

the biggest night we've had in here since the Fourth of July." Darius felt her kiss on his temple, then was alone in the celebrating mob.

A very drunk constituent tottered in next to Darius, imparted "Here's to the greatest president ever, Frank'n Eleanor Roosevelt," clinked his beer bottle against Darius's before Darius could whisk his away, then surged deeper into the saloon. *May you have a dozen noses and pepper in your snuff*; Darius bestowed after him. Yet Darius had to grant, even through the beers he himself was polishing off, that Roosevelt was only *that*, what did they call it, proximate cause of his dreadful state of mind. Plentywood. Mott. The Red Corner that had paled out. Those were the real shafts in the ribs. Mott had been soundly defeated. No, trounced. No, ground into the dirt of Sheridan County. *So much for Fusion, the fuse that fizzled. Back to square one again. No, Darius, be honest with yourself; if you can't, who will? Back before square one, that's where the movement stands now, somewhere off the damnable political checkerboard entirely. That funeral . . . the boy . . . the same with Crawford . . . why does blind chance forever have to intrude every blasted time we . . .*

Darius brought himself to, and turned to face the next tormentor awaiting him, grinning sardonically down the bar. The election bet he had lost to Tom Harry amounted to *twenty* dollars, fortunately unbeknownst to Proxy.

Hugh had not intended to be drawn into the election celebration, but wasn't it forever being said that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was magnetic? Here in the screeching Wheeler Inn therefore Hugh was; attracted by the historic moment, joining in every toast to the shantytowns' favorite President, the begetter of Fork Peck Dam, the big wheel of the New Deal. What was that joke, yes, he had it now: *A man's got to believe in something, so I believe I'll have another drink.* Beer providentially in hand. Bottle in either hand, now that he took conscious inventory. Hugh shrewdly put one back on the bar in reserve, pleased with his reasoning power. He had handed his wages over to Meg as usual, last week's payday; she'd be baffled how he had the money to go on this toot. *Confusion to our nemeses, eh, Darius?* Wiping beer foam from his mouth with the back of his hand, drunk but still capable, Hugh bit the skin there gently but firmly to keep from laughing aloud. Wouldn't do to laugh out loud at Meg.

The way Bruce had it figured, he was owed a little fun. Wasn't diving season all but over, now that Owen was putting the dredges into winter

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1 harbor? Hadn't he weathered the bends, survived the river again, sol-  
2 diered through this tricky year, ice to overheated, like a good fellow?  
3 Kate wouldn't be home until after midnight from dishing out T-bones to  
4 the election celebrants, and he could swing by and pick up Jackie from  
5 Mother and the Old Man before that and put him snug abed, then be  
6 waiting up casually to hear how Katy's night had gone. Meanwhile, there  
7 was his own to be tended to.

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9 Look, Tom Harry just had explained to Darius, think of the United  
10 States as a great big envelope, and the only states that hadn't voted for  
11 Roosevelt were the two pitiful little stamps up in the corner.

12 Darius had begun remarking what an infuriating bastard Tom Harry  
13 could be without even half trying, when he heard at his ear: "Hey, unk,  
14 celebrating the election? Old FDR sure showed them his rosy rear end,  
15 didn't he?"

16 Darius said with resignation, "Another country heard from." He  
17 made room for Bruce at the bar. "For the love of heaven, man, buy us a  
18 round before this barkeep steals the shoes off us."

19 Bruce in fact bought more than one, standing there spectating the  
20 fate of the world as argued by Darius and Tom Harry, but his heart  
21 wasn't in philosophy. Up on the bandstand, the Minstrelaires were bray-  
22 ing out dance music. A nice familiar tension started at the back of  
23 Bruce's throat. He peered over a bunch of heads and spied the whitish-  
24 blonde hair.

25 "I haven't said hello to Proxy yet," Bruce let drop to Darius. "Guess  
26 I'll go pay my regards, maybe see if she'd like to dance with a relative for  
27 a change. Be okay with you?"

28 His uncle gave him a glance, then waved a dismissing hand and re-  
29 sumed on the education of Tom Harry.

30 Maybe it was his imagination, but Bruce thought Proxy studied him  
31 like he was horseflesh when he went over to her. "Everybody is on the  
32 loose tonight, huh?" she met him with but included a slight smile. "You  
33 in here irrigating your way to health like the rest of them, Bruce?"

34 "A person can do better than lipping on a bottle," he observed, which  
35 cocked Proxy's smile a little sideways. "I know you get your fill of danc-  
36 ing," he went right on to, "but could you stand one more?"

37 She had to admit she was an eeny bit curious about Bruce. Kate hung  
38 on to this flirtface for some reason. Maybe the kid had something to flirt  
Short 39 about all the way down, so to speak.

Normal 40 Checking in Darius's direction, she made out that he was deep into



telling Tom Harry the history lesson of the workers at *The Times* of London coming back from tea break and finding that the owners had settled their labor dispute by wheeling in Gatling guns, The *bloody Times of toffee-nose* London, *man!* Which proved that not even the most elegant of the big bugs could be trusted, not FDR nor any—

To Proxy, history was one thing, commerce was another. "Sure, if you want to give it a whirl," she said to Bruce, taking care to make it seem a natural transaction. "If your money's no good, I can sic the rest of the family on you."

Hugh patted himself down three times, more surprised with each pat to find his pockets drained. Quite a feat, really, that the half of Darius's sum that he had set aside for this sort of liquid expenditure had already been expended, not to mention liquidated. He shook his head in wonder at himself. Wouldn't he be up a dry creek without a tiddle if he didn't know precisely and exactly—ah ha! prezactly—where to obtain further funds. Taking a woozy bearing toward an elaborately embroidered horseshoe on the back of a shirt, perched where its wearer could kibitz down at the Wheeler Inn's ceaseless poker game, Hugh began plowing through the press of bodies.

Proxy had danced with every kind of specimen, tall, short, neither, drunk to the gills, shy as virgins, obvious tomcats, puffy deacons in suits and vests, and once even with a traveling salesman with a wooden leg, and as far as she was concerned surprises were few and far between. Bruce was one. He danced like somebody who had been studying up on it since grade school.

"Will this do?" he asked as if he had a patent pending on it.

"Suits me," she had to admit. "In this job, people do more walking on my feet than I do."

Bruce gave her the winning grin of a kid who always counts on getting the large half of anything. "Your tootsies will get good care from me." He hugged her into him a little more, as other dancers squashed past on both sides of them. Dance steps were mostly only a matter of survival, in a crush of couples like this. Yet and so, Proxy could tell that Bruce had a first-class sense of rhythm, surprising in somebody with the male Duffs' customary build of long extremities joined with hard knots; her main complaint about Darius so far had been that his bony knees were wicked in bed.

"Not much running room on the floor tonight, is there," Bruce now

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1 observed softly, and pressed her close enough that she could feel the  
2 bump in his pants.

3 If Proxy wanted to lure a potential John D. out to the Packard, she  
4 could put herself on him like melting beeswax. That wasn't the case with  
5 Bruce. She wasn't volunteering much, but he was front and center on her  
6 and exploring for more.

7 "Speaking of room, how about a little breathing space?" she made it  
8 sound like a suggestion.

9 Bruce's concentration was elsewhere. Among his fascinations were  
10 Proxy's slacks. *Peter-cheaters. Is that why she always wears them, to string*  
11 *things out a while longer?* Then her bountiful blouse. *She's got a full house*  
12 *there, for sure.* Maybe it was his imagination again, but he believed that  
13 her nipples were standing out more and more at attention, the cozier  
14 they danced.

15 Proxy got his attention by pulling on his earlobe.

16 "This is not such a real great idea," she told him.

17 "Bought this dance fair and square, didn't I?" he murmured, looking  
18 at her as if spooning her up. "So I get to lead. Relax and put yourself on  
19 automatic, why not."

20 Instead, she lifted onto her tiptoes to peer around Bruce toward the  
21 bar. The back of Darius's head was still evident as he stayed busy being  
22 disputatious with Tom Harry. The swaying throng of other dancers was  
23 solidly elbow to elbow surrounding her and Bruce, which was the only  
24 way you could get away with this. She smiled her smile of long practice  
25 at Bruce and decided to give him a buckle job.

26 He appeared startled, then thrilled, then beyond that, when her right  
27 hand slid away from his back and crept around front and gripped onto  
28 his belt buckle, riding there jammed recklessly between them as they  
29 danced closer than close, then slowly the fingering reach down behind  
30 the buckle, touching exploratorily, skin greeting skin, the tips of her fin-  
31 gers cupping down over the tip of his hard-on and staying there.

32 There was not much motion to dancing like this, but what motion  
33 there was Bruce could feel with embarrassing intensity.

34 "Proxy, whoa," she could hear the strain in his whisper, "can we go—"

35 "Hnn nn. A little buckle-fuck will fix you right up, don't you think?"  
36 she whispered mockingly back. "You bought yourself a dance. This is a  
37 dance."

38 In alarm, agony, and a dizziness that seemed to extend all the way  
39 down to that place in his throat, Bruce thought the music would never  
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let up. The instant it did, he was saying thickly: "Come on now, I'll wait out back or wherever until you—"

"Bzzz," Proxy said pleasantly but drew away, hand and all. "Buzz off, Brucie. That's as far as this merry-go-round goes." She crinkled her nose at him, which made her look like Delilah must have in her prime, with a peroxide rinse. "Think that over the next time you try buy a dance and turn it horizontal." The last he got from her was the sight of the provocative back of her slacks vanishing toward the dance line at the end of the bar.

As the Minstrelaires tore into another tune, unrepeatable thoughts filled Bruce's mind while he jostled his way back to the bar and more or less blindly came out at the elbow of Darius again.

Bruce blinked. On reflection, this was maybe not the best spot to have ended up. On further reflection, it might be even worse if he slunk out of here without putting up a front to Darius. Besides, Darius's back was still doctrinairely turned to the dancefloor and its FDR skipjays. Tom Harry had departed to deposit the first installment of the evening's take in his office safe, but Darius didn't really look as if he was in the market for a new arguing partner at the moment. Bruce squared himself up and moved in shoulder to shoulder with his uncle.

"Champ dancer," Darius greeted him and shoved a bottle of beer to him.

"Needed that," Bruce said after a swig and a sunshine smile at Darius.

"You're also a damn chancer," Darius said.

The smile dropped off Bruce as if cut free with a knife.

"Don't be fiddling around with Proxy," Darius told him softly. He took a beer swig of his own, but his eyes never left Bruce's. After a long deliberate swallow, he said: "As they say about suicide, there's no future in it."

"Hey, what. You've got this wrong," Bruce tried to muster. "A turn around the dancefloor is all it was."

Darius kept on eyeing him. *Couldn't face a fact if his life depended on it. Hugh's old failing.*

Birdie Hinch nearly jumped out of his skin, and did hop down from his perch in poker table territory, when Hugh spoke up behind him.

"Birdie, I believe you have something of mine."

Birdie rubbed at his nose with the back of his hand, taking a racoon-like peek at Hugh as he did so. "You told me don't give it back to you, unless you was sober."

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1 "Sober is a relative term. Now, if you please, fork it over."

2 "Stone cold sober, is what you said."

3 "This is no time to turn scrupulous, man." Hugh stepped closer,  
4 teetered over him. His face was nearly in Birdie's. Breath like a brewery  
5 on overtime. Birdie bit a lip uneasily.

6 "Birdie, that money." Hugh was frowning, considerably at himself  
7 for asking back the safekeeping sum, the half that was left of Darius's  
8 payoff to him; but preponderantly at Birdie, righteous little banker all of  
9 a sudden. "I need it. Right now. Let's go, wherever you've stashed it."

10 When Birdie Hinch did not move, Hugh's control went. "Damn it!"  
11 he burst out. "Don't make me give you a ~~knuckle~~ sandwich! My money,  
12 go get—"

13 "Two can fight, Hugh." Birdie swiftly kned the taller man in the  
14 groin, then turned and ran.

15 "Whu—!" Hugh let out, half doubled over. Birdie hadn't laid into  
16 him very hard, but it didn't take much there.

17 He stayed hunched a moment, until fury overcame his hurt. Still  
18 clutching himself, he slowly leaned back and craned as high as he could,  
19 to catch sight of the fleeing back of Birdie as it appeared and disappeared  
20 through the maze of people in the Wheeler Inn. Birdie was squirming  
21 through the outer edge of the crowd, nearly to the door, as Hugh took  
22 out after him.

23  
24 "—didn't mean anything by it, that's the way people dance," Bruce was  
25 saying.

26 "—not accusing you of anything, merely informing you for your  
27 own health," Darius was saying.

28  
29 "If it isn't my horseshoe honey." Proxy gave Birdie the little tickle in the  
30 ribs reserved for regular customers. "Look, I'm real sorry, Oklahoma, but  
31 tonight has gotten kind of busy."

32 "This ain't about that," Birdie rattled out. Although he sorely wished  
33 it was. "Hugh is on a tear. Somebody better do something about him be-  
34 sides me." Birdie's words were still in the air as he ducked back into the  
35 Blue Eagle crowd and wove for the back door.

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37 Hugh swayed in the front doorway, still fumbling at his pants. He'd had  
38 to pause at the alley to take a leak, dimly relieved that he still could. Now  
39 he sorted the sardined clientele of the Blue Eagle for Birdie. His inspec-

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tion, though, caught on a piece of headgear visible just above the others at the bar. That Dutch-boy cap of Darius's, or whatever it was.

*Everybody I know is sartorial but me*, a great pity toward himself came over Hugh. Birdie forgotten, he lunged off toward the bar and the cap and Darius.

"—if that's the way you feel about it," Bruce was sounding hurt.

"—the only way there is to feel about it," Darius was sounding grim, "so the next time you think you can play twinkletoes with—"

"The two of you better quit feeling around," Proxy broke in, "and get the net out for— Speak of the devil."

"With the tongues of men and of angels, and cymbals and tinkles and such, eh?" Hugh barged in to the bunch, proud to declaim with the best of them. Old Ninian Duff and the Reverend Nevertheless Milne, between the two of them hadn't they done the guts out of half a dozen Bibles? Family line. It always told. Which brought Hugh's thoughts around to Bruce, unexpectedly present. "Where's Jackie? Why're'nt you home?"

"Mother's taking care of him, don't goddamn worry yourself about that," Bruce fumed. "She can take a crack at you next."

"In due course," his father granted, giving him a tragic wink.

Darius, who himself had been putting away drinks like a camel this evening, looked perplexed at the load Hugh had on. "Hugh," he asked in wonder, "do you tamp it into yourself?"

By now Hugh had focused onto Proxy. His head nodding in grave consideration, he asked as though concerned:

"And how're tricks, Proxy?"

"Hey, farmer." As she spoke it, it amounted to a summons to etiquette. "The last I heard, it doesn't cost anything to be civil."

Hugh looked surprised, gallantly wounded, and sly all at once. Darius was about to say that they had all had enough of an evening when Bruce beat him to it. "Come on, Dad, FDR is probably already in bed, let's us—"

"The election!" Hugh exclaimed, remembering. "Darius, you've ever been quite a follower of politics, haven't you. Always trying to make new britches out of old curtains, back there at the Clydeside? Tell us, as a connoisseur of things political. What'd you think of the election?"

"Unk is in mourning," Bruce could not resist.

"No!" Hugh let out, all amazement. "Do you suppose the big bugs

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1 conspired at things again, Darius?" Hugh brought his right thumb up to  
2 eye level, looked at it with fixation, then tapped the pad of it signifi-  
3 cantly with his opposite forefinger. "As the moron said over the empty  
4 mustard jar, 'This has all the fingerprints of a hidden hand.'"

5 "Hugh, you—" Darius grabbed out at his brother.

6 "What's going on here?" a new voice shouldered in. "Been getting re-  
7 ports you people are about at each other's throats."

8 The undersheriff, Peyser, was big enough to obtain the immediate at-  
9 tention of even Hugh.

10 "Eh, the harness bull of justice! Watch out now, miscreants. Officer,  
11 sir, I wish to report a matter of considerable missing mon—"

12 "Hush, Hugh." Darius forced a smile at Peyser and squeezed the  
13 back of Hugh's neck as hard as he could with one hand.

14 Bruce, blinking a mile a minute at the sudden lawman, stepped in  
15 close on the other side, where his father stood wobbling. Proxy, the only  
16 one in the bunch who appeared to Peyser to be in a sane condition, was  
17 pursed up like a radish tester.

18 In the background, Peyser saw Tom Harry throw up his hands and  
19 stalk off to the farthest end of the saloon.

20 Shifting his weight, the undersheriff studied this collection of Duffs,  
21 then glanced over his shoulder. Sheriff Kinnick himself was in town  
22 tonight, trying to hold the lid on Wheeler. The sheriff was working one  
23 side of the street while Peyser was supposed to be laying down the law to  
24 the other. *These rangutangs know how to celebrate, so a certain amount of*  
25 *bottle behavior we just have to put up with*, Kinnick had enunciated the  
26 night's policy. *But whenever any of them reach the fuck-you stage, that's it.*  
27 *Toss them in the cooler.* On the other hand, the sheriff wasn't the one who  
28 had to live in the same town with these Blue Eagle hammerheads.

29 "You going to take him home and hang him out to dry," Peyser fi-  
30 nally rumbled, "or do I have to?"

31 "We're about to have the matter in hand," Darius said quickly, "are  
32 we not, Bruce."

33 "Sure are," the younger man brazened. Peyser looked at him nar-  
34 rowly; he'd thought this was the trucker one, Neil, but no, it was the for-  
35 mer madcap motorcyclist. With great obviousness Bruce was gripping  
36 his father's arm energetically. "Else what's a family for, huh, Dad?"

37 Hugh glared straight ahead at the undersheriff. "WHERE'S MY  
38 MONEY, YOU TIN-STAR FUCKAROON?" he bellowed.

Short 39 Peyser warily considered him, meanwhile putting a hand in his back  
Jormal 40 pocket where he carried handcuffs. The guy really was as pie-eyed as a

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boiled owl. The undersheriff looked from the drunken one to the twitchy set on either side of him; Peyser would have felt a lot better about this if the high ~~muckety~~ muck Duff from the dam, Owen, was around.

"They can handle it, Norm," Proxy spoke up, not quite sure why she bothered. "Honest."

"They better. That sheriff of mine would just as soon billyclub a specimen like this as look at him."

"We're on our way," Darius vowed. "After you, constable."

Proxy, though, was the first to move in the wake of the big undersheriff. "Tom is going to cream his jeans if I don't get back on the dance line right now. Nighty-night, all," she left them with, one last pang to Bruce.

"If I help you steer him out of here, can you handle him home, do you think?" Darius asked as though thinking might be a new event for Bruce.

"You bet," Bruce maintained, stonily meeting his uncle's eyes.

Stepping around to start breaking a trail to the door, Darius glimpsed the open gap at the front of Hugh's pants. "Damn it, man, you're unbuttoned. You'll get us all arrested yet for letting your steed out of your barn."

"Eh?"

Darius let out a royal sigh. "Here, I'll do you up." He moved close in front of Hugh to shield the doing of it and began to button Hugh's fly.

Hugh swayed, then rasped out:

"Aren't you the clever whore, too."

Bruce froze, figuring this was it, Duff blood was about to cascade.

Darius's hands stopped, then did up the last button of Hugh's fly. As he stepped back from his brother his voice shook but he managed to say: "Better go home with the boy now, Hugh. You've had a mouthful more than you should've."

In the morning he met himself in the mirror and backed away. If beauty was skin-deep, Hugh Duff had definitely been skinned. Even his reflection looked shaky, and his facial color was off, except where it streaked like peppermint in his eyeballs.

Never given to easy confessions, even Hugh had to admit this was beyond dismal. The record for morning-after heebie-jeebies. Reluctantly he tried running his tongue around the inside of his cottony mouth, only halfhearing what Meg was telling him from the other side of the

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*change to:  
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1 kitchen until he caught the words *cannot stand to be under the same roof*  
2 *anymore, when you are as you were last night. Hugh. Hugh, I am going to*  
3 *have to leave—*

4 "That won't be necessary, Margaret. I'll go."

5 "You?" Meg erupted. "You? Where is there for you to go?"

6 He turned around to her, her outburst stoppered at the sight of his  
7 face. Hugh had a look on him she had not fully seen since his days of  
8 courting her in Inverley.

9  
10 Owen was as incredulous as she had been.

11 "He took off out of here just like that? Where the hell to?"

12 His mother deliberately looked away from him before she answered:

13 "He said to tell you he's gone to college."

14  
15 The jag boss searched his suitcase, then the chest of drawers, then under  
16 the mattress, for the third morning in a row.

17 Hugh watched him, melancholy for them both. Since the jag boss, a  
18 thickset back-of-the-Yards Chicagoan named O'Shea, stayed with him  
19 day and night, when exactly could Hugh have conjured alcohol into the  
20 room? Hugh all too well knew he had another twenty-five days ahead  
21 here at the Carteret Curative Institute, but O'Shea evidently was here for  
22 all time, inspector general of the satchels of drunks.

23 "Clean as an angel's drawers," Hugh's keeper announced, also for the  
24 third morning in a row. He cocked his ear to the sound of the cart in the  
25 hallway. "And here comes your slug of concrete."

26 Hugh wasn't saying much. The heavy gray concoction, which had to  
27 be taken every two hours, tasted like bad whiskey, hot malted milk, and  
28 chalk. It crossed his mind that not even Darius's money, soberly be-  
29 seeched out of Birdie Hinch for absolutely this purpose, could buy flavor  
30 here.

31 In subsequent days Hugh Duff went through moods he hadn't  
32 known were in him. He jumped O'Shea the fifth morning—the relent-  
33 less cleanliness of angel's drawers no doubt accounted for it—and after  
34 O'Shea pinned him and then stepped back with a grin, Hugh realized  
35 where he stood. *Christ, man, he could've cleaned your clock six ways to Sun-*  
36 *day.* Watching his behavior from then on, Hugh without a stumble ad-  
37 vanced to shots in the arm, hypodermics of pink something or other,  
38 and onward to jiggers of the nasty yellow goop which was the Carteret  
39 secret remedy; all of it dope of some kind, he figured, but he didn't care  
40 as long as it did the job on him. Outside the Institute windows, Chicago

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blared in the night. After the first week the jag boss was gone; in his place, dollops of wax which could be used to plug the ears if North Rush Street sang too temptingly. The Carteret philosophy prided itself on going hard on hardcase drinkers: this is the belly of the booze beast, this is Jonah's bed in the whale, and you had better lay stretched there scared and sober in the dark to make yourself know you can survive it. Hugh ingested on schedule, sat up straight in the Amen Corner sessions every afternoon along with meatpacking heirs and Southern cotton traders. After two weeks of this, the blessed midpoint, he was granted permission to go out to a movie with the other inmates who had been toeing the line. With a corporal's guard of O'Shea and a couple of orderlies, they trooped around the corner to the Windsor Theatre. To the bafflement of the other moviegoers, at nine o'clock sharp, fifty men simultaneously took out little vials and drank them in one toss, their community gulp of the Carteret cure.

When the first issue of the magazine reached him by somebody slyly shoving it along the counter of the Downtowner Cafe in Glasgow, the sheriff had a heart-stopping moment over the opening frieze-photo of taxi dancers and damworkers draped over one another and the big black-type underline 10,000 MONTANA RELIEF WORKERS MAKE WHOOPEE ON SATURDAY NIGHT. Then he remembered he'd just been safely reelected for the next four years.

Even so, Carl Kinnick felt as though he was being scrubbed down with gravel as he flipped his way through the magazine piece. *Cowless cow towns—rickety as git-up-and-git—saloons wide open—all-night whoop-eries—taxi dancers lope around with their fares in something halfway between the old barroom stomp and the lackadaisical stroll of the college boys at Roseland—Red Light suburb—the only idle bedsprings are the broken ones—Franklin Roosevelt has a Wild West—*

That last one, Wild West, the magazine smart alecks managed to use seven times in nine pages, by the sheriff's fuming tally. On the other hand, they counted up only six shantytowns for Fort Peck, missing the actual total by ten or so.

Sheriff Kinnick sat there not knowing what to think, looking at the dead-accurate pictures (including the one of some anonymous blonde number tossing down a drink under that damned FDR campaign poster in the Blue Eagle) and the haywire lingo, until he turned to the very front of the magazine. There the editors announced that in sending their camera eye to explore this exciting time in history that would be known

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as the American century, they were presenting Fort Peck Dam on the cover. Although it wasn't. The structure pictured, looking like the kind of massive parapet Mussolini would love to strut on while he made speeches, was the concrete piers of the spillway gates, three miles away from the actual dirt dam. This, said the editors and the cover of the new magazine, was LIFE. Well, maybe.

*The truth is not in that woman.*

Meg, masked with I-am-after-all-a-Milne-of-Inverley manners, watched as Proxy held the attention of Hugh and Darius and even Owen and apparently even Charlene. ← space out

*Although, really, it must be—she doesn't expend any of it when she talks.*

"... but that's how those dance marathons are," Proxy concluded with a flourish, looking around the Sunday dinner table at them all. "Real long." This latest story had been about the time in Hibbing, Minnesota, when she and her partner danced for so many hours straight that the contest judges gave up and paid them to quit.

"You've got more constitution than I have, then," Charlene said as if comparing histories. "I'd have perished of boredom first, Prox."

"Just in case any of us take up marathon dancing, what did you do to keep yourself occupied?" Owen prodded Proxy along some more. He always liked to see how far out on a limb she would let herself get, when she started storying.

"Umm, nothing worth mentioning," was all he could draw out of her, though. Proxy tried to watch her step where Owen was concerned—after all, who in her right mind would want to cross tomahawks with Charlene?

"Spent the time reading the Good Book, naturally," Darius interposed.

"You're one to talk," that brought him from Hugh. "You'd have parroted poetry the whole while."

"That reminds me," Proxy sailed on again, "do you know this one?" Prim as a spelling-bee contestant, she reeled off:

*"She offered her honor,  
He honored her offer;  
And so all night long,  
it was on 'er and off 'er."*



## BUCKING THE SUN

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Charlene giggled at that more than Owen thought was strictly deserved, but then he let loose a laugh, too. Hugh and Darius gave their indecipherable chuckles, so close to identical. Meg pasted on what she was pretty sure was the last Sunday-best smile in her and reminded herself that she had a full week ahead to get over Proxy before they all went through this again. For the benefit of Hugh, which was to say in the furtherance of his Carteret cure, she had enlisted Darius and Owen and Charlene for these round-robins of what amounted to sentry duty, and that meant putting up with Proxy, *bag of yarn that she is*. Meg fiddled with her spoon and then her fork and listened to the January freshet of wind in the kitchen stovepipe as the others razed Proxy's taste in poetry.

*So, happy 1937, Hugh Carlyle Duff. Year one of your Reform Act. When we shall see whether the mend holds.* For now, she would shoo them all into the Blue Room and follow up with more coffee and poundcake, whenever Proxy shut up.

*She thinks she is somebody*, Proxy retaliated against the fidgets of Meg's fork and spoon. *Face it though, Prox, there had to have been a time back in that thistle patch they're all from when she could have had her pick of Hugh or Darius. So maybe she is.*

Janus is the two-faced god, and while Kate could not have specifically told you that, she knew all about the fickle behavior of his namesake month. Snow and blow, clear away and then gray, with mocking icicle grins hung on the Rondola's eaves—this was January for you. Every start of every year of her life had taken place in such weather, Fort Peck weather, and Bruce's talk of Louisiana and California notwithstanding, anywhere with a sunshine coast and warm water to be dived, she would not be surprised to find herself still here when the next ice age came by. Although, she did mention to herself in this mood, there were women who punched their own tickets in life, got themselves to elsewhere; Proxy was well traveled, you could say that for her in more ways than one.

January, though, probably made even Proxy hole up on the houseboat, Kate figured. Snuggle in there with Darius; breakfast, lunch, and dinner in bed, she wouldn't be surprised. Noontimes past, Bruce and herself used to about beat down the door getting at each other, hadn't they. Not so much anymore. Jackie's presence in the shack, that of course made a difference. But even on those occasions when Meg, bless her

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1 cactus heart, kept Jackie a while extra, it wasn't a sure thing that Bruce  
2 would find his way home in time for an opportunity together. Kate  
3 wanted to be fair to him on this score of settling down, so-called, in  
4 some parts of life and not others. Bruce was always going to go around  
5 inviting lightning, as Owen said about him. Yet he was a good enough  
6 father toward Jackie. Better than that, actually. When he was around.

7 For now, all that Kate decided was to take January in sips, times like  
8 this when meal business went slack and she could carry a cup of coffee  
9 for herself over by the cafe's front window. She rubbed the usual spot in  
10 the window frost to see out again. Out there, the river, iced and white,  
11 the source of her chronic dream of somebody—lately it had been Jackie  
12 and her, both—tied to the ferried wagon the way Grandmère Henriette  
13 had been. Kate didn't put much credit in dreams. Didn't think she did,  
14 anyway. Nearer in view, cut in a long channel pointing toward the Ron-  
15 dola, was the winter harbor, the dredges moored there. She remembered  
16 every detail of how her father, late each year when the Missouri grew  
17 dangerous with ice, would skid the flatbottomed ferry out onto the river-  
18 bank, drain the converted Fordson tractor engine that powered its wind-  
19 less, take down the bridle pulley from the long cable across the river, and  
20 begin to wait out winter. All the harbors in the head.

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24 Neil climbed down from the truck into the snow, only ankle-  
25 deep here on the ridge above the Duff homestead. Winter had  
26 swept through without murderous cold, at least to this point of early  
27 March, and after testing the weather he decided he could work without  
28 his coat on.

29 He clomped across the ditch, his overshoes scrunching on the dry  
30 snow, and went over to the white lump on the prairie. Owen and he had  
31 taken care to pile the spilled lumber good and tight before they towed  
32 the truck in to Glasgow last fall, and the stack looked intact, but even in  
33 this mild, open winter it had collected a sizable bank of snow and so the  
34 boards were bound to be frozen to each other. The worst was going to be  
35 how wet his gloves would get, mauling the boards out of the snow, but  
36 he had a spare old pair somewhere under the seat of the truck.

37 He'd had every intention of plunging right at the work, but he found  
38 himself stalling, giving in. At last he turned around and took the look he  
39 had been dreading, down the long slope to the river and the stand of  
40 trees beyond the stark patch that had been the homestead buildings. The

## BUCKING THE SUN

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leaves, in the time since he stared so desperately into them that eclipse dawn, had turned and fallen and the cottonwoods stood bare and skeletal. *My God, what if it'd happened this time of year. That green thing would still be crawling in my—*

He knew it was batty to resent the blind bad luck of being singled out by the sun. That one unerasable moment here when all he'd done was to glance up from the verge of the road in curiosity about the out-of-kilter sunrise, and bang: everything turned upside down and a hell of a repair bill on the truck. A happenstance he couldn't have done anything about, he'd told himself over and over. But there were times ever since then when he wanted to take a swing at something. While Rosellen had chosen the exact same time to turn fierce about sticking with Fort Peck, instead of seeing about life for themselves somewhere less treacherous. He couldn't put his finger on it, why he and she couldn't seem to connect better on this one argument. As he kept telling her, trestle work and hauling at the dam weren't going to last, so before awful long she was going to have to argue with the calendar as well as him about their time to go.

He discovered he was shivering, and turned and dived to work on the lumber pile.

*In* a land usually beholden to wind, today's breeze was only the gentlest of stirrings. Come, this breeze laughed, help me chase the grass and set the wildflowers to jiggling on their stem legs.

Laughing along with it, Juanita and Gilbert next . . .

*Nhn, what do they do next, old Nita and Gil, about whom I barely give a hang?* Leaning back from her typewriter, Rosellen ran both hands through her hair and checked on the sundial of spring she had been watching out the Ad Building window: a patch of snow, gone gray and ugly, which clung to the side of a coulee between the Corps townsite and Wheeler. That snowbank dwindled markedly these April days, but spring was coming more easily out there then it was on her pages. *So, are stories going into hibernation on me? That's interesting. What would be the opposite, when warm weather—* She got out KNOW YOUR ANTONYMS! and there hibernation's reverse was, "aestivation: a state of dormancy or torpor during the summer or periods of drought." She had to chuckle. That could explain a lot about Juanita's and Gilbert's reluctance to show any life on the paper this noon hour, they were out there aestivating.

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*insert  
drop cap*

1 Antonyms put aside, she glanced around again, needing to keep  
 2 watch so that Owen didn't suddenly show up over her shoulder wanting  
 3 his dratted monthly dredging report and become curious about what  
 4 was in her typewriter. She'd tried to get the report off her desk and onto  
 5 his, but Max Sangster was in with him and they were talking over some-  
 6 thing about the dam hot and heavy. The clock wasn't doing her any fa-  
 7 vors either. Why was noon always the shortest hour?

8 Daydreamy as a glazed figurine, Rosellen did not look like someone  
 9 with all of life on her desk. Yet there she sat, steaming to know people's  
 10 sensations, stories, the private roads of their lives. Right now what she re-  
 11 ally wished she had the story of, knew how to tell, was Neil running into  
 12 the eclipse the way he had. But he was like a porcupine about that one  
 13 topic. When she had tried to coax details out of him, he asked her right  
 14 back whether she wanted to know about it or just write about it. *Both.*  
 15 *All.* She was surprised he would even put the question like that. *Neil,*  
 16 *sugarboat, why won't you turn loose of that eye episode? I know it must have*  
 17 *been awful for you at the time. But it didn't even leave a sty, did it?* He  
 18 shook his head. *Then why—?* All he would say after that was that she  
 19 should stick to making stories up.

20 Stickum wasn't the only ingredient, whatever Neil thought. Kate had  
 21 told her last fall that the famous photographer ate supper in the Rondola  
 22 every night with GONE WITH THE WIND propped open in front of her.  
 23 That book was longer than the Bible, and a good deal more windy, de-  
 24 spite its title. Yet people read it until they almost passed out from the ef-  
 25 fort. Disgruntled—*is there grunted?*—Rosellen took a hard look into her  
 26 typewriter at Juanita and Gilbert and the laughing breeze, and pulled  
 27 out the sheet of paper and crumpled it.

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 31 Time to move the circus. Owen as ringmaster, fillmaster, scarcely  
 32 took time to breathe; his figure, thin as a rake, but that beehive  
 33 of a head, seemed to be wherever anyone looked while twenty total miles  
 34 of dredgeline were being uncoupled in twelve-and-a-half-foot sections of  
 35 massive pipe and hauled by an army of trucks to new strutworks waiting  
 36 on the downstream side of the dam. All four dredges, Owen's great white  
 37 wagons of the Missouri, were going to parade one final time through the  
 38 river channel between the halves of the dam and take ready positions,  
 Short 39 downstream, to gnaw at the river's banks and bottom afresh. From here  
 Normal 40 on out, all of the dredging would happen downstream, because after the

start of this summer the river would be plugged. No more channel, once the boulder-and-gravel barrier was dumped into place at the upstream face. Even by Owen's impatient standards, the mouth of the channel there was already changing in startling fashion; an eight-hundred-foot trestle, sudden forest of pilings shooting up out of the water, was going into place in the gap between the dam halves.

With this final trestle and its railroad track being highballed into place, the dam site now from, say, famous-photographer altitude looked like a model-railroad layout: the track vaulting the bottomland and river on the high pilings of the new trestle and following the east bluff of the river around to the downstream top of the dam, then crossing back over the water on the steel truss bridge there. This oval was going to be used relentlessly for closure of the river, trains steaming out onto the trestle with barrier material and exiting back across the truss bridge, the ground continuing with train after train until the river no longer flowed. Owen and Sangster and the other engineers looked forward to it like kids promised a train set for good behavior.

Yet, as he prowled his pipelines and booster stations and dredges, he had the sensation of leaving a neighborhood he loved, this upstream stretch of the river where the earth had been made to flow into new form. For certain, he and his tons of apparatus had changed the neighborhood no little bit. Dredging cuts lay around him like square flooded fields. Time, though, to go.

Owen paused, to pull out his Eversharp and then a notebook. He had two of them going now, one in each shirt pocket, for the day-by-day dredging and for the big move downstream. He quirked a little smile at himself as he made sure he had the right notebook. To readily tell them apart from here on, he wrote in crisp lead on the cover of the one for the move:

#### EXODUS.

Someone on high, whom he correctly suspected to be Owen, had taken pity on Darius this past winter and instead of freezing half to death at ice cutting, he had been merely chilled to the marrow every day in a pour job down in the tunnel-gate shafts. Then and now, concrete was being poured furiously, and to Darius's surprise, with hoisting cranes going overhead and the operatic clamor of machinery and the odd crannies of workspots down in the shaft forms and the way the silolike walls took gradual curvaceous form, the work reminded him of shipyard life more than anything had yet at Fort Peck. Now that the weather was momen-

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1 tarily so winsome, though, he lingered up top before going down with  
2 the other two bullgang men for the next batch of pour.

3 "Duff, what the dickens they doing up there?" Rosocki called up out  
4 of the bottom of the shaft to him. "We been waiting forever on this pour.  
5 Tell them to get their ass in gear, would you, so we can be out of this go-  
6 pher hole."

7 Darius peered around over his shoulder. Down the dam slope from  
8 him and the shaft mouth, a driver of a cement truck had swung out onto  
9 the running board to take a dubious look at the rise where he had to  
10 back up. Darius watched the rear of the truck approaching as the driver  
11 revved it in reverse gear, but then the vehicle shuddered ahead, short of  
12 the pouring hopper, before the driver could get the brakes on. The fore-  
13 man Miliron was on his way over, looking dire.

14 Darius reported into the shaft, "They're trying to teach the truck  
15 manners," then went down the ladder steps nailed to two-by-fours of the  
16 shaftwall form with the odd shambling grace that always made others  
17 stop and watch him, a scarecrow dancing ballet. As Darius touched foot  
18 to the bottom of the shaft, he heard Miliron yell at the truck driver,  
19 "We're behind on this pour! Damn it, get that thing up here!"

20 Darius chuckled and turned toward Rosocki and Cates to say some-  
21 thing about the universal tone of voice of foremen, Clydeside to Fort  
22 Peck. As he did, a shadow fell over the three of them, instantly followed  
23 by the sound of metal slammed into metal.

24 Rosocki and Cates squeezed themselves against the side of the shaft  
25 as if papering themselves to it, Darius flinging himself into their clutch-  
26 ing arms. The pouring hopper, struck by the truck, plunged into the  
27 shaft with a grating roar.

28 The crash deafened them for a moment, then the stunned three  
29 stared at the shaftwall. The hopper as it plummeted had scraped down  
30 the wall, breaking like matchsticks every step of the two-by-four ladder  
31 Darius had just shimmied down.

32 "God Almighty had his hand on your shoulder that time, Duff,"  
33 Rosocki said shakily.

34 Darius said absolutely nothing. Even after an extension ladder was  
35 brought and he and Cates and Rosocki climbed out to the scared apolo-  
36 gies of the truckdriver and the grudging commendation of the foreman  
37 for not getting themselves killed, Darius still did not have a word to say.

38 That night, someone lodged a wrench in the gearteeth of the proj-  
Short 39 ect's biggest hoisting crane, crippling it.

ormal 40

. . .

By the tens of tons, rock was flowing onto the dam now. Trainloads of quarry stone were being brought in from two hours away, at Snake Butte—as the name promised, rattlesnakes accompanied the cargoes of boulders, and caused everybody at Fort Peck to think more carefully about where they stepped—and then the loads were discharged on the slope at the west end of the dam, where heavy equipment was beginning to place all this rock to form riprap, the breakwater-like artificial shore which would withstand the waves of Fort Peck Lake when the dam filled.

Bruce wished rock had never been invented. All spring, he had been diving to the footings of the new trestle, which straddled the river at the upstream face of the dam and in effect was going to be the haul road for the mountain of rock as riprap was emplaced on the full four-mile width of the dam. It was the middle of May now. The engineers, Owen very much included, demanded that the trestle be done by the start of June so that they could run their rock trains across it to the eastern half of the dam; then by the end of June, they wanted to be able to *stand* trains on top of the trestle and merrily dump boulders and gravel over the side until they had the river plugged. All well and good and dandy-fine for the engineers, it seemed to Bruce; for him, it meant underwater handling of braces and bolting in the hardest part of the river, the heart of the current. Unlike Sangster's truss bridge at the downstream end of the channel, an elegant cat's cradle of steel girders that suspended itself across the river, the trestle walked through the river on stilts, actually thick wooden pilings, and every one of them carried brace specifications that made Bruce sweat beads of his soul. If he messed up, went woozy from the bends and forgot to bolt down one end of a braceplate, then when the weight of a sitting trainload of rock came onto—he didn't want to think about it, and couldn't get it off his mind.

Up through the water, aloft in the strutwork of the trestle, Neil had been called in as brace monkey. Swaying over the river on a safety belt—he swore he could feel the thrum of the current, the Missouri humming in the wood of the pilings—he didn't like the channel trestle project any better than Bruce did.

Floodwater, they both gladly could have done without.

In that pleasantest spring, the water trickling down rock faces and soft coulees began to swell as the snowpack in the Rocky Mountains turned to mush. Down a 50,000-square-mile slab of the continent the trickles began to feed the creeks, Blacktail and Newlin and English and Cut Bank and Hound and Cow and some hundreds of others that were the

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capillaries of the vast geography of drainage from Bozeman to St. Louis. One by one the myriad creeks began to lift the rivers, the basic trio of Gallatin, Madison, and Jefferson in their collecting-basin valleys of southmost Montana; then, beyond where those three formed into the headwaters of the Missouri, north across six hundred miles, other river after other river muscularly began to contribute high water, the Dearborn, the Smith, the Sun, the Teton, the Marias, the Judith, the Musselshell. By the time the water reached Fort Peck, several hundred brimming creeks and ten enlarged rivers were running as one.

*Great, just sonofabitching great. The one spring when we could use a little cooperation from the river, it's running twice as much water as it did other springs. Where does it even get it all from, the colonel and the major peeing their pants about the schedule? Sangster is going to have conniptions if they have to shut down on bracing that trestle. I'm going to have something myself if all this sets back the plug date. Where the hell am I supposed to put fill by then if the channel isn't—*

"Eh, Owen. A minute of your time?"

Hugh had headed him off before he could reach the government pickup and start for the briefing at the trestle. "Dad," he acknowledged, trying to think why his father wasn't over at the dredgeline poking traps. Christ, was the dredgeline clogged? Had the Old Man and Birdie let—

"There's a job I want on," said his father, just like that.

*At long wonderful last.* Owen tried not to spoil this by looking too pleased. "Well, sure, good. Anything short of my own, just name it."

"Snakecatcher."

"Sn—? Are you out of your pickled mind?"

"Not pickled anymore, remember?"

*But what's the difference, if you're going to behave like this.* Owen worked his mouth without saying anything, trying to study his father afresh. Now that Hugh had turned dry, he went around with the willed aplomb of a firewalker. But, thought Owen, refurbished dignity or rectitude or whatever the blazes it was didn't particularly qualify him for—"Dad, listen. Since when do you know anything about handling rattle-snakes?"

Unfazed, Hugh told him:

"My idea of it is, it would give a man something to concentrate on."

Short 39 Snagboats were on busy duty upstream from the dam channel, grappling  
Normal 40 out the most threatening tree trunks and logs before they could build up

dangerously against the shins of the trestle. Still, everyone aboard the diving barge was keeping half an eye on that stretch of the river, colonel's briefing or no colonel's briefing. If, say, a floating forest of big cottonwoods suddenly showed up around that bend of the Missouri, there was going to be a unanimous footrace for the high ground of the dam.

By now even the color of the river looked mean, a sullen muddy tone as if lava was corrupting the water.

"But you can see enough to work down there?" Colonel Parmenter asked.

"Yeah," Bruce answered with untimely honesty. "Just enough."

All in God's world they wanted from this day, the Corps officers and the engineers and the apprehensive diving barge crew and for that matter Bruce, was the one more diving shift it would take to finish bracing the footings of the channel trestle. If they could get the bracing done, in Sangster's estimation, everything ought to hold. If they didn't, and higher water and a jam-up of snags and other trash found the right pressure to put against an unbraced section, then—Sangster mourned out in *Dear John* tones—that's all she wrote.

"I still say we need to wait and see how long before the flood crest is due to get here," Owen maintained. He watched for the effect on Colonel Parmenter, never easy to gauge either. Then he swung toward Bruce. *Come on, Bruce. For once in your life, take it a little slow.* "What does our government diver think?"

"That this would be a nice time," Bruce said as if the idea had just hit him, "for about a two-week vacation."

The bullgang, languishing along the top of the dam next to the trestle, heard the round of laughter come up from the diving barge and wondered to each other what was so funny down there in the big drink. Neil had shed his climbing gear and was lying back with his hands under his head, trying to just listen to the laughter come and go or to nap or anything except to think about the trestle and high water and random danger flicked down like a playing card out of the sky, but the thinking would not go away. Next to him, unusually untalkative, sat Darius, watching down the slope of the dam to the diving barge and the specific figure of Bruce.

"You know, though, sir," Bruce spoke up again, with Owen snapping a look at him, "I'd kind of like to get it over with. I'm ready to go down"—he a little theatrically peered at the lusty water—"whenever you say."

*Jesus, where does he get it from, piped in hot from the Old Man?* Owen

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1 was trying to hold his temper, knowing himself already riled about  
 2 the screw-up in the pipe hauling. If he could get his hands on the joker  
 3 who poured sugar in the gas tanks of his haul trucks . . . Bruce, though,  
 4 was the immediate issue. *Here's Bruce Duff for you, world—never happy*  
 5 *unless he's in trouble up to his bottom lip.* Aloud, actually quite loud,  
 6 Owen said:

7 "And I think we don't want to go off half-cocked here. Look,  
 8 how about this, everybody," by which he meant Colonel Parmenter.  
 9 "We get the noon reading from Tansy Creek"—the nearest measuring  
 10 station—"and if the river is cresting at Tansy, okay, we'll know it'll hit  
 11 here a couple of hours from then. That'll make it tight, but there'll still  
 12 be time enough for Bruce to go down and finish his bracing. Right,  
 13 Bruce?"

14 *Sure, you bet, Ownie know-it-all, if everything goes right. If I don't drop*  
 15 *my wrench in the silt. If I don't black out any too many minutes at a time. If*  
 16 *this and if that.* "I'd still rather start the dive now," Bruce argued, "and  
 17 have a little more time down there just in case everything—"

18 "Damn it, though," Owen broke in, "what if we get the noon read-  
 19 ing and the crest is past Tansy Creek? What if it's at about"—he took a  
 20 breath and looked bleakly at Bruce—"the Nettle Creek coulee? Then it'd  
 21 hit here while you're down on the dive. That wouldn't be such a hot  
 22 thing to have happen, would it, Bruce?"

23 "I can't guarantee holding this barge in the middle of something like  
 24 that," the barge boss Taine spoke up.

25 Bruce cut Taine off with an angry swipe of his hand. "Hey, here," he  
 26 was still directing his argument to Owen, "I'm the goddamn one on the  
 27 spot who has to—"

28 "I still say it's a matter of timing," Owen insisted, "we've got to know  
 29 when the sonofabitching crest will get here and work from—"

30 "Gentlemen."

31 Both Duff brothers appeared startled at the word from Colonel Par-  
 32 menter. The colonel gazed back and forth between Bruce and Owen.

33 "I don't wish to lose a diver, I don't wish to lose this barge, I don't  
 34 wish to lose the trestle," he solemnly enumerated, even if those didn't  
 35 particularly add up. "Everyone take a break. We'll wait for the noon  
 36 reading from the Tansy Creek station."

37  
 38 Looking steamed, Bruce climbed the face of the dam as though he was  
 39 charging up San Juan Hill. Near the top, the sight of Darius slowed him  
 40 considerably; he had been treading with care around his uncle, not to



mention Proxy's volcanic vicinity, ever since the night in the Blue Eagle. *Aw, hell, he can just hunker up and stay sore, if that's what he wants*, Bruce decided. "Unk," he acknowledged stiffly.

"Nephie," Darius returned commensurately.

Neil was sitting up, yawning but impatient. "What's the deal?" he asked Bruce. "You bigwigs got the river figured out?"

Bruce stopped short. *Christ Jesus, now him*. Neil seemed to be on the prod pretty often, anymore.

Holding his temper—there had to be some limit to how many brothers, uncles, and whatnot a guy could take on in one day—Bruce laid out river matters for Neil, primarily in profanity, then glanced over his shoulder as if the barge argument was following him. "Let's clear out of here until Owen gets off the warpath," he concluded. "Come on, I'll stand you to coffee and pie."

*Tactics. Take care of those and they'll take care of—* "Mind if I tag along?" Darius spoke up.

Bruce thawed so visibly Darius was almost embarrassed. "You bet, Unk. You can explain to us how one Duff can be such a horse's pa-toot"—he jerked his head in the vicinity of the barge and Owen—"while the rest of us are so perfectly nice."

The Rondola was brimming with customers as usual, but places at the end of the counter were being vacated by a railroad crew, and the three Duffs moved right onto stools still warm from the gandydancers' fannies. Bruce winked at the waitress. "We came to brighten your day, Better Half."

"Surrounded, am I," Kate greeted them, dealing out three cups and pouring coffee. "Won't the dam fall down without you characters leaning against it?"

"We left Owen in charge," Bruce muttered, "so it wouldn't dare."

"Hi, Kate, how you doing?" Neil was pleased to get her in on this. He had forgotten she'd be on shift or he would have proposed this Rondola sideshow himself, to try to settle Bruce down some. "Been trying to drill some common sense into this husband of yours, about how much water it's wise to walk under."

"Better get a big auger," she said.

Neil shot a glance at Bruce, expecting him to blow up. Instead, looking less riled than when he'd stomped away from the river, Bruce said so soberly it was comical: "There, hear that? This is what she does to me."

"Kate, merciful," Darius flashed in with. "Tell us, what's the pastry prospect?"

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1 "There's pie, and it's rhubarb."

2 "Saves on the strain of deciding, anyway," Bruce said. "Hon, put this  
3 on our tab, will you—I went out of my mind and told these guys I'd  
4 treat."

5 Neil and Bruce watched restlessly as Darius poured cream and sugar  
6 on his slice of rhubarb pie, then dug into theirs unadorned. While Bruce  
7 and Darius—mostly Bruce—talked trestle through mouthfuls, Neil let  
8 his gaze drift after Kate as she wielded the relentless coffeepot and swept  
9 dishes to and from customers. That little exchange between her and  
10 Bruce, wham bam; nothing moony about the state of their marriage, it  
11 looked like. Watching her at waitressing, he liked the way she never scur-  
12 ried, just covered the territory. Kind of interesting, actually, to rest the  
13 eyes on Kate's long silky build, although he was reminded of Bruce's  
14 original assessment that you couldn't see her coming around a corner.

15 On her next pass along the counter she came over to them again with  
16 the coffeepot.

17 "Not I," Darius declined again, one cup of the stuff more than ade-  
18 quate with him.

19 "Had all I can stand, too," Neil said against another refill. Which  
20 sounded stiffer than he'd intended, so he glanced up at Kate and kidded:  
21 "Bruce claims there's something in the coffee here and that's how you got  
22 him."

23 Kate judiciously looked in the pot she was holding as Bruce chortled  
24 and the other two sat there grinning.

25 She killed off Bruce's chortle by pouring Neil's and Darius's cups to  
26 overflowing and skipping his. With all the nonchalance in the world she  
27 told him, "You already had some, remember?"

28  
29 The noon reading of the river depth left no further room for argument.  
30 The flood crest had just passed Tansy Creek, it would hit Fort Peck in  
31 another few hours, and while Bruce could grind his teeth all he wanted,  
32 he also had to hustle into his diving suit. There was time enough left for  
33 a standard dive, Owen had been right about that. *But where the hell does*  
34 *he get the idea*, Bruce was still thinking furiously as his helmet snicked  
35 into place, *that this'll be a standard dive?*

36  
37 "The damned knothed of a kid did it, Charlalene! Bruce goosed the  
38 moose!"

39 Owen bounced into the house so full of strange beans that she at first  
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## BUCKING THE SUN

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thought he had come home drunk. Now she recognized it as engineer elation. "You're pinning medals on Bruce?" Charlene checked to make sure. "Since when?"

"The trestle! He—"

"—got done with the bracing in jig time," Neil was telling rapt Rosellen, "he didn't even take his whole diving outfit. The barge bunch looked like they couldn't believe it, him signaling already he had it whipped, down there. You should've seen him, though, when that helmet came off him—old Bruce looked like one relieved puppy." Neil himself looked as if he was thinking back step-by-step on the history of Bruce.

"Oh," he thought to say, though. "Saw Kate today, too."

Darius was kissing places on her, lingering here, darting there. Proxy nibbled her lip in pleasure. He did know how to get a woman's attention. She could feel every least maneuver of his mouth, tongue practiced as a cat's. Charting planet to planet on her, slow delicate orbit of first the aureole on one breast and then same on the other, then on to teasing each erect crest, somehow finding time in the soft valley between to say things. God, you wouldn't think a Scotchman could make love talk, would you.

"Hnnnn?" she brought herself out enough to respond. "What, sugar-bush?"

"Laid eyes on Kate today," he was saying as if just reminded. "She's a bit flat in the netherlands, isn't she."

Hugh had to admit he didn't care much for their rattling. *Far, far better to hear the buggers than not, though.*

By the nature of things, each rattlesnake was peeved, stirred up at its boulder cave being derricked away or yelling men trespassing into its vicinity, by the time Hugh was called to the scene. He was assigned the west half of the dam, which had the headstart in rockwork on the face of the dam and thus more snake business. Now that the riprap loads were rolling across the trestle to the east half too, a second snakecatcher had been put on over there and Hugh had heard practical jokes were being pulled on him, a dead rattler cozily coiled behind his lunchbox when he want to pick it up, for instance. No one pulled anything on Hugh Duff.

He stayed perched judiciously on a stone slab and scouted around for his latest poisonous customer. Invariably the snake was reported as being

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the size of the Loch Ness monster, but they were damnably hard to spot, the pattern on their backs blending so with their surroundings. In a way he was grateful to that angry buzz of the rattle, as a warning device. Poised there, he was outfitted with a sheephook, its seven-foot handle a healthy length, while the narrow springsteel neck of hook designed to snare the hind leg of a sheep did nicely enough around the circumference of a rattlesnake. Hugh's procedure was elemental but not necessarily simple. Yank a rattler out of its striking position, like a coil of enfevered rope. Then pin it down (make *sure* it's pinned down), in back of its wedge of head, with the flexible neck of the sheephook. Then reach in and employ the machete, which he carried at his waist in a scabbard that would have suited an admiral.

*And so now I am married to the St. Patrick of Fort Peck. There he goes—Sir Hugh, of the Serpent-Ridding Hussars.*

She had Jackie on an outing, on a walk along the bluff where they could look down and see the trains run. The boy attended closely to anything that went on wheels. Unfortunately, thought Meg, he seemed to be thoroughly his father's son in that. Bruce and momentum, kidskin and glove. She hoped Kate wasn't tiring of his velocity. Not that she herself was the leading expert at keeping up with the demands that were men. These days, these lovely walks with Jackie, Meg spent the major share of her attention on the lanky figure with the shepherd's crook, there on the boulder dike in the middistance. *How then can he keep being the same Hugh, having traded himself in wholesale as he did in Chicago? Are we stone, under it all, as Owen's dam will be there at the lakewater?*

"See Gramp?" she tried to point him out to Jackie. "Gramp, down there letting daylight into the snakes—see him?"

The child, though, had caught sight of color dancing by in the air. "Mum Mum," he called for her attention, pointing after the dancing thing. "Buttafly."

"Jack. I'm glad you brought that up," Meg said to him, as usual speaking to the child as though they both were Prime Ministers. "There now is something I have never understood—a ~~buttafly~~ does fly, I grant you, but do you see anything the least bit buttery about it? Would you not say, Jack, a better name for the lovely tiny beast would be 'flutterby'?"

Bright-eyed, her conversation partner considered this with the quizzical smile that reminded her so of Owen.

"Fluttaby," the boy agreed.

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er butterfly

Ah, now he saw the adversary, patterned-green circles of itself under it as the snake lay looped to strike. Pink mouth hotly open, twin fangs prepared, the better to dagger and poison you with, my dear.

Quick as a pirate, Hugh grappled down with the sheephook, spilled the nestled snake sideways into a curving series of writhes, pressed down with the neck of the hook, then delivered the chop with the machete.

His heart and breathing always sped up by about twice during this. Hours at a time went by, though, in snakework, when he did not think about a bottle of anything.

Now he employed the other item he carried on this job, a fisherman's creel. With another slash of the machete, he lopped the rattle off the defunct snake and dropped it in the creel with the others. "I don't see how you can go those snakes, Hugh," Birdie had said to him more than once. In the spirit of enterprise, though, Birdie shellacked the rattles Hugh provided, glued them on little wooden bases and sold them. Already the tails of rattlesnakes were showing up all over Wheeler beneath the mounted skulls of buffalo.

Four days before the river was to be closed off, in the middle of an already complicated enough afternoon of jigsawing the dredge-lines back together downstream from the dam, Owen was called to the field telephone.

"Sangster. Sounds like he's got a hair crosswise," the pipehaul foreman warned before handing him the phone.

"Owen," said the thin voice on the other end, "you better come see something."

"What, at the trestle again? I'll be right—"

"Huh uh," the fieldphone voice now sounded as if it was having trouble believing itself. "This is at the truss bridge again."

His first look at the slumped earth, within spitting distance of the truss bridge, sent Owen white-faced. Sangster's was whiter.

The slipped section of fill resembled a muddy scallop shell perhaps two hundred feet long and a hundred high. It had slid, still in one arched piece, several feet down into the river channel. Scoured away underneath by the flood, loosened by the rapid fall of the floodwater, who knew

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1 what the precise cause was: it had slid. The arc of gap where the shell  
2 edge had pulled away from the dam was spookily neat, as if a hill had just  
3 taken an innocent step forward from the mountain of earthfill. There  
4 was nothing innocent about it. The shifted heap of fill was throwing  
5 enormous weight down against the main pier of the railroad bridge.

6 "It holding okay?" Owen tore his eyes away from the sickening dam  
7 slippage to ask about the health of Sangster's bridge.

8 "Not really." Sangster even still sounded pale. "Out of line about a  
9 foot already, and more to come. That pier's cracked."

10 Owen spoke six or eight expletives, rapid-fire.

11 "I agree," Sangster said. "But we've got to do something besides cuss  
12 at it."

13 They knew they had only minutes before the official car delivered  
14 Colonel Parmenter and Major Santee and general hell.

15  
16 They already had the gravel cars going by the time the Ad Building con-  
17 tingent descended. First thing first, everyone could see that much. If  
18 they lost the truss bridge they lost the railroad loop, the key to plugging  
19 the river; they would lose the entire dam schedule, they would lose all  
20 advantage over the river for Christ knew how long. Thirty timely railcars  
21 of gravel, dumped on the weak side of the cracked concrete pier to tem-  
22 porarily shore it up, saved them from that at least for the moment. But  
23 now came the question of holding together both the bridge's underpin-  
24 ning and the channel shoulder of the dam until they could get the river  
25 plugged.

26 Owen and Sangster and everybody in the vicinity nervously sized up  
27 the Corps officers as the briefing was convened there at the river. Colonel  
28 Parmenter appeared to be wishing for the Philippines. Major Santee  
29 looked a little smirky, as he often did when things went wrong.

30 The colonel made short work of discussion. "What about this, Duff?"

31 *What about what? What the floodwater did along here, so that neither I*  
32 *nor God Almighty can guarantee you that chunk of earthfill won't move some*  
33 *more, won't cave off and take the bridge with it, in the next four days or the*  
34 *next four minutes? That there was only, what, one chance in five that we'd*  
35 *get the highest water of the whole project this spring, but that's exactly the*  
36 *thing we did get? Or that what I most want right now, the one thing I can*  
37 *think of to maybe stabilize the fill that's slipped, is to have high water up*  
38 *against it again? What are you going to think of any of my whats, Colonel?*

39 Owen took the deep, deep breath needed to go for broke.



Fort Peck woke up to dynamite at dawn.

The detonation, at 4:20 a.m. sharp, breached the dike which had been holding back the riverwater above the tunnel portals. That quick, with one *ka-BOOM* and a dirt geyser of blown dike, the map of the Missouri River changed. Now the river forked at the dam, the main flow still tumbling through the channel but an easternly eddy swirling its way into the tunnel inlets. It was a bit past dawn when the first riverwater made its passage through the tunnels and surged into the outlet channel below the dam, frothing white against the confining concrete.

At the main channel, at the truss bridge, four years of calm planning and temperate engineering about how to most handily close off the Missouri River had to be fed into the meatgrinder of the next twelve hours. Improvising every inch of the way, they were going to make the river into the counterweight proposed by Owen Duff, by backing the water up against the sloughed section of fill like a liquid retaining wall. Which meant plugging the river here and now, at the *downstream* end of the channel, instead of upstream at the trestle the intended three days from now.

"Owen, where the hell's that dispatcher, we got to get rolling on—"

Which meant that the forty-five-car trainload of plugging boulders could not be jauntily dropped straight into the river—the side girders of the truss bridge were in the way—but needed to be unloaded at both ends of the bridge, spilled down onto gravel approaches to the river.

"I know, I know, Colonel, it's not the greatest field office there ever was, but it's all the ready-built crew could skid over here to us in a hurry. What exactly is it? Well, sir, it's a two-holer."

Which meant that the crane barge laboring in the middle of the river current had to grapple the boulders from the gravel banks one by one, to build a rough sill out into the channel.

"Okay, Max, so this is slower than the wrath of God, but we don't have any choice but to keep that crane boat at—"

Which meant that the rail fleet of gravel cars couldn't let fly with their massive plug of gravel until the boulder sill was firmly there to keep it from washing away.

"Oh, Jesus, it won't be done until WHEN?"

To the engineers, this was like being trapped in a very long game of checkers when they had been all set to play bombs-away.

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*Hold, you so-and-so. There's no damn reason for you to be falling into the river.*

Owen wasn't addressing this thought to the truss bridge although, heaven knew by the blue smoke of invective and energy he was lending in support of Sangster and it, he did not want to see the steel span hit the water either.

*Either nobody savvies or nobody's saying—not even you, Max—that the truss bridge could be only the first symptom here.*

Whatever else he was at, through this longest day, Owen kept the slipped section of damfill guardedly in sight, forever in mind.

*Just hold. That's not asking such a hell of a lot, is it? Sit there, another few hours is all, and then I can tend to you.* If he ran the arithmetic of the situation through his head once this day, he ran it two hundred times. The site of the slippage, the core pool, the distance between: by every calculation he could think of, the core pool sitting dumb, fat and happy up there in the east half of the dam should be safely far enough from where that odd shell of fill had given way; look, millions of other cubic yards there in the channel shoulder supporting the core pool *hadn't* given way. Result: the slippage as it now stood didn't necessarily mean that the core pool was going to start leaking out of it any minute and the leak would increase to a gush in less time than it took to tell about it and the gush would speedily grow to be a breach and the breach majestically would cave away and the entire sonofabitching core pool would rush out in a 150-foot-high avalanche of water and fill, tearing the guts out of the dam.

Owen Duff, engineer, knew the slipped spot didn't necessarily mean that.

Owen Duff, alarmed member of the human race, Fort Peck subgroup, was not so sure. This version, the one he had to traipse around in while big rocks got fumbled into place beneath the bridge, would not breathe easy until he had the plugged Missouri and a Niagara of freshly piped dredge material both at work shoring up that slipped spot.

*So hold, damn it, okay?*

The bridge pier needed helpings of gravel every so often, and so Sangster at least had spurts of being busy at that, having the train dispatcher roll another thirty-car cut of dumper cars in, which Owen envied him. He himself had the pipeline crew hauling and installing along the channel shoulder and had called in the bullgang to help out with the last needed section of the strutworks there, and all four of his dredges were standing

ready downriver, so that as soon as the river was safely plugged they could pour material like mad into this neck of the channel and backfill the slipped slope. Begin to end the dam, as well. Oh, there'd be another full year, fifteen months maybe, of building it up and topping it off. But the vee of the river channel was the last gap, the four-mile valley between the chosen bluffs had shrunk down to it. Owen had ready or was getting ready everything he could think of to throw at the channel. But for now he was reduced to scenery inspector, standing watching the ungodly slow progress of the rock sill under the bridge.

The river boiled around the crane barge, which stood there in mid-stream like a patient broad-butted fisherman, its long boom swinging as it brought a ton-and-a-half boulder into the water, going back for another.

Reporting for pipeline work, the bullgang watched the scurry and commotion around the truss bridge with envy.

"Not much call for guys with hammers in that, is there?" someone asked wistfully.

"Afraid not," answered their foreman, Jepperson. "No, most of you, just whack away at setting up the next section of struts. I goddamn well know you're going to spend most of your time gawking over there, but try and look busy once in a while." Jepperson shifted his weight. "But four of you get to be gravelmasters."

A silence settled on the crew.

"What this is," Jepperson went on, "they're gonna double up on the gravel dumping. Constantly run trains until they get the river held. The four guys up there," he jerked his head in the direction of the railroad bridge, "who're used to doing it will show you how. Oh, and you'll draw an extra two bits an hour." Someone sang out "Our chance to be big rich!" and there was a little laughter.

"So, let's say—" Jepperson made a show of looking around "—Morrie . . . Livingston . . . Duff . . ."

*Not I, said the man named Me.*

The expression on Darius put a sourball look on the foreman as well. "Not you, Bonny Prince Darry. Other Duff, Neil there."

Neil bit a corner of his mouth, but stepped forward.

"And . . ." Jepperson shopped through the crew for one more. He stopped as Birdie Hinch moved indicatively. The three the foreman had named so far were all much younger, fitter. "Birdie, sorry, but I'm supposed to send guys who can run like—" He broke off, then grinned. "Yeah, okay. And Birdie."

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By midafternoon, officers and engineers were running on coffee and habit. They had all been up through the night, pitching in on the final readying of the inlet channels and the tunnels for the river diversion, and ever since early morning they had watched boulder by boulder as the sill gradually grew, and they were close to becoming zombies before Sangster cured them with:

"That's as much as we can do with rock. Hadn't we better go to gravel, Colonel?"

The quartet sent to be apprentice gravelmasters were at the end of the bridge, receiving the fastest education of their lives. The four men already working the gravel cars which periodically shored up the ailing bridge pier were showing them the routine. There was a catwalk between the truss girders and where the train ran. Scrambling along that, you had to keep pace with a given dumper car and when the shout of "Pull!" came, reach down and yank the big springpin which opened one of the two hopper doors beneath the railcar. Your partner on the other side of the train opened the other hopper door at the same time and the dumper car was emptied of fifty tons of gravel, falling with an appalling roar and a hellish cloud of rockdust into the river. This had to be done constantly at a trot—the trains were not to stop, not for anything—and the newcomers' respect for the gravelmasters rapidly rose by hundreds of percent.

This was Sangster's show now, the gravel plug to be dumped down through the bridge car by car and train by train, and Owen caught a fleeting look of gratitude on the bespectacled man when he told him he was clearing out of his way, going up to a perch in the bridge girders for a ringside seat.

He was startled to see Neil, below on the catwalk, then wished he'd thought of that himself, getting Neil assigned out of the bullgang to perform this. With a little softsoap and pressure, he could have wangled Bruce onto the gravelmaster crew too. Wouldn't that have been something, Owen thought to himself, twin Duff brothers plugging the Missouri.

Neil developed a lope to keep up with the dumper cars, although Birdie Hinch somehow managed simply by scampering. The four pairs of men ran a strange looping race, the lead pair dumping their car of gravel and

## BUCKING THE SUN

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

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

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

The three of them and the other women watched the activity at the truss bridge and the river gap, where tiny figures scurried and traincars marched in constant file and bulldozers lurched across slopes; from their distance, it looked like the place on an anthill where boiling water had been poured.

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

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

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

"Doesn't get off until nine," he handled that in a breeze. Actually, he added, he was on his way to the Rondola to pick her up after work. "But the view is better from up here." Whereupon he grinned around at Charlene and Rosellen and Proxy in turn, although only for the barest instant at Proxy.

Rosellen caught him off guard by asking:

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

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

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

11 Rosellen could have slapped them both. Here the time was, the dam  
 12 taking hold, the river changing forever, Fort Peck within inches, min-  
 13 utes, of becoming the monument they'd all spent these years making,  
 14 and the two of them chose now to go choochy-coo at each other about  
 15 that stupid shooting match.

16 Expert reader of faces that she was, Proxy kept watch on Rosellen.  
 17 *Smile, chile. If Big Sis wants to get her jollies by teasing Bruce-ums, not a*  
 18 *thing in this world we can do about it. She'd just better know when to turn*  
 19 *it off, is all.*

20  
 21 "There goes the river," Hugh wanted to say in the worst way. All that  
 22 prevented him was the understanding that it *would* be the worst way.  
 23 Meg would lay into him like a catamount if he took a dig at Owen's tri-  
 24 umph. He believed it constituted unnatural forbearance, but he stop-  
 25 pered himself while he and Meg and Jackie watched the action at the  
 26 bridge from the roof of the Rondola. Customers passing beneath into  
 27 the cafe joked about hoping the roof held long enough for them to get a  
 28 cup of coffee, and it was true the flat tarred surface groaned a little as a  
 29 dozen people at a time took short turns as spectators, but the Duffs by  
 30 some unspoken consent had residence up there while the river was being  
 31 pinched off between the great halves of Owen's dam. Holding Jackie,  
 32 Meg was keeping him mesmerized with the tale of a selkie, a man who  
 33 was also a seal—"Think of it, Jack, he could catch himself a fish anytime  
 34 he felt like it and wear lovely fur trousers as well."

35 "Meg." Kate came climbing the ladder, careless of knees and more  
 36 flashing out from under her waitress uniform. "Let me have him a  
 37 minute." She took the boy and turned so that he was looking with her  
 38 toward the railroad bridge and the rumbling gravel trains. Hugh dis-  
 39 tinctly heard her say, "I want him to see the river go."



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

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

Neil, sprinting and wondering along with the other seven gravelmasters how much more of this there would be, how much more they could take, glanced up at Owen whenever he could. Braced there in the girders like a spiffed-up steelworker in a Stetson and pressed khakis, Owen looked somehow distracted, gazing off at the channel shoulder instead of watching the bombardier-bursts of gravel into the river. *What do I expect, though, that he's going to act like some kind of radio announcer up there calling a fight? "Here's a haymaker from Neil Duff. . . followed by a wallop of gravel from Birdie Hinch. . . but the Missouri is absorbing all the punishment they can throw at it, so far." Huh uh. Owen is going to go about it his own way, whatever it is.*

Catching himself at this, knowing he was going a little giddy from exertion, Neil concentrated on his running, staying exactly even with the next dumper car, the little hop-skip when "Pull!" was shouted again and the thunder of gravel.

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

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

Tired as they were, the gravelmasters worked like acrobats now, bouncing to the catwalk railing to peek down at the effect of each

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IVAN DOIG

1 dumpload, then back into the rhythm of catching their next dumper car,  
2 yanking the springpin—

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

5 “That one’s staying dry!”

6 Neil scooted to the railing beneath Owen’s perch and the two of them  
7 stared down. In the vast wallow of gravel mush below, a low conelike  
8 heap—as Darius would have said, “Not two hands higher than a duck”—  
9 was a drier gray. The Missouri, by just that much, was captured now.

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## Part Six

### THE SHERIFF

1937

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

Waiting, watching, the sheriff hardly knew where to start in being nettled. GLASGOW, the depot sign read as the President's entourage began to disgorge from the train, but to Carl Kinnick it might as well have announced NIGHTMARE. For the past two weeks now the Secret Service advance man, Boatwright, barging into everything as if Valley County all of a sudden belonged to him; the elaborate chain of command it took for the sheriff to get the simplest thing done, such as roping off the depot platform; the wise-ass Highway Patrol special contingent who wanted to know whether the President's motorcade was going to go for the speed record from Glasgow to Wheeler; the on-loan police from Great Falls

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1 who figured they knew everything because they were from a city; the  
 2 couple of hundred of the National Guard called into uniform and de-  
 3 ployed along the presidential route, who figured that because they were  
 4 military they knew more than any cops; and all that only brought you to  
 5 Roosevelt's own voluminous retinue of staff and newspaper people and  
 6 the mob of politicians from far and wide, to be dealt with starting now.  
 7 As a Democratic officeholder the sheriff had to be part of the political  
 8 folderol, too, and it was amazing to him as he herded them through to  
 9 the train, the number of delegations who on the Fort Peck example  
 10 wanted to talk to the President about a water scheme for the Marias  
 11 River or the Two Medicine River or whatever their closest river hap-  
 12 pened to be; you'd think, the sheriff thought, Montana could be  
 13 dammed up enough to irrigate this entire side of the earth.

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

18 ~~America the Beautiful~~, the Glasgow high school Kiltie band now let  
 19 loose with, red-kneed in the October wind. The crowd had been gather-  
 20 ing for hours, the street behind the depot solid with people across to the  
 21 Goodkind Block and all the way down to the Coleman Hotel, and  
 22 wouldn't you know there'd be at least one, some smart-aleck Caruso at  
 23 the front of the throng warbling out the popular mock version: *a*

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

30  
 31 The serenade did not actually constitute disturbance of the peace—  
 32 hell, the peace was already disturbed by the President himself—so the *c/*  
 33 sheriff folded his arms and turned around to reconnoiter the trackside  
 34 situation again. The delegations wanting this or that had been busily  
 35 trooping through the presidential Pullman, and the schedule pretty  
 36 quick called for Roosevelt to emerge onto the rear platform to smile and  
 37 wave at the crowd, then descend into the open touring car for the drive  
 38 to the dam. *About time*, the sheriff told himself as he was given the high  
 Short 39 sign by McIntyre, the President's secretary, to step up into the Pullman  
 Jormal 40 with the final delegation of supplicants.

Backy caught error,  
via Bartlett's

one more  
patriotic blast,

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

Even the FDR handshake—the master campaigner's proffer of just-enough: *this much touch of my flesh shall ye have, and not a pore more*—provoked the sheriff, as he stepped back to watch the political menagerie in here sort itself out. Conspicuous by his absence this time was Senator Wheeler, who by now was at odds with the President for the New Deal having veered so far to the left. Here and appearing thoroughly unhappy about it was Congressman O'Connell, who appeared to suspect that Roosevelt didn't know where real left was located. The thought of FDR dainty-handing his way through the whole damned national picture like this, maybe even for another term after this one, was just about more than Carl Kinnick cared to look ahead at.

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

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

The legs, though.

Even to the unsympathetic sheriff it appeared pitiful and painful, Roosevelt's ritual of going clenched from the jaw on down, gearing himself for the lurch upward so the metal leg braces could be locked to hold him in a standing position, his son James there on his left, his weak side, to provide firm tensed biceps he could grip onto, now the President of

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1 the United States grunting himself ready, then the actual massive totter-  
2 ing rise like—

3 The sheriff didn't know like what, but it was damn sure unforget-  
4 table.

5  
6 The town of Wheeler, democratic and Democratic, antic and frantic,  
7 was boiling over for Roosevelt.

8 Cheers sang out at the approach of the motorcade of the President  
9 who put the country back to work, who provided a wage to those whose  
10 pockets had been emptied by the Depression, and, not incidentally, who  
11 reopened the nation's saloons. Theoretically the damwork was going on  
12 uninterrupted until FDR's big speech upon leaving Fort Peck, but some-  
13 how there were crews, complete with foremen, who saw the President  
14 from vantage points such as the Wheeler Inn and the Blue Eagle as well  
15 as from the jobsite later on. Toddlers and taxi dancers and cardsharps  
16 and Corps wives in their Sunday best jammed in next to the damwork-  
17 ers on the board sidewalks. When at last it arrived in the procession, the  
18 open touring car gave them their money's worth, the confident presi-  
19 dential smile and wave as Roosevelt was borne along the main street of  
20 Wheeler until the motorcade proceeded, naturally, to Delano Heights.

21  
22 Back in the jampacked Blue Eagle, a patron shouted out: "How about a  
23 free round in honor of the President?"

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

26  
27 As the motorcade wound down the ridge to the dam, the sheriff in the  
28 follow-car behind the President's brooded ahead. Not that Franklin D.  
29 himself seemed to have a care in the world, jovially letting his ear be bent  
30 by Colonel Parmenter in the jump seat or the governor or the senator  
31 alongside him on the big backseat. The man truly did possess the ulti-  
32 mate politician's knack of appearing interested in every gopher hole and  
33 dandelion.

34 All Carl Kinnick could think about was what could go wrong, here  
35 in his county, as the rajah of the Hudson River was shown the conquered  
36 Missouri, transported across the great earthfill, shown the entire sprawl-  
37 ing dam project from the overlook on the east abutment, then driven up  
38 into the hills to the spillway and at last to the spur railroad where the spe-  
39 cial train had been brought around for the presidential speechmaking.

40 The sheriff's heart, or at least the place where he pinned his badge,



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

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

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

Sheriff Kinnick scowled at the poker-faced Peyser in return, then stared up through the grillwork of the rear platform to where the hen herd of politicians was forming up around Roosevelt and his microphones.

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

The sheriff was no connoisseur of history, but he knew a lot about blame. Oh, sure, the gunman there in '33 potted the Chicago mayor right next to FDR instead. But people in Montana were good shots. No, if the President—particularly *this* President—was killed in Carl Kinnick's county, that would be it for his career as sheriff. He'd might as well go pick grit with the chickens, if that happened.

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

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

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1 So there was every kind of possibility here in this Fort Peck crowd,  
2 and one of the uncomfortable thoughts wasn't only the danger to Roo-  
3 sevelt. Supposedly the Secret Service bodyguards were to shield the Pres-  
4 ident from assassin peril, but where were those boys when the Chicago  
5 mayor got picked off? The sheriff knew that if it came to that, if he spot-  
6 ted somebody here yanking out a gun, he'd have to put himself between  
7 that gun barrel and Roosevelt. He'd take death. There wasn't any choice,  
8 sherifffing.

9  
10 As the governor launched into amplified greetings to Roosevelt and his  
11 trainload, the sheriff went and claimed the roof of the cab of the truck  
12 that had been pulled up parallel to the presidential Pullman for the  
13 newspaper photographers and reporters to see over the crowd.

14 "Governor Ayers, and I almost said 'My old friends of Fort Peck,' be-  
15 cause some of you were here three years ago."

16 The presidential voice now, and if the sheriff had been a praying man  
17 he would have asked that Roosevelt just say it was nice to be in Montana,  
18 accept a bouquet and kiss Miss 4-H Beef on the cheek, and scoot back  
19 inside the railroad car. But the sheriff knew FDR, blast his lordly guts,  
20 was not going to pass up a chance at an all-out speech.

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

23 "The one thing that I have specialized on ever since I started collect-  
24 ing postage stamps at the age of ten years is geography. The geography,  
25 especially, of the United States."

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

31 "This great river gathers into story, the written and told tributary,  
32 out of passages cut by large desires. Beginning, so far as we know, with  
33 the first cleaving of its water, by downstream Indian adventurers whose  
34 tribal name for 'canoe' was 'missouri'—never bettered, may I say, as a  
35 beautiful name for an inspiring river. Then came Lewis and Clark's  
36 Corps of Discovery, the day-by-day eyes and inks that captured onto  
37 paper for us the two-thousand-three-hundred-mile arch of the river  
38 from St. Louis to its Three Forks headwaters. Then followed the build-  
Short 39 ing of forts, America coming west by military and trading post hand-  
Normal 40 holds along the Missouri's immense chain of drainage. From that, the

axe-quick renunciation of the river's forest silence as woodhawks, perhaps within sight of here where we stand today, chopped trees into boiler-lengths to feed the steamboats. And onward, then, to the imprints of homesteaders and townplanters on the floodplain of this great river. Until now, a little more than one-third of the way through this century, the pattern is as set as cry and echo, each annal desiring a next—the human tide and the Missouri River, hungrily flowing together into storied destiny.”

Roosevelt paused, to let the applause roll before he went on to the invocation of the dam and the useful work it had brought and the future in which every drop of the river's water would do its duty. The sheriff stared at him from his trucktop, finally grasping this President's bargain with danger and all else.

*Surfacing.* That was what it was like, the way Roosevelt rose. The sheriff himself was only a so-so swimmer, nothing like this famous habitue of therapeutically warm pools, but he suddenly savvied FDR's way of thrusting himself up out of that wheelchair. Breaking upward through the polio that had sucked him down into it; rising past the political turbulence that ought to have sunk him. And once up there, having breached crippling infirmity and gravity and whatever the hell else, the irons clamped on his more or less legs to hold him in place, the presidential sonofabitch *presided*. You couldn't not listen to him, the sheriff had to admit, even if you thought you couldn't stand any more of that voice sanded so smooth by old family money. No, you listened, to his old tricks, new tricks, whatever he brought up to the surface with him this time. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt dove up into the air, onto a political platform and on out into the ethers of radio, he took you over by all the tricks that ever swam.

The majority of the President's hearers in the crowd had seasons of Fort Peck behind them, the making of the dam the prime calendar of their lives, and like the intent little sheriff, they listened as if they were being paged, one after another. Damworkers of every stripe, householders of Wheeler and the other shantytowns and the apple-pie Fort Peck townsite, in their thousands they took in the grand words FDR had come to give them. There were absences. Nan and J.L. Hill, with the wages of laundry and dynamite, gone back to their ranch country of English Creek. Jaarala self-vanished, of course. But others and others were here, shareholders in this day. The Birdie Hinchies of this earth, by that name and many others. Tom Harry in shining fresh shirt and blackest bow tie. The crisp officers of the Corps. Years' worth of Duffs, in

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1 plentiful scattering across this Fort Peck scene. The Fort Peck they had  
 2 cooked for, and notched its paydays one after another. Hairdressed.  
 3 Waited on. Danced with and more. That they had cleared brush off.  
 4 Built dredges for. Walked beneath in diving uniform. Fashioned an  
 5 earthfill onto. Carpentered and dug and labored for in a dozen different  
 6 ways. Now they listened hard to the great voice telling them this dam  
 7 was theirs as much as anybody's. A searching eye with enough patience  
 8 could have picked the tribe of them out of even this crowd, family re-  
 9 semblance in the way they stood akimbo but attentive, like soldiers pick-  
 10 eted, one here, another over across, pair there, the Duffs as ever  
 11 unmistakably in evidence, all but two. ○ A

12  
 13 No one would notice, today. That much they knew about this. The rest  
 14 was the treacherous part.

15 Where they were, the sound of Roosevelt and the crowd's roars of ap-  
 16 plause were a distant surf.

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

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

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

24 "That's when we have to start pretending." He knew what she meant.  
 25 From here on, careful at home, careful at family get-togethers, to not say  
 26 each other's name too often. Or too seldom. "I'm not going to like that,"  
 27 she whispered, although there was no need for whispering. "It just came  
 28 to me, the feeling of dreading supper tonight. And I wondered if maybe  
 29 I was picking it up from you."

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

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

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

36 Slowly their hands moved down on each other to where things begin.  
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Short 39

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*make into  
 separate  
 sentence:  
 all but two*

## Part Seven

### SLIPPAGE

1938

"Know something, Shannon? I'm hungry for mountains." "Tom, what the sweet hell do you expect me to do about that?" Although she immediately knew.

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

"Cut the guff. How quick are you pulling out?" she demanded.

"While yet. Before winter hits again." Proxy kept up her ice pick gaze at him until he had to specify. "End of October. Gonna try it over in the Two Medicine country. Pretty, around there." He folded his arms on his chest, looked at her and said as if reminding them both: "Mountains."

"Have fun." Proxy's smile was so slanted that Tom Harry muttered about bookkeeping to tend to and strode to his back office. She watched him go, the entire length of the Blue Eagle. She would miss this place, not to mention its contribution to her stash of Durham sackfuls of dollars. Wouldn't be the first in either category, though. *Jee Zuz, though. End of October.* Next month already. Tom was playing his cards so close to his chest they had to be read through the back of his shirt. One thing sure, she was in no mood to fend with some new cherry of an owner here; didn't want the hassle of breaking a fresh one in to the way she

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went about things. The new stupe probably wouldn't even have a Packard. Briefly she wondered whether to ask Tom to put in a word for her with Ruby Smith. That skag Snow White was working the Wheeler Inn, though; room for two milk-blondes? Proxy decided not to ask, she didn't want to be obligated. As Tom Harry had always put it, no hobblegations.

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

They had been back at their surgery of the world, arguing through mouthfuls and dipping philosophical sustenance out of open lunch-boxes, for the past week of noons during the spectacle of Munich. Darius, considerably red-eyed from sitting up nights with the radio and the Czechoslovakia crisis, could not help but feel history was dogging him personally. *Down your tools, boys!* The cobble streets of Scotland in '15, ringing against war. *The fields of death are hungry . . .* They still were. Across them now, though, the big bugs in brown shirts, black shirts, trousseau of goose-steppers. *There's this bit, too: pick the bones of truth out of it and I myself have already employed war. Against Crawford.*

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

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

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

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

*Hitler, howling hate in the Nuremberg torchlight.*

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

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

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

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

"They're feeding Europe to him like a tray of buns," Darius went on. He shook his head at what passed for statesmen these days. "Joe Chamber-



lain's chinless lad Neville. You can bet the best part of him ran down his daddy's leg."

Owen shifted a bit on the shale cutbank where he was sitting on his coat. His attention tended to drift when Darius got going on British political Pooh-Bahs. From this lunch spot on the east abutment, above the core pool, the dam lay below like a scale model on a classroom table and bone-weary as Owen was from the pace of work, he never grew tired of this instructive view. The jigsaw puzzle pieces around the edges of the project—railway spurs, haul roads, maintenance yards, the spillway three miles over the hills behind him—done now. The dam itself already functioning, the four giant steel-lined diversion tunnels taking the regulated flow of the entire fifty thousand square miles of the river drainage. The beautiful physics of this, the matter of the water funneled to become white foaming energy, the contained Missouri fauceting out of this one-of-a-kind dam, he had tried and tried to make Darius see. He was the one of the whole damn family who ought to be able to see it, grasp the process. But the only physic that seemed to interest Darius was the one he wanted to administer to the world and make it purge its political guts.

While Darius went down his list of major fools in charge of things, Owen contented himself with his inventory of the dam. Oh sure, a few items of it he happily could have done without. This shale under the seats of their pants, to name the foremost, with its tendency to crumble off the abutment and mess up the waterlevel in his core pool. *Bearpaw, yeah, it wouldn't take much of a bear to paw this crackerass rock apart.*

To name the other, he never had liked the scheduling setup on the face of the dam, where he as fillmaster was responsible for the gravel layer but not the riprap work which was always treading on the gravel crew's heels. *How about all or nothing for me there on the facework?* he'd tried on Major Santee. *How about doing it the Corps way for once?* the major put the kibosh on his try.

Minor stuff, though, either of those, compared with the big thing they were leaving to him, the topping-off. Twenty feet to go, on the last of the mountain of fill. *Height of a nice two-story house, is all. Okay, it'd be a two-story house four miles long, but so what.* Off in the haze along the autumn river, his dredges were flushing fill in from as much as five miles downstream and doing it smack on schedule. Darius was not a hundred percent wrong, the world was a worry, but Owen's own bit of high ground couldn't have looked better this cool September noon. He knew almost to the day, now, when Fort Peck would be topped off.

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1 "And France." Darius was shaking his head twice as strenuously.  
2 "The French, Owen, have gone steadily downhill ever since Sorel."

3 "Speaking of downhill," Owen seized that opening and stood up, un-  
4 accountably intent—to Darius—on not missing any minute he could  
5 spend on the dam. "We better get back down on the job, world or no  
6 world, while we still have one."

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10 The year was producing something like armor on the Fort Peck  
11 Dam, the riprap boulders steadily being lodged into place on  
12 the upstream side. A blanket of gravel was laid first, down the slope of  
13 the dam, so the gravel trains still ran incessantly across the ghost trestle.  
14 Bruce shook his head every time he glanced over there where the trestle  
15 had been systematically buried, footings and pilings and everything ex-  
16 cept the railroad track itself, every high-stepping inch of it now under  
17 two hundred feet of Owen's earthfill sluiced in since last spring. No sign  
18 of the river channel, either; by now the dam made a solid blunt horizon  
19 across the entire valley, and while Bruce granted that it was nice all their  
20 work, especially his, had added up to this piece of geography the world  
21 had never before seen, it left him restless and bored.

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

24 Bruce didn't like being of two minds this way. Mostly he was on idle  
25 time anymore, "getting paid for drinking coffee" as he liked to boast of  
26 it, just a little. Whenever he was summoned to dive, these days it was  
27 usually to inspect the end wall of the inlet to the tunnels or to deal with  
28 something caught in the trash rack there where the river funneled  
29 through the dam. Lots of yawn time, though, as now. He wandered over  
30 to the middle of the dam, where the truck ramp came down to the snub-  
31 nosed dock called Port Peck, and watched the crane barge unload base  
32 boulders for the riprap, each one a truckload in itself. When the appeal  
33 of that shortly wore off, he prowled back to where the diving barge was  
34 moored, trying to look like a contented man of leisure.

35 But, he couldn't help it, the not-diving made him hungry for the  
36 river. The lake, as it was awfully quickly turning into. The plugging of  
37 the river had changed the look of things there, underwater; without the  
38 channel flowing, the water had muddied up, gone filmy. Curtained. The  
39 last dive he'd done he had tried as many as three of the thousand-watt  
40 underwater lamps at once and they weren't much better than, what, can-

dles. Far from cursing it, the new darkness of the Missouri intrigued him. Nighttime in the river, midday. It all went with what Bonestiel had told him, when he was breaking Bruce in at diving. *Watch out for the kill-line.* A kill-line, said the Louisianan, was where the tidal salt of an ocean surged up a river delta and certain freshwater fish went belly-up. *Difference is, you can't see our kill-line. Which is why you got to watch for it*—Bonestiel tapped him in the center of the forehead—in here. The Missouri's new dark drew a diver's kill-line a little closer, Bruce knew, but kept him on his toes more, too. And that was what Bruce wanted, that kind of edge to toe up to but no farther.

Standing on the idle diving barge, he yawned and wished a little something would go wrong, a clog in the trash rack maybe, so he could suit up and go down. It helped keep life interesting.

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

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

WHOP. Another rattler off the living list.

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

*What am I, anymore? Graduate of Carteret, class of six hundred twenty-eight days ago. (KEEP TRACK. TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR NEW CALENDAR OF LIFE: another Carteret golden rule.) Dry days, every last blessed damned one of them. Now that I have the moisture out, though, I amount to—what? Farmless farmer. Damless damworker, about to be. Where our next wage is going to come from, I suppose we shall need to see, eh, Meggie? Winter in this country does have a way of concentrating the mind.*

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

*I am not a forgetter, Hugh. Haven't you done well, at staying on the wagon; but there is still your large record, from before. To this day I can hear you,*

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1 *prating against Owen's dam. Hugh the yew hewer, you scoffed at yourself*  
 2 *when you were put at clearing the bottomland. "Meg," you said, "this piddly*  
 3 *work-by-the-hour, this is never us." Fort Peck has not always been my cup of*  
 4 *tea either, but without it, where would we be? Shorn of the boys' wives, each*  
 5 *of whom I occasionally wish I could give a good shake, but all in all, not a*  
 6 *bad lot. Darius would be an ocean away, still, and while I cannot commend*  
 7 *his taste for peroxide, he has stirred you to life more than once, has he not.*  
 8 *(You are better off not knowing the stirrings he induced in me.) And we*  
 9 *might lack Jack, companion of my unemployed days.*

10 *And you would be the specimen you so long were, a bottle worshipper*  
 11 *anytime the moon changed.*

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

15  
 16 She was practicing her eavesdropping. Charlene was in her hair but  
 17 properly so, pushing a wave in and then making it hold with the mar-  
 18 celling iron, and while this was going on there was no reason not to rub-  
 19 ber in on the A-1's other customers, one woman done under the dryer  
 20 and waiting to be combed out and her permed friend waiting for her and  
 21 both with tireless tongues. *Blue Eagle* and *dancing* had been uttered.

22 "Who's on?" the one asked.

23 "The Melody Mechanics," said the other.

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

26 *Three Finger Curly! I never in a million years could get away with a*  
 27 *name like that in a—*

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

29 Rosellen could not help but despair for a moment. Try as she might  
 30 to invent people in her stories, in life they simply sat around and, well,  
 31 foodled themselves beyond what she could think up.

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

Short 39 He sneaked peeks between flipping pages, rare chance to see what  
 Jormal 40 went on in here. Each time the marcelling iron came out hot from its

midget oven, Rosellen's hair benefited that much more. Working over her, Charlene still had on a full-front apron from putting the chemicals in on the permed pair, but being Charlene, she simply looked like a million dollars that happened to be wearing an apron. Neil had heard that a place like Chicago had lady barbers, one of the prime attractions for ranchers who rode the trains in with their cattle, and he could see the benefits over having just any old guy rubbing the hair slickum in, yes he could.

Rosellen had her eyes closed now, waiting out Charlene's ministrations to her hair. She had spent this week, which seemed like forever, typing up the Corps' history of the dam project, Colonel Parmenter having instructed Major Santee to compile it and Major Santee having delegated it to Captain Brascoe, and Captain Brascoe might as well have written with only one letter of the alphabet, zzzzzz.

Churning out the captain's version Rosellen had wished, now that everybody's time at Fort Peck was numbered, that Charlene or Kate or Meg or even Proxy had lived somewhere else, so that she could have written letter after letter telling whichever one all the things of these years here. (Toston would have done, for Charlene. Proxy was harder to imagine a place for, she had worn out so many addresses already.) That wasn't quite it, because Charlene and any of the rest of them who had alit to Fort Peck, including Darius down from the moon, were all part of the story. There'd need to be another Charlene or whoever, the way Neil and Bruce were twins. In any case, someone out there on the other end of the words. But, lacking that correspondence in the invisible ink of wish, all she could do was keep ploughing along with Captain Brascoe's compilation. Rosellen, not much one for sighing, sighed now. Hugh and Meg and no doubt Darius had a saying for doing anything that annoyingly useless: *Pulling up nettles to clear a way into the thistles.*

"About done, hon," Charlene's voice broke in on her drifting. Alert again, Rosellen realized Neil had been watching her get the beauty treatment, and she rewarded his patience with a quick grin and wink.

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

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

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

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

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

2 "Poking traps."

3 When he said that, he saw eyebrows go up in an identical way on  
4 both Rosellen and Charlene behind her. After a moment, it was Char-  
5 lene who giggled and said, "In the footsteps of giants," meaning Hugh  
6 and Birdie.

7 "Size twelves." Neil shed the magazine, onto the pile he'd been  
8 through. "I'll be working with Birdie, so it's kind of an easy-chair job, in  
9 a way."

10 Rosellen hoped she was looking convincingly surprised. She hoped a  
11 lot harder that her having wangled this fresh job for him would simmer  
12 Neil down on his inclination to quit Fort Peck before she was ready to.  
13 "*Keep at it, you're always telling me. You don't know the half of it.*" "Duff,  
14 Neil Milne, dredgeline trap inspector," she tried out loud, just the way  
15 she had it already down on the payroll roster. "I like the sound of that,  
16 Neiliepoke."

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

19 "Too bad this didn't work out so that we could all get together  
20 tonight," Rosellen said on impulse, as much to Charlene as to Neil. The  
21 three couples of them, supper at the Rondola and then the movie and af-  
22 terward maybe seeing what those Melody Mechanics amounted to,  
23 would have been fun; but Bruce and Kate anymore could only afford a  
24 night out on payday, a full week from now, and Owen was working late  
25 on paperwork he'd been putting off. "How about coming with for sup-  
26 per?" she tried for Charlene at least, make some kind of occasion out of  
27 this. "Birdie Hinch's new right-hand man will probably even buy, hnn,  
28 Neil?"

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

30 "Just because you're beautified and ready to paint the town," Char-  
31 lene said to the back of Rosellen's head. "Some of us know the meaning  
32 of work." Addressing the intent two customers at the back of the shop:  
33 "Mrs. Foraker is going to have my scalp if I don't get to hers right after  
34 this, isn't that right, Mrs. Foraker?" The two tittered, and went back to  
35 an uneasy low conversation.

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

Short 39 "Aw," he registered disappointment. "Too bad you weren't quints,  
ormal 40 my odds would be better."



*Just listen to them*, Charlene thought as she manipulated the marcelling iron. A lot more than Rosellen, Charlene wished she and Owen had the night off, could go out with others and frolic. They both could stand that kind of a change. Nights lately, he had been giving her a hard time about life after Fort Peck. Or pretending to.

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

Or worse yet:

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

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

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

It gets to be a lot, Kate thought. The waitressing hours she could handle, Jackie as a wildcat three-year-old she could more or less handle, the complicated raft of Duff in-laws she could handle, even Bruce in his less sterling husbandly moments—well, handle was too strong a word there; put up with was the better expression, for now. But anyway, handling them all together would test Houdini, she was beginning to believe. She felt guilty for feeling so, but take right now, when she had just rounded up Jackie from Meg and was trying to keep an eye on him and listen to him chatter about his day with Mum Mum while at the same time supper had to be figured out and an educated guess be made on Bruce, whose hours were more unpredictable than ever now that he was on idle time.

“—an' it scared me poopy, Mommy.”

That nailed her attention. “Jackie, honey, let's don't be saying that, all right?” With his particular grandfather, two uncles and great-uncle added onto his father, not to mention the general run of mouths in Wheeler, Kate considered it a wonder that Jackie's language wasn't saltier than it was. “If you say that around Mum Mum, Mum Mum will have kit—Mum Mum will not be very happy.” She snared the boy to her, then knelt down on one knee to be at his level. “Now then, Jackerado, what came along and scared you?”

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1 "My nap."

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

4 "How—what scared you about that?" Kate asked, doing the best she  
5 could with her voice. Normally Jackie slept in the style of his father, like  
6 a petrified log.

7 "There was—the was a, a, a swimmy thing."

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

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

15 "Night—?" *Meg is going to have him talking in Pig Latin, if I don't*  
16 *watch out.* "Yes, honey, everybody gets those. But in yours, what did the  
17 swimmy thing look like?"

18 The boy pouted tragically. "Like a washclaw."

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

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

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

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30 It was tricky, finding ways to meet, be alone together. The two  
31 knew that carelessness, even once, would do them in. All it would  
32 take was some other member of the family noticing the least little thing,  
33 odd coincidence of her and him. Or picking up a bit of gossip: *I thought*  
34 *I just spotted your better half on (her) (his) way into . . .* Reading it back  
35 into the behavior they both tried to keep so pussyfoot. Then word would  
36 be dropped, well-intentioned and devastating: *They're not going off to-*  
37 *gether to learn to play the zither, are they.*

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

re there

They did not absolutely have to, but they made love in whispers.  
 Afterward, other whispers:  
 "They're going to catch us yet."  
 "Not if we quit this now."  
 "If."

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

Darius, however, had noticed something to the contrary.

A hiccup in the system always attracted him, and this one had locomotive proportions. What had been the regular rhythm of the gravel trains, laying the way for the riprap work, seemed to have a skip in it now. Keeping track day by day from his vantage spot in the bullgang, he found that the interruption sometimes stretched to half an hour or more, before a train would come backing onto the crest of the dam from the east—opposite of the usual rail flow—and hurriedly dump its gravel cars. The third time this happened, he also caught sight of Owen in an armwaving argument with the train dispatcher.

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

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

That night he said to Proxy, "Dust off your in-law manners, love. I want to have Hugh and Meg over for supper one night quite soon."

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

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

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

"Paint it all gold," Darius said airily.

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1 Proxy looked at him narrowly, but knew there was no seeing it yet.  
2 What he had up his sleeve.  
3

4 Lima beans of extraordinary hardness and a meat loaf dry as Melba  
5 toast and an unfortunate brown gravy and mashed potatoes with the  
6 gravity of dumplings—Meg could not have been more pleased with the  
7 meal Proxy produced, believing as she did that food was a direct index of  
8 morals. Hugh, too, appeared to take the philosophical approach. Noth-  
9 ing like these tastes, he thought, since those shots of goop at the Carteret  
10 Institute.

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

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

19 Actually Meg felt quite at home in the clutter of the houseboat and  
20 had been daydreaming a bit again of Inverley and when she and Hugh  
21 and Darius were green in judgment and trying to make up for it in kisses  
22 and flirtation. But Proxy sounded as if she had something on her mind.  
23 *Such a novelty is not to be missed*, the Milne attitude toward battle formed  
24 up in Meg, and the two women went out.

25 "You're a man of exalted position now," Darius said genially, mean-  
26 ing Hugh's hopping route atop the riprap and the burrows of snakes.  
27 "You'd know this. What's the bind with that gravel crew every infernal  
28 day? We're racing past them with the rockwork."

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

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

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

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

37 "It takes some doing, I admit. But figuring out when to squeeze that  
38 train in, get it backed down onto the dam and so on, that's what's giving  
39 them fits. Owen no doubt can cite you chapter and verse as to how soon

now they'll have it worked out and the extra train will be one more feather in—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Quite," said Meg.

"Had an offer once from a guy to come in with him on a photo studio up near Lake of the Woods," Proxy spoke as though this tale was being spelled out to her in the lights of the night. "I could be his dark-room assistant, he said. It all seemed kind of phony, though. I mean, here he was, lining up honeymoon couples under cardboard trees in that studio of his, and right outside there was this real woods." Proxy shook her head like an auctioneer. "So how could I trust him on that darkroom stuff either, right?" When Meg chose not to comment, Proxy mused on. "Real picture shooting, that'd be something else. That fancypants photographer who was here, I asked her what kind of a deal she had. She said her wages were just okay, but the way that magazine paid her expenses was a dream. 'Here, hire an airplane.' I could go for that. But I've never had any too much luck, taking pictures. Not sure I've got the eye for it."

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

That got under Proxy's skin, as Proxy knew it was intended to. She turned her head enough to size up her adversary there in the dusk. Meg's composed profile, with that aggravating knack of staring off as steadily as a figurehead. On down, she was better than okay in the entire figure department, too. Meg was a beckoning woman, still. Not that there were as many years between them as Proxy wished. *Try this on for size, though, old sister—one of us used our time better on Darius, didn't I.*

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

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

6 "Attachments are tough," Proxy could agree.  
7

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

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

14 Darius's head stayed cocked quizzically, which seemed to please  
15 Hugh. As though Clydesiders were not the only ones who knew the ins  
16 and outs of equipment, Hugh now provided:

17 "The spur line, up at the spillway."

18 "Ah," said Darius.  
19

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

21 Honey and milk. Under the tongue. Solomon knew whereof he  
22 sung. She granted.

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

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

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

31 Meg knew she was never going to be proficient in the afterpart of this  
32 as, say, old campaigner Proxy, but she determinedly pecked a kiss onto  
33 Hugh's sharp cheekbone and let spring: "I wonder if they know what in-  
34 gredients they put in at that Carteret establishment."

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

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

Short 39 "That brother of mine," Hugh finally mulled out loud. "He must  
Normal 40 have his eye on a foreman's job."



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

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

*When it comes to many things, Darius has his wants.* She shifted a little on the bed. *In my experience, though, such as it is—I will spare you the details, Hugh—the pronouncements that count with him are of the all too private sort.* Her fresh furrow of wondering about Darius kept carefully within the lines of conversation, she said now: "Too true, you never quite know with him, do you. I know one job I'd see him have. Yours. Lord High Executioner of snakes. Hugh, I do worry—"

"There've been times when I'd gladly have sicced them onto him," Hugh announced in the dark beside her. "Just to nibble on him around the edges, mind you. Teach him some manners."

*There's ever the question, isn't it, Meg held in private. How teachable any of us are.*

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

"Aun' Charlene! Watch!! I being a pony!!!" Jackie thundered past her when she stepped in to collect Kate and him now. Charlene thought Jackie was as spoiled as they come, and equine behavior at 8 a.m. didn't sway her opinion any.

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

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

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

"Mmm"—Kate glanced around from putting shoes on Jackie—"my uniform still needs pressing. That fancy iron of Bruce's ran out of gas on

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me." Charlene firmly tucked her tongue in her cheek. *Must be the only thing about him that ever runs out of gas.*

Kate was saying, "Better let it—Jackie, honey, you are such a wiggle-worm. Don't you want to go see Mum Mum?"

"I can contribute a swipe or two of ironing," Charlene offered, and unscrewed the spout cap on the gallon can of white gas.

"*Jackie*, you're going to squirm us both to death," Kate scolded. Then remembered: "That iron maybe needs another minute to cool before you—"

The WHOOSH of flame came then, over where Charlene had poured the first trickle of gas into the iron's teacup-size tank. Fire flashed up the streamlet of gas into the can, then rivered across the floor as Charlene had to drop the can. "Wouldn't you just know," she said almost conversationally. Then over her shoulder, sternly, "Get out! Take Jackie out!" Still so calm she was amazed at herself, she scanned around for something to beat at the fire with.

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

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

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

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

Charlene saw that she and the rug were in a losing battle against the fire, and wished she had saved a douse from that water bucket to pour on herself. She backed across the room to the window, got it unlatched and yanked it up with all her strength. It rose six inches in the windowframe and then the catchpins zinged into the casement holes. *Oh, fiddlesticks*, still calm but needing to hurry. Another twelve inches above those holding holes was another set and if she could just get the window open that wide, she could climb out. But she needed three hands to simultaneously pull up the window and manipulate the catchpins on either side of the window. She instead let the window down and grabbed the water bucket one more time. Scars are better than burning to death, she told herself,

clamped her eyes shut, and with both hands swung the empty bucket to shatter the windowglass. She had no time to knock out every last shard that stayed in the frame, and felt one get her across her shin, but then she was out, free of the licking fire.

It was all over but the embers by the time Bruce arrived. The Fort Peck fire department was parsimoniously hosing down the charred heap—not that much of a heap, either; the place had gone up like a wad of paper.

*All right, so it's bobbed. Maybe my customers will all want it, too—the latest style, the bobcut with a singe.*

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

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

Now, finally, she heard Owen's pickup door slam, and he came charging in, stopping short and blinking at the sight of her, radically barbered and with her bandaged leg up on the footstool.

He crossed the room and sat on the footstool, his hand lightly cupping her ankle, the nearest safe place to touch.

"I hear you had yourself quite a morning."

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

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

"Glad you got the kid out."

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

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

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1 there would inevitably need to be another loan to Bruce and company.  
 2 He knew it was the day that had him out of sorts, not to mention the  
 3 shock of coming home to a shorn and wan Charlene, but he still felt en-  
 4 titled to be damned good and tired of having to pull strings for members  
 5 of this family. *It's neverending. Wouldn't you think somebody could hang*  
 6 *on to what they got, for a change?* No, now, that wasn't fair, not even to-  
 7 ward Bruce who had never heard of a piggybank, or at least it wasn't  
 8 what an attentive husband ought to be stewing about while Charlene sat  
 9 here looking badly used. To buck her up, he commended:

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

13 "What about dumber than a truckload of them, too, for trying to fill  
 14 a hot iron." As Owen opened his mouth to loyally knock that down, she  
 15 said in quickstep: "No, I didn't know it was hot, it was not my fault, no-  
 16 body's fault, it could have happened to Eenie, Meenie, Minie or Moe."  
 17 She stopped, to put together the next. "But something about it was  
 18 dumb, Owen. The, I don't know, the *situation* was dumb, if nothing else."

19 "It must be catching," he surprised her with. She saw that he sud-  
 20 denly looked as tired as she felt. "Lot of dumb situation going around,"  
 21 he went on, absently stroking her ankle. "I got greeted with a gravel train  
 22 that broke loose last night. A cut of twenty cars. They're scrap iron now."  
 23 He brought his attention up from the ankle and white-wrapped shin to  
 24 her face. "That's why they couldn't track me down for you sooner. I was  
 25 up there at the spillway, trying to get somebody to tell me how long that  
 26 siding will be out of commission."

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

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

34 "Mmhmm. Pretty much."

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

37 "Came to see the firebug."

38 Before Owen could launch up from the footstool, Charlene started  
 Short 39 trying to fend: "Sorry about how that ironing job turned out, Bruce.  
 Normal 40 Really, I—"

#/

"Hey, never mind."

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

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

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

Owen swallowed, and nodded.

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

"For good?" he asked Mommy.

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

Daddy heard and gave her a frown and him a tickle and told him they were going to live in a tailor house soon.

Every morning now Darius stepped out onto the deck of the houseboat feeling the world had gone farther downhill.

The minuet of the cowards, London and Paris to Munich and Berchtesgaden, played night after night from the pitiless radio. Proxy would arrive home in the small hours and find him hunched, captive to listening, mind on the Czechs and the Sudetenland Germans and the frantic diplomats and Hitler's troop movements. The first few times, she came over to where he sat, and did things to him until Europe couldn't compete. But when this kept on, the choir of woe from the radio holding him there each night, it irritated her to have to draw his attention that way—*it used to be, he was all volunteer*—and she took to stepping past him, turning the radio down low, and with her fingers making a mocking walkie-talkie exit up his sleeve and over his back and away, she drifted to bed alone.

He knew he could not get by with being automatic toward Proxy. Not for long. Part of him knew too that hypnotic flames such as Munich

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1 were the oldest hopelessness, man fated to be more savage than any crea-  
2 ture the world had seen yet. It would have settled everything, the corner  
3 of dour logic in Darius Duff said, if the first human looking into a fire  
4 had gone blind from it. Cats or ravens could have evolved into the ar-  
5 biters of life. But no, the human species had learned to peek, and then to  
6 eye each other across the dancing blaze and argue the distribution of  
7 firepits. Politics, the answering corners of Darius said, were a necessary  
8 madness. If the argument with our own natures did not go on, why  
9 exist? And so, all apologies to Proxy and her wares, but these nights he  
10 was away to that other desire.

11  
12 "Rough luck about Bruce and Kate and the lad."

13 "Yeah," Owen ground out around the sandwich he was wolfing into,  
14 "you bet." Darius was right on that score at least. Bruce seemed to take  
15 it as a matter of course when Owen came through with not only a trans-  
16 fusion of money but the idea of his and Charlene's old trailer house, now  
17 sitting surplus in Park Grove, which was taking some real finagling with  
18 the Corps. Not the easiest item to fit through channels, a kid brother  
19 with pernicious anemia of the wallet. Acting as if his household burned  
20 down every day, Bruce merely had said, "Getting us a ringside seat for  
21 your dredging, huh, Ownie?" And it was true, the *Gallatin* held sway in  
22 that vicinity, slurping away at a neighborhood of abandoned shanties,  
23 and its giant pipeline and all three from the other dredges snaked right  
24 through town—life in Park Grove, down from the dam, had the reputa-  
25 tion of being like living under a sink. Owen felt sorry for Kate, reduced  
26 to those circumstances, but for Bruce, not noticeably.

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

32 "Bruce and company hiphopping from handout to handout, make-  
33 work to make-work," Darius inclined his head to the half-dredged  
34 sprawl of Park Grove below the dam. "While Owen and company"  
35 —here he mimicked doffing his cap to the dam and the Corps townsite  
36 beyond—"are the masters with the blueprints."

37 Owen swallowed furiously. "You've been here since I forget when and  
38 you still don't savvy thing one about Fort Peck."

39 "I 'savvy,' as you say, that it has paid off handsomely for you. A good  
40



house for you and the lovely Charlene, a fancy wage, doubtless your pick of a next job as Roosevelt doles out these projects. While the rest of —

"Is that what you think I'm at, here? Jesus aching Christ, Darius. You make me tired. I'm at this job to do it up royally, build this dam the best way I know how. *That's* the point, to any of this."

"Ah, but is it. Isn't it more the point to keep society lulled with a bit of work, a bit of wage, while there's no real solving of anything?"

"Lull—? Where's anybody who's lulled, around here? These guys are going to go around saying until their dying breath, 'I worked on Fort Peck.'"

"But you'll always sing the lead, won't you."

"What the hell is it you think, that a mob of people can just fling themselves at something and it'll be built? You can't get away with that. They couldn't even at Dnieperstroy. The Sovietskis had Cooper and Company in there as engineers, somebody's got to be answerable when you're build—"

"Knowhow, the American language, I'm sure."

"In *any* language! Even in Red!" Owen was up and standing over him. Now he shouted over the top of Darius's head. "Max!" Sangster, middistance figure overseeing an extension of the dredgeline strutwork, turned and waved. "Cover until I get back, okay?" Owen called to him through cupped hands. "And ring up Jepperson, would you, and tell him I'm detaching this one"—he jerked a quick thumb at Darius—"for a little while." Then he spun around to his uncle, frowning intently at him and then down the abutment slope to the motor pool vehicles. "Get in the pickup."

Darius cocked his head warily. "What would be the reason for that?"

"There's something I want to show you at the spillway."

"Hold on, Owen—I've had the ha'penny tour of the spillway once already, you know."

"Get in the goddamn pickup before I stuff you in it!"

Darius closeted his anger in the face of Owen's worse case of it, and climbed in the government pickup. Owen veered over to the nearest ransack shack where tools and supplies were kept, grabbed a sizable empty box and flung it in the back of the pickup. Then, mystifying Darius, he drove without a word across the dam, the opposite direction from the spillway, and up into the Fort Peck townsite. At the bowling alley, he jammed to a halt. Darius could not resist asking:

"Are we going to settle this with a duel of skittles?"

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1 Still wordless, Owen slammed out of the pickup and into the bowl-  
 2 ing alley and soon came back with the box full, heaving it with a grunt  
 3 into the back of the pickup. He glowered at Darius for a moment  
 4 through the back window of the cab, then jumped in again and drove  
 5 across the dam, this time unmistakably into the maze of humpy little  
 6 hills that would bring them out beside the spillway, and its rail spur.

7 Darius appraised Owen, stonily driving, and felt a sense of arguer's  
 8 stimulation along with his apprehension. He had missed Jaarala some-  
 9 thing fierce; someone who grasped by habit, almost by bloodright, the  
 10 need to chew at the heels of the powers that be. He even pined a bit for  
 11 Mott, bent trumpet though he had turned out to be.

12 Darius tensed as the pickup barreled down a hill to where acetylene  
 13 flickers threw light and shadow over an iron valley of wreckage, the cutting  
 14 torches at work on railcars crumpled and tangled like a kicked set of toys.

15 *Sabot, Owen. A wooden shoe—French, as it happens. The word is from*  
 16 *that, sabotage is. But I suppose you know so, educated fool that you are.*

17 The first time, the wrench into the gearteeth, was mad fury; Darius  
 18 himself would not have called it anything other. Tactics, however, were  
 19 fury pounded cold and snipped into actions, were they not.

20 *The movement, you see, Owen. You think you know by book what it is*  
 21 *about, what I am about. And you can't, poor learned mealmate. "In the*  
 22 *mind of every man, hidden under the ashes, a quickening fire"—biblical to*  
 23 *me as your blueprints are to you. Tactic by tactic, "compatible with the min-*  
 24 *imum of brutality": my gospel, old Sorel's as far as he went, you would pry at*  
 25 *instantly, ask "Who gets to set the minimum?" I could tell you—but must*  
 26 *never—that it sometimes sets itself; that a George Crawford and I blunder it*  
 27 *back and forth between us until, bad surprise, one of us exists no more. But*  
 28 *here within our family enterprise, as you regard Fort Peck, metal is the min-*  
 29 *imum.*

30 *The machine-breakers. Did you ever read up on them, in your earnest*  
 31 *engineering courses? Not a man at this dam, except perhaps you, would know*  
 32 *the name "Ned Ludd" if it floated in his breakfast bowl. But what a bogey-*  
 33 *man old Ned was, set loose by laborers when they burned hayricks and cloth-*  
 34 *iers' mills, broke up knitting looms and wrecked the winding gears at mine*  
 35 *pits. You're a man of numbers, you'll appreciate this: before the Luddites were*  
 36 *done making their point by riot, London had to put them down with an*  
 37 *army the size of those it was sending against Napoleon. But even that didn't*  
 38 *put paid to the tactic itself. Were Jaarala here, he could tell you of the IWW's*  
 39 *knack of slowing a sawmill with but one spike driven into a log.*

*And here we're all at making this one great machine of yours, this dam, are we not. And why? To take everyone's mind off any cause except perfecting the gadget, a thing that turns running water into standing water. Cleverest sink plug in the world, this Fort Peck machine.*

*So what I have done to machinery in a few nights of slipping sabots into the works, Owen, dear, is to make the kings of things know. Your Corps. Your construction companies. Your dolemaster Roosevelt. For that matter, you, who have no quarrel with the order of things so long as it meets schedules and sets records. But those who put their hands to the work ought to own that work, Owen. That's flat basic. That's the meaning of the movement, poor battered bastard piece of history that it is. Of myself, we may as well say. As long as there is one spoor of the movement—I somehow seem to have become that minimum, here—the rest of you are made to know that the order of things can be turned upside down.*

Mind awhirl, Darius cut glances from the smashed gravel cars just ahead to the unreadable profile of Owen. As they pulled even with the railroad spur, Owen swept a tallying look along the wreck and the repair work.

And drove on by.

Before Darius quite caught his breath, they were alongside the huge concrete trench of the spillway, Owen jouncing them down through the hills next to the gape of it, Darius having to keep watch back and forth between his possessed nephew and the mile-long fan of spillway floor below his side of the pickup.

The pickup roared to the service ramp which angled down onto the spillway. The watchman there, appalled to have this traffic, waved them on in a hurry when Owen flashed his particular job button.

*Now, by God, Darius. Push the political wool away from your eyes for once. Now you're about to see some solving.*

Owen drove up the spillway, no longer the dirt canyon where Proxy gave Darius lessons in how to herd the truck but a vast inclined floor of concrete sections as neat and new as fresh linoleum. Halfway along, Owen abruptly pulled to a halt.

"Sit," he said to Darius as he would to a dog.

He himself bailed out of the pickup cab, hefted the box from the back, and over at the center seam of the concrete sections, a groove perhaps half the size of a rain gutter, he yanked bowling pins out by the neck and meticulously set them up, all ten at last standing at attention in their triangle formation. Darius watched silently.

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1 Back into the pickup, Owen drove a ways while watching the  
2 rearview mirror. When he stopped this time, Darius knew to get out  
3 with him.

4 The pins were specks in the distance, against the fresh gray of the  
5 concrete. Owen hefted the bowling ball out of the box. Going over to  
6 the seam in the concrete, he put the bowling ball down onto the shallow  
7 groove and gave just enough of a push to start the black ball rolling. The  
8 two men listened to the slight rumble as the ball rolled and rolled, hold-  
9 ing to the hairline mark of channel in the middle of the concrete  
10 expanse, until it looked the size of a BB demolishing the formation of  
11 the pins.

12 "That's engineering," said Owen, after the distant clatter. "Know-  
13 how,' if that's the best you can stand to call it." He swept his hand  
14 around to indicate the concrete canyon they were in. "This was all hills  
15 and coulees, shalebanks until Hell wouldn't have it—you couldn't have  
16 flown pigeons through here without them getting dizzy. Now take a  
17 look. Go ahead. *Look!*"

18 Darius with obvious reluctance moved his eyes from Owen to the  
19 immense straight gout of the spillway, half a mile of concrete ahead of  
20 them to where it met the river below the dam and even more of it behind  
21 them where the colossal spillgates stood.

22 "A mile of concrete in here," Owen resumed intensely, "laid two feet  
23 thick, down a five percent grade, and all of it so gaddamn exact and  
24 smooth that ball rolled along it without ever bouncing, didn't it. Blue-  
25 prints and specs and hard-ass engineers and crews who want to go about  
26 it right, this is the kind of thing we can give the world. It's what the dam  
27 is going to be, something that works like it's supposed to. We know how  
28 on this, you bet we do. Those pie in the sky politics of yours, though,  
29 they can't ever take the world in hand this same way. You can work on  
30 how to run people until you turn blue, be my guest, but I'm going to  
31 keep doing what I can see a real result on. Dams, jobs. The actual factual,  
32 Darius."

33 "If I ever see the light, I'm sure it'll be because you brained me with  
34 it," Darius said with surprising surrender. "Does this conclude the ser-  
35 mon for today?"

36 Owen actually had been set to argue on and on, until he had Darius's  
37 cuckoo politics backed into the corner where they belonged. He was  
38 somehow disappointed to see this expression on Darius, which looked  
39 oddly like a smile of relief.

"You know my inclination about the stoppage rate," the colonel said.  
 "Zero would be a nice number to have."

Both supposed to be at ease in front of his desk, Major Santee and Captain Brascoe conspicuously waited for each other to respond first.

Rank always told. Giving way under the major's bland silence, Brascoe had to offer up: "We—I still think the breakdowns are nothing but carelessness."

"Sugar in gas tanks isn't careless," Santee took advantage of that.

"Someone mad at a foreman is all that one amounted to, I believe," the colonel weighed in unexpectedly. "Someone has to get the deuces and treys of life, and whoever did, that day, lost his head and went sugaring."

Santee and Brascoe waited out the colonel's pensive expression. When his eyes snapped to the captain again, Brascoe reported: "The *federals* in Butte are about done running their check on our fingerprint files, sir. Nobody matches up yet to their list of known radicals, and they're up to the *R's*."

The colonel turned his head to the other officer. "We know there's nothing to fear in the names starting with *S*, right, Joe?"

"Yes, sir," Major Santee answered by rote.

Colonel Parmenter's mouth turned down. He did not make many jokes, and wanted it acknowledged when he did. He swung back to Brascoe, who resumed:

"I've put on more watchmen. Beyond that, it's a question of taking measures that will slow up the night work and—"

"No," the colonel cut in. "I'd bet these spots of trouble are just a little run of bad luck. Keep the work at full push. Dismissed, gentlemen."

There was not a man or woman at Fort Peck who did not forever remember precisely where they were and what they were at shortly after noon on September 22nd of 1938.

Hugh was by the front door of the Blue Eagle, trying to look as if the saloon had sneaked up on him instead of vice versa. With a last bleak glance along the main street of Wheeler—after all, what could he say to Meg or any of the rest of the family if he was caught slipping in here: *Eh, have you heard there's an epidemic of amnesia?*—in he went, heart hammering.

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1 The saloon was all but empty. Right time of day for this, at least.  
2 Tom Harry scanned down the bar at him in sardonic surprise. "Look  
3 what the snakes chased in."

4 "The riprap work is shut down for a little while," Hugh defended his  
5 presence here. "They're mucking around with a walking crane that got  
6 itself stuck." Giving him just time enough for this. He hoped.

7 Tom Harry seemed to have heard that one and all other variations  
8 before. He added to that impression with a bartender shrug and said,  
9 "What can I get you, a glass of mother's milk or what?"

10 By now Hugh qualified as a connoisseur of soda pop, working his  
11 way through the flavors. His latest, Orange Crush, he considered sweetly  
12 vile.

13 "You can't tell me you don't miss the real stuff," Tom Harry prodded  
14 as he set the garish bottle of pop before Hugh.

15 "I can never touch it again, that's all," Hugh said nobly.

16 "Not ever, huh? That's a long dry while, Duff."

17 Hugh looked at him with a start of panic, as if Tom Harry somehow  
18 knew what they had all ended up confessing to each other at the Carteret  
19 Institute, outside the Amen Corner sessions, afterward when no staff  
20 were around: that, yes, if a man knew he was about to be on his  
21 deathbed; say he had only a month to live, doctor's sworn diagnosis;  
22 then, yes, every last one of them had concluded that under such circum-  
23 stances they would go on a final blue-screaming walleyed delirious jag.  
24 "*There I stood at the gate of God, drunk but unafraid,*" quoted one of the  
25 Southerners, who tended to be dreamy and literary. But that was wish,  
26 the fuzzwuzzyland called If. Here and now, a man honorably cured  
27 would . . .

28 "You heard me, you smirky bastard," Hugh said to Tom Harry.  
29 "Never." He drained the last of the Orange Crush. "Give me another of  
30 those putrid things."

31  
32 Owen's mind was on shale, which still was slipping off the east bank  
33 into the core pool and messing up his water level.

34 *How the hell am I supposed to stay on the mark if that stuff dumps itself*  
35 *in whenever it feels like it?*

36 The second hell of it was, this was a perfectly nice day, for a change;  
37 the rowdy weather that moved in after Labor Day had finally petered out  
38 and now the sky chose Indian summer, chinked with a few high streaks  
39 of cloud, thin and shaped like wingspans of birds. Owen a lot rather  
40 would have been at lunch, sunning himself and making Swiss cheese of



Darius's arguments, than trotting to the far end of the core pool again. Not for the first time, he wished the planet had been constructed without any Bearpaw shale.

The boss of the survey crew, Pete Blegen, hailed him before he could reach the latest slide of shale and commence swearing at the substance.

"The freeboard reading is way under," Blegen reported as if relieved to be rid of the news. "Hate to tell you, but it's at only three feet."

"Can't be," Owen said instantly, then gave Blegen a quit-kidding grin. "Better *not* be."

In spite of himself Owen spun around to shoot a glance at his dredgeline, eyeballing the cascade from its discharge pipes into the pool water beneath. The specification there he knew as well as his own name. A constant four and a half feet interval was supposed to be maintained between the water level in the core pool and the discharge emptying into it, so that the fill would drain and settle properly. The reading Blegen had given him, off the mark by, Christ, a foot and a half, meant either a mighty amount of shale had slipped into the pool and brought its water level up that much, or the dredgeline had sunk that much. Either sounded wacky, and Owen had to hope the discrepancy was in the surveyors' numbers. He carefully watched Blegen's face. "You're not fooling, huh?"

"That's the reading I got."

"Pete, go run your level on it again. The Ad Building's going to want a confirmation." *So do I, you better bet.* Owen's expression told the surveyor and sent him off at double-time.

*Hard damned stuff to nurse,* Hugh decided of the Orange Crush as the second bottle rapidly emptied despite his every effort at moderation. Sighing heavily, he signaled Tom Harry for another. As the barkeeper bore the next bottle to him, Hugh restlessly asked:

"What time does she come on?"

"Who?" said Proxy, from the doorway. "Mother Machree?"

*I hope the rest of the day isn't going to go like this.* As ever, Owen would rather have eaten toads than have to shut down his dredgeline, but he trudged over to the nearest field telephone and stood by. *Specs are specs,* another unwelcome but unavoidable thought. If the core pool water level was really as far out of whack as Blegen maintained, they shouldn't keep pouring fill in. *Can't. Don't dare. It'll mush up, if it hasn't already.* Any toddler making mudpies knew the right recipe: just enough water,

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1 *not too damn little, not too sonafabitching much. As we all of a sudden seem*  
2 *to have an extreme excess of, here in the world's biggest core pool, congratula-*  
3 *tions, Fillmaster Duff.*

4 He watched as the survey crew, down at the edge of the pool, unani-  
5 mously gave him a hateful glance over their shoulders when Blegen told  
6 them they had to rerun their reading. The astronomers, as they were  
7 known, already felt it was beneath their dignity to be squinting through  
8 their lovely transits in the muck around the core pool. Blegen's tone of  
9 voice, though, was sending them hopping to do it over.

10 Waiting, Owen prowled three paces back and forth, as if tethered to  
11 the field telephone post. At least misery had a lot of company this after-  
12 noon. He could see down onto the face of the dam where the riprap  
13 work was gummed up, too; halted for the past half hour or so because  
14 the walking crane had mired in a soft spot. They—when it came to  
15 snotty tasks that always meant the bullgang—were going to have to  
16 walk the huge Cat-tread crane out to firmer ground by laying big  
17 wooden mats in front of its tracks. But right now, hanging loose, smok-  
18 ing and joking until the trucks with the mats showed up, none among  
19 the bullgang looked looser than the rail-thin figure spectating up in  
20 Owen's direction. *Darius to the rescue*, the thought momentarily enter-  
21 tained Owen, *whether or not a stuck crane can be elevated according*  
22 *to Marx.*

23 Blegen was yelling for his attention.

24 The survey boss had his arm up, three fingers extended toward  
25 Owen, as if bidding at an auction. The freeboard reading had surveyed  
26 out at three feet again. *Damn.*

27 Now Blegen pointed emphatically with his other arm at the dredge-  
28 line discharge pipe. The survey crew had run a separate reading on it  
29 from a benchmark this time, and Owen Duff's core pool was not up a  
30 foot and a half; Owen Duff's dredgeline had sunk, sagged, that much.

31 *What a horseshit turn of events this is.* Owen sourly fieldphoned all  
32 four dredgemasters and told them to shut down. He hated the next step  
33 and had to keep telling himself over and over *regs are regs, too, Duff, even*  
34 *for you* as he picked up the phone and, like any man of regulations who  
35 had both a crane and a pipeline bogged down in inexplicable soft spots  
36 in his dam, notified the Ad Building.

37  
38 The two of them, Proxy and Hugh, resorted to the backmost table  
39 at the Blue Eagle, out of the saloon traffic and Tom Harry's range of  
40 hearing.

"Odd time of day for this, I know," he stabbed at making conversation.

She wasn't sure why, but she gave him a break by not asking if he had gone to all this trouble of looking her up to tell her the time. "Different in here in broad daylight," she granted, nodding a greeting to the piano player Gert as she passed by to her keyboard with a brimming shotglass carried carefully in each hand. "A little."

Hugh watched the shotglasses go past as if they were the crown jewels on show. He turned again to Proxy with a surprisingly winning rueful smile. "Not so much temptation to expand the job, you mean?"

"Hugh, I said 'a little.'" Not that it was any of his business, but she would let him know anyway. "I go out back with somebody if and when I want. But I'm not taking on drunks and wet-eared kids and whatever else in pants that walks in here, am I. I *mostly* dance anymore, okay? Now what's on your mind besides your chapoo."

"A thing I need to know."

"Just one? Aren't you lucky."

"That brother of mine and whatever he might be getting himself into," Hugh named off. He looked Proxy over, as if sizing up a witness. Not that it was possible to be neutrally judicious in looking Proxy over. "As regards political matters," Hugh thought he had better specify. "If that size of words covers the matter of Darius."

She couldn't help smiling a little. One thing life with Darius had taught her was that a response didn't necessarily have to be an answer. "You've known him a real lot longer than I have," she now responded.

"I knew him when we were lads and I've known him since he showed up here cap in hand. There's damn near all of history in between." *And a bothering quantity since, such as fingerprints that want hiding and trains that become a topic of conversation one fine night and let go their brakes soon thereafter. That's what I need to know of our Darius, Proxy. If I am right. If I am not the world's leading fool, which sometimes has been the case, too.*

"Why care?" Proxy asked as if she could use the answer. "Why let yourself in for heartburn?"

"Proxy, now, that's up there with the best of them, isn't it, in the all-time questions," Hugh told her in a tone that gave no ground. "It would take somebody who can lie faster than a horse can trot to say we're always happy with the object of our interest. There are times we're simply stuck with it, aren't we." He clonked the pop bottle on the table, looked at it, picked it back up, then glanced across and held his gaze steady against hers. "I was handed Darius for a brother, and I helplessly care."

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Proxy studied him. More than years, or politics either, made a difference between Hugh and Darius. Hugh had rough spots in him you couldn't iron out with a steamroller, but at least they were on the map. Watching him sit across from her and take a swig of orange pop now with repulsion and determination, she kind of liked the fact that while he had cleaned up his drinking, he hadn't gone Holy Joe in any other way.

Neil liked to know what he was doing, but working with Birdie Hinch had its mysteries.

As now, when they had just come on shift, a little late as Birdie seemed to think was their right, and were starting their patrol of the dredgeline along the crest of the dam when Birdie let out a buzzsaw whine—which Neil after a moment realized was an Oklahoma rendition of GAWWWWDDD DAMN!—and threw his hat at the first drain trap.

"Lookit that!" Birdie stomped over to the huge pocket of metal beneath the first section of pipeline and crammed his hat back on his head. "Bastards on the last shift left us a clogged trap," he complained. "That ain't fair play. They ain't supposed to hightail off before—"

"Is this what's got everything shut down?" Owen hadn't looked as if he was in his best mood when the pair of them had to go past him on their way out here, so Neil was uneasy with the idea of the entire work of the dam hung up waiting on how expeditiously he and Birdie Hinch could clean out a trap.

"Naw," Birdie answered. "Something else." Slower than molasses but without wasting an ounce of effort, Birdie began undoing the turnbuckles on his side of the pipeline trap, still voicing hurt over the unfairness of the previous shift. When the trap hinged open, though, Birdie drew in his breath sharply.

"I take it all back. Our ship just come in, Neil," he crowed. "We got ourselves a wowser of a skull, look at that sucker. Tom Harry'll pay plenty for this one."

The buffalo head, with one cavern of eye socket peering out of the muck and twin hooks of horn on guard, appeared weirdly determined to stay buried in the clot of clay. Birdie in admiration, Neil in resignation, they hunkered down to study the tub-size skull.

"Alas, poor shaggy Yorick."

"Huh?" They both jumped at the intonation from Darius, who was standing over their shoulders.

"What the dingdong hell is that supposed to mean?" Birdie demanded with a querulous squint.

Darius's hand made a wiping never-mind motion against the air. "What's the bollix that has us shut down?" He knew virtually all there was to know about work stoppages, but this standstill puzzled him.

"It ain't us," Birdie fairly spat. "The bastards before us left—"

Darius did not stay for the recitation, simply shook his head impatiently and clambered back down from the crest of the dam to where the rest of the bullgang were still lounging around, standing on one foot and then the other and wisecracking about easy money today, tourist wages.

Birdie and for that matter Neil had other things on the mind right now than Darius. They barely watched him go before the lodged skull claimed the fullest attention again. "A lot of people might call me a liar on this," Birdie said judiciously, "but I'd say this is the stud daddy of all buffalo."

"Yeah, right, it's a whopper," Neil had to agree distastefully. He didn't like the look of the thing, blind to the bone yet that socket seeming to fix an eternal stare on them. Weird business with eyes bothered him, still. If it was up to him, he would smash the staring monstrosity with a crowbar, break it out of there in pieces like a giant eggshell before the dredge-line boss or even Owen himself came and got on their backs. But one of Birdie's vocations was involved here. "Okay, what's the recipe for getting the thing out?"

"See, all's we do, Neil, is you work on that clay around it and I pry in kind of gentle behind it. I got to get a lady shovel for that. Be right back."

As Birdie scooted off along the crest of the dam, Neil shrugged out of his jacket, slung it over the nearest pipeline support, and started clearing muck away from the buffalo skull.

Darius still did not like the setup of this shift.

The big bugs—some foremen of the work gangs, and contractors' superintendents, and a clot of engineers featuring of course Owen—were clustering at the lip of the core pool where the field telephone was located. In Darius's experience, an assembly of bosses always brought trouble. He glanced along the dam for any sign of equipment breakdown or someone injured, but that did not seem to be it.

He checked again toward Neil and Birdie, Neil noggin down at work on the clogged trap and Birdie skylarking off in search of a small-headed

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shovel. Nothing to be divined from that pair except the cranial measurements of a buffalo. On impulse Darius headed up the face of the dam. Whatever the war council was about, up there, he wanted to take a gander at it himself.

"Hey!" the bullgang foreman Jepperson yelled. "Where you going, Scotchman? Christ's sake, you haven't even put your gloves on yet."

"Drastic case of the drizzles," Darius called back over his shoulder and climbed faster.

He reached the crest in time to see a car rapidly coming, that of the colonel, biggest bug of the outfit. Something tickled in the back of Darius's mind and down his neck. He halted and sighted west along the top of the dam.

The steel rails of the railroad track were bending sideways, bulging like a drawn bow.

Darius turned east and ran, toward the shore, to race all the way back to Scotland if that's what it took.

To Owen, the start of the slide was like a heat shimmer, as when waves of air danced in the alfalfa field in hottest summer. Slow and hazy to the eye, distorting everything. Bringing about the unbelievable: the railroad track snapping apart sideways, as if of its own volition. Next the light-poles swayed as they couldn't possibly, and then swooned to the upstream side of the dam. The slope there of fill and gravel and partial riprap looked out of kilter to him, oddly unmoored. *God, no! The whole thing can't—* Along the crest of the dam the dredgeline was crumpling section by section, almost orderly. *Neil! Get the hell—* Then, though, everything speeded up. Crevices cut the earthfill of the dam's upstream face, collapsing it into mush. The water in the core pool was vanishing, a wet roar was over everything, people scrambled everywhere. A dam-worker darted past Owen so fast he only belatedly realized it was Darius. Statuelike, Owen watched as a half-mile section hinged away from the rest of the dam and slid into the lake, taking with it the walking crane and bulldozers and trucks and the railroad track and the dredgeline and men.

Some 180 of them were at work on the east upstream section of the dam when it gave way, and the eight or ten minutes of the slide turned them into hydraulic arithmetic.

The riprap crew nearest the east bank comprised the main number, about 125. They were waiting to start laying the next tier of rock, as soon

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## BUCKING THE SUN

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as the crane got back into action and resumed hoisting big quarry boulders from the railcars down onto the face of the dam for them. Meanwhile they were killing time by greasing their equipment and trading insults with the bullgang, below them where the crane had sunk into unusually wet gravel. Close to the crest of the dam as they were, the riprap crew had mostly level running when someone shouted LOOK OUT, THERE SHE GOES! and the slide started. They fled, clambered, vaulted, whatever it took, in wild retreat to the east bank of the river valley, the face of the dam crumbling at their heels.

Five persons were in the colonel's car. Colonel Parmenter and Major Santee and Captain Brascoe, all in the backseat, saw the calamity past flinching heads in front of them. For Max Sangster, coming out to see if he could lend Owen a hand with the core pool puzzle and sitting across from the colonel's driver, the slide was framed in the windshield, horror focused in the panel of glass. Half a decade of engineering, millions of cubic yards of Fort Peck Dam, were melting like brown sugar in front of Sangster's eyes. He and the three officers were thrown forward as the driver hit the brakes, then the car was racing in reverse, the colonel's wordless driver turned tautly half around as he steered over his shoulder and gunned the accelerator, one crevice after another opening and folding away from where the car had just been.

Scattered across the ~~half-mile~~ slope of caving earth, four dozen men of the bullgang rode the slide. A typical set of them, a pair of workers watched by Owen from his helpless distance, managed to leap across two cracks that opened in front of them, but the third took them and then closed over them. For a panicked moment both thought they would suffocate, but water gushed up below and pushed them out where they could breathe. The water tumbled them down the ooze into the lake, where they had to fight not to be sucked down by a whirlpool. There were islands of muck now, a Missouri archipelago in the lake, and they managed to pull each other onto one of these mud mounds and cling there until a motorboat crew came for them. Other escapes, out across the tide of devastation by twos and threes and other handfuls, were just as miraculous.

Those who died did so one by one.

A deckhand on the workboat at the foot of the riprap saw the vast wall of avalanche coming, grabbed the railing, but was swept overboard and buried in the mudslide.

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1 A young riprap worker who had been down on one knee tying a  
2 shoelace when the damslope gave way also was buried, and suffocated;  
3 hours of effort to revive him in an iron lung failed.

4 A bullgang laborer who seized a passing section of dredgeline strut-  
5 work was carried safely down the trajectory of the slide but jarred loose  
6 when it careened into the lake, and drowned.

7 Four simply vanished.  
8

9 Neil was carving clay away from the buffalo skull when he felt the  
10 ground shake. He thought a bulldozer must have run into the dredge-  
11 line, and he jerked his head out of the trap of the pipe to have a look.  
12 Then he felt the general motion, the slippage, everything tipping.  
13 Around him the dredgeline crew was running, trying to run; he saw  
14 Birdie disappear in a quicksandlike whorl of gravel. The dredgeline was  
15 starting to snake down the slope, atop the avalanche of all the fill mate-  
16 rial from the crest of the dam on down. *Jesus, this is worse than—* To get  
17 out of the gravel tearing at his feet, Neil straddled up onto the dredge-  
18 line pipe, desperately hugging down around it to grab the trap's turn-  
19 buckles to hang on to. Bareback on the Chinese dragon of pipe, he rode  
20 down the avalanche toward the waiting water.

21  
22 Owen backpedaled, skittered sideways, outright ran when he had to, but  
23 always with his head turned toward the slide, staying clear of the crater  
24 in the side of the core pool as it washed out, all the while trying to regis-  
25 ter where Neil would end up.  
26

27 Rosellen was making short work of next week's Corps duty roster, pay-  
28 ing only half attention to it whipping through the typewriter, glancing  
29 up and around her for the latest on the rumor that had been bouncing  
30 through the Ad Building. Some sort of problem at the dam. She noticed  
31 Major Santee's secretary, Betty Jane, coming her way and she timed  
32 the last of her piece of typing, as she liked to do, so that she could rip it  
33 out of the typewriter and hand it across with a grin the instant BJ arrived  
34 for it.

35 Betty Jane didn't take the roster. With an odd look on her face she  
36 asked Rosellen:

37 "What shift is your Neil on?"  
38

Short 39 Wanting to throw up but telling himself he didn't have time, Owen  
Jormal 40 edged back out along what was left of the rim between the core pool and

where the face of the dam had been, desperate to turn around and start scanning down into the soupy mess of the slide but forcing himself to watch the remainder of the dam. Here where the slippage had occurred the dam now was narrowed by half, as if a monstrous bit had been taken out of its upstream side. As best Owen could judge, the downstream crest hadn't budged, yet. *Hadn't better, either, the sonofa*— If a similar slice of it fell away, the whole dam would go, Missourians would be fishing the bodies of half of Fort Peck out at St. Louis. *The Johnstown flood, hell.* The Owentown version, if it happened, would make Johnstown look like a swimming accident. Owen Duff knew there was no reason why the downstream side of the dam would go out, too; slippage wasn't a form of epidemic. Yet why, why had any of his scrupulous earthfill slipped?

Dancing from nerves, jittering himself out along the earthfill cliff with his back turned to the gulp of slide, Owen decided if the rest of the dam was going to go, it would go; looking at it would never stop it. He whirled around to what he had to face at the slide area.

An immense raw gulch lay below him, half a mile across, where the fill had flowed out into the lake, millions of yards of carefully dredged material reverting into goo and gravel, and the dredgeline was strewn on it like sections of blown-down stovepipe.

*The trap*, Owen remembered. Neil had been cleaning the trap. Find that steel pelican-pouch in the dredgeline, what was left of it, and Neil ought to be with it.

Charlene set her jaw and kept on combing out old lady Abbott, one of the Cactus Flat porcupineheads, as people poured past the front window of the beauty shop. Must be a fire somewhere down the street, she figured, and she was in no mood to see another one of those. People were really on the trot, though, every time she glanced up from Mrs. Abbott's stiff obdurate hair. If she hadn't known better, she'd have thought one of those pounding past in the crowd was Hugh.

From the east shore Darius stared at the delta of destruction below. Some sections of the stone-tiered face of the dam had stayed intact as they skidded out into the lake, solid islands like chunks of a jigsaw puzzle pawed apart. A queer spur of the railroad track still was in place atop the lip of the biggest island, wavery streak of rails beginning in mid-air, ending in midair. Between the archipelago of riprap islands and the damaged crest of the dam was what looked like a cesspool lake,

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1 gravel and mud and the backed-up Missouri mixed into a murky brown  
2 basin.

3 Already the pandemonium of the escape was precipitating into hun-  
4 dreds of separate aftermaths, some of the damworkers standing petrified,  
5 overcome with thoughts of their close call, a legion of others racing back  
6 toward the slide area to search for survivors. Darius thought of Neil with  
7 a pang. Willing cog in the machine of work, Neil had let it cost him his  
8 life. And Owen; Darius looked but could not spot him in the school of  
9 dam bosses, from the colonel on down, frantic on the far side of the  
10 slide.

11 *Owen.* Darius jerked his bitter gaze away from the gesticulating  
12 bosses and stared again at the riprap islands, strewn but solid, in the lake,  
13 suddenly knowing what he was seeing. The face of the dam, shalehater  
14 Owen's crafty dam, had not merely avalanched, had it, not plummeted  
15 apart in a simple collapse of slope. It had slipped on its underearth, as a  
16 ship would slide down the greased launchway into the Clyde.

17  
18 "Jackie, no, you can't play soldiers in the flour bin. Meg, would you—"

19 "Jack, my man, let's go for a promenade." Meg captured the boy out  
20 of the trailer house kitchen that Kate was trying to set to rights and  
21 whisked him past Bruce edging through the doorway with an armload of  
22 bedding. "Perhaps it already has come to your attention, Jack," the par-  
23 ents heard her deep instructive tone begin before she and the boy were  
24 even past the front fender of the truck, "that the municipality of Park  
25 Grove is more grove than park."

26 Bruce furrowed his forehead. "He's going to grow up talking like a  
27 lawyer's parrot."

28 But Kate was busy at sliding the trailer's kitchen window open side-  
29 ways, which was going to take some getting used to. She was intent be-  
30 yond that at watching the huge *Gallatin*, broadside to them in a dredged  
31 pit less than a hundred yards away, the mountain of the dam behind it.  
32 The giant dredge, a cross between a verandahed hotel and a steamshovel  
33 and painted sailor-white, was nothing like the cable ferry her grandfa-  
34 ther and father had operated, yet she felt she had been here before. She  
35 had been like Jackie, at the rampage age, when Grandpère died and they  
36 moved in with Grandmère to take over the ferry business, and that same  
37 first day her mother had caught her dabbling in the water alongside the  
38 hull of the ferry and given her an astounding bare-butt spanking. *You are*  
39 *to stay away from that river*, Lucille Millay made her small daughter know  
40 between whaps with the flat side of a yardstick, *you are to stay away from*

*that boat.* Jackie was going to need the same, the first instant he wandered toward the river. Today would not be too soon, Kate believed.

Bruce's next armload of moving stuff in, she felt his flanks brush teasingly along her fanny as he edged past. "Close quarters," he alibied.

"Everything is, with you," she said.

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

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

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

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

Kate spun, toward the door, the truck, the scream to be let out for Jackie and Meg, but Bruce caught her arm.

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

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

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

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

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

Owen was at the first still-standing section of dredgeline now. He filled his lungs to shout Neil's name, looked out at the long stretch of kinked and zigzagging pipe in front of him, and held the lungful of breath. Beyond on the east shore he could see the intake-gate towers, four in a row, unscathed, people everywhere up there, and men coming down into the slide area with prodpoles. They were too distant to be of any help in his search. He was in motion now, following the pipe sections out across the muck as it still gurgled and seethed, the slide carrying on an awful conversation with itself. Owen clambered alongside the dredgeline until it occurred to him, furious with himself, to climb atop it. The footing wasn't the greatest, and every dozen feet or so he had to step over a support pole lying half over the huge pipe, but he made better time than wading down there in the mud. He watched below his feet for the collar of the trap.

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

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

Owen in six careful steps went to a place on the pipeline just beyond



## BUCKING THE SUN

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the mud-globbed head, spraddled down and then slid off into the mud.  
The blob mired under the pipe had shoulders now.

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

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

The mud-caked figure gave a ragged combination of gasp and giggle, head wobbling back to give Owen a full white-eyed stare, making sure he was really there. Neil was drawing in tortured breaths as deep and ragged as if he had run for miles, but at least it constituted breathing.

Frantically Owen dug barehanded at the heavy mush of earth encasing him. "Stay still," he ordered.

"Did it . . . all go?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Hurts . . . on the side."

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

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

"Owww!" Neil's eyes had opened twice as wide. "Hell, yes . . . there!" He gulped painful air into himself, and used it to say: "Ownie, you'd massacre a man . . . while you're saving his life."

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

All that endless afternoon, at last into common dusk, Fort Peck tried to pick itself up off the floor of the big slide. Searches went on until there was deemed no chance anyone could have lasted beneath the flood of muck, the mosquito buzz of planes with newspaper photographers already overhead as rescue parties slogged and poked and slowly retreated from the slideflat. Queasy communities downstream from the dam, Park Grove only the first of the number along the Missouri's descent toward St. Louis, had to swallow hard and decide where to sleep that night,

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slid

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1 somewhere on high ground or in the valley cut by the river's eternal  
2 longing to wander.

3  
4 Birdie Hinch felt all beat to hell.

5 Gravel had gone over him and roaring water from the core pool had  
6 surged him free and then there was a pell-mell mudswim, half dogpad-  
7 dling and half being oozed along, ~~put~~ into the mush at the head of the  
8 slide. His shirt had filled with so much mud it weighted him into the  
9 mess like a lead sinker on a fishing line, but he managed to tear it off and  
10 bob better. Birdie had been constantly amazed at the kaleidoscope of  
11 clear thoughts coming to him as the muck avalanche tossed him along:  
12 *Wouldn't this have to happen just when we found that nicest buffalo*  
13 *skull . . . I'm gonna die, out of this. Ain't yet, though . . . They just can't pay*  
14 *a man enough to put up with this . . . And at last, gingerbread man of*  
15 *mud gasping on one of the isles of the slide, I'll be a sonofagun, look at*  
16 *those guys running out onto this.*

17 Rescued, and with somebody's practically new mackinaw jacket  
18 draped over him, and deposited to the hospital where the ambulatory  
19 ones such as him had to wait while the worse injured were rushed into  
20 care, he found a corner to limply sit in and ache, watching the parade of  
21 casualties pour in. Muddied and bloodied, the thirty or so men who had  
22 undergone the slide and lived weren't much recognizable, but toward the  
23 last Birdie saw Neil, bunged up but obviously going to make it, brought  
24 in by Owen and some of the rescue workers, and was glad of that.

25 Right in the middle of the hospital hubbub a flustered timekeeper  
26 pressed into service by the Ad Building was running around with a clip-  
27 board, taking down names of survivors.

28 Birdie, one of the world's talents at overhearing, caught the time-  
29 keeper's voice when that pintsize sheriff popped in to check with him:  
30 "We're up to three known dead and five still missing."

31 When the sheriff whirled back out, the timekeeper scanned the hos-  
32 pital uproar for any fresh arrivals and lit up when he finally spotted  
33 Birdie. He hustled over, pencil and clipboard ready, to take Birdie's  
34 name.

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

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

38 "Aw, yeah, hell, I'm sorry," the embarrassed timekeeper said, his fin-  
Short 39 ger finding *Duff, N.* on his hasty list. "You guys look all alike with the  
Normal 40 mud on you."

out

That was all it took. By nightfall the name of Birdie Hinch was everlastingly among Fort Peck's missing, and the man he had been was hopping a boxcar on a Great Northern train bound for the Pacific Coast and a next life.

They crammed into Neil's hospital room the minute the doctor would let them.

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

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

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

A majority of the Duffs chimed in that way, Neil able to grin and kid them back between winces. But everyone uncomfortably knew that the worst casualty in the room was Owen, who looked as though he'd been hammered directly on the heart. Charlene stayed always next to him, not saying much.

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

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

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

"You'd grin too when you saw it wasn't some geezer with a halo and wings coming for you," Neil spoke up from the bed. Then, as if he had been giving this some thought, he said: "Unk, you must've known a shortcut off the dam."

Hugh stirred, and sensed a warning look from Proxy as he did. He too had been curious, at Darius's spotless deliverance while the rest of the bullgang and poor devil Birdie were handed a flood of mud. In no position himself to bring up precise whereabouts at the time of the slide, *a* Hugh waited with terrible interest Darius's answer on his. *t*

*More fool you, Neil, to be scrabbling around at that trap rather than tending to the goings-on around you, as I was.* Aloud, though, Darius had

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ready: "Nature called at the right time and in the right way, in my fortunate case, Neil. I was on my way to visit the littlest of houses, when the dam began to shimmy."

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

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

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

In the starchy sheets, Neil tried to remember. The shudder of the dredgeline, the tremor he had thought was a big piece of equipment ramming the pipe, was the first thing that would come back. Then the ground under him giving way, and his instinctive scramble atop the dredgeline. Life as he now possessed it began with those.

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

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

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

Stained with disaster but still standing, Fort Peck Dam met each morning now in the company of hollow-eyed engineers and Corps officers and construction bosses. They took turns staying up nights in the Ad Building, emerging with a fresh day's schedule for the work of repair, and then machines and crews would go warily into the half-mile gouge of the slide area.

"It went fast," Darius mused. "You wouldn't think soil could outrun a man. Eight men."

He and Proxy had formed the habit of watching out the houseboat window at this work, before time for their own. By now, pretty sure she had seen what there was to see, Proxy had gone back to favorite morning pursuits, such as propping up on the bed and studying her picture in the old copy of LIFE. Darius had sometimes warned her, humorously, that she would wear that page out with looking. But right now he was all in-

tent himself as he watched a railroad speeder go across the dam to the slide area and stop, the section crew climb off. "Very damn nearly nine, counting our Neil," Darius said as if in afterthought.

Proxy still did not say anything.

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

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

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

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

"Woman, you think I don't hear? You ought to be married to yourself—you'd soon find out. Every loose mouth at Fort Peck lets me know who you've been with. Oh, casually, of course. Merely making a bit of joke. 'Saw that goodlooking wife of yours dancing the pockets off of old Smitty, wish I had a means of support like that,'" he mimicked. He kept on looking out the window. "When the slide went, you were monkeying around with Hugh."

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

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

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

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

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

*Why didn't I savvy . . .*

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

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

This time Owen was atop the spillway's imperial gate piers pictured

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1 by the LIFE camera, the highway bridge going across them like the lofty  
2 trough of an aqueduct. Beneath the slowly walking man and the midair  
3 highway were the sixteen great gates of the spillway, waiting to regulate  
4 overflow from the lake into the spillway channel. If the dam, his dam,  
5 would ever hold together long enough to produce an overflow.

6 When he reached the middle of the structure, Owen stepped up out  
7 of the road onto the walkway and halted there, hands resting on the  
8 waist-high balustrade while he stared down at the vast concrete trench  
9 below as if it mirrored everything.

10 *The sonofabitching Bearpaw shale.* Here they had known to rocksaw the  
11 exposed shale and haul it out, or to face it over with waterproof  
12 bituminous compound; known they did not dare let any scour of moisture  
13 in to crumble that shale to mud under the heavy concrete channel. *But no,*  
14 *Duff, you couldn't carry that idea for only three miles over those hills and . . .*

15 Why hadn't he demanded rockcutting the entire face of that bluff, or  
16 bitumen sealing of everything in sight, or a mammoth retaining wall,  
17 something, anything, back there at the east abutment where that bank of  
18 shale kept tormenting his core pool. Having the bluff, one whole wall of  
19 the valley, as the anchor bank of the core pool was supposed to have been  
20 an advantage; sure, bits of it might crumble, but as soon as the impervi-  
21 ous fill built up onto it and the core pool water was drained away, there  
22 the sealed east end of the dam was supposed to be, natural and perpet-  
23 ual. Except that shale sidehill had its own ideas about how it was going  
24 to behave around water, didn't it, Duff. The lost face of the dam's east  
25 section—*now* he knew, *too late* he knew—had slid on a wettened under-  
26 bank of that shale like a hog on ice. *Huh uh, slicker and quicker than that,*  
27 *even.* Owen could envision instantly the railroad tracks, like pieces of a  
28 model-train setup neatly pulled apart, out there on the several slide-  
29 islands. Couldn't have asked for smoother sledding. The geologists—  
30 *Christ, toboggan experts would've been better*—the geologists back there at  
31 the core sampling and porosity tests had missed the deep-seep process,  
32 that saturation could keep spreading down through the abutment shale  
33 like water through a monstrous sponge. The Kansas City blueprinters of  
34 the dam had missed it. And he himself had missed it, in worrying about  
35 what the shale was doing to his core pool instead of what his core pool  
36 was doing to the Bearpaw shale.

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

38 Owen leaned into the balustrade, elbows on it now, still seeming to  
39 contemplate the mile-long concrete floor down there. Corps scuttlebutt



had it that Quigley, the Harvard brain on the investigating board, was saying the dam was not worth finishing. Its other eight engineering whizzes, though, were not likely to conclude that a slide of 3 percent of its total earthfill was anywhere near fatal to Fort Peck Dam. No, they were going to want the slide fixed, weren't they, and by whatever prescription needed to make certain it did not happen again.

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

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

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

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

Kate was doing battle with the ready-counter of the Rondola, asking whether her orders of ham and eggs were past the oink and cluck stage yet, when in Mr. Important walked and marched right past the counterful of customers. He turned her around to him, lifted her off the floor in a full-length bear hug, and carted her like that through the swinging door into the kitchen.

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

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as per  
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IVAN DOIG

1 It was only inches worth, but Kate stared worlds into Bruce's face  
2 until he set her down.

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

7 Kate's dazed expression failing to change, he spelled it out for her.

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

10 Finally out of things to reel off to her, Bruce was the one who looked  
11 dazed. "Katy, we've got it made, again."

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## Part Eight

### THE SHERIFF

1991

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

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

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

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

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

All she would have to do to dispose of this situation was to ask him the four little words, "Did you sign up?" Shit no, he hadn't signed up for the outing to the dam, she knew. He hadn't done anything except sit here and be ornery for as long as she had worked here. *Why on my shift?* she reflected as she angrily stretched past him to flip the emergency call button back to OFF. *Why couldn't the old poot take it into his head to go to bingo tonight, if he finally wants to get out of his room?* She didn't even

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1 really have to think through all the kinds of trouble involved in letting  
2 him go to the dam. They would need to take the cabulance van instead  
3 of the rec bus because of him in his wheelchair, and Mosteller the driver  
4 would shit a brick about that. Doris the recreation director went miles  
5 out of her way to avoid Carl Kinnick ever since that birthday party fi-  
6 asco; she'd be spooked silly to have him show up for her pitty-pat little  
7 visit to Fort Peck this afternoon. Howls would go up from the other res-  
8 idents on the excursion, too, the nurse could just about hear those al-  
9 ready: *old devil him anyway, has to spoil it for everybody else, coming along*  
10 *and sitting there like death warmed over.*

11 On the other hand, such as it was, the Little Prick had never before  
12 shown her he really wanted anything.

13 "If I let you," she said in her tone that kidded and didn't, "promise  
14 not to come back?"

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

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

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

30 This very first part, right out of town, was the only bit of this famil-  
31 iar route he cared anything about. The intense green, a color almost  
32 savage (although the sheriff found it restful), of the cottonwoods con-  
33 centrated along the Milk River, before the road headed over the ridge to-  
34 ward the Missouri. Otherwise this drive down from Glasgow still did  
35 not amount to much, by his standards of interest. The traffic deaths of  
36 speedball damworkers had all happened before white roadside crosses  
37 were put up to mark car-wreck fatalities, so the sheriff couldn't even pick  
38 out the spots where he'd had to gather up the crushed and flung bodies.

Short 39 What still surprised him, as the cabulance topped the last rise before  
Normal 40 starting down to the river, was that the town of Wheeler had vanished

absolutely. The hasty frame buildings had been easy pickings, torn down for salvage or hauled away to farms and ranches for use as granaries and chicken coops. The sheriff enjoyed the thought of Wheeler ending up as barnyards.

Fort Peck, the town of, still featured the big dark hotel and the Swiss gingerbread theater, and a Corps of Engineers office with a Spanish red roof in the permanent portion of the old Ad Building. Then it thinned radically, to a couple of neighborhoods of cookie cutter houses fixed up and a luncho-gaso-laundromat. Not nearly as gone as Wheeler, New Deal, Square Deal and all the others, but plenty depleted.

As were those Army Engineer big shots who went on into the war, the sheriff ruminated as the cabulance drove on. Parmenter, Santee, and Roscoe—no, Brascoe. Dead, dead, and dead. Santee, the story they told on him was that he'd been assigned as one of those top-secret couriers sent places with a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, and that he'd somehow lost one of those courier cases. Killed himself, over it. Huh. Those prettypants Corps boys all gone and here he still had breath in him.

Suddenly, the dam.

You were on the thing before you could ever recognize it as such. It had never seemed right to the sheriff that the downstream slope of the dam had grassed over, looking like a sidehill hayfield that had been there forever. Overall, the dam now resembled a narrow-topped and particularly flat benchland which somehow happened to stand in the way of a body of water backed up across the curvature of the earth. (Out there on the water was another thing the sheriff was never going to grow used to, the everyday sight here of boaters and fishermen. *Tourists* even, a few anyway.) You had to study this view inordinately to realize the scale of the dam, the immensity of fill that was diked across here. And over near the dam's east side there was not even a trace of where the big slide had happened, they had riprapped over that so it looked as innocent as virgin scenery, too.

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

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1 Slowly the cabulance drove and drove across the dam, west to east,  
2 one full mile, two, three. Far down the slope now, at the toe of the dam,  
3 the river tore out of the diversion tunnels in a narrow white gush. On the  
4 dam's other side, upstream, across that entire half of the horizon the lake  
5 lapped against the midribs of hills. Outdoing the original intentions of  
6 the engineers, Fort Peck Dam backed up the waters of the Missouri for  
7 135 miles from here. The sheriff read somewhere once that this lake's  
8 load of standing water affected the rotation of the earth, and he didn't  
9 doubt it a bit.

10 "Almost there," Doris sang out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 Doris unbuckled her seatbelt and went to the back of the cabulance,  
30 to the sheriff situation.

31 "Just leave me off here," he ordered, if she was hearing properly.  
32 "Pick me up on your way back."

33 "But what . . ." The reasoning against that was automatic, it was as  
34 plain as the wrinkles on his face. "Mr. Kinnick, we can't just go—drive  
35 off and leave you here all alone."

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

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



## BUCKING THE SUN

395

"Any responsibility for me is mine."

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

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

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

Then Doris was hovering over the sheriff again, asking whether it suited him to have Theresa stay with him, which he thought he concurred with civilly enough, considering.

Even so the recreation director hesitated, hanging on in his vicinity but staying a little away from him, too. She evidently couldn't make up her mind whether he was more likely to pitch over and die, or reach up under and snap her garter. After another uncertain hover, Doris backed off and asked him:

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

He couldn't help looking at her as if she was a complete fool. "There's always wind in this country."

"Yes, well—" She bit her lip and told Mosteller, "All right then, Jerry," and the driver operated the cabulance's lift platform and indifferently wheeled the sheriff off and over to the lake end of the overlook.

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

"It was up there."

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

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

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

Theresa had parked herself on a sittable rock a decent distance from the sheriff's wheelchair. She dug a pack of cigarettes and her silver-plated retirement lighter from her coat pocket. After lighting up, and then

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1 letting out a crashing cough which somehow seemed to satisfy her, she  
 2 offered the pack in the general direction of the sheriff for politeness'  
 3 sake. "But you never used these, did you."

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

5 Snorty chuckle from her, something equivalent silently from him.  
 6 Then, shriveled up there in his wheelchair, he turned his head from her,  
 7 back toward the bluff across the dam.

8 Theresa periodically emitted smoke and checked up on Carl Kinnick  
 9 with a glance. What a little sonofabitch on six wheels he had been, when  
 10 he was sheriff all those years. Bite your head off if you couldn't put your  
 11 finger immediately on whatever piece of court paper he was after. She  
 12 timed another casual glance at him. Two-wheeled now, though.

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 16 It was up there, that he had gone through it that other time.

17 Procedure took him to the point, back there in 1938 in that af-  
 18 termath of the truck, where he had questioned the remaining Duffs until  
 19 the questions wore out. Their answers, though, showed no wear at all. *I*  
 20 *was at home. Or: Working my shift. Or: We went to the show that night,*  
 21 *both of us.* Their chain of alibi, always somebody handy to vouch for this  
 22 or that in their stories, except on the central matter of the pair in the  
 23 truck cab.

24 *No idea he was up to anything like that,* the widow of the drowned un-  
 25 clothed man maintained.

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

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

31 At last, he gave in and borrowed the truck.

32 More like confiscated it, if you want the truth. Well aware that his  
 33 undersheriff would blab something like this all over Fort Peck, the sher-  
 34 iff went by himself to Moore Motors in Glasgow and informed Ted  
 35 Moore he was taking that reconstituted Ford Triple A for a couple of  
 36 hours, making sure to mention to Ted that he'd be piloting the truck to  
 37 the dam project to check out a circumstance. But halfway down the  
 38 highway to Fort Peck, the sheriff veered off, west, along an old section-  
 39 line road, no more than a set of ruts grooved alongside a stretch of barb-  
 40 wire fence. The truck jolted across the prairie on the twin wheeltracks,

*together*

the sheriff perched on the edge of the wide-bodied seat, up close over the sizable steering wheel, grimly absorbing the bumps.

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

Here the slope to the water was quite sharp, higher and steeper than the ramp the truck had freewheeled down at the dam site to its plunge into the lake, so Kinnick took care in nosing the truck to a stop, facing down to the valley of the Missouri. Wasn't sure why he needed the actual water below him for this; knew it was basically a dangerous idea, if the truck should happen to get away from him. And wouldn't that be one sweet hell of a way to go: the whole county talking about him drowning, too, same as that Duff affair, and not even a woman keeping him company. He wished there had been a way to bring a woman along for this, make it considerably more real; but if word about something like this escaped, he'd be laughed out of office. Drowning would be simpler.

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

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

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

Even though he had examined this vehicle to the point of eyestrain before the remaining Duffs turned it back over to Moore Motors, now he made himself systematically scan the inside of the truck cab one more time, starting at the steering wheel and then the emergency brake, defunct, of course, and sideways and down to the gearstick angling up from the transmission housing in the floorboards, and across the wide seat to the passenger-side door, and on up and around to the rear

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1 window where that cloud of their clothing had damply clung. Only to  
2 divine the same thing again, nothing.

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

7 Nothing more to do but do it.

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

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

13 The seat felt a little cool, ungiving, against his freshly shaved cheek.  
14 Not like the woman's skin would be, there, but he couldn't help that. He  
15 checked over his left shoulder to the knob of the gearstick. It was within  
16 range of his hip, but not nearly touching. The sheriff was sure as any-  
17 thing that the truck had been left in low gear, the night of the deaths;  
18 that's what people do, after all, when they park a vehicle anywhere that  
19 it might roll, jam it into grandma-gear.

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

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

24 The sheriff swore quietly at the gaudy knob, then tensed himself and  
25 battered it as hard as he could with his hip. Still nothing, except the  
26 major bruise he knew he was going to have there. The sheriff could not  
27 believe the woman's hip would have been more lethal, but in the interest  
28 of research he turned over onto his back as he imagined she would have  
29 been, knees somewhat sticking up, and banged against the gearshift with  
30 his other hip, hard and harder. Next he flung out an arm sharply against  
31 the gearknob. Then he tried a tumble against it, half-falling off the seat  
32 so that all his sideward weight went against the taut metal rod. He  
33 thought for a moment, then scrambled behind the steering wheel, and  
34 careful not to let the truck start rolling, jammed a foot on the brake  
35 while he shifted gears into reverse, toward the dashboard. His personal  
36 theory was that the couple would have been so involved they wouldn't  
37 have bothered with getting the gearshift a little more out of their way,  
38 but okay, say they did. With the truck now in reverse, the sheriff lay back  
39 down to see if he could bounce the shiftstick out of this gear, either, with  
40 his hip.

Short Jormal

*deluxe 20*

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

And so the truck at the dam site had to have had help in starting to roll, coasting down the slope of the ramp in its deathride to the floor of the river. Back then, more than half a century ago, the sheriff despised the feeling of frustration after his failed reenactment, and it still got him worked up, just thinking about it.

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

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

Murder, then?

Both of them knocked over the head and sent rolling into the river? The two bodies were a bit banged up, but that dodo of a coroner had not been able to single out any contusions that the plunge in the truck wouldn't itself have caused. In his own mind the sheriff could come up with a way for it to happen at gunpoint: somebody following them to their tryst on the damslope ramp, surprising them there naked in the middle of the action, shoving a gun in their faces and forcing them to start the truck rolling, the gunhandler riding the running board until the last moment, leaping off as the truck sailed into the Missouri. But that scenario was a stretch, several ways. And how come the pair still couldn't have bailed out as soon as the truck hit the water?

Two lives gone. And others thrown into a hell of a tangle. That fed the sheriff's fury, too. Anyone who encountered Carl Kinnick at, say, a car wreck would remember forever his snappishness, his coil of what seemed to be affronted anger. Which is absolutely what it was. The waste

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1 of lives drove him wild: how dare they? how could they throw away,  
2 through too much speed or booze or showing off, the sum-result of  
3 themselves? Sheriffing could not control everybody's behavior, he had  
4 concluded with reluctance, but that did not alter the fact that it needed  
5 some controlling.

6 And so, the final *so* he always came to, the Duff case always had been  
7 doubly perturbing to him because the deaths in the truck stacked up as  
8 a deliberate forfeit of life. Not just the foolishness of making seatbelts  
9 sing in the night, although there plainly was some of that involved in  
10 this episode. But beyond that, what had happened was done intention-  
11 ally. What people were capable of thinking up. That was the lasting  
12 question, wasn't it. Carl Kinnick supposed it had better be, or he might  
13 as well be wadded up and tossed in this lake instead of still pursuing  
14 thoughts along that line.

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

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

22 He sat there, hunched, confined, older than the hill of manufactured  
23 earth beneath the wheels of his chair; sat and with all the ardor left to  
24 him kept at it. Kept furious at the Duffs for the mystery they lived with  
25 and two of them died by, and just as helplessly loving them for this last  
26 slick stone of sheriffing to gnaw on, this case of theirs that would not let  
27 itself be solved.

perplexity



## Part Nine

### TRUCK AND RIVER

1938

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 "Proxy is climbing Hugh's leg," the words came bitterly out of him,  
5 "good Lord, woman, haven't you seen that?" She watched him take off  
6 the cap, run a hand through his hair, hesitate for a place to set the cap. *You*  
7 *came saying you tip your cap only to yourself, didn't you, Darius. Here you*  
8 *are, still at it.* Looking across at her again, he put the cap up on the back  
9 of the seat behind him. "Proxy hot to trot, time for a new Duff, a little  
10 taste of brotherly love direct from my brother? Hasn't everyone seen that?"

11 She didn't answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

33  
34 *He had been looking high and low for Owen, core pool to the toe of the dam,*  
35 *as the crowd poured to the Fort Peck railroad siding and the presidential*  
36 *train, waiting for Roosevelt. In their tournament of argument, noontimes,*  
37 *FDR was ever there like the mercury in a thermometer, register of what*  
38 *Owen believed was politically far enough and Darius believed was doctri-*  
39 *nally never enough, and Darius could hardly wait now to keep company*

*royal* during the speech and then argue it degree by degree with Owen. A chance to see America's trickster in action, it would be a treat for any thinking man, as they both were. Word had reached the crowd that the President's motorcade was on its way, down through the hills from the spillway, and Darius was as keen for the coming performance as any. He lacked only Owen.

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

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

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

"Favor to ask you, Proxy—I'm going to be snowed under by Corps rigamarole on Franklin D. day," Darius could hear again Owen of a few nights ago, at one of those encouragement suppers at Hugh and Meg's. "Can you give this working wife of mine a lift out to the shindig?" Proxy had said sure, why not, somewhat unnecessarily adding that the Packard always had plenty of room, and then Charlene had joked about finally riding in style at Fort Peck. And just now, in this prowl for Owen, Darius had spotted the three of them, bartender and hairdresser and taxi dancer, perched like nabobs on the Packard roof where they could see to FDR's train.

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

His brow knit, Darius searched higher, heading up the bluff toward the Ad Building. This is not like our Owen, to miss out on a Roosevelt holy day. Latecomers from Glasgow and beyond were hurrying onto the bluff's slope here between the Y of the road to the Ad Building and the dredgeline road down past the winter harbor. The sidehill gave a clear view out over the gathering, FDR's motorcade in sight alongside the train down there now. Darius hesitated, lingered, then decided this onlooking site was as good as any, Owen or no Owen.

The preliminaries gradually came and went and then all at once the lordly Roosevelt cadences, of politics and the river, and of the river and politics, were rolling out over the thousands of cars and more thousands of listeners, including the impressed skeptic Darius. Voice like God's town crier, he was thinking to himself, no wonder the man can get away with—

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1       Then he saw the truck.

2       The Model Triple A, unmistakable with its little cap-peak outside visor,  
3       was on its way from the river, the oxbow section downstream from the dam  
4       where the dredges were working. Working, that is, except during this Roo-  
5       sevelt event, when all crews were given time off. Watching in the Triple A's di-  
6       rection, Darius could not help but wonder why Neil would be trucking  
7       anything at this hour, this day. The truck pulled in at the back edge of the  
8       winter harbor lot solid with vehicles, a scrawny deputy sheriff pointing to a  
9       parking spot. And out hopped Rosellen, walking swiftly, head down, around  
10      the parked mob. She looked for all the world like someone hastening back  
11      now from a quick errand, something tended to at home or the office, taken  
12      care of by dashing off in the truck. Except she had been on the fork of the road  
13      that went only to the dredges.

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

15      And in minutes here the other one came, in the familiar beat-up govern-  
16      ment pickup. Around to the motor pool lot, and then Darius could make  
17      him out on foot, Owen in long strides cutting across to see the presidential  
18      train pull away. Owen the fillmaster, from the dredge Gallatin where the fill-  
19      master had quarters.

20      After that, Darius believed he could even tell the times when they were  
21      slipping off together, to whatever hideyhole. Whenever Owen edgily excused  
22      himself out of a noon, it had been all Darius could do not to give him the  
23      oldest mocking smile there was and pipe out, "Have you tried a pantry yet?"  
24

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

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

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

36      She had come for him at the houseboat. "Not here," she had said.  
37      "Not under Proxy's roof." He had chuckled, dry sound. Then followed  
38      her out and into the truck.

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

"At the show." Neil, Charlene and Owen, Kate and Bruce, all five of them in the midnight dark of the movie theater, the newsreel coming on now; more Europe. They'd been determined, the three couples, to try to make a night of this, supper together as they used to and then the usual few beers and music at the Blue Eagle, Neil was recuperated enough to dance gingerly. Everybody needed this Saturday night out, they said as if it was a chorus, Owen the only one overly quiet but not the only one deep in worry. Rosellen had pleaded a splitting headache when the movie came up, but insisted Neil go with the others, he needed some fun. The headache was close to the truth, although the sensation reached all the way down through her, the harrowed feeling and the taut determination.

Darius had left the choice of site to her, she was the expert at slipping around to such places, wasn't she. She had driven with him, curious passenger in America, to the quiet end of the dam where the riprap work stood stalled until the slide section was rebuilt. Deserted this time of night, the little dock called Port Peck was a dark stub into the water at the base of the dam. Where the planked ramp angled down to the dock and the lake, Rosellen parked carefully, on enough of the incline that they could see out to the temporary lights on the slide-islands, and killed the engine. "Scenic," Darius had commended then. "If it's the sort of thing you're here to see," she had said back, trying to sound composed.

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

All the long thoughts that led her here crisscrossed now. Neil would have to take the hurt of this, but less than if he had been hit with the news of her and Owen. Owen, Owen and Charlene, this was a way to make up for the trespass there, wipe away his escapade. Proxy? Proxy knew about stories and consequences, she would grit and bear this and go on. The others, they would close ranks against whatever the world said about this, as Duffs always did when they had to. Rosellen only regretted this wasn't the kind of thing she could run by her debating partner Kate.

"That board yet could, you know," Darius's voice a goad in the dark. "If someone were to put a word in their ear."

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

4 "Tell us, Jealous," Rosellen said.

5 He cocked a look at her. Sounding suddenly cautious, he asked:  
6 "Whyever do you say that?"

7 "It's what came. Words have that habit."  
8

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

11 *Seeing she finally could get rid of the dredging report she'd typed up for*  
12 *him, that April noon, she took it to Owen's office right away after Sangster*  
13 *emerged from their session of dam talk and whistled off to lunch. When she*  
14 *stepped in, Owen was turned in his chair, facing the window where he could*  
15 *see the river and the dam, the eraser on his pencil bouncing brup brup brup*  
16 *on his desktop as he sat there mulling. At first she wasn't sure he even knew*  
17 *she had come in, but then he said: "Thanks. More paper ammo for the bat-*  
18 *tle of Fort Peck."*

19 *Curious, she said: "You look like you're in danger of thinking yourself in-*  
20 *side out. What about?"*

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

24 *"That's funny." The cute serious concentration marks showed up between*  
25 *her eyebrows. "The sun must be doing different things to us. I just looked up*  
26 *the opposite of hibernation."*

27 *Quick as presto, Owen gave her an appreciative look and was hooting*  
28 *with laughter about getting his seasons crossed, next thing he knew he'd be*  
29 *outside on Christmas trying to aestivate with the snow snakes. And after a*  
30 *surprised moment at all that, Rosellen laughed because she was glad the two*  
31 *of them chimed this way.*

32 *Is there such a thing as inadvertent flirting? Unintended mad pash? She*  
33 *came to wonder, after that noon and others, as the two of them paid atten-*  
34 *tion to each other, new ways, little ways, ways that did not necessarily have*  
35 *to lead dangerously far but could, could.*

36 *After they took the plunge, dazed and giddy and guilty and stimulated*  
37 *there in the tight shiplike quarters while everyone else was off seeing Roo-*  
38 *sevelt, she tried to sort out what was happening. Juanita and Gilbert chasing*  
39 *through the grass with her typewriter keys after them, chickenfeed. What she*



and Owen were drawn into was as complicated as a family album, it seemed to her. The best way she could put it was that they each wanted something like a portion of a person more, another helping, in their marriages. Not the first pair ever to catch catnip on the breeze at the same time, they both knew; plural of spouse is spice, but that oldest of jokes on humans is always freshly played. Slipping off to meet, their not many times—Rosellen's educated guess on Owen was that he tiredly wanted back his dating days of Bozeman, someone warm and willing and without Charlene's grudge against his work. Someone, instead, who prized Fort Peck as he did. Go for broke, the part of him beyond blueprint had chosen when the chance with Rosellen surfaced. Her diagnosis on herself didn't take much: a little starved, that was all, for somebody who when you asked what was on his mind, told you. And getting back at Charlene, of course that figured in, too—all the big sistering, any Bluebird Girl could spell that out in macaroni letters. Charlene and her prettiness, her fanciness, her little flirts traded with Bruce. Sisters paired like ark animals that didn't quite match, she and Charlene. On his side of things, Owen had to flinch past the fact of Neil; but brothers fork apart where a woman is concerned, ask anywhere in history.

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

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

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

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

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1  
2 "What's this 'Tell us, Jealous?'" Darius's mimicking voice rose in the  
3 truck cab. "Is there more where that's from? Because—"

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

14 "Barefoot driving," Darius said of her quick exploit. "I am all admira-  
15 ration."

16 "Barefoot all over, next," Rosellen said, that saying of Proxy's making  
17 him blink in the darkness. Then he felt the drift of her fingers onto the  
18 buttonline of his shirt. "You, too," Rosellen stipulated.

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

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

30 "Wait." She wriggled, out from under and up onto her side, breath-  
31 ing openmouthed. "Let's . . . trade places."

32 Bare and bright-eyed, Rosellen moved partway over him, hands  
33 kneading the strategic hollows between his collarbones and the root of  
34 his throat. He couldn't help but wonder whether she was taking tips  
35 from Proxy, where else did she learn spice such as this? Rosellen was sur-  
36 prisingly instructive, what a bonus, coaxing him to lay his head back,  
37 kissing her way down him, *wait*, she said again, and he did, letting her  
38 shift around to where she wanted, murmuring something tersely to him  
39 about not wanting to bump into the steering wheel, until he could feel  
40 her finding a position over his lower thighs. His head turned a little, he

could see up at the windshield which had grayed over, steamed up from their breath and body heat. Darius would have chuckled at that if his throat had not been too tight with wanting. He shut his eyes a moment, all the desires humming in his head, *Fiona, temporary Proxy, missed-chance Meg*, as he waited for this next.

Rosellen paused in midmotion there low on him. She had to slip behind the steering wheel, a bit sideways, for this. There was just room. She kept as much of herself applied to him as she could while her left leg angled down and her left foot just touched the clutch. This ending she had found in herself. Employ the eraser. On him, on the mess made of her own story and three others', on the way life was ambushing all hopes. *Over with.* Rosellen pushed her foot down on the clutch and palmed the gearstick knob to her, out of reverse, out of gear.

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

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

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choke-setter