised and disapproving. "Roosevelt and his crowd can't shovel money to them forever. When the makework runs out and people see that nothing has gotten better, then is when they will listen. Bide your time, Mister Duff. In this calling, we have to do a lot of biding."

"I dunno, Bruce, do I have to watch this? My money going to the bottom of the river, with you wrapped inside?"

"Come on, Ownie. Do you good to see how we do things here at the business end of the river."

*Uh huh. I've seen disasters in the making before,* Owen thought, but went onto the diving barge with Bruce.

Taine, the barge boss, obviously wasn't any too thrilled to have the fillmaster looking over his shoulder as he broke in a new diver, but Owen took care to tell him, "Nothing official about this, Al. I'm not even here, okay?"

Bruce already had started soaping up. The vulcanized rubber cuffs of the diving suit had to fit so tightly onto his wrists that water could not work its way under. Watching, Owen began to savvy that he had been wrong in a major way about Bruce needing him here as an audience. Bruce was his own audience.

Before the eyes of the barge crew and Owen, he began turning both rubbery and metallic. The diving suit was sheet rubber sandwiched between tough layers of twill, but over the top half of that went the corselet, the metal breast plate. A good deal of fuss surrounded the corselet; it had to be bolted to a strap arrangement around the neck of the suit, clamping the rubber collar against the corselet rim to make a watertight joint. *Or you're liable to get a drink of water you didn't ask for, huh, Bruce?* Owen was intrigued in spite of himself with the daring that this took.

When the tender and Taine himself finished grunting and tugging and bolting and backed away, there sat Bruce, or rather his head, wearing a leather cap with telephone receivers embedded to fit down over his ears, looking like a pilot in a huge Katinka doll.

*I wonder how many dollars a pound this comes out to,* Owen brooded as he scanned the bulky diving suit. He and Charlene had had words over his loan to Bruce. Hers were: *I'm not sure, Owen, I can rake the money in as fast as you can shovel it out to them.*

Now the tender gingerly lifted the copper helmet in both hands and stepped directly behind Bruce.

Owen realized he was watching a crowning.

The entire atmosphere on the diving barge had changed. From Taine's more attentive regard, to the tender's softer tone of voice, the figure in the diving suit was drawing something out of the crew that had not been there before. No one joked now. No one moved unnecessarily. Owen uneasily wondered whether this brother of his could carry off all that seemed to be expected of him. Wouldn't it be just like Bruce to get under forty feet of water and call upstairs, "Hey, I thought I was signing up for the balloon corps!"

The tender put the helmet over Bruce's head, the front glass turned eerily a bit toward Owen as if a Cyclops was eyeing him askance. Then the helmet was turned an eighth of a turn in the corselet joint. *My God, is that all?* rose in Owen. *It just snicks into place, against all the water in the Missouri?*

Through it all Bruce had behaved as though Owen was nowhere around. But the amphibian apparition turned now and gave Owen a stubby thumbs-up.

Owen stayed for the descent into the river, nervously watching the barge crew nervously handle Bruce's air hose, and found himself still staying, gazing down into the river, even after the water darkness hid Bruce from sight and the only sign that he was down there was Taine's constant telephone conversation.

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1 "Can I?" Owen asked, gesturing.

2 Taine squirmed, caught between the unwelcome request and Owen's  
3 status as fillmaster. "Generally not a good idea to break the diver's con-  
4 centration in any way. But this is more of a tryout run. So, okay, this  
5 once."

6 Owen went over to Taine and was handed the telephone headpiece.  
7 "Bruce? Can you hear me?"

8 "Yeah, I'm right here, Ownie."

9 "Now I know we've got this river whipped. Top to bottom."

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11 But the river fought him on the arithmetic every day of every month, on  
12 through that spring and summer.

13 The number that Owen Duff lived by, and regularly wondered if he  
14 was going to perish by, was three with six zeroes after it. Three million  
15 cubic yards of earthfill a month had to be dredged, piped, and poured  
16 out into the core pool atop the dam, and by the sacred writ of Fort Peck,  
17 the schedule, it needed to be done for seven months out of the year, win-  
18 ter or no winter, high spring runoff or no high spring runoff, break-  
19 downs or no breakdowns.

20 "Marchette, I wonder if you could get right at my monthly report for  
21 me. The colonel's going to have kittens if I don't had him—"

22 "Owen, I'm so sorry," the gray-haired secretary indicated the heap of  
23 paperwork she was typing up, "but he already was by here and had a  
24 batch."

25 April, that horrid half-assed half month of startup, had been as close  
26 to a write-off as Owen ever wanted to come in this business of dredging.  
27 April of '35 he just wanted to kick under the bed of the river and forget.

28 "BJ, I'm kind of up against it here, I need this monthly report typed  
29 up for the—"

30 "It's lunchtime, Owen," Betty Jane of the henna hair told him  
31 serenely. "And then I have to take dictation from Major Santee."

32 The month of May gave him hope. The dredging still had a hiccup  
33 now and then, but they had met the 3,000,000 cubic yards goal. In June,  
34 he'd thought he had the job knocked, absolute easy stuff this around-  
35 the-clock dredging: the total of cubic yards moved was a fat 10 percent  
36 above goal. But now July, here in his hand, made bad reading; at the bot-  
37 tom of his compilation of daily dredging averages the number was three  
38 million, but damn barely. Owen Duff did not like to scrape by that way,  
Short 39 and with August-September-October-November yet to come in his  
Normal 40 dredging year, and right now when he should be out there on the

dredgeline trying to figure out how to boost the flow of fill, he was having to stomp around here in the Ad Building trying to find somebody, just anybody, to type—

“Rosellen, hey, glad I caught you before—uhm, you went to lunch.”

Her fingers had jumped off the keys when she heard his voice behind her, and she swung her head around toward him and swooped blank paper onto the top of whatever she'd been typing, all at the same time.

Experienced as he was with Charlene, who never liked a surprise unless she was delivering it, Owen hurried to say:

“Excuse me all over the place. It's just that I'm in dire need on my monthly report, and saw you sitting in here, and so—”

“No, no, that's all right. I eat in, these days. I'm—” she vaguely indicated toward her typewriter and its hidden contents “—practicing my speed.”

Owen didn't buy that at all. *Christ, woman, you get any faster, they'll have to invent an asbestos typewriter.* But while he was standing there trying to keep his face straight, Rosellen crinkled her caught-kid grin at him and gave him the joshing turn of words that Charlene sometimes did:

“What can I do you for?”

Pesky just that quick, was she. Owen stuck tightly to business instead of repartee. “This blasted report, that has to go in to the colonel half an hour ago. Can you whiz through it for me this once?”

Rosellen plucked it from him and told him she'd see what she could do. Owen walked off to the clatter of her typewriter resuming behind him, still wondering about her noonhour secret pages. *Neil had better-to-Christ hope they're not love letters.*

Three envelopes, long and white.

Independence Square in Philadelphia, the first return address.

Arlington Street in Boston.

Park Avenue in New York, New York.

Rosellen wildly wanted to rip them open right there in the post office, but thought no, take them home. Tingly suspense. Then giddy triumph. She could use this, in another story.

At the kitchen table, she slit open the envelopes and the worst messages of her life fell out. *The Saturday Evening Post* regretted it had no use for “The Steel Daisy,” the *Atlantic Monthly* was rejecting “Janie's Doll,” and *Collier's* had turned down “Expectations.”

The rejection slips stunned her, but under her mortification there was a greater panic: what had they done with her stories? A second slip

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lay under one of the rejection notices: *Due to the numerous submissions we receive, we cannot return any manuscript unaccompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope.*

Rosellen felt herself blush, probably to the roots of her toenails. So these were the ground rules of being a writer. Her carefully typed stories had been thrown in waste baskets in Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Thank heaven she still had the notebook pages.

Nothing fazed Neil. When he came home and found her red-eyed and blurry with the triple bad news, he kissed her enough to start taking her mind off Philadelphia etcetera, then sat her down.

"You keep at it," he instructed as Rosellen hung on his every word. "That's the only advantage, with people like us. Just keeping at it, until the other ones drop."

Bide.

Most definitely, Darius was bidding.

He could perform the Missouri River boatyard tasks with whatever the mental equivalent of a little finger was, and devote the rest of his thinking to the other matters.

Tactics.

At the moment, there did not seem any exertion great enough to bring Meg his way, but he was willing to wait and see whether the leverage ever changed, there.

As to the politics at Plentywood, well, that passion couldn't be requited instantly either; Mott himself had told him as much.

Meanwhile the time had to be passed some way. There was always that about bidding.

He persevered in the taverns of Wheeler, impossible though it was to become accustomed to the glorified water that Americans called beer. Taking care not to cross payday paths with Hugh, he favored the Buckhorn, one of the smaller and more orderly drinkeries, until the evening when he was on his way there and a human form flying out of the Blue Eagle nearly bowled him over.

The figure, one of the tunnel gang from the look of his mucky overalls, ended up woozily on hands and knees in the gutter after hurtling past Darius. In the doorway of the Blue Eagle stood Tom Harry, the majority of his white shirt torn off but his bow tie still in place.

"This ain't Butte," Tom Harry stated to the ejected customer. "You don't hop up on my bandstand any time you feel like it and sing 'Mother Machree.'"



## BUCKING THE SUN

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Doctrine always interested Darius. He headed into Tom Harry's realm.

A three-instrument band called the Melodeons was blasting away, behind a contributions box with a sign reading prominently FEED THE KITTY. Dancing was epidemic. Darius secured a beer from a hamhanded man behind the bar and settled in to watch.

His attention went at once to a white-blond head of hair; or rather, his attention glanced off that of the woman, who gazed around the Blue Eagle as if judging donkeys.

Darius watched her as she danced snugly with a young damworker, smiled her way out of his paid-for grasp as the dancetune wound down, then went back to her stool at the far end of the bar. She wore trousers, or whatever silly thing were they called in this country—slacks? Darius saw nothing slack about the way her form molded out the fabric. Upward, her breasts were silkily held by a blouse with a midnight sheen to it.

Darius headed down to the end of the bar to work out the rules.

Just then the saloonkeeper appeared, fresh white shirt on.

"The real money here is in being your haberdasher, Tom," the woman was saying to him. "When you bounce a guy like that, maybe you ought to just do it in your undershirt."

"Shannon, you concentrate on peeling the shirts off these—" Tom Harry broke off as Darius materialized at her side. "Customer for you, looks like. Another beer to wet the other end of your whistle too, chum?"

"Assuredly," Darius said.

Tom Harry thrust him a bottle, then vacated to a short distance down the bar.

American propositioning tactics still were none too clear to Darius. The lewd old music hall joke—*The Honorable Member from Groinwich . . . is rising . . . to a point of order*—by now was pertinent, but he wasn't sure that was the best approach here.

The woman had been looking him over in quick, crisp glances. "Care to dance?" she recited. Warm as an ice pick, thus far, but everything else about her was attractive enough.

"No, dancing isn't my field."

"Whichever, you're supposed to be buying me a drink first."

"Ah." Darius called out to Tom Harry, "A dram for the lady, please, Prime Minister."

The drink came and more of Darius's money went. "Are you his?" Darius indicated Tom Harry, now stationed at the cash register, with the slightest nod of his head.

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1 "No." She gave Darius a dead-level stare. "I'm mine."

2 "You're luckier in your ownership than most, then," he said drily.  
3 "What I meant was, how does this transaction work? Does he"—Darius  
4 did the slight nod toward Tom Harry again—"provide the premises?"

5 "I use his car, out back," she said. "Packard DeLuxe. It's got a back-  
6 seat the size of an ambulance."

7 "I'm not much one for doing it in vehicles," Darius said. "It sounds  
8 a bit rushed, for what I have in mind."

9 "Isn't this my lucky night, the only man at Fort Peck who's proud to  
10 be a slowpoke," she mocked. "I suppose you can come up with some-  
11 place more leisurely?"

12 "I was counting on you to. After you finish business for the evening."  
13

14 Until two that morning, quitting time, Proxy Shannon couldn't help  
15 wondering what she had waiting for her in this odd duck of a Scotch-  
16 man. Most men hated the idea of any other man being with her. This  
17 one simply sat there and watched as she worked, a little amused look flit-  
18 ting across his face once when a tunnel mucker, still in his rubber boots,  
19 arrived in what was obviously a flaming hurry and sped out back with  
20 her. Hardest thing about the business, as far as she was concerned, was  
21 the male conviction that they were all something rare; but this specimen  
22 waiting patiently for her didn't seem to mind the rest of the parade.

23 Just before two, she caught his eye and indicated he should meet her  
24 in back of the saloon. Darius went out the front and around the build-  
25 ing, and she was waiting beside the car. "Borrowed it from Tom to go  
26 home in," she said, and held out the car key to him.

27 Darius hesitated. "Is it far? Can't we simply foot it?"

28 "Everything's far here," Proxy informed him. He still didn't take the  
29 key. "You really aren't one for cars, are you. What's the matter now?"

30 "I don't know the driving."

31 "Fella," Proxy told him as she opened the door on the driver's side  
32 and climbed behind the steering wheel, "sometime tonight, you're going  
33 to have to contribute something."

34 The Packard sped out of Wheeler, across into the smaller scatter of  
35 buildings called Delano Heights and on through the even more scattered  
36 and sarcastically named neighborhood called Lakeview, then downward  
37 toward the river. Proxy parked the car on the riverbank above a strew of  
38 boxy forms. As Darius's eyes adjusted to the dark, he realized they were  
houseboats.

"The one on the far end," she told him, and led the way, her slacks and hair moonlit against the dark of the river.

When she turned up the wick on the kerosene lamp, Darius saw that the inside of the houseboat was as mussy as a daw's nest. Amid the clutter, he had to search twice to spy the bed. The houseboat rocked slightly as the Missouri roiled past.

Darius chortled. "I didn't know seamanship was going to be a requirement, too."

Proxy had made no move toward the bed, and that wisecrack or whatever it was caused her to look sharply at him. Gaunt handsome joker, but that didn't count. Business did. She said only: "More than that's required, you know."

"Yes. Well, now," he studied her. "What is the tariff?"

Out back of the Blue Eagle it was two dollars a go, plus extra for French and on up the menu; but here, her own premises and all and this cluck fresh off a boat of a different kind, she took a calculated chance and announced:

"Five dollars."

He pulled out a pursy kind of wallet she had never seen before and took his own good time about fingering through the American money which all looked greenly identical to him. At last he sorted out a ten-dollar bill and a five, holding them up to her carefully before putting the money on the table by the lamp. "Here's for three goes."

"You're a perfectly dreadful housekeeper," he observed from amid the tussle of bedcovers the next morning.

"Houseboatkeeper," she corrected him in that mocking way. "Whole different deal, when you can just throw stuff over the side when it piles up and gets too rank. And anyway, since when does somebody like me have to come with doilies."

"I like it that you're on the river, though," he said as if thinking out loud. He turned and gave her a studying gaze. "It commends your taste."

"My taste in men," she figured she'd better begin letting him know, "never lasts until breakfast."

"That probably commends your taste, too." He gave her a surprisingly attractive thin-faced smile.

"No 'probably' about it," she notified him. "Okay, Bosephus. The circus is over. Everybody up, out, we all had our money's worth—"

"Wait. One formality." He put a businesslike arm across her as she

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1 started to roll out of bed. "What's your name, then?" He'd heard the  
2 publican call her Shannon, but even in America a last name must be a  
3 last name.

4 "Proxy."

5 Darius stared at her, unsettled. *I hope to God I heard an r in that.*

6 "That's a new one on me," he ventured. "What, was your father a  
7 legal scholar?"

8 She hooted. "Him? Neither one!"

9 "What's it from, then?" Darius persisted. "I mean, it's perfectly fine  
10 by me, whatever you wish to dub yourself. Society oughtn't be permitted  
11 to put a person in lifelong irons by fastening onto you some name that  
12 you utterly don't—"

13 Wherever that was headed, she cut it off with:

14 "It's a nickname I picked up, is all. Short for peroxide."

15 She saw he still didn't have a clue, and wondered what century Scot-  
16 land was back in. "My hair, stupe. How do you think I get this blonde?"

17 Ah!" He nodded and nodded as if he savvied everything about her  
18 now, which Proxy entirely doubted.

19 "You're one to talk," she pointed out sharply. "Dah-RYE-us. Where's  
20 that kind of fandoodle come from?"

21 "My father was in his Persian period," Darius said. "He went nights,  
22 ancient history classes at the Mechanics' Institution. I've always told my  
23 brother Hugh he was lucky that was over with by the time he came  
24 along, or he'd have ended up Xerxes."

25 He turned back to her. "What's your real one, though?"

26 "Oh," she mulled a moment and with a skewed smile brought out:  
27 "Susannah."

28 "Susannah Shannon?" He looked inordinately pleased. Men will al-  
29 ways go for anything sappy enough, Proxy found confirmed for the hun-  
30 dredth time. "But that's utter music, woman!" he enthused. "Person  
31 could dance a reel to that."

32 "Proxy," she said uncategorically, "is what I go by."

33 Two nights later, he was back for more.

34  
35 *Something for you, Meg.* Hugh had been meaning to say. Hand her his  
36 share of the trade beads, make a joke about having gone all the way back  
37 to old Fort Peck to shop for jewelry for his wife. But he didn't, not quite  
38 yet. He knotted the azure trove of beads in a corner of one of the oil rags  
39 Neil kept behind the truck seat, then tied the little bundle to one of the

coil springs up under the sea, out of sight. Save them, he could just hear that fancy tongue of Darius saying, for when the time is propitious.

*In bed is the only way he knows how to make up,* Meg mused. *The Hugh Duff definition of everything, is that? For that matter, is it going to be mine?*

"You work too hard," Charlene was telling Owen.

"That's how hard it takes," Owen told her tiredly.

"Gotta be your carburetor." Bruce had his head under the hood of the truck alongside Neil's. "That or your gas line. Probably both need blowing out."

"Wasn't I born lucky," Neil said, "to know somebody who's full of government air."

"How you doing now?"

"I feel big as a house."

"But Kate, does it feel like there's an honest-to-goodness person there inside of you, or some kind of other thing that'll, you know, turn out to be a person?"

"You ask stuff that most people don't even want to think about, anybody ever tell you that?"

"Oh, are you back in that awful mood? Does that come and go, or do you generally just feel stinko?"

"Rosellen, I'm so pregnant I could bust. If I'm *lucky*, I'll bust. So, okay, then? That satisfy your curiosity?"

"Let me borrow your office, Tom."

"Shannon, what you haven't thought of to borrow from me hasn't been invented yet." Nonetheless he waved her toward the back of the saloon and turned his attention to the bar commerce again.

Proxy locked the door behind her, then stepped to the office's sole window and yanked down the greenblind shade.

Privacy thus insured, with one hand on Tom Harry's desk to balance herself she whipped off one shoe and then the other, then took down her slacks and in a practiced quick unbuttoning was out of her blouse as well. Underwear and stockings she didn't wear on the job, they only complicated matters and besides, the joes fell for that in a big way, naked lady under a couple of pearl buttons.

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Barefoot all over, she dipped water into Tom Harry's washbasin and began using his washcloth on herself. Ran the chilly soppy cloth over her breasts first, there was always some reassurance in how quick her nipples stood up and saluted. (Another thing the joes fell for.) She scrubbed on downward, flinching but thorough. Told herself what she had to keep telling herself in this line of work: *Take care of the merchandise, Prox. Don't let it show wear and tear.* Wurr and turr, would be Darius's version. She wondered whether all Scotchmen had their voiceboxes in their noses.

She didn't often do this, take a spit bath before going home with an overnigher. But there was no real chance to clean herself up at the houseboat, these nights, before the bed went into gear—this nightly tomcat was no different from the rest of men on that, naturally inclined toward the horizontal—and besides, sacktime with this one counted for a lot. Darius Duff unhesitatingly paid for extra stuff, and extras onto the extras. Whatever—more likely whoever—this joe was trying to get over, he had it bad.

Only problem was, he was running through his money as if he had haystacks of it, which Proxy doubted. She hated to slow up on him. Beneath that bed in the houseboat was a suitcase which held neat rows of the pocket sacks Bull Durham tobacco came in. A used Durham sack would hold exactly twenty silver dollars, and Proxy was filling them assiduously; the only bank she trusted was the bank of the Missouri River. Yet how much good would it do her to pump money out of Darius so fast that even he would catch on; a John D. of this sort didn't often crop up. So, string him along, or grab it off as it comes? *Come on, Prox, make up your mind, this shouldn't take a frigging Act of Congress.*

She toweled off, then reassembled herself into the silklike blouse and snug slacks. Doing up her face in Tom Harry's mirror, Proxy Shannon was short of beautiful but more than qualified as provocative. She had a spoilsport diagonal smile, which, paradoxically, the sharper she slanted it, the broader its force on the male recipient. Look very closely and there could be found a few battlelines at the corners of her hazel eyes, but again, these simply confirmed to the male order that she knew what to do with all this arsenal of hers.

This could not be a sound idea, Darius told himself, this amount of Proxy.

Yet could it.

He examined the matter. The other Duffs shared him around at Sunday dinner—once a month for him and Hugh to be at the same table



seemed to be about the right interval, just now—but otherwise he didn't much cross paths with any of them except for Owen, busy bee whose overseeing often brought him to the boatyard. Darius was quite sure he was not missed during his traipses to Plentywood with Jaarala every second Saturday, so why would a nightly hour or two, well, all right, several, in somewhat dubious company be noticed either?

Besides, the kind of company he was finding on the houseboat was its own best argument. He still ached for Meg, and Proxy expertly extracted that ache, at least the physical portion of it.

He stirred himself, back to giving her a listening smile as she was telling him about—if he was following this correctly—her stint as personal nurse to a bootlegger.

"It was real too bad, but he was one sick pup," Proxy's narrative had reached. "His own homebrew did it to him. Fusel oil poisoning—see, he didn't get all that junk out of his brew and when he tasted it some, that's all she wrote, Buster. You ever see anybody with fusel oil poisoning?"

He shook his head, rapt.

"They turn blue as a robin's egg," she told him in a confidential tone.

Darius shuddered and decided he was getting off easy with only ill-tasting American beer.

"What became of him, then?" he urged her on.

"I brought him out of it. all I could do. Day and night, I stayed with him, kept making him sweat that stuff out of himself." She rolled her head back and forth on the pillow in evident wonder at the memory. "You know what? He paid me double what he was supposed to, he was just so hopped up with gratitude."

Incredible woman, really. She had already told him about the time an Indian chief on the Fort Peck Reservation had wanted to make her one of his wives, and the episode of, if he understood it right, an alphabetical elk who had been roped during a cattle gather near her uncle's ranch in one of the Dakotas and branded one end to the other with cattle brands from Lazy A to Flying Z. True, Darius had detected a bit of a tendency for Proxy to be cast large in her own stories, but then aren't we all.

"Proxy, where do you come from?" he suddenly wanted to know. "Originally, I mean."

"As much as anywhere, the Twin Cities."

"And those duo are—?"

Proxy raised her eyebrows, then gave him a laugh. "Wheeler and Fort Peck, can't you tell by looking?"

"Enough about nativity, evidently." He cast a glance across her to the

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1 alarm clock. "I'll need to be going, won't I. First, though, as the Irishman  
2 said on his wedding night, 'Could I trouble ye again, Miss Shannon?'  
3 That bit we were doing last night, I could stand another session of that."

4 "A sixty-nine?" she asked with professional consideration. "Or the  
5 sidewinder?"

6 "Well, one and then the other, what about." He raised up on an  
7 elbow, though, grimacing in the direction of a dog's nightsplitting barks.  
8 "Blast that cur. a man can't hear himself function." He climbed out of  
9 bed, went over to the widow and called out, "Quiet down, pot licker."

10 "Don't you know anything? Dogs speak German." She padded to the  
11 window and let loose at the top of her voice, "*Raus!*"

12 The barking stopped.

13 "Devastating." Darius gave her an appreciative chuckle, then a caress  
14 that started high and ended low. "But then, you naturally are, Proxy." He  
15 stepped toward the chair where his pants and wallet were. "While I'm  
16 up, I'll tend to the pecuniary—"

17 "Never mind," she said, "I'll take it out in trade." She saw his face  
18 light up. "Not that kind, pudhead. Do some chores around here for a  
19 change. Split some wood, pack out the ashes. Start just about anywhere."  
20 She turned her naked back on him and started toward the bed, then said  
21 as if it had just occurred to her: "Make breakfast."

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25 **C**harlene was pretty much right about how draining his workdays  
26 were, Owen had to admit. The start of October, now, and so far  
27 today he had managed to be snappish to Rosellen ("*What,*" she'd asked  
28 when he took a look at the freshly typed September dredging total and  
29 swore. "*Did I make a mistake?*" "*Maybe this whole sonofabitching process is*  
30 *a mistake,*" he'd said and stomped off, leaving her mystified) and had  
31 riled Major Santee by insisting on Sangster for some booster pump en-  
32 gineering when the major wanted him on something else ("*Glad I mar-*  
33 *ried a nurse,*" Sangster said of the Ad Building atmosphere, "*she can help*  
34 *me put my straitjacket on*") and he was only now getting to his ostensible  
35 task, troubleshooting the dredging. Owen jounced down the bluff from  
36 the Ad Building, digging his heels in to keep his balance, toward the wall  
37 of soupy earth that was his dam and the temperamental maze of pipes  
38 and pontoons and trestles that were his dredgeline. He could not help  
39 wondering what the engineers at Grand Coulee and Bonneville and

Boulder were doing at this moment. Probably sitting around in carpet slippers, solving crossword puzzles.

But Fort Peck was making monthly average progress of three million cubic yards, just. They still were atoning for April. A strong August had made up for some of that early lag, but September didn't pick up the monthly average as much, which was what had set Owen to cussing earlier this morning.

*So now we got October left to go, he put his mind to. October, November, and whatever December will let us have before snow piles up to our belly buttons again. One nice sixty-day month out of that, just maintaining a hundred thousand yards of fill a day, and there it'll be, sufficient unto the goddamn year. Won't matter what the calendar says, just see it all as autumn on the Montana Riviera. Take it day by day, sixty more times out of about the next seventy-five, is what I've got to do. Move the mud, that's the daily drill, Duff.*

Owen was up onto the west half of the dam by now, the broad and brown Missouri flowing through between this and the east half, and upstream in front of him lay the quadruple sprawl of pipelines and timbering stuck in muck and clawed-out pits where the dredges were cutting and sucking.

Yet wasn't it pretty.

The pipeline-trestle strutworks strode across the distance like cadets with a palanquin on their backs.

The four pipelines themselves were each two-mile-long thongs, lacing the river valley to the new bluff of dam.

The white dredges, and the four brown fields where they were digging away, looked almost like diligent farms.

And all of it, the long pendants of pipes and machinery, day and night flickered with light where arc welders were rebuilding dredge pumps and cutterheads: Owen's constellation of blue flashes.

At the day's start of business in the Blue Eagle, Tom Harry let drop:

"You've got an admirer."

"I thought I had nations of them," Proxy said warily.

"Judging by the wear and tear on my Packard, that could be. Watch it, though. Don't go tooting that Skywegian's bagpipe for him so much you forget our arrangement here."

"He's after-hours."

"I can tell. At one minute to two, he straightens his cap, says to his

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1 pecker, 'Hello, down there, ready for another ride on a houseboat?' and  
2 off he goes with you."

3 "Tom, you don't run me after I pack up out of here for the night."

4 "Then don't be letting some bughouse lawyer run you either, all I'm  
5 saying. That's not like you, Shannon."

6 Tom Harry turned away from her toward his cash register, but then  
7 flinched and uttered, "*Jesus*, what the—?" Reaching behind himself, he  
8 plucked the beer-soaked back of his white shirt away from his hide.

9 "Sorry about spilling all that perfectly good beer," Proxy was telling  
10 him, empty glass aslant in her hand. "That's not like me, is it."

11  
12 Even Darius, chary with any credit to the Fort Peck way of doing things,  
13 was taken with the implication of the dredgeline.

14 It's an aqueduct, isn't it," he said to Owen during their daily lunch  
15 joust. "For muck, instead of water."

16 "That's kind of a cockeyed way of looking at it, but yeah, basically,"  
17 Owen granted.

18 "Does that make your Corps of Engineers the new Romans?"

19 "I forget, Darius, didn't they kick the crap out of the Persians once?"

20  
21 The dam was a foolkiller, they never dared forget that.

22 Hugh and Birdie were clearing a trap in the section of dredgeline  
23 nearest the diversion tunnels when hubbub broke out at the railroad  
24 trestle just above them.

25 The two of them climbed the side of the dam to see what was up.  
26 One of the gravel crew had stepped down into a dumpcar of pea gravel,  
27 where his hat had blown off to, just as the dump-doors sprung open. Be-  
28 tween the drop to the diversion tunnel portal below and the beating he  
29 took from the gravel, the poor sap never had a chance.

30 A foreman, looking green around the gills, came up from the tunnel  
31 portal and told everybody to knock off the gawking, get back to work.

32 "Them tunnels aren't any too good a luck, are they," said Birdie as  
33 the pair of them slowly made their way back down the dam. Hugh knew  
34 what he meant. Tunnel pneumonia was rampant among the crews dig-  
35 ging the four huge diversion boreholes that the river was destined into.  
36 The dynamiter J.L. Hill, next door to Bruce and Kate, had lately come  
37 down with it. Between that and accidents that could happen while you  
38 were reaching for your hat . . .

Short 39 Hugh had to say, "You do wonder if there are pockets of that kind of  
ormal 40 luck, yes."

"Incredible, really though, Owen, how your Roosevelt can put a Corps of Engineers bit here and a WPA piece there and a pack of contractors in around the edges, and it's all supposed to stand in one stack."

that "Whatever works, I guess he figures." Owen started going through a sandwich as if he was famished. *He even hurries his digestive process*, Darius was convinced. "You take ~~the~~ prunehead Hoover," Owen provided between rapid munches, "his notion of things was, 'Don't just do something, stand there.'"

Owen was never on hand for long at the boatyard these noons, but the two of them crammed in a remarkable amount of the world's doings. There was plenty to go around. Spain. Ethiopia. Germany. As usual it was not clear what was going on in Russia, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics rather, but Darius had edgily agreed with Owen that Stalin seemed to be knocking people around a bit much. Occasionally they even brought the discussion down to Fort Peck.

As now, when Medwick strutted by them with a curt greeting. *Belly on him like a burglar's sack*, ran Darius's thought, but he phrased it down to:

"There's a man with 'boss' written all over him, in his own hand."

"Yeah," Owen agreed, "there are times when I'd like to bring the full force and effect of a two-by-four down on Cece. But he does come through with my pontoons and pump boats, eventually."

"On the Clyde," Darius mused, "we'd have had a standing committee on Medwick."

Owen had finished off his food and was tanking up on black coffee. He blew lightly onto his thermos cup of it for a moment before saying:

"Tell me something, Darius. How come you chose here instead of someplace like, oh, say, Dnieperstroy."

*The rivers faced each other from opposite pages of the world. The Missouri longer and arching and more sinuous, the Dnieper blunter and right-angled and to the point. Two hundred Ukraine miles above the Dnieper's discharge into the Black Sea, the Dnieperstroy Dam took the river in through teeth of sectioned concrete, the greatest power feed that had ever been achieved. Each river no longer a moving road, but something more like a giant hose, the Dnieper through its dynamos and the Missouri through its diversion tunnels were to hum out the bragging rights of each government. Dnieperstroy's peasant thousands of workers were meant to announce Communism's capability, the Soviet achievement: We have abolished Sunday. The Fort Peck project*

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1 *was using the Missouri as its writ of ever-contriving America:* We deal with  
2 tomorrow as it comes.

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4 Darius gave Owen the swiftest of looks, then tried to joke past the ques-  
5 tion. "But Owen, my man, I don't know how to speak a word of Dnieper-  
6 stroyski."

7 *But from what I savvy about the Clydeside, uncle of mine, you've proba-*  
8 *bly talked some leftski of some kind.* He told Darius as much with simply  
9 his return gaze.

10 Darius studied him back, then reached for his thermos bottle and  
11 took his time about pouring a cupful of moderately-toned tea. "Along  
12 the Clyde, political wrangle was simply everyday conversation."

13 "Any particular brand?"

14 "Basic as springwater, is all," Darius lilted. "A lad of parts, such as  
15 yourself here, must know that there are mountains of reading on this all  
16 the way up to Marx—"

17 "Marx? The man's dead, Darius—what does he know about anything  
18 anymore?"

19 "—and I've done a fair bit of that reading, you can bet your Sunday  
20 britches, Owen, my man." Owen had noticed Darius's tendency to grow  
21 more fancy before coming to the point. "But me, now, I know it most by  
22 gut," he was arriving at. "That the working class has always been  
23 hounded by the owning class. There does seem to me a clear bit of ad-  
24 justment available there. That if they were one and the same, there'd be  
25 nobody to do the hounding."

26 As with everything else he had ever read, Owen's college course on  
27 political economy had sopped in and stayed; even before Darius was  
28 done, he had found the term for this particular pie in the sky.

29 "Syndicalism," he murmured. "That what you're about, for crying  
30 out loud? Sorel and his general strike, that's just going to topple every-  
31 thing neatly into your—excuse me all to hell, the working class's—lap?  
32 The Wobblies were for that, in this country, and all it got them were  
33 some good songs and lots of jail sentences."

34 "'Neatly,' now, I don't think that necessarily applies to—"

35 "Jesus H., Darius, that *syndicat* setup of worker committee this and  
36 worker committee that, wouldn't it be like trying to build a locomotive  
37 on a bicycle frame?"

38 Darius blinked, and in an instant of instinct, decided what he had  
39 better confine himself to in this scrimmage with Owen.

40 "I've been in more strikes than you've had hot breakfasts," he con-



fessed ruefully. "But again, Owen, what's a man to do? Strikes were the way of it on the Clyde, they're how we brought up wages and conditions."

"Sorel's big idea, as I remember it, was more about bringing down governments than bringing up wages."

"What can you expect of a Frenchman, they never think small. Now, a Fabian female acquaintance I once had—"

"Let's whoa on the theory stuff," Owen decreed, "right about here. I don't have time to go through all the spectrums of Red with you." He hesitated. "For that matter, I don't think I even want to know some of what you maybe believe. But what you better keep in mind is that you aren't back there in the Soviet of the Clyde now." He did not bother to indicate the gray dromedary hills in the direction of the spillway, the high silent bluffs overtopping the river valley, the six-square-mile scatter of the dam workforce at their separate projects like tribal encampments.

"Peckerstroy I don't think is in the cards here, Darius. Detroit, the waterfronts out on the Coast," Owen named off for him, "Butte, even. If strikes are your game, that's more the territory. But not here. Hell, people here are flat-out grateful just to have a job."

"As am I." Darius gave him a quick keen smile. "Owen, about my being here. Maybe it's an interlude. Maybe it'll prove to be an entirely new tune. But I can't not care about what I've worked for. I think I'd do away with myself, before that."

"Strong talk," Owen remarked. "You take your politics awful damn seriously."

"The running of the world, I take seriously, yes. I've never seen why it has to be left to the big bugs. Even this interesting Roosevelt of yours—all this work here, the wages, the whacking great dam itself, it's all rather something he and his crowd are doling out, isn't it."

"Darius," Owen told him stonily, "I'm only a medium bug, okay? Some guys give me orders, and I give orders to other guys, and I don't know how the hell else to make anything work. I'm in this because the Fort Peck Dam is going to be built, and that's what I do, figure out ways to build. Sermons are never going to help me at that."

Kate strained.

"You keep that up, dear, it's coming," the nurse said.

The watermelon bulge of herself and the baby rose before her in the hospital sheets. Along with agonized and exhausted, she was madder

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1 than hell about how long it takes to put things together. All her life  
2 she had seen things be born, kittens by the carload, pups every time  
3 you turned around, lambs sliding out in a wet slink and the more  
4 difficult calves and colts, and it had not once occurred to her how  
5 the puzzling act of delivery would be with her. Too casual about it to  
6 take that "twilight sleep" dope they'd offered her, but how about some  
7 kind of *midnight* anesthesia to put her out cold right now? *Didn't mat-*  
8 *ter, didn't MAT-ter*, she raged, *too late UHH now*, it was occurring all at  
9 once now, like pain of a lifetime's ailments concentrated between her  
10 thighs.

11 She hung on to the bed rails and convulsed the lower half of her  
12 body, feeling as if she was taking the biggest grunt of her life and it was  
13 not enough, not yet . . .

14 She closed her eyes so hard that the corners of her eyelids hurt, so she  
15 let them shoot open, staring at the hospital room ceiling, *beaverboard*,  
16 *why do the idiots call it that, it's not made of beavers* . . .

17 The doctorly advice that she ought to concentrate made her peeved  
18 on top of angry: as if a person *could* think of anything else but this, this  
19 delivering, unloading . . . *Giving* birth—if she could just *give*, she  
20 would—it had to be grunted out, it had to be . . .

21 "Here comes the head. Here we go, nurse." We? If *we* were hav-  
22 ing this, why was she getting all the grief? "I have it, nurse, I have  
23 *him*." Doctor's voice, cheerful as cherry pie. "Mrs. Duff, you have a son  
24 here."

25 Kate panted, swallowed, shuddered. They repeated to her that she  
26 was a mother now.

27  
28 The Duffs piled into the hospital room the next noon. Beat up from the  
29 hard birth as she was, Kate on her pile of pillows gave them a pale grin.  
30 For his part, Bruce looked like parenthood was a tune he had casually  
31 written by himself. Everybody crowded around the bed to gauge the red-  
32 faced bundle in the crook of Kate's arm, and they unanimously declared  
33 him the best ever.

34 "What do you think we named him?" Bruce asked. "Give you seven  
35 guesses."

36 *Donald*, Meg hazarded.

37 *Pasquale*, and *Squally* for short, Hugh joked, making Kate mad at  
38 him for weeks to come.

Short 39 *Junior*, Owen thought for sure, and was genuinely taken aback when  
ormal 40 Bruce smirked and shook his head *huh uh*.

Probably something like *Robert*, *Roderick*, or *Ronald*, said Charlene as if that was the way it ought to be.

*Merritt*, offered Rosellen.

*Brewster*, Neil came up with.

*Tim*, Darius surprised everyone with.

The parental couple shyly grinned back and forth over the baby, as if giving each other the christening privilege. It was Kate who revealed:

"Jack. He's Jack, aren't you, hon."

"As in crackerjack," Bruce could not resist adding.

In bed, Darius reported:

"All of a damned sudden, I'm a great-uncle."

Proxy reached down on him and fondled. "I'd have said a little above average, maybe."

"Madness, though." In the darkness of the houseboat she could just see the profile of his face, upturned as if the ceiling and beyond was being read from. "Bringing a child into this world, what with all the fixing the damnable place needs."

Proxy didn't say anything, and her hand did not stay there long.

The mother and child both were fine, fine, the newest father at Fort Peck learned to recite to the diving-barge crew and Kate's co-workers at the Rondola and any other interested parties, the doctor merely wanted her to rest up a few more days before letting her come home.

Her absence, though, left Bruce unmoored, drifty in both mind and the rest of him. The house seemed to him dead as a tomb. The thick silence of noon followed him into the kitchen, where he halted and tried to get his bearings for this lunch hour. He crossed to the breadbox, opened it, snapped it closed again without taking out so much as a crust. He was hungry in a different way than food could satisfy.

Tense with that feeling of not quite knowing himself, he went and stripped the sheets from the bed, bundled into them the dirty clothes Kate had told him not to worry about because Rosellen had offered to do them with hers on Saturday, and plunged out the back door and across into the Hills' yard. Best route against anyone seeing him, there between Nan's lines of laundry. Schooner sails of sheets and pennants of undies danced whitely on the wind as he passed. His heart going like a piston, he rapped on the Hills' back door.

Nan opened, surprise turning swiftly into her tidy smile. "I understand you're a proud father."

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Neither of those fit how he felt at that moment, but he managed a grin. "Yeah, so they keep telling me."

"Here, those can go in the basket there," Nan steered Bruce's armload of bedding and such into an empty wicker clothes basket. She did not have the heart to tell him she had offered to Kate to do this wash and been told it already was taken care of, thanks a million anyway.

Bruce deposited the clothes and stepped back, but not awfully far. *I hadn't oughta notta*, the damned lines of a song were going in his head like a radio that wouldn't shut off, *but I really gotta gotta . . .* Trying to sound like a natural neighbor, he asked:

"How's J.L. getting along?"

"Better. They want to keep him in the hospital to watch him a few more days yet." Nan kept her smile, but was poised in a way suggesting she had a Himalaya of laundry to get to.

"Quite a thing, isn't it," Bruce said as if amazed by the sudden thought of it. "Each of us on our own like this."

Nan Hill did not blush, did not look away in any melting maiden style, did not even entirely drop her smile.

"Speaking of that," she said, "I'd better get on with my day so you can get on with yours." She added in a tone that brought red to his ears: "I know I'm keeping you from your lunch."

As if it was a given, Darius went over and sat with Proxy at a relatively quiet table along the far wall of the Blue Eagle whenever she took a break from dancing and other activities, these nights. Along with his beer, this Friday night he carried what he had just heard from Jaarala.

*"Plimpton's out."*

*"What's that mean, 'out'?"*

*"Been expelled. From the Party. He claims he quit, but . . ."*

*"Tim. I'm not in this for these damnable arguments over your Trotsky and your thisky and your thatky. All I want, all I've ever wanted, is a full say for the workers."*

*"How you get to that, without all this other, I just can't help you with." Jaarala's baggy face looked bleak, but then it generally did. He eyed Darius as if testing a board on a bridge. "Both of us've heard the choir break up before. I figure I'll go over there tomorrow like usual and see how things stand."*

*Darius said nothing for a moment and then told Jaarala yes, of course, that made sound sense, he'd accompany him. So tomorrow there would be the nearly half-day journey to Plentywood again, hour after hour of Tim Jaarala's wearying old-maidish driving across the dun geography. Damn the*

*geography, geography was the blubber of America, great fat spaces between the human clusters. Darius almost felt nostalgia for Great Britain's vertical class system, kick it in the shins at the Clydeside and draw an immediate yelp in the House of Lords, whereas here everything went bending away out of sight over ridge after—*

"Think the rain'll hurt the rhubarb?"

Proxy's tone practically crackled in Darius's ears.

"Sorry. I was a bit drifty there." Realizing he had better put away politics for the night, Darius made eye contact across the table to her. Encountering cool weather there, he sent his gaze on south toward what looked like the warmer clime of her nearly sheer blouse. He cleared his throat. "Proxy, love, any chance you can make an early evening of it tonight? Tomorrow—"

"—'I canna manage to be aroond,'" she flourished the mockery before those words could troop out of him. "Naturally, you can't. Which is real too bad, because I had a Saturday night doozy I wanted to tell you."

"I hope it'll save?"

"I don't know that it will. See, it's one of those you just can't stop yourself from thinking about. Mystery, kind of. There's this bird who shows up, pretty much out of nowhere. He manages to get on at the dam, does his job, doesn't call any attention to himself. Sugar probably doesn't even melt in his tea, he goes about everything so hushy. Then along with that, he finds somebody enough of a stupe to take him home with her. Snuggles right in with her, night after night after night after night, except every other Saturday. Poof, he's gone, every other Saturday. Funny, isn't it, for a guy who likes a helping or two of nookie all those other nights. Doesn't come around, ever, those every other Saturdays." Proxy addressed the night at large. "Where do he go, and what do he do?"

"Proxy, I've told you. An extra shift—"

"Extra shift, your earhole. I've asked around. Nosiree, no sign of Darius Duff on the boatyard crew those Saturday nights. What somebody did see, though, was Darius Duff toodling down the road with that sad sack who cooks at the barracks. I suppose the two of you go off on baloney picnics together?"

"It—has to do with political things."

"People like Tom Harry keep yapping that everything does." Proxy had on her ice pick expression. "This big dam out in the middle of where there's never been nobody but gophers, Tom says is a political thing. Whoopedy-do for political things, then. You trotting off with a

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1 beanburner every couple of weeks, though, that doesn't sound like polit-  
2 ical generally does."

3 Darius was looking more unstrung with every minute. This was a  
4 front he hadn't expected to have to defend himself on. Even to himself  
5 he sounded wounded and lame: "I can't really tell you, Proxy. It's, don't  
6 you see, it has nothing whatsoever to do with the pair of us, and so I  
7 need to ask you to not—" he broke off raggedly and grimaced upward.  
8 "And what do you want, sonny?"

9 A young roustabout, red-haired but otherwise green as grass, had  
10 mustered himself enough to approach their table. Shifting from one foot  
11 to the other but standing his ground, the kid managed to sing out: "A  
12 dance with the lady?"

13 The pair at the table seemed to take a long time to digest this request.  
14 The kid fidgeted. "I didn't want to butt in or anything. But I been wait-  
15 ing most of an hour, and I'm gonna have to go on shift pretty quick."

16 "I'll give you a shift up your—" Darius furiously lurched from his  
17 chair and made a roundhouse grab which would have taken the red out  
18 of the kid's hair if it had connected, then started for him around the  
19 table. Proxy jumped up and with veteran skill interposed herself.

20 "Snookie pie, this actually isn't the best time for us to foxtrot." She  
21 propelled the kid toward the millrace of taxi dancers and customers at  
22 the far end of the bar. "One of the other ladies will be glad to dance your  
23 socks off, okay?"

24 She turned back to Darius. He still was poised there motionless,  
25 halfway around and half across as if he had run aground on the table. It  
26 didn't take much of a guiding shove from her to put him back blindly  
27 into his chair. "Try not to take on the world," she instructed, "while I go  
28 get you some nourishment."

29 She went to the front of the bar, absolute farthest from Tom Harry,  
30 to order a double whiskey. He marched down on her there anyway.

31 "Shannon, what the bejesus is going on over there, Latin lessons?  
32 You're supposed to be out on the floor—"

33 "He's a little riled up, Tom. I'll—"

34 "—dancing, not gassing the sonofabitching—"

35 "—make up the difference on the dance take and—"

36 "—night away with some yayhoo crying in his—"

37 "TOM, I HAVE TO!" Proxy divulged at not quite the top of her voice,  
38 but near enough. She stared nearby customers back to whatever they'd  
39 been doing, then leaned across the bar toward Tom Harry and said into  
40 his face:



"I'm the one who got him going on—what he's going on. So, I'll buy out my frigging dance take tonight, and I'll tell frigging Darius not to show his mug around here tomorrow night, and you won't have a thing in the frigging world to howl about, now will you."

Muttering, Tom Harry headed back to his cash register. Proxy sipped the double whiskey down to where it wouldn't spill, carried the glass across the room and deposited it in front of Darius. "Here. Nerve medicine."

Darius looked as if he was about to pop out of his skin.

"Drink it," Proxy tapped a fingernail indicatively against the oversize shotglass, "or I'm going to rub it in your hair."

Not seeming to see, Darius automatically closed a hand around the glass and drew it up for a gulping drink.

"Here." She frisked him until she found a handkerchief in one of his hip pockets, planted it in his hand, then lifted his hand to the wet trail down his cheek.

"You shouldn't look at a crying man," he managed to say as he dabbed, "it's seven years' bad luck."

"They'll just have to stand in line with the rest of my luck." She folded her arms beneath her breasts in the *I'm waiting, stupe* gesture recognized by Tom Harry across the entire length of the Blue Eagle. Darius took some time at it before words were found.

"Jaarala knows some persons somewhere who're interested in changing matters," he started in.

"The Red Corner," she said impatiently. "Puh-lenty-wood."

Her short circuit of the apparatus of explanation he was building up to knocked him speechless for a minute. His voice, once he found it, strained out:

"I thought you didn't give a fiddle about political matters."

"Never bothered to ask, though, did you. Anyway, I don't."

Darius studied her, wiping his cheeks with a sleeve. "Proxy, can we—this is a bit public for political elucidation."

"Everything sounds better on a houseboat, I suppose you think."

"So how come you have to sneak out of town for these politics?"

"That's where they are, that's the damned point! Don't you see?"

"Darius, there's some stuff I know that would curl your toes, okay?" More by habit than intention they had rushed to bed as soon as they reached the houseboat, and the now-familiar touch of their bodies along each other was simply part of the atmosphere there. But Darius realized

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1 that tonight Proxy was heating up in not the accustomed sense. "Maybe  
2 I don't give a flip about these politics of yours," her words struck him like  
3 pebbles of warning, "but you better not ever think you can write me off  
4 with 'Don't you see?' I see quite a frigging lot when I want to, Scotch-  
5 potch."

6 "I've no doubt of that now," he could say with sincerity.

7 "Keep it in mind then," she recommended. "So what's all this with  
8 you dipping your wick in politics?"

9 "Back in Scotland I was in the movement . . ."

10 "What'd you ever move?"

11 "Proxy, if Marx'd had to answer to you, he'd still be sorting his um-  
12 lauts from his apostrophes."

13 "Sor-ry," she said derisively, but snuggled closer to him.

14 Wary, he waited a minute. Then the long struggle began unspool-  
15 ing out of him, litany of trying to find the political moment, the pivot  
16 of rule.

17 "We all but had the bastards in '14," he bitterly arrived at. "Proxy, I  
18 tell you, we had them like this." Above where she lay, she could just dis-  
19 cern in the darkness that Darius had lifted his left hand and closed it into  
20 a fist. It was a good guess that fist was clenched so tightly the knuckles  
21 had gone pale. "The Triple Alliance," his voice journeyed on. "The rail-  
22 waymen, the miners, and the dockworkers," he named them off like  
23 bellpeals. "They were readying to shut down the country, and that  
24 would have brought out enough of the rest of us in support. We'd have  
25 changed the face of history, turnable whore that she is."

26 Proxy went tense as a cat at a fur show, but Darius shot on:

27 "But the war came. And before you could say Tommy, men lined up  
28 in ranks to kill men just like themselves."

29 She made no pronouncement about the world's majority of stupes,  
30 but almost.

31 "We nearly had them again in '26, the General Strike." Darius lightly  
32 pounded his fists together, knuckles against knuckles, like rams' heads  
33 meeting. "That was to be the time." His fury came and went again, with  
34 the rasping memory of the warships standing gray but distinct out there  
35 on the Clyde while ashore the strikebreakers wrested back the docks and  
36 power stations and tram lines, sailors and police and blacklegs conspir-  
37 ing to keep the General Strike from ever living up to its name.

38 "The hard times, that was the next chance." His chest rising and  
39 falling as if still catching breath from then, Darius recited to Proxy the  
40 hunger marches of '31 and '32, the Depression-desperate crowds that

took to the streets and struggled with the police, the perfidy of Ramsay MacDonald's government, the flare-up along the Clydeside this past winter . . . there at 1934, his voice stopped for a moment, then stumbled out with:

"There was some trouble."

Alongside him in the wordless minute after that, Proxy puckered her lips and began to blow silently and steadily toward the side of Darius's neck, perhaps six inches away.

When that eventually drew his attention and he turned his head in her direction, she cut off the little stream of air.

"Unless I miss my guess," she said, "you were in it up to the top of your neck."

*The crackdown had begun in '32, led by the London police. Up the length of Great Britain, the tactic now was to charge into the marchers and crowds of the unemployed, break their numbers with the swing of truncheons. The Clydeside had been delivered blows before, and by experts, but there was no sense having your brains scrambled on a regular basis. Darius, by then a member of his committee's flying squad—movement veterans who were dispatched into the streets whenever trouble or opportunity flared—adapted to the times by carrying a piece of lead pipe, just short enough to fit in the deep side pocket of his jacket, just long enough to have some effect against a policeman's club. He and others of the flying squad particularly watched for young coppers in the street skirmishes; catch one unaware and you could give him a shiver, the whack of your lead pipe against his oak truncheon stinging his hand. Doctrine lay behind even such street guerrilla tactics, after all: the minimum of brutality compatible with . . .*

*By the winter of '34, Darius's wing of the labor movement and the middle-of-the-road Trades Union Council were in blind alliance simply to try to keep people fed. There were those, Darius included, who believed the TUC couldn't find its guts with both hands during the General Strike, but resentment never made a meal; food tickets had to be distributed to the unemployed, and Darius was to spell his TUC counterpart at the Woodturners Hall the afternoon of doling out tickets there. He arrived to a mob piled against the closed hall.*

*Darius struggled, half-swam, through the swarm of men.*

*"I'm from the Clydeside flying squad! Let me through, we'll get the distribution going, LET ME FOR CHRIST'S SAKE THROUGH!"*

*He shoved and was shoved to the door of the hall, where he managed to negotiate the men there—some of them fortunately recognized him—into*

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1 *letting him unlock the door and go in alone. Then he had to push in against*  
 2 *the resisting shoulder from inside.*

3 *"Crawfurd, you great fool, it's me, Duff!"*

4 *Darius wrenched through the narrowly opened door, then he and the*  
 5 *other slammed it and leaned their backs against it, looking at each other.*  
 6 *George Crawfurd was white as nunnery paint.*

7 *"We're in the shit," the TUC man whispered to Darius. "They allotted us*  
 8 *but five hundred tickets. Christ only knows how many are howling out*  
 9 *there."*

10 *An easy riotful, Darius could agree. Still, the pair of them had to do what*  
 11 *they could.*

12 *"None the neverless," Darius intoned, then laughed. Crawfurd gaped at*  
 13 *him like a beached fish.*

14 *"We need to get cracking at this," Darius told him as the outside clamor*  
 15 *began to rise again, "or they'll be in here all over us. I'll pass them through*  
 16 *one at a time, you hand the tickets."*

17 *Crawfurd backed away doubtfully, pulling a table and chair to one side,*  
 18 *away from the direct sluice of the doorway.*

19 *Darius turned around to the door. Unlocked it, rammed it open and*  
 20 *flung himself sidewise into the doorframe, his back straight and tight against*  
 21 *one side and his right foot up as high as he could against the jamb on the*  
 22 *other side, making a barrier of his cocked leg.*

23 *"One at a time, boys, under the leg!" he shouted into the mass of faces.*  
 24 *"Our man George Crawfurd, inside, has your food tickets. But we've got to*  
 25 *do it orderly or it can't get done. Easy go now, here, you be first"—he reached*  
 26 *out and tugged at a thick-shouldered man who appeared to be the most ex-*  
 27 *plosive of the bunch. "Under the bridge. If you'll fit, we can put through any-*  
 28 *body up to drayhorses."*

29 *That drew a tentative laugh from the human wall. The thickset man*  
 30 *hesitated, then ducked awkwardly under Darius's leg, his back bumping the*  
 31 *underside of Darius's thigh as he waddled under and through.*

32 *"Easy go," Darius said again, to the next man. "It's the only right leg I've*  
 33 *got, so scoot as low as you can, that's the way . . . Another, now." He reached*  
 34 *out for a sleeve, any nearest sleeve, and tugged indicatively downward.*  
 35 *"That's it, down to the scenic route. I know this'd be more interesting if my*  
 36 *name was Fifi, but . . ."*

37 *For the next hours and hundreds upon hundreds of men, Darius stayed*  
 38 *jammed in the doorway, a cork against the hungry human sea. When he*  
 39 *spotted a particularly small man coming, he would make the switch and put*  
 40 *his other foot up on the doorjamb, to rest the aching leg.*

Twice, too, he had to drop his leg and fight off doorbreakers, men who lost their heads, whether from panic, fury or desperation it didn't matter, and lunged blindly at the doorway. Both times he had the luck that the nearest men on line instantly turned into his allies, swatting sense into the berserk ones.

Even a good many of the better-behaved men were wild-eyed, plunging into the arch of Darius's leg. Many others simply looked dog-miserable, ashamed of taking this dole, even if it came from their labor brethren.

Then out of the head of the line raged a man with a thin, pinched face, a twitchy manner, and a screeching disbelief.

"What's it to you whether we starve or not?" he unloosed from inches away.

"It would offend me," Darius railed back, "to see people die like midges!" Grabbing the man by the scruff of the neck, he ducked him on through beneath his leg.

Through it all he kept count, deliberately making it obvious, as proctorial as possible. If we would stay intent and orderly about this, the incipient mob would. Possibly. He let the running stream of numbers purl under his aching leg, his weariness and fear. He found his flat pencil, and each time that he had counted twenty men, he would reach up and score the lead across the doorframe above him.

At last the waiting men were a wedge several deep instead of dozens. Darius shifted his eyes carefully among this remainder, the last men which would mean they were the angriest. He let the next few go uncounted beneath his leg as he looked up at the doorframe and tallied the twenties. Twenty of them themselves, which it took him a groggy moment to work out as equaling four hundred. He swung his gaze back to the waiting remnant and, but for the vital matter of demeanor, could have cheered. There were going to be enough food tickets, by a sound margin.

Darius had the tortured back of a kneelhauling victim. From his rump to the base of his neck, skin was gone in several places and what was left was red and raw. Crawford uncorked a pint of whiskey and handed it to him. The shirtless man swigged, shuddered, swigged again and nodded his thanks. Then with obvious pain he put on his coat.

"You're sure you want anything touching that back?" Crawford asked.

"No," Darius expelled, "but can't you see them arresting me for public indecency if I don't?"

"You did a grand job of work here today," Crawford said. "It was a near thing, too—we've only a dozen tickets left. Minus yours, of course"—he

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1 *thumbed one from the thin sheaf and put it on the table beside Darius—*  
 2 *"and my own," putting that one in his coat pocket. "I'll turn these other few*  
 3 *back to the committee first thing in the morning."*

4 *Darius stood silent, weaving just noticeably, the coat draped over his*  
 5 *shirtless upper body.*

6 *"Another lift of this?"*

7 *Crawfurd held out the whiskey to him again.*

8 *"George," Crawfurd heard Darius Duff say coldly, "turn out your*  
 9 *pockets."*

10 *The shorter man kept his gaze on Darius and tried a laugh. "What's this,*  
 11 *now. Darius, man, you've had a massive day—"*

12 *"Give or take goddamn few," Darius's voice came to him wearily but*  
 13 *fiercely, "I put four hundred and forty-eight men through that doorway. That*  
 14 *plus our two plus that ten you're so busy showing off to me comes out at four*  
 15 *hundred and sixty tickets, doesn't it. Where're the other forty you've palmed?"*

16 *Crawfurd cast a disturbed look at the figure before him, damned ladder*  
 17 *of a man. He was not predisposed in favor of Darius Duff, who according to*  
 18 *gossip along the Clyde had a plentiful history of bedmates among his female*  
 19 *Red mates. George Crawfurd, a bit of a trimmer in everything but family*  
 20 *matters, wasn't going to be chided by a sleepabout.*

21 *"It's not that way at all," Crawfurd began to protest hotly. "You must've*  
 22 *miscounted, or maybe I—"*

23 *Darius slammed him against the wall, one hand holding the neck of*  
 24 *Crawfurd's shirt while the other felt at his pockets. The searching hand found*  
 25 *the extra sheaf of food tickets in the inside pocket of Crawfurd's jacket.*

26 *"It's none of your damned business!" Crawfurd shouted. "A man has a*  
 27 *right to—" he broke off and swung an arm around onto Darius's back,*  
 28 *thumping as hard as he could with his fist. Darius gasped and arched his*  
 29 *back, but wrenched out the wad of tickets. Crawfurd grabbed that wrist, try-*  
 30 *ing to make him turn loose of them. They scuffled until Crawfurd pounded*  
 31 *Darius's back again, and as Darius groaned, Crawfurd forced his hand*  
 32 *against the table, clawing for the tickets. Too late he glimpsed the lead pipe*  
 33 *in Darius's other hand.*

34  
 35 *"Who, mannerly me?"*

36 *Darius swung off the bed, keeping his face away from Proxy after*  
 37 *that unmissing guess of hers. In the trouble to the top of his neck? More*  
 38 *like over the peak of his head. He went to the waterbucket and drank*  
 39 *from the dipper, the cold galvanized taste going down in big swallows.*  
 40 *He remembered the exact sound, like a dropped sack of meal, of Craw-*



furd's skull splitting, he could trace out every inch of how that foolish death had come to happen. *Crawfurd, don't. This time man, don't do as you did, and spare us both the . . .* But there wasn't a second time, was there, where Crawfurd was concerned. The once was the all.

Proxy could tell trouble a mile off, and Darius was only from her to the waterbucket.

*Isn't this just ducky,* she mulled over as she watched him, *I find one with a little money and who halfway has some smarts, and he's some kind of hoodoo in the old country.*

He knew she was calculating him. He tried to muster a smile but didn't nearly make it. "What obtains, do you think? Regarding me."

"You mean should I bounce your butt off this houseboat sooner rather than later?"

"That's the essence, Proxy, yes." He did manage a bit of smile now but of the sad sort.

"This Red stuff, and these tictacs of yours over there in Outer Nowhere," she gave a little thrust of her head in the approximate direction of Plentywood. "Are they catching?"

"Some people are quite immune," he admitted. "But you, I would hope—"

"Darius. If they pin something on you, will any get on me?"

He looked at her, in that dry way that she figured Scotchmen adopted at the time they were weaned. "Your reputation probably will not suffer, Proxy, even if mine should happen to."

Neil had made the discovery of coal. The seam of it was a couple of hours' drive straight east along the Missouri, to where Big Muddy Creek found its way down out of the Plentywood country and joined the river. As a mining operation it did not amount to much—the coal crew had to crawl in on hands and knees to dig the skinny seam—and neither did the coal, soft slightly brownish lignite junk that burned like punk. But Neil already knew life wasn't guaranteed to be a scuttle of anthracite, and so he garnered a ton of the soft coal at a time, all but living in the truck after he got off his dredgeline shift. Wheeler and the other matchbox towns now were showing coal heaps in backyards where he and the Ford Triple A had deposited woodpiles the autumn before, and Neil told himself that if he didn't turn into a zombie and drive the truck off the bridge into Big Muddy Creek one of these dark evenings,

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1 he and Rosellen were going to have the world by the tail after a few more  
2 trucking seasons.

3 He blew in for supper now, though, to find Rosellen looking both ex-  
4 cited and perturbed.

5 "Get a billydoo from one of those magazines?" he barely had to guess.

6 "Really did, this time," she said, somewhere between rueful and  
7 thoughtful. "Not one of their printed-up rejections—an honest-to-God  
8 letter from the editor."

9 "Well, that's progress!" He studied the mixture of expression she still  
10 had. "Don't you think?"

11 "It is and it isn't." What Rosellen had dreamt of was an editor's letter,  
12 a telegram would have been even better, saying *eager to publish whatever*  
13 *you care to send* . . . "He said my endings need work." In fact, the sen-  
14 tence that stood out in the actual editor's message was, *There is an adage,*  
15 *Miss Duff, about the writer's requisite scrutiny of his previous tries: 'Employ*  
16 *the eraser.'* "He said they're too much like O. Henry."

17 "Who the hell is Old Henry?"

18 She saw how instantly angry Neil was on her behalf. Before she could  
19 say anything, he was telling her:

20 "This guy, editor or whatever he is. Write *him* a letter. Right now,  
21 why don't you. Tell him to go take a flying jump."

22 She charged over and hugged him, coaldust and all, coaxing each  
23 other out of their mood with the familiar press of body against body. But  
24 there still was a trickle of fear in her, that the editor might be right. Not  
25 only right, but that she maybe could not do any better with endings or  
26 any of the rest of it than she already had.

27  
28 "Scurf," Meg said. "all babies get scurf."

29 "Yeah, but—" Bruce looked at Kate and she at him, mutually dismayed  
30 over the ugly patch of dry scaly skin on the exact top of Jackie's head.

31 "Kate." Meg's commander-in-chief tone. "It is no lasting reflection  
32 on you as a mother."

33 "Thanks. I think."

34 "A little scurf on him or not, he's a beaner," Hugh declared. He  
35 grinned across the bassinet at Kate and said, "The family line has taken  
36 a distinct upturn," suddenly convincing her of the virtue of Jackie hav-  
37 ing grandparents.

38 "Hey, didn't I have something to do with—"

39 "No offense intended, Bruce."

The night after going off to Plentywood again with Jaarala, Darius hove into the Blue Eagle at his usual time and there was no Proxy.

"She said to tell you she's out finding gold tonight," Tom Harry relayed. "I were you, I wouldn't wait up."

"Ah," Darius digested this news. "What's that name you and she have for a customer with a heavy purse, a John Q.?"

"John D.," Tom Harry provided drily, "as in Rockefeller."

"The very one, of course." Darius shifted from one foot to the other, casting long-faced gazes around the confines of the Blue Eagle. "Well, then, now." He put a hand in his pocket toward coinage, upon second thought drew it back out.

"Cripes sake, fella, you look like somebody just took a leak on your leg," Tom Harry diagnosed for him. "Belly up here, I'll stand you a beer. Hate to see a man too bollixed to buy himself a drink."

"What's this under the category of, 'The devil's good to his own'?" Darius marveled as Tom Harry uncapped a beer and positioned it in front of him. "Or have you merely gone mad?"

"Duff, I wouldn't trade you for a pinto pony. Come on back into the office a minute, there's something interesting you've got to see."

Darius and bottle strolled after him to the cubbyhole office off to the side of the bandstand. Tom Harry opened the door and stepped back. Darius stepped in and found himself facing a large man who wore the obvious item of interest, a badge.

At Darius's look, Tom Harry lifted his shoulders in a shrug and closed the door after himself.

"Name's Peyser," the man said, holding out a thick mitt of hand. On his hip rode a pistol with an ivory butt the size of a hunting horn. "I'm the undersheriff down at this end of the county."

*Crawfurd, oh Christ, Crawfurd and Duff, you'll die facing the monument* screamed a chorus together in Darius's head, but he managed to shake the undersheriff's meaty hand and drop into the straightback chair the man indicated.

"Where'd you land in here from?" Peyser started right in.

"Glasgow," Darius said without specifying which nation.

Peyser grunted as if that was what he had expected. "Something you better know about," he said as if Darius had come to him for advice. "I was appointed to this badge by a sheriff who is hell on wheels about politics. He's hell on wheels about most things, but politics really fires him

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up. Particularly those that go pretty far in a certain direction. Off toward Plentywood, say."

*Not Crawford then*, sang in Darius. *At least not yet.*

Bold with relief, he mustered:

"I had no idea there's a law in America against going for a Saturday drive."

"If you're claiming that a man's political persuasion isn't against the law in this country, that's true, as far as it goes. But Sheriff Kinnick, if he was here, would point out to you that we can generally come up with some law that a person is on the stray side of." The undersheriff leaned forward as if getting down to business. "There's feeling that goes back a long way against radicals—Wobs and such. Troublemaking, wildcat strikes, sabotage—that's the kind of stuff the Wobblies got themselves a reputation for, in case you didn't know."

"That's their reputation, is it," Darius said as if marveling. "And here I thought the Industrial Workers of the World, to give them their rightful name, were known for being put in front of a firing squad in your Utah, shot on the docks in your state of Washington, and hanged from the nearest trestle in places such as your Butte."

"I won't say those didn't happen, too," the undersheriff said. "Lots happens." Peyser eyed Darius as if calculating how large he had to spell it out for him. All the way, he decided.

"If you get on the wrong side of Sheriff Kinnick," the undersheriff said unequivocally, "he's the type who will nail your pecker to a tree and give you only a rusty saw to get loose with."

"Ah, thank you, no," Darius said. "Point taken."

"But," Peyser patiently kept on, "Sheriff Kinnick isn't here, is he. So, to keep me from having to keep track of you for him, why don't you be a little choosier about who you hang out with."

By Clydeside reflex, Darius instantly set about to split that doctrinal hair. "Everywhere?"

"No, hell no, only around here. Up in Plentywood, I don't give a poop what you do. That's not our jurisdiction."

"So I'm to mend my manners when I'm *not* in a car with a certain party," Darius pursued, "but once we hide off together . . .?"

"That pretty much ought to do it," the beefy undersheriff said in the same spelling-out voice. "As far as I'm concerned, Jaarala's okay. Some will tell you he's one of those bughouse cases, off the deep end politically. That's only the Scandihoovian in him, I figure."

## BUCKING THE SUN

211

Darius took a swallow of beer and carefully tried: "That sounds like perhaps a different tack from your Sheriff Kinnick's."

"This job's a job." Peyser looked impassively at Darius. "If I had to agree with everything any boss thinks, where the hell would I ever work?"

He always dealt with them naked, waiting in bed with only a sheet over him, lights off, his mouth a little dry with anticipation until whichever floozie it was this time rapped on his door.

When he heard the knock now, he raised his voice just enough to be heard outside. "You found it."

About all he could make out of this one as she stepped into the darkened room was that her hair was unnaturally pale, nearly the silvered-up color of the moon on a clear night. As usual he couldn't see the face in any detail and didn't care; face wasn't the part that interested him on these occasions. To his surprise, this one stopped there by the door and said:

"You do keep it darker than a black cat's ass in here, sheriff, sir."

He didn't say anything to that, as it was self-evident. He listened to the slidy sounds of her undressing. When she padded over to the bed, he asked:

"You're who?"

"Does that matter any?" Proxy had been all set to say something like "Claudette" as usual, but somehow decided the hell with it, brass would do. She still was huffy about Tom Harry having sent her on this, even though she had dickered double the usual price out of him; if Tom and the other Wheeler nightspot owners had to slip some satisfaction to little Kinnickinnick here every couple of weeks, that was their problem, not hers. Quite where this risky attitude came from, she didn't know. Usually the thing to do was to tell herself a joe was a joe except when he was a John D. and then the enthusiasm could be found to exert herself on his wallet somewhat more; but tonight, she was in just no mood to pretend. Nor did she care what he was going to think, sheriff or no sheriff. After all, she had been run out of better towns than this.

This one isn't scared, the sheriff thought to himself, and wasn't sure whether he liked that fact or not.

"I need to tell you what's involved here?" he asked.

"I hear you like—you always want a trip around the world," she said.

As much as it galled him to know they talked about him, he was

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1 relieved not to have to issue minute instructions. "That's the deal, all  
2 right," he said gruffly. Then: "That sort of thing suit you?"

3 "That doesn't matter either, does it," he heard her say, and then her  
4 mouth began to make its ports of call on his small body.

5  
6 Workforce roster in hand, around him dredgeline pontoons being built  
7 as fast as hammers could go and the swing shift about to come in the  
8 gate and keep the pace going, Cecil Medwick looked upon his boatyard  
9 and found it good. Except for one Scottish thistle.

10 Medwick watched Darius Duff handling work with an ease that, if  
11 you did not know better, could be mistaken for inattention. Most of  
12 these Fort Peck workers had cut their teeth on rural manual labor, so that  
13 the only style they knew was to tear into a job and muscle it into sur-  
14 render. But Darius more—Medwick wasn't sure he even had the right  
15 word for it—*teased* away at the construction of pontoons and pump  
16 boats and the like. His work was good as gold, that wasn't the problem.  
17 He was just—different. And evidently going to stay that way, Medwick  
18 had found out. The time he caught Darius putting in a couple of bulk-  
19 heads where he was sure one would serve, he asked: "Where the hell did  
20 you learn to do it that way?" Darius had looked at him with a perfectly  
21 serious face and answered, "Building the *Queen Mary*."

22 Granted, a man could learn his boatbuilding trade on the Clyde  
23 River or up the Woogadooga and Medwick wouldn't care, so long as the  
24 guy really knew his stuff. No, that wasn't what was bugging Medwick.  
25 He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about Darius did not fit.  
26 The guy rang wrong as a solder dollar.

27 The shift changed, and Medwick traded gab with the men coming  
28 on, but he still watched the stiff-spined figure of Darius Duff until it  
29 went out the boatyard gate. Medwick knew in his sleep that the best way  
30 to can a guy was always FFI, failure to follow instructions. But that  
31 method of firing wouldn't work with Darius, because Darius *did* follow  
32 the goddamn things, he simply did so in a way that told you he knew  
33 better.

34 Maybe, though, just maybe there was another shot at showing him  
35 the road. Medwick had been feeling it in the air all evening, and its little  
36 stings of cold were starting to hit the backs of his hands with nasty reg-  
37 ularity now. He took another look at his clipboard with the roster on it,  
38 thinking through the angles. Owen Duff was always a major considera-  
Short 39 tion, but from what Medwick heard about the dredge averages, Owen  
Normal 40 was maybe having his own troubles. So Owen might not be so hot a hot-



shot from now on, looking out for every Duff on two legs. And if that was to be the case . . .

Medwick moved his finger down the roster and checked the letter after Darius's name. There it sat, the way to discharge him, good old *S* for *single*. After the dredging shutdown, and the Fort Peck fleet was tucked into the winter harbor, a proportion of the workforce would be laid off seasonally, so-called. Preference for being kept on went to the *M*'s, family men.

Satisfied, Medwick unclipped his roster and stuck it inside his coat to protect it from the faster falling snow.

"Well, fuck and foey." In disgust Owen directed an angry heel at the frozen mud of the riverbank. His spirited try didn't even dent the substance. Overnight, with the help of a north wind and a dusting of dry snow, the banks of the Missouri had turned into brown iron. And his hope of dredging on into December hadn't even made it to November; this was the thirty-first of October, and it looked like shutdown.

Owen unloosed a few more stanzas of cussing, but absently, already studying the dredge fleet and the dull gray morning as if adding up a column of numbers and checking the unwelcome sum. "Max, what do you think the chances are of lucking out on a week or two of thaw?"

"Zero, or maybe just none," Sangster provided.

"You're telling me to stash it all in winter harbor, just accept shutdown six or seven weeks earlier than we had to last year."

"Uh huh."

"You're telling me I could get my tail in real trouble if I fiddlefart around and get the whole dredging setup frozen into the river."

"You bet."

"What I like about you, Max, is the way you present an argument." Owen shoved his hands even deeper into his coat pockets, pulled his chin into his coat collar and peered from under his brows up the bluff toward the Ad Building. "Isn't the colonel just really going to love this news for breakfast." With Sangster in step beside him, he set off to deliver the word of shutdown.

*Wouldn't you know it. Last year I had only the one dredge and the weather let us peck away on the fill until Christmas Eve. Now I've got the four of them up and going and it's the earliest winter since the Ice Age. Okay, okay, take it easy, Duff, these things happen. Next year is what I better start worrying about now. Figure out April, this time.*

*Holy cow, though. For that matter, foey and fuck, again. All of a mighty*

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1 *sudden there's three million cubic yards of fill that I'm short this year. That*  
 2 *ain't canary feed, as Max would tell me. Next year we—we, hell; me, myself*  
 3 *and I—are going to need to move mud like it's never been moved before.*  
 4 *Meanwhile, welcome to winter harbor, everybody.*

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8 The dreamwork of Fort Peck built through the November nights,  
 9 turbulent, drifting on the dark change of season and work and  
 10 prospect, restless inside the bone hulls of fate, thousands of sleep-made  
 11 privacies tossing and turning. Wheeler, with its alcohol content, tended  
 12 toward inward uproar: showdowns, arguments won on a second try,  
 13 woozy otherwise-unimaginable sexual situations. In the Fort Peck town-  
 14 site along Officers' Row, the dreams held a tendency toward hierarchy,  
 15 Colonel Parmenter's vision of a command post in the blissful sweltering  
 16 Philippines and Mrs. Parmenter's nocturnal jaunt backward thirty years  
 17 and thirty pounds to her cotillion debut both overriding, say, Captain  
 18 Brascoe's delirious armwaving scene with garbagemen who were *deliver-*  
 19 *ing* garbage into his tidy streets instead of *hauling it away*. Across a few  
 20 of those streets, in the barracks, Darius dreamt back to Scotland. One  
 21 floor up from him, Jaarala in his slumber was shaking dice against Tom  
 22 Harry and Ruby Smith, and winning.

23 In both towns, in the course of any night, more than one man  
 24 dreamt of Proxy Shannon.

25 Within the walls of the Duffs, Hugh was on mental horseback, rid-  
 26 ing a workhorse—it seemed to be the broad-beamed dun nag they had  
 27 called "Hippo," back on the homestead—through the snowdrifts of the  
 28 road between Fort Peck and Glasgow. He thought it odd he was drawing  
 29 a wage for this, merely riding around in the snow, but who was he to  
 30 complain. Meg, beside him and not, was on the bandstand of the Blue  
 31 Eagle, where she could peer over the heads of the crowd, watching and  
 32 watching, until finally she saw him come in through the door, the tall fa-  
 33 miliar figure of Hugh. It was Hugh, wasn't it? Bruce slept the sleep of the  
 34 underwater walker, stupefied but unalarmed, while Kate wanted out of  
 35 the dream she was in, where she was trying to wait on customers in the  
 36 Rondola and feed Jack on her breast at the same time and the smartasses  
 37 along the counter kept saying, *I'll have what Jackie's having*. Meanwhile  
 38 Rosellen was stalled in a reverie version of the Wheeler post office, wait-  
 39 ing for the mail. Every time she went up to the wicket window and asked  
 40 *Is there any for me?*, the postmaster would say *Did you bring a gunnysack*

for it?, then laugh and turn away. Minutes before, Neil woke up on a rancher's approach road halfway between the coal mine and Fort Peck, having pulled over to doze when he thought he might fall asleep at the wheel, and now had climbed out and was walking around and around the truck to get himself warm and awake enough to drive home. Charlene, by contrast, was steaming in her dream, trying to run a beauty shop the size of Cunningham's department store, customers in chairs even up on the mezzanine, and the only help she had was Meg who kept asking, *Charlene, tell me again what to do when they say they want the works*. And working at sleep next to Charlene, in sessions that were more like naps linked together, lay Owen, perpetually trying to get somewhere on a train, but every single time the conductor came by and demanded his ticket, he cold not find the thing.

Owen stood it until the Monday before Thanksgiving, when with the holiday ahead and the weekend and a couple of compensatory days off for the overtime that was owed him, he was going to be a man of leisure. None too soon, either. The recession of the dredge fleet, off the river and into hibernation in the winter harbor, was over and done with, but after that first hard freeze and whiff of snow, the weather had turned infuriating. Persistently cold and nasty but not *that* cold, not enough to form meaningful ice on the Missouri River. And he badly wanted the evidence of ice, immediate thick humped-up drastic ice, to ratify the shutdown of dredging. More than evidently, so did the Corps muckety-mucks. He had been tromping around overseeing the dismantling of the dredge hookups on a gusty cold afternoon (but not *that* cold) when a message was brought down to him from Major Santee, asking whether current conditions weatherwise warranted reconsideration of shutdown decision. Back up the hill to the Ad Building went the message with Owen's familiar dashed penciling in the margin CONTINUE RECOMMEND SHUTDOWN BUT UTY. Up To You: Santee was one peeved marshmallow at having the decision bucked back to him that way, but he ended up not countermanding Owen on shutdown.

And since then, Owen's work had consisted of a lot of staring down the road, so to speak. Next-year calculations to be done on piping the fill in from enough dredge-pits to keep the dam inexorably growing, and the question of how to regulate the waterlevel in the core pool which would be bigger and trickier than ever, and the guessing game of where to pick up enough added dredging output to make up for this year's three million cubic yard shortfall. Owen by that Monday before Thanksgiving

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1 had noticed he was jiggling his knee pretty much constantly as he  
2 thought over the year that lay ahead.

3 Charlene was home when he reached there these days, shutting the  
4 beauty shop earlier as winter layoffs sobered Fort Peck's expenditures.  
5 After they had kissed and she started to turn back toward making sup-  
6 per, his hand and arm caught her waist again. Before she could even re-  
7 verse her direction, she heard:

8 "Maybe we better go across the mountains and have a look."

9 It took her a moment to catch up.

10 "Live it up in Spokane, a night," Owen was saying his way toward it.  
11 He met her eyes with his. "Then go on to Grand Coulee and see what  
12 we think."

13 Excitement knocked under Charlene's ribs. "I'll write the Everetts,  
14 right tonight." They'd been friends with Connie and Ev all the Bozeman  
15 years, before Ev latched on as one of the first engineers hired for Grand  
16 Coulee Dam.

17 "Yeah, do." Owen hesitated. "For now, let's just tell people here we're  
18 taking a trip through Glacier Park before the snow really starts to fly."

19  
20 He felt they had to tell Max and Pam Sangster the truth, and she could  
21 not bring herself to up and go without saying at least something to  
22 Rosellen and therefore Neil. But otherwise that was their leave-taking of  
23 Fort Peck, few words to anyone and those less than fact. Half a dozen  
24 days ahead yet before anybody, even the rest of the Duffs, would know  
25 they had gone off to climb a fresh ladder. The two of them (mostly Char-  
26 lene) worked it out that by taking all their clothes, they wouldn't even  
27 need to come back for their other things; Rosellen and Neil could send  
28 or store whatever was wanted. A telegram from Owen to the Ad Build-  
29 ing—COULEE JOB UNPASSABLE UP—would do the rest. The A-I  
30 Beauty Shop could be advertised for sale, and Charlene could come back  
31 by train long enough to handle that whenever there was a taker.

32 So, truant from the world, they aimed themselves west toward the  
33 Rockies, swapping at the wheel of the Chevy every hour or so as the rail-  
34 road towns of the High Line gazetteered away behind them, MALTA  
35 HARLEM ZURICH HAVRE KREMLIN, and the mountains slowly defined into  
36 crag and timberface and snowfield in front of them. Through Glacier  
37 National Park, the cliff-clinging curlicues of Going to the Sun highway  
38 kept Owen grinning at the ways the engineers had managed to graft the  
39 road onto the mountains, Charlene enjoying watching him at it. The

night in Spokane, they made love in an auto court, feeling fantastically free to create all the rumpus they could, what with only vehicles in garage stalls on either side of their room. After sleeping in and a leisurely late start, at last they were on the plunge of the road to the Columbia River, dark with afternoon shadow. In a mile-wide gorge, amid the slate color of the riverwater, the dam at Grand Coulee was rising like a scaffolded cliff. Grand Coulee's construction town appeared to be a diluted Wheeler, but Charlene was determined to think the best of it.

The next morning Ev Everett sneaked a job button and an inspector's hard hat for Owen, and with them on he could prowl the huge project of concrete. He knew Grand Coulee Dam in theory, but a look around said it more strongly. Canyonwork, this was; the ends of the dam anchored into cliffs, granite bedrock at its base. The organizational lines were altogether different from Fort Peck, too; this was a Bureau of Reclamation dam, no puffed-up Kansas City colonels, majors, or captains. While Owen inspected Grand Coulee, Charlene visited two years' worth with Connie Everett, and learned to her delight that other Bozeman couples she and Owen had lost track of, the Lowells and the Krebses, were here on this dam, too. The men came home for lunch, then Owen went off with Ev to be introduced around the Grand Coulee version of the Ad Building. Conversations there confirmed what Owen mostly had heard already, that the Columbia was on its way to becoming one massive generating device, an entire sequence of dynamo-feeding dams that could be regulated with a few flicks of a few switches. The feed of power, he was shown on charts, was potentially colossal, from the little red-dened coils of toasters on a million breakfast tables on up to the new potline method of cooking up giant amounts of the light metal called aluminum. *Of time and the electric river, huh*, ran his thoughts. *Well, maybe it is time. Hook up an entire river drainage and see what it can be made to do, maybe it is time to get in on that.*

When the men returned after work, Connie and Charlene cooked rib eye steaks for supper and afterward the two couples drank beer. Close to the end of the second bottle apiece, Ev reiterated that he was positive there would be no problem in getting Owen hired on. A little dreamy with the beer, Charlene was watching out the living room window at the nighttime lattice of lights on Grand Coulee Dam, as if even the swing shift crew was helping to dim away Fort Peck. And then Owen was saying:

"We're going back, first thing in the morning."

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1 The two of them lay on the Everetts' fold-out davenport, Owen catching  
2 sleep in those chainlink naps of his while Charlene was stretched beside  
3 him stiff as a post, waiting and waiting for the night to be over. She wasn't  
4 going to fight in whispers.

5 Nor did her stormiest tones make any difference on Owen, the next  
6 morning when they went out to the car.

7 "They've got this dam knocked," he told her. "They'll be at it for  
8 years yet, but they've already reached the point where they can build it  
9 like they're reading off a grocery list. And that's—that doesn't feel like it  
10 fits, for me. I feel like I'd be throwing away Fort Peck."

11 Well, yes; Charlene had thought that was the whole point.

12 "Can't blame you for getting worked up over this." He himself was  
13 considerably that way, she saw. "But we came and took a look, and Char-  
14 lene, damned if I could see myself just stacking concrete on top of con-  
15 crete. I know coming here got your hopes up. It did mine, too. But huh  
16 uh. I stood around here listening to these juice jockeys talk about how  
17 they're going to be able to electric-up your zipper of your pants, if that's  
18 what you want, and all I could think about was how many of those watts  
19 it would take to cure the pump lag in my poor sonofabitching over-  
20 worked dredges."

21 Facing around from the steering wheel to her as he was, the set of his  
22 mouth told her as much as his words; the quizzical underline he had  
23 brought to Grand Coulee was gone.

24 "I know it's tough," he said to her. "But let's go home."

25  
26 Neil came humming home late for supper because of delivering coal,  
27 and Rosellen didn't care, and when he kissed her she knew his nose  
28 would leave a coaldust smudge on her, and she didn't care about that ei-  
29 ther. He headed to the washbasin to clean up and she had intended to let  
30 him get done with that and sit down for supper, but she couldn't hold it  
31 any longer.

32 "I sold some writing."

33 "You didn't." He spun to her, his expression lighting up. "You did?  
34 Wahoo! Which—how much—"

35 "To the *Grit* paper."

36 "Uh huh!" He was eagerly toweling coaly water and wettened dust  
37 off himself. "So let's have a look at it."

38 She handed him *The Weekly Grit*, full of pithy tales and kernels of  
39 wit, with her thumb next to a line in the "Oh, Say!" column.



Neil read out loud:

*"The wind, dancing in a dust dress."*

"Uhm?" He peeked inquiringly at her, shaking the pages of *Grit* as if more ought to fall out.

"That's—what they took, from my 'Dry Land' story. But they paid twenty-five cents a word."

"That beats the pants off hammer wages," Neil rallied loyally. "Rosellen, this is just great. Gives you your start. Grab your coat and let's go tell everybody. Bruce and Kate first, then—"

"No, wait. Not yet. They'll think I'm . . . putting myself too high. It's, well, it is only seven words, Neil."

"What the hell about that, though? Old Shakespeare must have started with seven, sometime or another." He watched her expression, which was an odd confessional smile amid firm shaking of her head. "What, you need this writing to be a secret?" he puzzled it out.

"For now." Rosellen went to him. "You know about it. For me, that's everybody."

"Airplane ride, Jackie! RRR RRR ZOOOM RR RREAUGH!" The baby laughed down from where Bruce's hands were holding him aloft. "Doesn't he have a smile on him like a million dollars, Katy?"

"He's a honey," she agreed over her shoulder, still trying to pack their things and Jackie's to go to Bismarck, the car nowhere near ready.

"So are you, Katycat, you know that? You really goddamn are."

"And you're a windjammer."

Thanksgiving supper at the cookhouse, Hugh showed up when the rest of the eaters were starting on their second helpings. Thoroughly Hugh-style, Meg thought, dispatching herself across the kitchen to the serving window to tell him so.

But he shook his head when she started to dish up turkey and fixings for him. "I'll wait and lift a fork with you, if you please, Margaret."

After the dining hall had emptied out and the servers shed their cranberry- and gravy-wounded aprons and one lone morose pearldiver was beginning to scrub away at sink load after sink load of dishware and cutlery, Meg's head appeared in the serving window again. *She does still look like the top of the line with that hair*, Hugh noted to himself one more time. She called over to him, "If you still want a witness to that eating habit of yours, come take a plate."

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1 He went up for the laden plate, Meg now busy dishing her own. In  
2 through the serving window, he could see Jaarala over by the stove, stir-  
3 ring this and shaking that. Hugh hesitated, then spoke out:

4 "Care to join us?"

5 "No, gonna eat off the stove. There's always cookin' needs watchin',"  
6 came the response. But then Jaarala more or less looked at Hugh, and  
7 fleetingly even toward Meg. "Thanks anyhow."

8 Meg and Hugh ate, across from each other at one of the long tables  
9 that seated forty-eight. Bruce and Kate were spending the holiday at her  
10 parents' in North Dakota, to show off the baby. Neil was working a shift  
11 of overtime, since so many others of the dam force were off for the day,  
12 and Rosellen said she had something she needed to finish up at home. As  
13 to Darius, in circumstances such as this Meg was apt to mention him  
14 only in cautious general terms and Hugh to speak of him not at all. They  
15 did have the food to be comfortable with, turkey a la Jaarala roasted to a  
16 moist succulence and smooth mashed potatoes and heavenly gravy and  
17 cranberry relish with tiny taste nuggets of orange peel and corn pudding  
18 an ecstatic taste of which would put you to wondering with Hugh:

19 "What does old Cookalorum in there"—he nodded in the direction  
20 of Jaarala—"do to this?"

21 "Don't I wish I could figure that out," Meg said.

22 At pie, mincemeat that made the mouth water helplessly for more, it  
23 was her turn. "I was just thinking, what Owen said about Kate that  
24 once? That if Roosevelt his very self were to come into the Rondola,  
25 she'd wait on him as if he were anybody else until he was through and  
26 then tell him, 'Save your fork, President, there's pie.'"

27 "She would, too," Hugh agreed, with a slightest chuckle.

28 When they finished the feast, Meg got up and brought back fresh  
29 cups of coffee.

30 Hugh took a strong sip, looking off out the window at the dam lights  
31 haloed by the frost in the air.

32 "We'll soon have winter here again," he said.

33 "We will," she acknowledged guardedly.

34 She nursed her cup of coffee, wondering about the long nature of  
35 this marriage, while Hugh went into the other room of his mind.

36 He did not want to deal with his suspicion toward himself that had  
37 been building as he went to work on the dredgeline traps day after day,  
38 but it was growing inescapable. The furrowed path all the way from In-  
39 verley to the Missouri River homestead—had he been an impostor, all

those years? Worse, a dabbler? A doubt such as this cut to a man's core, that's what it did. No reason it should, he kept insisting to himself. A drop of sweat, produced on hourly rate of pay, ought to be the same as any other drop of sweat, seasonally induced on a farm; but the sun-warm sweating done in a greening field surely somehow—*Christ on a slick raft, man*, Hugh told himself, *you'd better not start trying to sort out sweat*. Yet he found himself doing exactly that, these days. He was beginning to suspect that damwork was growing sinfully more comfortable to him than farming.

"A penny for them," Meg said, to try to draw him out of his well of silence.

Hugh shook his head. "They're worth positive millions." He looked across at her, a familiar look that said his thoughts would not make themselves known until later, if ever.

*Hugh is elsewhere, though, isn't he* pierced back to Meg from that pantry session with Darius. While she waited, waited, waited. Sometimes she had the patience of an imbecile, she thought.

"It would help on the employment, I'm told," Darius stared at the houseboat ceiling and said, "if I were married."

*How can they be such total bastards without even half-trying*, Proxy asked herself although it was no longer even a question, *men. They swarm all over us and they want to play house on a houseboat with us and they tell us about every time they cut their finger with a jackknife when they were little boys, and then they slink off and marry some stupe who's still got her cherry. That tightfart sister-in-law of his must've found him somebody. Neaten up the famn damily by marrying him off to whoever-the-hell. Jee Zuz, I'm so sick of the way they behave. I could just pigstick—everything* furiously piling through Proxy all but blocked out the next from Darius:

"Do you suppose you could arrange to be there?"

Proxy stayed silent, the ceiling receiving a scouring stare from her. Finally she said:

"This is some kind of Scotch joke, right?"

"Isn't this just the way of the damnable world?" Darius asked the ceiling. "Here I am, ready to enter marital bliss at last, and my intended chooses now to turn back into a coy virgin."

Proxy raised on an elbow and looked down at him. "I hope I wouldn't have to go that far." She studied him like a skeptic buying wild honey in molasses country. "Are you serious? You're serious."

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1 "I'm at least that bad. One stipulation, though." He reached up and  
2 grasped a handful of the short hair at the back of her neck. "If you've had  
3 any proposal before this one, don't tell me the comparison."

4 Proxy didn't say anything for a bit. Then:

5 "Say we go get licensed. What am I supposed to do with myself then,  
6 weave brooms?"

7 "You can do much what you like. I need some leeway myself, now  
8 and again."

9 "The Bolshie business, you mean."

10 "Ah, well, some of that. Then too, I'm a bit long in the tooth to be  
11 thoroughly domesticated. Simply because we'd be married doesn't mean  
12 we need oversee each other every minute, does it?"

13 "I could stay on working for Tom? The dancing, I mean?"

14 "Assuredly."

15 "If I once in a while see a John D., maybe a little backseat driv—?"

16 "Proxy, don't go down a list with me! There's such a thing as quitting  
17 while you're ahead, woman."

18 She moved over onto him. She licked a tantalizing course along his  
19 collarbone to the base of his throat, tongued a humid kiss into the hol-  
20 low there, brushed the effective tips of her breasts across the rise of his  
21 chest once, twice, and again, then lingered above him with a diagonal  
22 smile. "Since when?"

## Part Four

### THE SHERIFF

1991

Bastard of a case, that truck-in-the-river shenanigan had been. Long after he had lost office and everything else but age, the sheriff thought his way back and forth through it. Staring out the window of his room in the Milk River Senior Care Center, he would take moments from 1938—that sight of the pair of bodies naked as Creation; or that clodhopper undersheriff, what was his name, mewing “*Married, you bet; only not to each other*”—and pull those pieces of time apart. Lay them out, conversations, expressions on faces, all the puzzlework of investigation, and sort them over. Try again to find his way into when he was just starting on the tricky process of figuring out what Duffs had done to Duffs.

*“We can’t account for what happened any more than you can, Sheriff.”*

One of them, one of that damned family, had made that baldfaced claim to him back there at the outset.

*“And don’t think we haven’t tried.”*

Huh, they hadn’t seen trying until they saw Carl Kinnick.

Beyond his window, same as ever—samer, it somehow seemed to him anymore—Glasgow streeted off below the bare northside hill the Senior Care Center sat on. Daylight at least alleviated one of his aggravations,

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1 the rooftop sign at the east end of the old downtown. Up there on daddy  
2 longlegs supports, in the dark before dawn it was sometimes burned out  
3 to EL VELT and other times it blazoned in full pink HOTEL ROOSEVELT.  
4 Either way, that name poked at the sheriff like a neon pitchfork. He al-  
5 ways waited until daybreak took care of that sign to do what he did now,  
6 employ the wooden coathanger he used for opening the window by fit-  
7 ting the hook over the handle of the stiff latch and giving a both-hands  
8 pull to unlock it, then shoving a wooden end of the hanger against a cor-  
9 ner of the glass to push the window as open as it would go. Air the place  
10 out, let in what he could against the institutional stuffiness. Even bad  
11 weather improved this place. Actually this appeared to be a good enough  
12 day outside, although you never knew, even here in September, if the  
13 clouds were going to build in from the west and by one o'clock be storm-  
14 ing hard enough to knock down a nun.

15 Glasgow looked weathered in a lot of ways.

16 Up and down was the history of towns like this, of course, but it had  
17 been a while now since up. Things had boomed when the SAC air base  
18 came in, north of town—B-52 runways the fattest construction payroll  
19 since Fort Peck Dam. Then when it seemed as though we weren't going  
20 to have to atomize the Soviet Union after all, the flyboys picked up and  
21 went. Empty base, bigger than the parade ground of Hell, just sitting  
22 there, weeding up. Concrete all over the prairie, while the dam holding  
23 back the Missouri was of dirt; it took a lot of government doing to get  
24 things that backward, the sheriff thought.

25 Grimacing, he slightly shifted position, there in his supposedly mo-  
26 bile confinement. He had been hating this wheelchair from the precise  
27 moment his fanny first met it.

28 *"The two of them, out there that way—none of us knew anything like*  
29 *that was going on. Sheriff, we're a family who've always had our differences.*  
30 *But you never can expect something of this sort, can you. It takes a lot now,*  
31 *for us to hold our heads up."* How hard that Duff case had started off. And  
32 kept on being. He could still remember how his heart stopped a little,  
33 there on the boulder face of the dam, when he grasped the fact that the  
34 two drowned bodies in the truck were not a simple pairing. How he  
35 started, on the instant, trying to reconstruct the chain of events. The  
36 watchman heard the splash at such and such a time, then the lapse with  
37 the driver grappling down there in the dark, then the truck coming to  
38 the surface nosefirst on the crane cable, water sheening from it. But the  
39 greater water, the river, shut off the scene of before that. Of what had  
40 drawn that truck to the bottom. The only sure thing he had then, in



e — what had gone abruptly from a vehicular mishap to a full-fledged case of probably homicide, were unclad bodies—one of each, naturally—there in the truck cab. Intact-looking people, yet the spark gone from beneath the woman's crown of hair, and from behind the man's span of forehead. For his own benefit the sheriff had needed to study up some on forensic medicine in his job—the oldest dodo of a doctor always was appointed county coroner, and about half the time couldn't even be trusted on cause of death—and so he knew that each brain, under the bonecap of each person's head, was shaped something like a low leafy tree, a canopy of cortex. Under that canopy rested the brain's constituent parts, root-like. Looked at that way, the *person* was the family tree, in and of his or her self. Carrying everything that had gone before, familywise, back all the way to the dawns of history, there in that personal mental spread of tree. And for all that to just go, vanish—how people could let themselves be pruned out of life, through some weird situation they had put themselves into, was beyond Carl Kinnick. But then maybe that was why that man and that woman had ended up as victims, there in that sopping truck cab, and he as sheriff.

Ex-sheriff.

Xed out of the political picture in the '74 election. He'd done every kind of electioneering he could think of in his own county that year, then gone down to Billings for the Republican congressional candidate's last-gasp rally. This is what politics had come to, dragging yourself halfway across the state to try to get glimpsed on television along with a swarm of other tie-wearing stiff-smiling office holders or would-be's. Back in 1952 the sheriff had managed to switch parties in good style, declaring himself as Eisenhower man and contending that he of course would have been proud to remain a Democrat if that party'd had the common sense to nominate Ike instead of that eggbrain Adlai; pretty shrewd alibi, if he did say so himself. But it cost him in '74. As he drove home from that Billings rally to Glasgow on election night, defeat drummed down on the Republicans, the car radio reporting the Democrats had obliterated the GOP congressional candidate, taken most of the state legislature, won across the board. Watergate and that creep Nixon; the sheriff drove north through the night listening to every detail of the national crapstorm cascading down on anything Republican, the moment at last arriving when the radio voice said *"Even long-time sheriffs are being turned out of office in the Democratic sweep. Up in Valley County, Walk Jepperson is leading the incumbent Carl Kinnick by nearly five hundred votes . . ."*

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