

tude on the homestead, a new aloneness daily crisscrossing my own. Constantly now I had to try to fathom this sudden young gray-eyed woman with my name joined onto hers. This quietly-here newcomer from the past. This afterthought bride in the lane of time where I foresaw only Anna.

That was the parallel I meant with the sheep: the saying is that to be successful with sheep, even when you're not thinking about them you had better be thinking about them a little. Now that I was coupled into life with Adair, even when I was trying not to wonder I had to wonder whether I was up to this.

I was letting this be seen bald by remarking to the presence across the breakfast eggs from me about her snorelessness, wasn't I. Figuring I had better get out of the topic before damage was done, I deployed: "You're sure you're related to Rob Barclay, the Scotch Banshee?"

"Would you like me to ask Rob for lessons in sawing with my nose?" she said back, lightly enough.

"No, no, no. I can step out and listen to the coyotes whenever I feel too deprived."

My wife lifted her chin at me and declared softly, "Adair has the same news for you, old Angus McCaskill. You aren't a snorer, either."

"Where do you get the evidence for that?" For if she was asleep as she seemed while I lay there searching the night—

"I wake up early, well before you do. And you're there, quiet as a gatepost."

So Adair and I were opposite wakefulnesses, were we, at either end of the night. The dark quiet between, we shared.

"I always knew marriage would agree with you," Rob accorded me. "You don't have that bachelor look on you any more." He sucked his cheeks into hollows and meanwhile crossed his eyes, just in case I didn't happen to know what abject bachelorhood looked like.

Adair had barely come across the threshold when Rob and I had to trail his wethers and my lambs to the railhead for shipping. Quick after that, school began again and I was making the daily ride from homestead to the South Fork and then back. In weekends and other spare minutes, winter had to be readied for.

It sometimes seemed I saw more of Scorpion than I did of my new wife.

She said nothing of my here-and-gone pace, just as I said nothing of her beginning attempts at running a household. Accustomed to tea, Adair applied the principle of boiling to coffee and produced a decoction nearly as stiff as the cup. Her meals were able enough, but absentminded, so to speak; the same menu might show up at dinner and at supper, then again at the same meals the next day, as if the food had forgotten its way home. Courage, I told my stomach and myself, we'd eventually sort such matters out; but not just yet. There already was a problem far at the head of the line of all others. Adair's lack of liking for the homestead and, when you come all the way down to it, for Montana.

Again, her words were not what said so. I simply could see it, feel it in her whenever she went across the yard to fling out a dishpan of water and strode back, all without ever elevating her eyes from her footsteps. The mountains and their weather she seemed to notice only when they were at their most threatening. I counted ahead the not many weeks to winter and the white cage it would bring for someone such as Adair, and tried to swallow that chilly future away.

Before winter found its chance to happen, though, there was a Friday end-of-afternoon when a session of convincing Ninian on the need for new arithmetic books—*ay, are you telling me there are new numbers to be learned these days, Angus?*—didn't get me home from the schoolhouse until suppertime. During my ride, I had watched the promise of storm being formed, the mountains showing only as shoals in the clouds by the time I stepped down from Scorpion.

"Sorry, Dair," I said, providing her with a kiss, and headed sharp for the washbasin while she put the waiting food on the table. "It's just lucky I didn't end up arguing with Ninian by moonlight."

"The old dark comes so early these days," she said, and took the glass chimney off to light the lamp wick.

"We get a little spell of this weather every year about now," I mollified her as I craned around to peer out the window at the clouds atop the mountains, hoping they would look lessened, "but then it clears away bright as a new penny for awhile. We'll be bask-

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ing in Indian summer before you know what's hap—" The sound of shatter, the cascade of glass, spun me to Adair.

She was staring dumbstruck at the table strewn with shrapnel of the lamp chimney, shards in our waiting plates and in the potatoes and the gravy and other food dishes as if a shotgun loaded with glass had gone off. In her hand she still held a glinting jagged ring of glass, the very top of the chimney.

I went and grasped her, wildly scanning her hands, arms, up the aproned front of her, up all the fearful way to her eyes. No blood. *Mercy I sought, mercy I got.* Adair gazed back at me intact. She did not look the least afraid, she did not look as if she even knew what the fusillade of glass could have inflicted on her. Tunnels of puzzle, those eyes above the twin freckle marks. She murmured, "It just—flew into pieces. When I went to put it back on the lamp."

"That happens the rare time, the heat cracks it to smithereens. But what matters, none of it cut you? Anywhere? You're sure you're all right, are you, Dair?"

"Yes, of course. It surprised me, is all. And look at poor supper." Adair sounded so affronted about the surprise and the stabbing of supper that it could have been comical. But my heart went on thundering as I stepped to the shelf where I kept a spare lamp chimney.

In the morning I said what had lain in my mind through the night.

"Dair? You need to learn to ride a horse today."

She thought it was one of my odder jokes. "I do, do I. What, do I look like a fox-hunting flopsie to you? Lady Gorse on her horse?"

"No, I mean it. As far back in here as we are, no one else near around, it'd be well for you to know how to handle a horse. Just in case, is all." In case lamp chimneys detonate in innocent moments, in case any of the accidents and ailments of homestead life strike when I am not here with you, I was attempting to say without the scaring words. "I'm living proof that riding a horse isn't all that hard. Come along out, Scorpion and I'll have you galloping in no time." I got up from my breakfast chair and stood waiting.

"Now?"

"Now. Out to the barn." I put my arm in hers, ready escort. "Scorpion awaits."

Her gaze said *all right, I will humor you, show me what a horse is about if you must.*

At the barn I demonstrated to her the routine of saddling, then unsaddled Scorpion and said: "Your turn."

"Angus. This is—"

"No, no, you don't do it with words. Hands and arms are unfortunately required. They're there at the ends of your shoulders if I'm not wrong." No smile from her. Well, I couldn't help that. "Just lift the saddle onto him and reach slowly under for the cinch."

Beside the big gingerbread-colored horse, Adair was a small pillar of reluctance.

"Now then, Dair," I encouraged. "Saddle him and get it over with."

She cast me a glance full of *why?*

"Please," I said.

The saddle seemed as big as she was, but she managed to heave it onto Scorpion. Then in three tries she struggled the cinch tight enough that I granted it would probably hold.

"There," she panted. "Are you satisfied?"

"Starting to begin to be. Now for your riding lesson. *Over Pegasus I'll fling my leg and never a shoe will I need to beg.*" Verse didn't seem to loft her any more than the rest of my words. "What you do is put your left foot in the stirrup," I demonstrated with myself, "take hold of the saddle horn, and swing yourself up this way." From atop Scorpion I sent my most encouraging look down to Adair, then swung off the horse. "Your turn. Left foot into stirrup."

"No." She sounded decisive about it.

"Ah, but you've got to. This isn't Nethermuir. Montana miles are too many for walking, and there are going to come times when I'm not here to hitch up the team and wagon for you. So unless you're going to sprout wings or fins, Dair, that leaves you horseback."

"No, Angus. Not today. I have this dress on. When I can sew myself a riding skirt—"

"There's nobody around to see you but me. And I've glimpsed the territory before, have I not?" I hugged her and urged her, wishing to myself that I knew how to snipper Barclay stubbornness into five-foot chunks to sell as crowbars. "You can do this. My school-girls ride like Comanches."

"I'm not one of your wild Montana schoolgirls. I'm your wife, and I—"

"I realize that makes your case harder, love, but we'll try to work around that handicap." She didn't give me the surrendering smile

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I'd hoped that would bring, either. By now I realized she wasn't being stubborn, she wasn't being coy, she was simply being Adair. At her own time and choosing, riding skirt newly on, she might announce her readiness. Fine, well, and good, but this couldn't wait. "I'm sorry, Dair, but there's no halfway to this. Come on now," I directed. "Up."

"No."

I suppose this next did come out livelier than I intended.

"Dair, lass, you came across the goddamned Atlantic Ocean! Getting up into a saddle is no distance, compared. Now will you put your foot here in the stirrup—"

"No! Angus, I won't! You're being silly with all your fuss about this." Adair herself wasn't quite stamping that foot yet, but her voice was. She sounded as adamant as if I'd wakened her in the middle of the night and told her to go outside and tie herself upside down in the nearest tree.

The only thing I could think of to do, I did. I stepped to Adair and lifted her so that she was cradled in my arms. Surprised pleasure came over her face, then she giggled and put her arms rewardfully around my neck. The giggling quit as I abruptly took us over beside Scorpion.

"Angus, what—"

"Upsy-daisy, lazy Maisie," I declared. "Whoa now, Scorpion," and with a grunt I lifted Adair, feet high to clear the saddle horn and I hoped aiming her bottom into the saddle.

"Angus! AnGUS! ANGUS, quit! What're you—"

"Dair, let yourself down into the saddle. Whoa, Scorpion, steady there, whoa now. Don't, Dair, you'll scare the horse. Just get on, you're all but there. Whoa now, whoa—"

Her small fists were rapping my back and chest, and not love taps, either. But with no place else but midair to go, at last she was in the saddle, my arms clasped around her hips to keep her there. Scorpion gave us a perturbed glance and flicked his nearest ear. "Dair, listen to me. Sit still, you have to sit still. Scorpion isn't going to stand for much more commotion. Just sit a minute. You have to get used to the horse and let him get used to you."

She was gulping now, but only for breath after our struggle; her tears were quiet ones. "Angus, why are you doing this?"

"Because you have to know how to handle a horse, Dair. You just absolutely do, in this country." I buried my face in her dress

while the sentences wrenched themselves out of me. "Dair, I'm afraid for you. I could never stand it if something happened to you on account of marrying me. An accident, you here alone, this place off by itself this way . . ." The ache of my fear known to both of us now. I had lost one woman. If I lost another, lost her because of the homestead— "But this place is all I've got. We've got. So you have to learn how to live here. You just have to."

A silent time, then I raised my head to her. She was wan but the tear tracks were drying. "Hello you, Dair Barclay. Are you all right?"

"Y-yes. Angus, I didn't know—how much it meant to you. I thought you were just being—"

I cleared enough of the anxiety out of my throat to say: "Thinking will lead to trouble time after time, won't it. Now then, all you need do is to take these reins. Hold them in your right hand, not too slack but not too tight either, there's the way. Don't worry, I'll be hanging tight onto Scorpion's bridle and first we'll circle the yard. Ready?"

You won't find it in the instructions on the thing, but for the first year of a marriage, time bunches itself in a dense way it never quite does again. Everything happens double-quick and twice as strong to a new pair in life—and not just in the one room of the house you'd expect.

Here, now, in the time so far beyond then, when I see back into that winter after Adair and I were married, it abruptly is always from the day in May. The day that stayed with us as if stained into our skins. Take away that day and so much would be different, the history of Adair and myself and—

Even on the calendar of memory, though, winter must fit ahead of May, and that first winter of Adair and myself outlined us to one another as if we were black stonepiles against the snow. After the first snowfall the weather cleared, the air was crisp without being truly cold yet. Being outside in that glistening weather was a chance to glimpse the glory the earth can be when it puts its winter fur on, and Rob and I tried any number of times to talk Adair into bundling up and riding the haysled with us as we fed the sheep. "Come along out and see the best scenery there is. They'd charge you a young fortune for an outing like it in the Alps." But nothing doing.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Adair quietly smiled us away, brother as well as husband. "Adair can see the winter from where she is," she assured us.

For a while my hope was that she was simply content to be on the inside of winter looking out, the way she paused at any window to gaze out into Scotch Heaven's new whiteness. That hope lasted until a chortime dusk soon after the start of the snow season when George Frew, quiet ox in a sheepskin coat and a flap cap, trooped behind me into the house. "Anything you'd like from town besides the mail, Dair?" I asked heartily. "George is riding in tomorrow."

"Yes," she responded, although you couldn't really say it was to George or myself. Times such as this, conversing with her was like speaking to a person the real Adair had sent out to deal with you. Wherever the actual mortal was otherwise occupied at the moment, the one in front of us stated now: "Adair would like a deck of cards."

George positively echoed with significant silence as he took those words in. Flora Duff might want darning thread, Jen Erskine might want dried peaches for pie, but what did Adair McCaskill want but a—

"You heard the lady, George," I produced with desperate jollity. "We're in for some fierce cribbage in this household, these white nights. Kuuvus's best deck of cards, if you please. I'll ride down and pick it up from you tomorrow night."

Thereafter, Adair would indeed play me games of cribbage when I took the care to put my reading aside and suggest it in an evening. But her true game was what I had known she intended. Solitaire. After the deck of cards arrived, I began to notice the seven marching columns of solitaire laid out on the sideboard during the day. Aces, faces, and on down, the queues of cards awaiting their next in number. Adair amid her housework would stop and deal from the waiting deck to herself, play any eligible card where it belonged, and then go on about whatever she had been doing, only to stop again her next time past and repeat the ritual.

But I soon was repeating my own silent ritual that winter, wasn't I. My own solitary preoccupation. Against every intention in myself, I was soon doing that.

The schoolhouse dances brought it on. At the first dance in my schoolroom, fresh silver of snowfall softening the night, I was in mid-tune with Adair when I caught sight of Anna and Isaac Reese

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

entering. The sensation instantly made itself known within me, unerringly as the first time I ever saw Anna. Toussaint Rennie once told me of a Blackfeet who carried in his ribcage an arrowhead from a fight with the Crow tribe. That was the way the feeling for Anna was lodged in me: just there, its lumped outline under the skin same and strong as ever. *Dair, here in my arms, what am I going to do with myself and this welt inside me? Marrying you was supposed to cure me of Anna. Why hasn't it?* Until that moment of Anna entering from the snow-softened dark, not having laid eyes on her since the day Adair and I were married, I was able to hope it was my body alone, the teasing appetite of the loins, that made me see Anna so often as I waited for sleep. *I am not inviting any of this, Dair, I never invited it.* Her in the midst of this same music, that first night of glorious dancing here in my schoolroom. Her in the Noon Creek school, turning to me under a word in the air, her braid swinging decisively over her shoulder to the top of her breast. *Dair, I wish you could know, could understand, could not be hurt by it.* Anna beneath me, watching so intently as we made the dawn come, arousing each other as the sun kindled the start of morning. Double daybreak such as I had just once shared with a woman, not the woman I had wed. Night upon night I had been opening my eyes to explode those scenes, driving sleep even farther away. Beside me, Adair who slept as if she was part of the night; there in the dark was the one place she seemed to fit the life I had married her into. But this other inhabitant of my nights—I knew now, again, that whether she was Anna Ramsay or Anna Reese or Anna Might-Have-Been-McCaskill, every bit of me was in love with the woman as drastically as ever.

How many times that winter, to how many tunes, was I going to tread the floor of my South Fork schoolroom or her Noon Creek one, glimpsing Anna while Adair flew in my arms? I couldn't not come to the dances, even if Adair would have heard of that, which she definitely would not have. To her, the dances were the one time that Montana winter wasn't Montana winter.

"She's another person, out there in the music." This from Rob. He meant it to extol, but that he said anything at all about an oddness of Adair was a surprise.

"She is that," I couldn't but agree. Dancing with Adair you were partnered with some gliding being she had become, music in a frock, silken motion wearing a ringleted Adair mask. It was what I

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had seen when she danced with Allan Frew after the shearing, a tranced person who seemed to take the tunes into herself. Where this came from, who knew. At home she didn't even hum. But here from first note to last she was on the floor with Rob or me or occasional other partners, and it was becoming more than noticeable that she never pitched in with the other wives when they put mid-night supper together. To Adair, eating wasn't in the same universe with dancing.

"Angus, you look peaked," Adair remarked at the end of that first schoolhouse dance. "Are you all right?"

"A bit under the weather. It'll pass."

But then the Monday of school, after that dance. A squally day, quick curtains of snow back and forth across the winter sun, the schoolroom alight one minute and dimmed the next. By afternoon the pupils were leaning closer and closer over their books and I knew I needed to light the overhead lanterns. Yet I waited, watching, puzzled with myself but held by the mock dusk that seemed to find the back of the schoolroom and settle there. Davie Erskine in the last desk gradually felt my stare over his head toward that end of the room. He turned, peered, then at me. "Is something there, Mr. McCaskill?"

"Not now there isn't, Davie." Of all the tricks of light, that particular one. Slivers of cloud-thinned sunshine, so like the moonsilver when Anna and I lay with each other on the floor there. *You've got to let the moonbeams in on a dance, Davie.* The silvered glim had come and gone in the past half-minute, a moment's tone that I had seen in this schoolroom any number of times without really noticing, that now I would always notice.

"Davie!" I called out so sharply his head snapped up. "Help me light the lanterns, would you please."

That winter, then. Adair and I so new to each other, and the snow-heavy valley of the North Fork so new to her. I at least believed I could take hope from the calendar. Even as the year-ending days slowed with cold and I fully realized that Adair's glances out into the winter were a prisoner's automatic eye-escapes toward any window, even then I still could tell myself that with any luck at all she would not have to go through a second Scotch Heaven winter with only cards for company. Any luck at all, this would be our only

childless winter. Children, soon and several, we both wanted. Adair seemed to have an indefinite but major number in mind—it came with being a Barclay, I supposed—while I lived always with the haunt of that fact that my parents had needed to have four to have one who survived. It would be heartening to think the world is growing less harsh, but the evidence doesn't often say so, does it. In any case, the next McCaskill, the first American one, was our invisible visitor from the winters to come.

It was a morning in mid-March when Rob and I declared spring. Or rather when the sheep did, and he and I, fresh from the lambing shed, came into the kitchen bearing those declarations, a chilled newborn lamb apiece.

"Company for you, Adair," sang out Rob.

She gave a look of concern at our floppy infants, who in their first hours of life are a majority of legs, long and askew as the drone pipes of a limp bagpipe. "But whatever's wrong with them?"

"A bit cold, is all," I told her. "Bring us that apple box, would you please."

"Poor things." She went and fetched the box. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Put them in the oven, of course."

"The oven?"

"A cold lamb's best friend," vouched Rob.

"In—this oven? The oven of my cookstove?"

"It's the only oven there is," I replied reasonably.

"But—"

"They'll be fine," I provided instruction to her as I dropped the oven door and Rob arranged his little geezer in the box next to mine, "all you need do is set the box behind the stove when they come to. In you go, tykes." With their amplitude of legs out from sight under them, the lamb babes in the open oven now looked like a pair of plucked rabbits close to expiration, their eyes all but shut in surrender and the tips of their tongues protruding feebly. "They're not as bad off as they look," I encouraged Adair. "They'll be up and around before you know it."

"But, but what if they climb out of the box?"

"In a situation like that, Adair," Rob postulated, "I'd put them back in. Unless you want designs on your floor."

"How long are they going to be in here?"



DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Rob gawked around studiously. "Do you have an almanac? I can never remember whether it's the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving when we take the lambs out of the kitchen. McAngus, can you?"

"You know better than to listen to him," I counseled her. "He'll be up to get these lambs when they thaw out in an hour or so. Dair, the lambs are our living. We've got to save every one we can, and when they're chilled, as a lot of them are always going to be, this is the only way to do it."

"How long did you say lambing goes on?"

"Only about six weeks."

So May was a double event for Adair, an end to lambs in the oven and the beginning of weather that wasn't winter. Her spirits rose day by day, taking mine with them. Compared with how we had wintered, Adair and I were next things to larks the afternoon when we were to go to Gros Ventre for provisions.

"You're ready for town, are you?" I called in through the doorway to her. "Or can you stand to be away from the company of lambs for that long?"

"Adair is more than ready for town," she informed me.

"If she's that eager she can practice her driving, can't she. I'll go see whether Jupiter and Beastie are agreeable to you handling their reins."

"Tell them they'd better be if they know what's good for them."

The day was raw, despite the new green of the grass and the fact that the spring sun was trying its best. We were a bit late starting because I'd had to take a look at the last bunch of ewes and lambs that had newly been put out to graze. Even so, how fine it felt to have a change from the muck of the lambing shed.

"This must be what they mean by the civilized life," I said with my arm around Adair as she handled the reins. "A carriage and a driver and the kind of day that makes poets spout. Have you heard this one: *My life your lane, my love your cart! Come take my rein, come take my heart?*"

"I've heard it now, haven't I. Depend on you and your old verses." We were almost at the side road up to Breed Butte. "Had we better see if Rob and Judith want anything from town?"

"Rob was in just yesterday, there'll be no need. Let's make up the time instead. Poke the team along a little, Dair, what about. Then I'll take a turn driving after we cross the creek."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Jupiter and Beastie stepped along friskily as we passed meadow after meadow of half-grown hay beside the North Fork. I never tired of reviewing Scotch Heaven, the knob ahead where I first gazed down into this valley, Breed Butte and the south ridges on either side of us and the plains opening ahead through the benchland gap made by the creek.

"A halfpenny for them," spoke up Adair eventually. "Or are you too lost in admiration for my driving to have any thoughts?"

"Actually, I've been watching that horse." Considerably distant yet, the stray animal was moving along the fenceline between the Findlater place and Erskines' lower pasture. It acted skittish. Going and stopping, going again. Shying sideways. Too early in the season for locoweed. Odd.

"Dair, stop the team. I need to see over there."

With the buckboard halted, I stood up and peered. The distant horse shied once more, and the inside of me rolled over in sick realization. That stray horse had a saddle on.

"Angus, what—" Adair let out as I grabbed the reins and slapped the team into a startled run.

"Something's happened over there, we've got to go see what. Hang on, Dair." She did, for dear life. We left the road behind and went across the Findlater pasture at a rattling pace.

The wire gate into the Erskine field was closed: it would be. I saw the scene in my mind as Adair held the team and I flung the gate aside. The rider starting to remount after having come through the gate and closed it, his foot just into the stirrup, the horse shying at the sudden flight of a bird or a dried weed blowing, then in alarm at the strange struggling thing hanging down from its stirrup . . .

I swerved our team from the worst rocks and dips in the ground but we could not miss them all and keep any speed, so we jolted, banged, bounced, Adair clinging part to me and part to the wagon seat, closer and closer ahead the antsy saddlehorse and the figure dragging below its flanks.

By the time I got our own horse stopped they were agitated from their run.

"Dair, you've got to get down and hold them by their heads. Don't let go, whatever happens. Talk to them, croon to them, anything, but hold onto those halters. We can't have a runaway of our own."

"Good Beastie, good Jupiter, yes, you're good horses, you're

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

good old dears . . ." Her words came with me as I slowly approached the restless saddlehorse, my hands cupped as if offering oats. I was halfway when there was a sharp jangle of harness and a clatter behind me; I looked fearfully around to where our team had jerked Adair off her feet for a moment, but she still clung to their heads, still recited "Beastie . . . Jupiter . . . be good horses now," still bravely holding a ton and a half of animals in her small hands.

"Are you all right there, Dair?" I called with urgent softness, not to startle the saddlehorse off into another dragging of its victim.

"Yes," she said, and resumed her chant to Jupiter and Beastie.

"Easy now," my voice added to Adair's horse chorus as I turned back to the saddlehorse, "easy now, fellow, easy, easy, easy . . ."

The false offer of oats got me to within a few steps before the saddlehorse snorted and nervously began to turn away. I lunged and caught the rein, then had both hands clinging to his bridle.

"Whoa, you son of a bitch, whoa, you demented bastard, whoa . . ."

The worst wasn't done yet, either. Somehow I had to hold his head rock-firm and at the same time sidle along his side until I could reach the stirrup and the ankle and foot trapped in it. For once I was glad of the long bones of my body as I stretched in opposite directions to try this rescue.

When I managed to free the ankle and foot I had time to look down at the dragged and kicked rider.

The battering he had undergone, it took a long moment to recognize him.

"Dair," I called. "It's Davie Erskine. He's alive, but just. You'll have to lead the team and wagon over here. Slow and easy, that's the way."

Adair caught her breath when she saw how hooves and earth had done their work on Davie. "Angus. Is he going to live?"

"I don't know that," I answered, and tried to swallow my coppery taste of fear for poor Davie. He was a bloodied sight it made the eyes pinch together in pain just to look at. "He looks as if he's hurt every way he can be. The best we can do is get him home to Donald and Jen."

Now our ride to the Erskine homestead had to be the reversal of the careening dash we had just done; as careful as possible, our coats under Davie in the back of the wagon while Adair held his head steady, the saddle horse docilely tied to the tailgate.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

By the time the doctor had been fetched to the Erskine place and delivered his verdict of Davie to white-faced Donald and Jen, his news was only what Adair and I expected. Oh, it is hindsight, there is no way she and I could have known as we conveyed him home in the creeping but still jolting wagon, that the places of shatter in Davie could never entirely true themselves, that he would lead the limping half-atilt life he had to afterward. But I still feel we both somehow did know.

Two days after that, Adair had the miscarriage.

"Angus, you dasn't blame yourself."

Seeing me silent and long-faced, Adair herself brought the matter into words. "We had to help Davie. That's just the way it happened. You heard the doctor say it's not even certain the wagon ride caused it. Maybe so, maybe no. Isn't that the way everything is?"

I had heard. And as best I could divine, Adair entirely meant it when she said there was no blame on me. As well blame the rocks for jarring the wagon wheels, or the wheels for finding the rocks. No, I knew where Adair put the blame. On Scotch Heaven itself, on Montana, on a land so big that people were always stretching dangerously to meet its distances and season-long moods. Not that she came out and said so. Another case of dasn't; she did not dare lay open blame on our homestead life, for she and I had no other footing of existence together.

You would have to say, then, Adair took the loss of our child-to-be as well as a person can take a thing such as that. Not so, me. To me, a double death was in that loss. The child itself, the packet of life, we had withheld from us; and the miscarriage also had cost us a possible Adair, Adair as she could be, Adair with the son or daughter she needed to turn her mind from the homestead, the isolation. I had lost my own best self when Anna spurned our life together. How many possibles are in us? And of those, how many can we ever afford to lose?

"Angus." Adair by me now, touching me, her voice bravely bright. As if the ill person had climbed from bed to dance and cheer up the mourning visitor, she was doing her best to bolster me. "We'll have other children," she assured me. "You're definitely a man for trying."

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That December, Adair miscarried again. This time, four months into her term.

I see that second winter of our marriage as a single long night. A night in the shape of the four walls of a bedroom. The man Angus with thoughts hammering at him from the dark. *How has it turned out this way? I saw where my life ought to go, to Anna. Why then this other existence, if that is what it is, of Adair and me not able to attain the single thing we both want?* The woman Adair this time the one staying grievous, silent as the frost on the window and as unknowable. A pair patternless as the night, us.

I turn onto my side, to contemplate again the sleeping stranger who is my wife. And am startled to meet her awake, her head turned toward me.

"Angus. Angus, what—what if we can't have any children."

Silence of darkness, our silence added into it. Until she says further: "If I can't have any children."

"You don't seem anything like a stone field to me." I move my hand to her. "Or feel like one either."

"I need to know, Angus. Do you still want me for a wife, if?"

How to answer that, in the face of *if*?

"Dair, remember what the doctor keeps saying. 'There's not that much wrong; as young and strong as you are, there's every chance . . .'"

"Every chance. But none has come yet, has it." She didn't add but it is there anyway: *will it ever?*

Suddenly I was angry with life. Not in the spit-against-the-wind way of exasperation, but vexed all the way up from my core, from whatever heartpit of existence I have. For life to be against this marriage of ours was one matter. Adair and I could answer for that, we *were* answering for it. But why begrudge us our child, life? A child would be the next link of time, the human knot woven from all McCaskills and Barclays there ever have been, the new splice of Scotland and America and Montana and what was and what needs to be. But here where our child ought to fit—by your own goddamn logic of us, life—the only strands of time in sight to us were the old harsh ones of winter and night. Well, you haven't done us in yet, I vowed silently to the winter thorns of frost on the window and the faceless night, we will stave you off a while yet. Adair did her

utmost to bolster me after the wagon ride cost us our first child. My turn now.

"Dair, listen to me." I touch to her, stroking the gentle horizon of her body. "Dair," I say with the kind of declaration that can be said only in bed, "we'll get you a baby."

We . . . I rise over her and kiss her lips . . . *will* . . . next kiss for the point of her chin . . . *get* . . . now down to her throat for the next kiss and the tender unbuttoning . . . *you* . . . this kiss on her breastbone . . . *a* . . . kissing back and forth on her breasts now . . . *baby* . . . as she lifts to me with her quickening breath.

It was one of those May mornings which could have just as well saved itself the trouble of posing as spring and simply admitted it was leftover February. A wash day, too, and Adair was hard at it when I pecked her cheek and went out into the day. In the gray chilliness of the barn I had untied my sheepskin coat from behind Scorpion's saddle and gratefully put it on, and was ready to swing onto the horse when I heard Adair, calling from the house: "Angus! Come look!"

I wrapped Scorpion's reins and hurried out of the barn. Snow had begun to fall, a fat and feathery May squall, so that I saw Adair as if through cloud tufts. I strode across the yard calling to her, "What's happened?"

"Just look around you! It's snowing!"

I peered at her, then had to laugh. "Either that or it's awful early for dandelions to fly."

Laugh was the least thing this wife of mine was in a mood to hear. She was the closest I had ever seen her to ~~anger~~ when she fastened her gaze on me and demanded: "But how can it snow? This is May! Almost summer!"

"Dair, in this country it snows any time it takes a sweet notion to."

She scrutinized me as if I'd told her the sun was due to go cold. Then she was reminded of her basket of wet laundry. "My poor wash, though. What'll I do about—"

"Hang it as usual. If nothing else it'll freeze dry."

"Angus, you really don't care that it's snowing in May?"

If I couldn't say truth about the weather, then what could I. "Worse than that, Dair. I'm glad to see it."

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"Glad?" As if I'd said treason. "But what will this do to the grass? And the lambs?"

"I was on my way to shed up the ewes and newest lambs. They'll be fine, under roof. And a spring snow is just exactly what the grass wants. After an open winter such as we had, the country needs the moisture."

Adair blinked steadily against the snowflakes as we stood looking at each other. "A strange way to get it," she told the country and me.

The next did not surprise me. I had only wondered when it would come.

Two days after the snow, when slush and mud were everywhere and spring was reluctantly starting over, Adair asked:

"Angus, do you ever have any feeling at all to see Scotland again?"

"No, Dair. It never occurs to me." We might as well have the next into the open. "But it does to you, doesn't it."

"I don't mean going back for good. But for a visit."

"If it's what you want, we can get the money ahead some way for you to go."

"But you won't come?"

"No."

"Is it the ocean? Adair doesn't really like the old Atlantic, either."

"No, it's not the ocean, at least not just. Dair, everything I have is here now. Scotland is an old calendar to me." To hear that from me who once stood pining up the Clyde to yesterday. *Angus, are we both for it?* And to have the sister of Rob the America prophet turning back like a compass needle toward Nethermuir and all its defeats. Straight paths simply are not in people.

Adair at least deserved to have the terms between us made clear, here. "If you feel you want to, you can go—for however long you like."

She did the next clarifying. "Do you want me to, Angus?"

"No." The full answer was greatly more complicated than that, but that was the uppermost edge of how I felt. I wanted not to be alone in life, and whatever else marriage with Adair wasn't, it was not utter aloneness. My way of saying so came out now as: "What would I do without you?"

She answered as simply as those gray eyes gave their knowledge of me: "You would still have a life to look ahead to."

Time to be honest, said the thief in the noose. Since the moment of my wedding vow to this inexplicable woman, I had spent four-thirds of my time imagining how I might ever be found out, and here when it happened, it was nothing at all like the rehearsed versions. Time and again in those, out of somewhere it would come, Adair's question *Angus, after all this while, haven't you been able to forget Anna?* There we would be at last. On the terrible ground of truth that I had hoped we could avoid. Adair would be staring at me in appeal. *Convince me otherwise*, her look would be saying. And I would ready myself to begin at it. *Dair, you are imagining. There is nothing between Anna and me any more, there has not been for—for years. You are my wife, you are the one woman I hold love for.* The disclaiming would marshal all of itself that way in my head, ready to troop along my tongue. And instead I would look at Adair and in eight words give up all I had. *Dair, you're too right. I still love Anna.*

But now it had happened, and not that way at all. Whether Adair saw it in the manner I tried not to watch Anna at the dances, or whether it simply stuck out all over me as I tried to be a husband, she knew my love for Anna was not changing. More than that. In her distance-from-all-this way of doing so, Adair had just told me she knew that Anna maybe was possible for me yet, in time. And more than that again. By invoking Scotland, Adair was saying that our marriage need not be a lasting barrier keeping me from Anna.

Straight paths are not in people: amidst all my relief that Adair knew, and granted, my helplessness about Anna, I was sad that the knowing had to cost her. She was carefully not showing so, she was staying at that slight mocking distance from herself as she calmly answered my gaze with her gray one. But cost surely was there, in her and in our marriage from here on.

Our marriage, if that was what it was going to continue to be. Wedding vows are one thing; the terms of existing together are another language altogether. "Dair, where are we coming out at here? Are you going back to Scotland?"

My wife shook her head, not meaning no, she wouldn't like to go, just that she wasn't deciding now. "I'll see." We both would.

"Adair seems a bit drifty lately," Rob remarked when he rode by the next day.

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"Does she," I acknowledged without really answering.

His head went to one side as he studied me. "Angus, you know I only ask this because Adair is my sister and you're all but my brother. Is life all right between you two, these days?"

"Right as ever," I provided him, and managed to put a plain face over my quick moment of irk before I added: "But you didn't come all the way to take the temperature of Adair and me, I know."

"You're right, you're right, there's other news. I've been up looking at the grass"—he gave a head toss toward Roman Reef, where we grazed our sheep each summer—"and there's no reason we can't trail the sheep in a week or so." A good early start toward fat lambs in the fall, and I nodded in satisfaction with his news. Or rather, with that much of it.

"We've got a new neighbor up there," Rob went on. "The Double W."

My turn to cock a look at him. "With how many cows?"

"No more than a couple of hundred head, is all I met up with. I gave them a dose of dog and pushed them north off where we've been pasturing. But that damn Williamson," Rob said in what almost might have been admiration. "The man has already got cattle on every spear of grass he owns on Noon Creek, he 'borrows' on the reservation, and now he's putting them up in the mountains. Old Wampus Cat must have invented the saying, 'all I want is all I can get,' ay?"

"We'd better hope he doesn't make a major habit of putting cattle up there."

Rob shook his head. "They're big mountains. No, Angus, I don't like having Double W cows within mouth distance of our summer grass any better than you do. But Williamson will have to put enough cows up there to tip over the world, before he makes any real difference to us. That's what brought us here, wasn't it—elbow room when we need it?"

True enough, Rob. But as you gave me a lifted hand of goodbye and rode away that day, Montana even then did not seem to me the expanse it had been.

At first I thought it was bad pork. Just an evening or two after our inconclusive circle of Scotland, Adair took her opening bite of supper and then swiftly fled outside, where I could hear her retching as if her toenails were trying to come up.

I pushed my plate back. Even our meals could not go right.

When a marriage begins to come apart, the stain spreads into wherever it can find. The thunder between my father and mother within the stone walls of River Street. The worse silences between whatever Adair sought of life and the unattainable, the Anna shadow, that I wanted. Those mindblind days before Adair and I said the vow there on Breed Butte, why had I ever, why had she ever—

The screen door slapped again. Adair leaned against the doorway, one hand cupped onto her stomach. She still appeared a bit weatherish, but strangely bright-eyed, too. Fever next?

"Dair, are you all right?"

Her heart of a face had on the damnedest expression, a smile-try that wasn't anything like a Barclay smile; a nominated look that seemed a little afraid to come out. Adair gazed at me with it for a considerable moment. Then she moved her cupped hand in a small arc out and down over the front of her stomach, as if smoothing a velvet bulge there.

I can only hope my face didn't show the arithmetic racing through me before I stood and went to my wife-with-child. *May-June-July-August-September-October-November?-December?* That calendar of pregnancy could not have been worse. If we lost this child as we had the other two, it would be with Scotch Heaven winter staring Adair in the face again.

"McAngus, the third time is the charm," Rob proffered with a hearty smile but worried eyes.

"Something grand to look forward to, Angus, pure grand," from Lucas, his eyes not matching his words either.

We count by years, but we live by days. Rightfully, we should do both by seasons. Even now, looking back, it makes greater sense to me to recall how that springtime, when the baby was yet invisible in her, nurtured Adair's hope along cautiously, as a sun-welcoming tree unobtrusively adds a ring of growth within itself. That summer, when the creekside meadows became mounded with haystacks, Adair began to round out prominently. Then as autumn came and remorselessly wore on toward worse weather, a gray strain began to show on Adair as well. But so far so good, we said to each other in our every glance. Each season in the procession had handed her along without jolt, without fatal jostle to the life she was carrying.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Drawing ever nearer to the birthtime, I cosseted her every way I could think of. The oldest Findlater daughter, Jenny, for months now had been on hand as hired girl to do our washing and other work of the house. Adair was the first to declare of herself, "Adair has the life of a maharajah these days." I knew it was put somewhat differently by others in Scotch Heaven. "Adair is still feeling delicate, is she?" I was queried by Flora Duff, who marched babies out of herself as if they were cadets. Elbows of the neighbors I didn't care about; Adair and her inching struggle to bring us a child were all that counted. She had become a kind of season herself, a time between other times. I noticed that once in a while now she would lay a game of solitaire, but only seldom. Almost all of her existence now was waiting. Waiting.

One single day of that time stands out to be told. The day of Isaac.

It came courtesy of Ninian Duff. "I am here to borrow a favor," he announced straight off. "We have a wagon of coal coming for the school." Ninian stopped to glance sternly at the sky. This was late October now; first snowfall could come any hour. "But Reese's man can only deliver Sunday or never. Ay, he's busy as the wind these days. Everyone in Gros Ventre has caught the notion they can't live without coal now. A Sunday, though. You see my dilemma, Angus."

I did. Any hard breathing on Sunday that wasn't asthma was frowned upon by the Duffs and Erskines.

"Angus, I will trade you whatever help you need around your place when Adair's time comes, if you'll handle this."

I agreed to be the welcomer of Sabbath coal, and on the day, the big wagon and its team of horses were no sooner in sight on the road from Gros Ventre than I knew. Isaac Reese himself was the teamster today.

"Annguz," he greeted when he had halted the wagon. "You vish for coal?"

"Isaac," I reciprocated, my throat tight. "I'll see if your shovel fits me."

Not much more was said as we began unloading the coal. I suppose we were saying without words, letting our muscles talk. Coal flew from our two shovels. I wondered if he had any least idea of my love for his wife. Of those words of hers to me, *If I ever see that Isaac and I are not right for each other, I'll know where to turn for*

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

better. Those were words with only the eventual in them, though. The ones with the actual in them had been the ones that counted: *You know how we were, Angus, that last night there in your schoolroom. Isaac and I have been that way together all this summer.* I sent a glimpse at him as we labored. Since when did Denmark manufacture Casanovas? Isaac Skorp Yun Reese. Scarecrow of sinew and mustache and unreadable face. If you had tried to tell me the day I bought Scorpion from him how this man was going to figure in my life, I would have laughed you over the hill. Yet, maybe Isaac in turn was living in silken ignorance of me and what I might someday—in the eventual—do to his life with Anna. Wasn't that more than possible? With an ordinary human, yes, but with a horse dealer . . . I would have given a strip of skin an inch wide to know what Anna's mate in life knew. In that mustached face, though, there was no sign I ever would. Through everything, I had never managed to hate Isaac Reese. Not for lack of trying; with him as a target my despair about Anna would have had a place to aim. But Isaac was not a man who could be despised. Calm, solid, entirely himself in the way a mountain is itself; that, and nothing else, so far as could be seen. I had might as well despise the coal we were shoveling. No, all I ever felt when I was around Isaac was a kind of abrupt illness. An ache that I was myself instead of him.

Exertion greatly warmed the chilly day, and as soon as Isaac stopped to peel off his coat, I did, too. As we stood and blew, he asked, "How are your missus?"

I told him Adair was fine, hoping as ever that our history of misfortune wasn't making a liar of me at that precise moment. Then I was privileged to ask: "And your better half. How is she, these days?"

Isaac Reese gave me a probable smile under that mustache, nodded skyward and gabbled out:

"Ve got a stork on de ving."

I held my face together not to laugh, and cast a glance into the air around for the hawk or heron that Isaac was trying to name. Then his meaning came.

"So, congratulations," I got out, trying not to swallow too obviously. Anna now with child, now of all times? Now as I watched Adair grow with out own creation, Anna with this man's—"When does the baby arrive?"

"Sometime of spring." He gave me a twinkling look, unquestion-

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ably grinning under his handlebars now. "Foalz, calfs, lamps," he recited, as if the busyness of the animal kingdom then was contagious. I stooped to more shoveling, more pondering. But Isaac's hand came down onto the haft of my shovel. When I peered up at him I found he had something more he wanted to say. It came out: "Ve vill be feathers of our country, Annguz."

I had to hope Isaac was right even if his corkscrew tongue wasn't. I had to hope he and I indeed would be fathers of children whose dangerous voyages into life somehow would do no harm to the women we were each wed to.

On the eleventh of November, 1899, Adair's baby came—weeks early but alive, whole, healthy, squalling for all he was worth.

"It's a wonder a son of yours didn't come out spouting verse," Flora Duff tendered to me when she had done the midwifing.

In our bed with the tiny red storm of noise bundled beside her, Adair was wan except in her eyes. I leaned over her and said low and fervent, "He's the finest there ever was. And so is his mother." She smiled up while I smiled down. Our son found higher pitch. We didn't care. He could yell for a year, if that was the fanfare it took to bring us a child. Softly Adair asked, "Whatever time of day is it?"

"Early. Flora is fixing breakfast and right after I'll need to feed the sheep. And you're going to have a feeding of your own to do, with a prettier implement than a pitchfork."

When I went out into that day and its start-of-winter chores I felt as exultant as any being ever has, I felt that this was the morning the world was all possibilities. Adair and I and in the frosty November daybreak this miracle of a baby, our son of the sun.

To balance this boy of ours, Adair and I gave him a name from each side of the family. *Varick* because it was her father's, and then the traditional McCaskill *Alexander* for a middle, in spite of it being my father's.

I measure the next span of years by you, Varick. You who were born into one century, one era of Scotch Heaven and the Two Medicine country, and by the time you were approaching eight years of age, a different epoch and place had been brought around you. Or so it very much seemed to me, as sentinel called father.

You were not past your first birthday before your mother and I

knew by doctor's verdict that you were the only child there was going to be for us. You weren't past your second before our hearts ticked on the fact that keeping you in life was never going to be simple. Every winter from then on you worried us, coming down with alarming coughs and fevers and bouts of grippe, as influenza was called then, for which spring seemed to be the only cure. Strange, the invalid ghost of yourself that you became as soon as cold weather cooped you in the house. As if your vitality dwindled when the length of daylight did. But in your hale seasons you more than made up for that; you sprouted long and knobbly, like me, and rapidly you were out and roaming into every corner of the homestead. The first major talking-to I ever had to give you was about wanderlust, the spring afternoon I found you in the barn: down under the workhorses at their oat trough, crooning happily amid those hooves that with a casual swipe could have smashed you as if you were a pullet egg. Had your mother seen you there innocent among the feet of death, she would have forfeited years of her life. My own heart pounded several months' worth before I managed to sidle among the big horses and snatch you. Snatch only begins to say it, for I also gave three-year-old you a shake that rattled your eyeballs, and the appropriate gospel: "If I ever again catch you anywhere, ANYWHERE, around the hoof of a horse, I'll lather you black and blue! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? Varick? DO YOU?" You looked downright shocked—at me rather than realization of your peril. But you piped apologetically, "I unnerstand," and lived up to it.

You went on, in the next year or so, to your lasso period of trying to rope the chopping block, the dog, the cat, the chickens, and fortunately got over that. But horses you did not ever get over. By the time you were five you could ride as well as I could, and by six you were twice the person I was on the back of a horse. The more horseman you became, the more worrisome it was for your mother; that hauntful day of our finding Davie Erskine bloody as a haunch of beef was ever there in her eyes when she watched you rollicking full-tilt across a meadow aboard Scorpion or some other mount. But she braced herself, as a person will when there seems nothing else to be done, and like a person who has simply decided to suffer—there is no less way to say it—she watched you out of sight the school morning when you proudly set off toward the South Fork on the back of your own pony Brownie now.

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To say the truth, I had my own overwhelming fret about you. The dread deep as the bloodstream in me. What I feared for you, from the time you began to toddle, was what I had until then always prized. The water of the North Fork and its easy nearness to the house. I who would never swim was determined for you to become complete tadpole; water and the McCaskills were already several generations late in coming to terms with each other. And so the minute you were old enough I got Rob to teach you the water, your small strokes dutifully imitating his there in the North Fork's beaver ponds beneath Breed Butte, until he was saying, and meant it: *See now, McVarick, they couldn't drown you in a gunnysack.*

Did it lead on from there, the alliance between you and Rob? "Unk" as you called him from the time you were first persuaded to try your tongue on "uncle." No, even without the swimming you and he would have doted on one another, I have to believe. The two of you made a kind of inevitable league against your girl cousins, Rob's daughters Ellen and Dorothy and Margery and Mary, who for all that he treasured them like wealth were unmistakably four versions of Judith. Your tenet of those years, *girls are bossy*, fit snugly with his customary joke about unexpectedly running a convent on Breed Butte, and it was your Unk more often than not who enlisted you into riding the gutwagon with him during lambing time or a buckrake during haying, you little more than a tyke but the reins taut in your small hands as Rob taught you to tug the workhorses into their necessary routes.

You just don't know how lucky you are, Angus, I heard from your Unk regularly in that time, having a Varick.

I maybe have some idea of it, Rob.

I did not take the school that first South Fork year of yours, on the doctrine that you ought to be spared the awkward load of having your own parent everlastingly up there at the teacher's desk. But when that first year produced as little in you as it did, I tossed away doctrine and became schoolmaster as quick as the annual offer came again from Ninian. And found out for myself that as a pupil, you were reminiscent of the fellow who declared that his education simply hadn't happened to include reading, writing and 'rithmetic. Oh, you could do well enough to scrape by in the schoolroom, and did, with prods from me. But the main parts of you were always outside the walls rather than in. Riding beside you to and from the schoolhouse, I saw day by day what made you absentminded above

a book. Absent to the mountain canyons like crevices in the wall of the world, absent to the warm velvet back of Brownie, absent to the riffles and trout holes of the North Fork—you already were a fishing fiend—absent to anywhere your volition could be your own, rather than an arithmetic book's or a teacher father's. Those were points at which, as maybe all parents ever have, your mother and I wondered where we got you. Except in the lines of your body, there was much about you that did not necessarily seem to be my son. Except in your annual war with winter and a certain habit of drifting quietly into yourself, there was considerable about you that did not seem to be your mother's son. You seemed to be the Two Medicine country's son. Your chosen curriculum, even then, was with Rob and me in the year's rhythm with our band of sheep, lambing-shearing-summering-shipping-wintering. With us as either Rob or I rode up atop Roman Reef once each summer week to tend the camp of our sheepherder, Davie Erskine, whom I had hired as soon as he grew from twisted boy into twisted man. With us as we more and more discussed—*cussed and discussed*, as Rob put it—the jumping total of Double W cattle on the mountains' summer grass after the Blackfeet reservation finally was fenced against the Williamsons of the world. With us, jackknife in your earnest small hand, skinning the pelts off our bad loss in the winter of 1906, when almost a quarter of our sheep piled up and smothered during a three-day blizzard. With us to every extent a boy could be in his greenling years.

A last thing that needs saying of those earliest years of yours, Varick. In all that was to come, I hope it was not lost to you that some supreme truces were made of those years. Your mother's with the homestead. Mine with the everpresence of the shadow between your mother and me, the shadow named Anna; Anna now with children of her own, Lisabeth born half a year after you and Peter a few years after that, children who might have been mine, instead of you. Truce, yes: your mother's and mine with each other, for I believe—I hope with all that is in me—that you grew through these years without yet having to know that a truce is not a full peace.

In the spring of the year that Toussaint Rennie ever after spoke of as *that 19-and-7*, you at rambunctious seven-going-on-eight. A Saturday morning amid lambing time you were helping me at the sheep shed, watering the jugged ewes with as much as you could

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

carry in a bucket while I suckled a freshborn lamb onto its reluctant mother. As you were making one of your lopsided trips from the creek, outside the shed door I heard a voice with Missouri in it say to you:

"Hullo, mister. Funny how water turns heavy when you put a bucket around it, ain't it."

"Uh, yeah, sure is, I guess." I could hear, too, the startlement in your question back to the Missouri voice: "Who is it you're looking for, my dad?"

"If he's the sheep boss of your outfit here, yeah, I'd kind of like to talk to him about something."

You plunged into the shed as nearly running as a person can with a bucket of water tilting him sideways. "Daddy!" you called out, your face still lit from having been mistered for the first time in your life, "Daddy, there's some man—"

"I hear, son. As soon as little Fiddlesticks here gets his breakfast, I'll be there. Tell our visitor so, will you please?"

But you lurched on toward me with your water bucket until near enough to whisper in scared thrill, "Daddy, he's wearing a badge!"

An added fact such as that does take the slack out of a person's behavior. I finished with the lamb quicker than I'd have thought possible and stepped out of the shed, you close as a shadow to my heels, Varick.

And both of us very nearly tromped on the nose of a chestnut-colored saddle horse with so much white on his head he was the sort called an apron face, chewing the tall new grass beside the shed.

"Hullo," the figure atop the big horse greeted. "Sorry to pull you off of your work this way." The man wore a campaign hat and a soft brown leather vest, and was lazing on the horse with one knee hooked over the saddle horn in an easy way I knew I would never learn. His face had good clean lines but only a minimum of them: a sparse, almost pared look to this rider. And while the badge on his vest seemed to say he was a lawman, he was more casual about it than any I'd ever seen. He was asking me now, "You the gent of this enterprise?"

"I am."

"Myself, I carry the name Meixell. Stanley Meixell." He put down a hand and I responded with mine and my own name. The restlessness behind me was close enough to feel, and I added: "This bundle of fidgets is my son Varick."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Him and me has met just now, though we didn't get quite as far as names. Pleased to know you, Varick," and the rider put down his hand again. While your small one was going into his large work-brown one I snatched the chance to look hard at the man Meixell's badge. Not a law star; not anything I had ever seen: a shield with a pine tree embossed in its middle.

Stanley Meixell moved his head to take in the ridgeline above the creek valley, the summit of Breed Butte above that. "This's a pretty valley in here. Kind of up toward the roof of the world, though. Get some snow in the winter, do you?"

"A bit," I submitted. "Then a few feet more for sauce on that."

"Winter," he repeated, as if it were an affliction of the race. Meanwhile the chestnut saddle horse chewed on at the high grass, the only one of us getting anything accomplished. Whatever this Meixell's business was he seemed to have forever to do it in, but I had a maternity ward of sheep waiting.

"Your badge isn't one I'm familiar with. What, have the trees elected you sheriff?"

"Not exactly the trees. A character named Theodore Roosevelt. I'm what's called a forest ranger." He went on in his same slow voice, "The country up west of you here is gonna be made a national forest." Meixell shrugged in what seemed a mildly regretful way. "They sent me to make it."

"Mr. Meixell, I have to ask you to trot that past me again. A which forest?"

"A national one." He began giving me an explanation of the new United States Forest Service, and then I remembered that what were called forest reserves existed a number of places, mostly west of the Divide where trees grew big enough to be made into lumber.

"Mr. Meixell, I'm afraid you've got your work cut out for you if you're looking for timber to reserve anywhere around here. It reserves itself on this dry side of the mountains. No self-respecting logger would bother with these little pines of ours for anything but kindling, now would he?"

Meixell's gaze had been all around our valley and up the pinnacle of Breed Butte and back and forth across the mountains we were talking of, and now it casually found me, and stayed.

"No, I don't guess he would, Angus—if I can go ahead and call you that?"

I had to nod; civility said so.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"But actually it ain't just the trees I'm supposed to be the nurse-maid of," Meixell went on, "it's the whole forest. The soil and water, too, a person'd have to say."

He contemplated me and added in a slower voice yet:

"Yeah, and the grass."

I felt as if a tight rope suddenly was around my insides. It was then I blurted to you, Varick, "Son, you'd better get on with your watering, before those ewes come looking for you."

"Aw." But you went as promptly as a reluctant boy ever can. And I have regretted since that I sent you, for if you had stayed and heard, the time ahead might have come clearer to you. You who were born in the Two Medicine country with its rhythms and seasons in you had a right I did not manage to see just then, there in the welter of apprehensions instantaneously brought on me by Stanley Meixell's words, a right to witness what was beginning here. We both knew it was not the worst you could ever hold against me, but if I had that exact moment back . . . Instead, as soon as you were out of earshot, I spun around to the man Meixell. "But we summer our sheep up there. Everybody here, on both forks of the creek. That's free range and always has been."

"Always is something I don't know that much about, Angus. But I just imagine maybe the Blackfeet who used to have free run of this country had their own notion of always, don't you suppose? And if there was anybody here before them, they probably knew how to say always, too." Meixell shook his head as if sorry to be the herald of inescapable news. "As I get it—and I'm the first to admit that the Yew Ess Forest Service ain't the easiest thing in the world to savvy—the notion is we can't go on eating up the land forever. As the lady said to the midget, there's a limit to everything."

I could feel the homestead, seventeen years of labor, hours incalculable spent on the sheep, all slip beneath my feet as if I were on a 160-acre pond of ice. With surprising quickness now, the forest ranger spoke to my wordless dismay:

"Don't take on too hard about the national forest, though. More'n likely you're still gonna be able to summer your sheep up there. There's gonna be grazing allotments and permits I'll be doling out, and prior use is something I'm supposed to take into account." Up there on his chestnut horse he began outlining to me how the permit system was to work, every inch of it sounding reasonable in his

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

laconic tone, but I was still unready to let myself skid back to hope. I broke in on him:

"But then, if we can still use the range, why bother to—Mr. Meixell, just what in holy hell is it you and President Teddy have in mind for us?"

"The idea ain't to keep the range from being used," Meixell said as if it was a catechism. "It's to keep it from being used to death."

Now the summer mountains filled my mind, the rising tide of Double W cattle we sheep graziers were encountering in each grass season up there, Wampus Cat Williamson's chronic imperial complaint, *You people would sheep this country to death*. The awful echo of that in what this—what was the word for him, *ranger*?—had just said. Prior use. But *whose* prior use of that mountain range? Suddenly cold with suspicion, I studied the hardworn lean face above the badge, beneath the campaign hat: had he come as agent of the Wampus Cat Williamsons of the world, those who had the banks and mills and fortunes in their white hands? *Ruin's wheel drove over us hair/in gold-spoked quietness*. I had thought it wouldn't be like that in America. I clipped my next words with icy care:

"I hope while you're so concerned against grass being sheeped out, you'll manage to have an eye for any that's being cattled out, too."

From his saddle perch Meixell gave me a look so straight it all but twanged in the air. "Yeah," he spoke slowly, "I figure on doing that."

Maybe so, maybe no. I kept my gaze locked with his, as if we were memorizing each other. Say for this Meixell, he did not look like anyone's person but his own. Yet even if he was coming here neutral, that eternal seep of Double W cattle to wherever Williamson's eye alit . . . "You may as well know now as later," I heard myself informing the man in the saddle, "there'll be some who have their own ideas about your government grass."

"Oh, they won't have no real trouble telling the difference between the forest grass and their own," Meixell offered absently. "There's gonna be a bobwire fence for the boundary. And I'll pretty much be on hand myself, if the fence ain't enough." Still absently, he tacked on: "And if I ain't enough, then Assistant Ranger Windchester likely'll be." The butt of his Winchester rifle



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stuck out of its scabbard as casually ready as this forest ranger himself.

"Fellow there in the saloon in town," Meixell resumed as I was striving to blink all that in, "he told me you're the straw boss of the school up here. I wonder if I could maybe borrow your schoolhouse for a meeting, just in case anybody's got any questions left over about the national forest." Meixell paused and scanned the long stone colonnade of Roman Reef atop the western horizon. "The Yew Ess Forest Service is great on explaining. Anyway, next Saturday wouldn't be any too soon for me about your schoolhouse, if it wouldn't for you."

I answered, "I'll need to talk to our school board," which meant Ninian. "But I can tell you the likelihood is, people here are going to have questions for you, yes."

Meixell nodded as if that was the fairest proposition he'd heard in years. "Well," he concluded, "I better get to getting. Figured I might as well start here at the top of the valley with my good news and work on down. Noticed a place on that butte." He inclined his head an inch toward the summit of Breed Butte. "I suppose you maybe know the fellow's name up there?"

Only as well as I knew my own. And although this forest ranger was a stranger to me, and maybe a dire one, I felt impelled to tell him at least the basic of Rob Barclay. "He has a mind of his own, especially where his sheep are concerned."

Meixell cast me another look from under his hat, a glance that might have had a tint of thanks in it. "There's some others of us that way. Be seeing you, Angus." Before he swung the chestnut saddle horse away, he called into the shed to you: "Been my day's pleasure to meet you, Varick."

While the man Stanley Meixell rode away, I stood staring for a while at the mountains. National forest. They did not look like a national anything, they still looked just like mountains. A barbed wire fence around them. It did not seem real that a fence could be put around mountains. But I would not bet against this Meixell when he said he was going to do a thing. A fence around the mountains not to control them but us. Did we need that? Most, no. But some, yes. The Double W cattle that were more and more. It bothered me to think it in the same mental breath with Wampus Cat Williamson, but even Rob's penchant for more sheep was a formula the land eventually would not be able to stand. And without the

land healthy, what would those of us on it be? The man Meixell's argument stood solid as those mountains. But whether he himself did . . . Not Proven.

I heard you come out of the shed with your bucket and start your next dutiful journey to the creek. When I glanced around at you, I found that you had taken a sudden new interest in your hat. You were wearing it low to your eyes as the forest ranger did. I registered then, Varick, that from the instant he reached down to shake your hand, you looked at Stanley Meixell as if the sun rose and set in him. And I already was telling myself that you had better be right about that.

"What in goddamn hell"—Rob, full steam up—"are we going to do about this national forest nonsense?"

"You're of the opinion there's something to be done, are you."

"Man, you know as well as I do that's been our summer grass up there ever since we set foot into this country. We can't just let some geezer in a pinchy hat prance in here and tell us how many sheep we can put on this slope, how many on that one. What kind of a tightfart way is that to operate, now I ask you?"

"There's maybe another piece to the picture, you know," I had to say. "Those grazing allotments could mean Williamson can't pour every cow on earth up there any more, too."

"Williamson has never managed to crowd us off those mountains yet."

"Yet."

"Angus, are you standing there telling me you're going to swallow the guff this man Meixell is trying to hand us? Just because he wears a goddamn tin badge of some kind?"

"I'd say it's not the worst reason to pay the man some attention. And no, I'm not swallowing anything, just yet. I do think we all need to do some chewing on the matter, though."

Rob shook his head slowly, deliberately, as if erasing Meixell and the heresy he called a national forest. "I'll tell you this: I can't stand still and accept that any sheep I own has to have a permit to eat grass that doesn't belong to a goddamn soul."

"Rob, there's a fair number of sheep you own one side of and I own the other."

That drew me a sharp look. I had not seen Rob so het up since our ancient debates over how many sheep we ought to take on.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Yet why wouldn't he be; this matter of the national forest grass was the same old dogfight, simply new dogs.

Rob must have realized we were fast getting in deep, for he now backed to: "All right, all right, I might've know you're going to be an independent as a red mule. If it'll keep peace in the family, you can go around daydreaming that we can run sheep with reins on every one of them." He cocked his head and made his declaration then and there: "But if that forest ranger of yours thinks he's going to boss me, and a lot of others around here, he has his work cut out for him."

When I made a quick ride down to the Duffs' after supper, Ninian was bleak, even for Ninian. "Ay, we can open the school-house next Saturday and give a listen to the man Meixell," he granted. "But if what he has to say isn't against our interests as sheepmen, I'll be much and pleasantly surprised."

That night at bedtime, I told Adair: "I think we'd better make a trip to town, after school Monday."

She glanced over at me in surprise. Any town trip other than a periodic Saturday was rare for us, and during lambing time it was unheard of.

"Davie can handle the lambing shed until we get back," I elaborated. "That way, we can take our time a bit, have supper with Lucas and Nancy."

She still gazed at me. She knew as well as I did that my elaboration was mere fancywork, not revelation.

"Dair, I need to talk to Lucas about this national forest."

"Rob has made his opinion clear."

"Rob isn't Lucas."

At least that turned off her gaze. "No," she said. "No one is anyone else."

Gros Ventre these days was a growing stripling of a town, all elbows and shanks. The main street was beginning to fill in; fresh buildings for the *Gleaner* newspaper, for a new saloon that called itself the Pastime, for the stagecoach office next to Dantley's stable, for an eating place that had opened beside the Medicine Lodge—*pure convenient*, as Lucas put it, *whenever the notion of a meal happens to strike one of my customers*. But it still had plenty of room to go.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

In every conceivable way, though, I was assured by Lucas in the next breath after I stepped into the Medicine Lodge, the town was advancing grandly. "We're even about to get ourselves a bank, Angus. It's bad business to let such places as Choteau and Conrad keep our money in their pockets." All this he tendered to me as I was noticing that now that a bridge of bright new lumber hurdled the creek ford, by weathered comparison the Northern Hotel looked as if it had been in business since Lewis and Clark spent the night there. And Rob and I preceded the Northern, and Lucas preceded us . . .

I took a sip from the glass Lucas had furnished me, and speculated, "Then if we were to put the royal mint next to the bank, with a chute between for the money to flow through, and spigots on the front of the bank . . ."

Lucas had to laugh. But he came right out of it with: "Angus, you'll see the day this town of ours is the county seat, and of our own county, too. Gros Ventre is a coming place."

I could agree with that. It had been coming for nearly twenty years that I knew of personally. Before I could say anything to that effect, Lucas produced a glass for himself, between his studs, then the whiskey bottle, freshening my drink after he had poured his own. "But enough progress for one day. Lad"—for a change that was not me but Varick, who had wanted to tag along with me rather than endure while his mother and Nancy were fixing supper—"what would you say to a fine big glass of buttermilk?"

"Uh, no thanks," uttered Varick with that eloquent dismayed swallow only a boy can perform.

Lucas peered over the bar at him. "It's a known fact that buttermilk will grow a mustache on you practically overnight. How do you think this father of yours got his? I'm telling you, this is your chance to get yourself a cookie duster." Varick grinned up at him and gave out a skeptical "aw."

Lucas shook his head as if dubious. "If you're going to pass up perfectly good buttermilk, I'm afraid the only choice left is root beer." That resolved, while Varick happily started into his rich brown glassful, Lucas remarked all too casually in my direction: "It's not usual to see McCaskills in town on a school night."

"I thought we ought to talk, Lucas. You just maybe can guess what about."

"Angus, Angus." Lucas's great face behind the bar, his bald

AA
EA
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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

dome and his kingly beard, and those gray Barclay eyes regarding me; how many times had I known this moment? "Life was a lot simpler before this man Meixell, wasn't it," Lucas was saying.

"You've met up with him, I understand."

"The day he hit town. I believe this was the exact next place he found after the Northern."

"And?"

"And once I'd picked my jaw up off the floor after hearing the words national forest and what they meant, I stood him a few drinks while I tried to figure him out. That, I have to say, didn't even come close to working." It was an admission chipped in stone, the chilly way Lucas said that, then this: "Our Meixell definitely is a man with a hollow leg, and by the time he strolled out of here I was the one wobbling."

Lucas stopped and cocked a look Varick's direction. Then, soul of discretion, said: "That was Meixell's first half hour in town, Angus, and his second was a visit to Uncle Bob," which was to say Wingo and his "nieces." A fellow who attends to priorities promptly, this Meixell, ay, Lucas?

All of this Varick was taking in avidly. The first Montana McCaskill, trying to hear beyond his years. Even to myself I couldn't have specified why, but I now wanted my son to know as many sides as there were to this thing called the Two Medicine National Forest, this matter of the land and us on it, and the sudden forest ranger on whom our future pivoted. I asked Lucas straight: "Other than Meixell's social capacities, what've you concluded about him?"

To my surprise, Lucas Barclay hedged off to: "The talk I hear, this national forest notion is about as popular around here as a whore in church."

"I've heard similar, just recently. But unless our conversation walked out the door while I wasn't looking, Lucas, we're talking now about Meixell himself and what we can expect from him."

"Angus, Robbie is not wrong about what this national forest can do to us and the way we're used to going about things. I know as well as you do that Robbie can be the quickest in the world to get a wild hair up his"—Lucas's eye caught the attentive face of Varick below—"nose. But this notion of divvying the grass as if it was the oatmeal and we were the orphans. By Jesus, I don't know why that should have to be, Angus, I just don't. What I do know is that we've always run whatever sheep we could manage to, up on that

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

grass, and we've built ourselves and Scotch Heaven and Gros Ventre and the entire Two country by doing it, ay?"

"That's been the case, yes," I had to agree. "But how long can any piece of ground, even one the size of those mountains, keep taking whatever sheep get poured onto it?" I studied Lucas to see how he would ingest this next: "Or cattle either, for that matter."

Lucas rubbed a stub across his beard as if reminded of an untidiness there. "You mean Williamson. Our dear friend Wampus Cat. I don't have the answer there either, Angus, any more than I do this geezer Meixell. I'm as fuddled about this as the old lady when she was told that astronomers had found planets named Mars and such up there among the stars. 'I've nae doubt they can see those things with their long glasses and all,' she said, 'but how did they find out their names?'"

And that proved to be Lucas's say on planetary matters this night. Even after the lilt of that joke, though, I was certain of this much: certain that I saw come back into Lucas the same bleakness I had found in Ninian Duff two evenings ago. *Ay*, the one of them beginning dourly about Meixell, and the other concluding dourly, *ay*? Not pleasant to be squeezed between, Ninian and Lucas. If these two old stags of the country set their minds and horns against Meixell; if they led the many others who would listen to them into rank behind Rob's anger . . . A fence could be built around a forest, but a fence could be cut, too. Grass could be allotted, but sheep could forever stray onto the unallotted, too. A forest ranger could be sent to us, but that forest ranger could rate early replacement if everything he touched turned to turmoil.

I looked down at my son and had the sudden wish for him to be twice or three times his not-quite-eight years, to be old enough, grown enough, to help me think through what I ought to do. To bring his native attunement to the land into my schoolmasterly mind.

Lucas, too, now put his attention on the inquisitively watching boy. Leaning across the bar, he announced:

"Varick, I happen to know for a fact that Nancy has ginger cookies in oversupply at the house. Go tell her I said to give you the biggest one, ay?"

Varick couldn't help blurting his astonishment at such unheard-of fortune: "This close to supper?"

"I know just who you mean by that, lad," sympathized Lucas.

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"But tell that mother of yours that I've known her since she was just an idle notion up my brother's leg"—I'd wanted Varick to have full education tonight, had I—"and I don't want to hear any whippersnap arguments out of her about when a cookie can be eaten. Tell her that for me if she needs it, ay?"

Varick scooted out of the saloon for the house and I sat wondering if the Barclays maybe constituted an entire separate human race. It would explain a lot. Lucas now turned his magnanimity my way and proclaimed: "We've just time to top off these drinks before supper." He poured and toasted, "Rest our dust."

As we put our glasses down, Lucas asked: "And how is life treating its schoolkeepers?"

Schoolkeepers. That's whispering *more than just yourself and you know who I mean by more, Angus.*

I studied my glass while all the other whispers of Anna whizzed in me, years of accumulated echoes of not having her, a chorus of whispers adding and adding to themselves until they were like the roar of a chinook wind. *Angus, I've told Isaac yes . . . Angus, Angus, take it slow now, both on this whiskey and yourself. . . . Angus, man, this is the best news in the world! . . . Angus, I'll try with whatever's in me to be a good wife. . . . Annguz, ve got a stork on de ving.* And ever around to first words again: *I am called Anna Ramsay. And it is Miss Ramsay.*

The swarm of it all was too much. If I ever once began letting it free . . . Even here now to Lucas, I could stand only to say the utter minimum of my Anna situation:

"We get by, Lucas. That seems to be the story of schoolkeepers."

"And that's enough, is it?"

"I try to make it be."

George and Abraham traded their eternal stoic stares along the schoolroom wall, and the bunch ranged below seemed to have caught their mood. If faces could somehow be said to be sitting there with crossed arms, these of Scotch Heaven's sheepmen on Saturday morning were.

Stanley Meixell half-perched half-leaned on the corner of my big desk in front of us. By years, he was the youngest person in this gathering. But with his hat off, the start of a widow's peak suggested itself there in his crow-black hair, and the lines webbed in at

the corner of his eyes by wind and sun and maybe personal weather as well made his face seem twice as old as the rest of him.

Having just given us the full particulars of the land he was boundarying to create this Two Medicine National Forest of his, Stanley paused to let it all sink in, and it definitely sank.

"Why don't you just arrange your goddamn boundaries to the North Pole and the Atlantic Ocean while you're at it?" spoken lividly by Rob.

To say the truth, the empire of geography the forest ranger had delineated to us was stunning. Grizzly Reef. Roman Reef. Rooster Mountain. Phantom Woman Mountain. Guthrie Peak. Jericho Reef. Anywhere in the high stone skyline to our west, name a rimrock bow of mountain or a sharp flange of peak, and it sat now within the Two Medicine National Forest. And its foothills below it, and its neighbor crags behind it, all the way up to the Continental Divide. All the way up to the moon, may as well say. And Stanley hadn't only tugged his indelible boundary west to the Divide and north to the Two Medicine River. To the startlement of us all, he already had put a Forest Service crew to building his ranger station here on the east edge of Scotch Heaven, at the juncture where the North Fork and the South Fork met to form the main creek. The narrow panhandle of national forest boundary he had drawn from the mountains down here to the station site took in only hogback ridges of rocks and stunted pine that could never be of use to anyone, but still. Everyone of Scotch Heaven and the South Fork both would need to pass by the ranger station and the bold flag atop its pole, whenever they traveled to or from town. Like having an unexpected lodger living on the front porch of our valleys, although I knew from Stanley's own lips why he had done it: *You're asking me if I absolutely have to bring the national forest all the way down to the forks of the creek, Angus, and yeah, I figure I do. If I hide the ranger station way to hell and gone out of sight somewheres, that's not gonna do either side of the situation any good. This station and the forest have got to be facts of life around here from now on. People might as well get used to them as quick as they can. My answer, some aren't going to like your station out there so prominent. I didn't much myself. Me and the forest got plenty of time, said Stanley, for them to change their minds.*

Changing of minds wasn't the fad yet, if this schoolroom audience was any evidence. In the seat next to me Rob was tight-jawed, fired

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

up as a January stove. On the other side of him, Lucas was the definition of skeptical. Around us, a maximum Ninian frown and variations of it on Donald Erskine, Archie Findlater, the two Frews . . . the only unperturbed one in the room was Stanley.

He wasn't going to stay that way if Rob had anything to do with it. "Christ on a raft, man! You're taking every goddamn bit of the country we use for summer range!"

"I ain't taking it anywhere," Stanley responded quietly. "It's still gonna be there."

"What makes you think," Rob spoke up again, "you can parade in here from nowhere and get us to swallow this idea of a national forest and like it?"

"I wouldn't necessarily say you got to like it, Bob," answered Stanley. "If you just got used to it, that'd be plenty to suit me."

"But man, what you're asking of us"—pure passionate Rob, this—"is to get used to limiting our sheep on all that mountain grass. That's the same as limiting our livelihoods. Our lives, too, may as well say."

"I'm not here to fool you any," Stanley responded. "You're probably not gonna be able to put any more sheep into those mountains than you've already had up there, and maybe some fewer." Glower from Rob, on that. His look changed to bafflement as he realized the ranger didn't intend to expand that response. Rob burst out:

"You mean you're flat-out telling us there isn't anything we can do about you and your goddamn grazing allotments?"

"Me personally," Stanley said to Rob, "I guess you could get rid of someway. Or at least you could try." The schoolhouse filled with consideration of that. "But about the grazing allotment system, no, I don't really see nothing for you to do."

Before Rob's fury found a next tangent, the forest ranger went along us from face to face with his eyes. "But none of what we been saying so far here today goes through the alphabet all the way from A to Why, does it. I've told you what the national forest is gonna be, you've told me what you think about it. Seems to me we both better take a look at just why I got sent here to make the Two Medicine National Forest."

I shifted drastically in my chair, not just for the exercise. Was this going to work? Was I several kinds of a fool for abetting Meixell as I had? The night after my visit to Lucas in town, another visit,

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

this one in the lambing shed after supper: Stanley Meixell appearing again where Varick and I first laid eyes on him. *Found your note under my door, Angus*. I almost hadn't gone to the Northern and left that message, when I announcedly got up from Lucas and Nancy's table to go harness the team for our drive home to Scotch Heaven. Yet I did, yet I had to make the effort to give Stanley the words, the thoughts, for fitting this national forest onto the Two Medicine country with as little woe as possible to all concerned. My words to him there in the lantern light of the shed, that the national forest was actually the pattern of homesteading, the weave of land and utility, writ large: lines of logic laid upon the earth, toward the pattern of America. A quiltpiece of mountains and grass and water to join onto our work-won squares of homestead. The next necessary sum in trying to keep humankind's ledger orderly. Those words of mine, Stanley's tune of them now to listening Scotch Heaven: "I guess you're all familiar with the term public domain. It's the exact same bunch of land you were all able to homestead on . . ." Land, naked earthskin. America. Montana. *We can be our own men there*, the Rob of then to the me of then. Maybe so, maybe no. What can you have in life, of what you think you want? Who gets to do the portioning? Stanley's voice going on, low, genuine: "The national forest is a kind of pantry for tomorrow, for your youngsters when they grow up and inherit all this you've got started . . ." In the lambing shed as Stanley and I met, our one witness: Varick. *Your mother doesn't need to know about this, son*; one more item put into that category, sorry to say. But Rob and Lucas already were more Barclays than any sane man ought to have to contend against, without an Adair salient, too. I hated for Varick to see me sneak. But I wanted him there that night, to absorb whatever he could of the words of the land as Stanley and I knew them.

"My life maybe don't count up as much in years as some of yours, but I been quite a number of places in it." No one of us in his audience could doubt that. Stanley definitely had the look of a man with a lot of before in his life. "Every one of those places," he went on, "I seen some pretty sad behavior toward the country." I watched him twice as carefully as I had been. There was none of me in these words, this was undiluted Stanley now. "I used to ask people about that. What was gonna happen when the land wore out. And they always said that when they'd used the country up, they'd just move on. But I don't know of anything you can just keep on

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363 - 366

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

using up and using up and using up, and not run out of. And that's all the Forest Service is saying with this Two Medicine National Forest. You can use it, but not use it up."

The schoolroom was quiet. Stanley was finished with that part of the task. But now the next.

I wanted not to be the one to ask it. Yet no one else was. I would have to; Stanley had to have the chance to answer. Before I got my mouth to agree, though, I heard my intended words coming out of Lucas:

"What about cattle? Do your grazing allotments take in the fact that cattle eat grass, too?"

"I guess I know what you got on your mind, Mr. Barclay. Its initials are Double W, ain't they." Stanley paused to gather his best for this. "I went and did some riding around in the mountains, taking a look at the ground wherever the snow was off. Trying to figure out for myself just what the country up there can carry. How many sheep. And how many cattle." *There's one thing you've utterly got to do, my last words to him in the shed those nights ago. Somehow prove you're going to put a rein on Williamson as well as on the rest of us. If you're going to have people of Scotch Heaven accept the notion of this national forest, prove to them it's not just going to be another honeypot for the Williamsons of the world.* Prove it to me, for that matter. And Stanley easing away then out of the lantern light, saying only, *Been a interesting evening. Good night, Angus, and thanks.* And to the watching boy not much higher than our waists: *My pleasure one more time, Varick.* Now I waited with the rest, waited for proof.

"Arithmetic never was my long suit," Stanley was saying unpromisingly. "But I do savvy that old formula, which I guess all of you know better than I do, that you can run five sheep on the same ground it takes for one cow. Now, each of you in this room has got a band of a thousand sheep, by yourself or in partner with somebody"—here a Stanley glance along the line from me to Rob to Lucas—"or whatever. So, the fairest thing I can think of to do is what I went ahead and did. Let Williamson know I'm allotting him a grazing permit the equal of a band of sheep. Two hundred cows."

A massive thinking silence filled the schoolroom.

Stanley spoke again. "If it'll help your own arithmetic along any, I figure he's been running a couple of thousand cows up there the last summer or so. Fact is, I came across some bald places around springs and salt licks where it looks like he's been running a couple

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

million." Came across such places, yes, with my guidance. It would take a man weeks to ride an inspection of those mountains, and Stanley had had only days; I'd cited him chapter and verse, where to see for himself the overuse and erosion from Williamson cramming the land with Double W cattle. "Manure to your shins, and the grass worn away just as deep," as Stanley was saying it now. "I asked our friend Williamson about behavior like that. He told me any overgrazing up there was done by you sheep guys. I kind of hated to have to point out to him I do know the difference between cowflops and sheepberries when I see them on the ground."

Ninian now, starkly incredulous—it was worth being here today just for this. "Ay? Am I hearing you right, that you've already instructed Williamson you're cutting him to just two hundred head of cattle in those mountains?"

"Yeah." Stanley peered out the window toward the mountains, as if for verification.

"And then—?" demanded Ninian.

"Some other stuff got said, is all. Mostly by him." Stanley still studied the mountains. "As long as I'm the ranger here, though, he ain't gonna get treated any different than the rest of you."

Now Stanley Meixell looked out among us.

"None of us needs any more trouble than we already got," the man at my desk with a face older than himself offered. "For my part, I can always be worked with if you just keep one thing in mind. It's something they"—the jerk of his head eastward, to the invisible church of the Forest Service in Washington—"claim President Roosevelt himself goes around saying. 'I hate a man who skins the land.'"

Deep silence again. Until Stanley cleared his throat and said: "Just so we all know where we're coming out at here, can I get a show of hands on how many of you go along with the idea of grazing allotments the way I intend to do them?"

I raised my hand.

No other went up.

Indecision was epidemic in the room. Stanley had said much sense. But the habit of unrestricted summer grass, the gateless mountains, the way life had been for the two decades most of these men had put into their homesteads, those said much, too. Skepticism and anger and maybe worse weren't gone yet. I could feel

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316-319

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Rob's stiff look against the side of my head. My hand stayed lonely in the air, and was getting more so.

Then, from the other side of Rob:

"Will a slightly used arm do?"

Lucas's right sleeve, the stub barely showing out its top, slowly rose into the air.

The next assent that went up was that of Ninian Duff. Then Donald Erskine's hand vaguely climbed. Archie Findlater's followed, and George Frew's, and Allan Frew's. Until at last Rob's was the only hand not up.

The expression on Rob was the trapped one of a man being voted into exile. I felt some sorrow for him. The horizon called Montana was narrower for Rob after today.

But you never wanted to be too quick to count Robert Burns Barclay out. As if by volition of all the other assents there in the air, Rob's hand at last gradually began to rise, too. For better or for worse, in trepidation and on something a bit less than faith, all of Scotch Heaven had taken the Two Medicine National Forest for a neighbor.

There was not a one of us who stepped out of that South Fork schoolroom into the spring air and put a glance to the mountains of the new Two Medicine National Forest who didn't think he was looking at a principal change. But those of us that day weren't even seeing the first wink of what was coming. In the next few years, change showed us what it could do when it learned the multiplication table. Change arrived to the Two Medicine country now not in Stanley Meixell's mountain realm west of us but onto the prairies everywhere to our east, it arrived wearing thousands of farm boots and farm dresses, and it arrived under the same name we ourselves had come with, homesteaders.

Overnight, it seemed, the town Lucas had always said Gros Ventre was going to be was also arriving. But it was arriving twenty miles away, at a spot on the prairie which had been given the name Valier. A town made from water, so to speak, by a company fueled by water. *Irrigation* was the word wetting every lip now. The water-flows coursing from the Rockies would be harnessed as if they were clear-colored mares, and made to nurture grainfields. Dam to canal to ditch to head of wheat was going to be the declension. And soon enough it began to be. Scotch Heaven simply watched, because the

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

valley of the North Fork was narrow and slanted to the extent that only a smidgen of hayfield irrigation could be done, or, honestly, needed doing. But a water project such as the one around the townsite called Valier, seventy-five thousand acres of irrigation being achieved and homesteaders pouring off every train, was reason enough to rethink the world and what it was quick becoming.

Yet you have to wonder. If someone among those prairie homesteaders, Illinoisan or Missourian or Belgian or German, if some far-eyed soul of 1908-9-10 who had come to plaid himself or herself into this Montana land could have taken an occasional moment to watch Scotch Heaven, would even we up here have seemed as fixed in a rhythm of life as we assumed we were? Riffle through us in those years, and you find Scotch Heaven's first automobile—Rob's Model T Ford. *See now, McAngus, I haven't laid eyes on one of these contraptions yet that has a wheel worth the name. But the thing is an amazement, am I right? To be able to go down the road without horses . . .* You find a fresh new wire atop the fenceposts beside the road to town, the Forest Service telephone line from the ranger station to the world. You find in my schoolhouse a long-boned boy named Samuel Duff, son of inimitable Ninian and brother of inimitable Susan—Samuel, my first pupil whose dreams and passions are of airplanes and wireless messages that fly between ships at sea.

So, no, even spaces of time that seem becalmed must be riding a considerable tide.

357

Season by season, those nearest around me were altering. Varick was ever taller, like a young tree. His quiet beyond-the-schoolbook capabilities grew and grew; he had a capacity for being just what he was and not caring an inch about other directions of life. A capacity that I could notice most in one other figure, when I did my wondering about it. Was it in any way possible that Varick somehow saw the knack he wanted for his own, began to practice it in himself even then, that first time the two of us laid eyes on Stanley Meixell?

57

My son, then, was steadily becoming some self that only he had the chart of. And as he did, my wife just as surely began glimpsing ahead to the time when Varick would leave us. Several years yet, yes, but Adair saw life the way the zoo creature must see the zoo; simply inexorably there, to be paced in the pattern required. The requirement beyond raising Varick through boyhood was losing him to manhood, was it? That being life's case, she would go to the only

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

other manner of pacing that she knew. She was preparing herself to be childless again, while I watched with apprehension. Not that Adair was in any way ending, yet, the companionable truce that was our marriage. We had our tiffs, we mended them. We still met each other in bed gladly enough. The polite passions of our life together were persevering. But in the newly watchful gazes she sent to the mountains now, in how the deck of cards occasionally reappeared and she would be absorbed into the silent game of solitaire, I could more than notice that this was beginning to be the Adair of our first winters of marriage again, the Adair of *Angus, I don't want you disappointed in me*. The Adair of *A person just doesn't know . . . Or at least this one doesn't know*.

So there were shades of change anywhere I looked in those years—except within me. This person me, permanent in the one way I ought not to have been: in silent love with a woman not my wife, not the mother of my son; seeing her at dances, thinking across the divide of the North Fork and Noon Creek to her. Angus the Hopeless. If I could have changed myself from that, would I? Yes, every time. For it was like having a second simultaneous existence, two sets of moments ticking away in me at once, one creating the Angus who was husband to Adair and father to Varick and partner to Rob in sheep and schoolmaster to my pupils and all other roles to the community, the other the mute Angus who did nothing but love Anna Reese. One existence too many, for the amount of me available. It was cause enough to wonder. Was everyone more than the single face they showed the world? It periodically did seem so. The side of Adair I could not get to. Angles within Rob that could catch me by surprise even after twenty years. And were these divisions in people relentlessly at war with each other, as mine were? Or did I alone go through life in the kind of armistice that my South Fork pupils used as time-out in their games at recess, thrusting up crossed fingers and calling out *King's X*?

Nineteen-ten was our year of fire. A summer that would have made the devil cough. We of Scotch Heaven had seen hot before, we had seen dry before, we had even seen persistent forest fire smoke before. But this. This was unearthly.

What seemed worse than the acrid haze itself was that the great source of it lay far beyond the horizon to the west of us, all the way over in the Bitterroot mountains along the Idaho border, halfway to

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Seattle. Every splinter of that distant pine forest must have caught aflame, for its smoke seeped east to us day after day as if night was drawing over from the wrong side of the world. Somebody else's smoke, reaching across great miles to smear the day and infect the air, it rakes the nerves in a way a person has never experienced before.

And next, as if our own mountains were catching the fire fever from the Bitterroot smoke, in mid-August a blaze broke out in the Two Medicine National Forest. From the shoulder of Breed Butte the boil of gray-black cloud could be watched, rising and spreading from the timber gulches north of Jericho Reef. Stanley Meixell rounded up crews and fought that fire for weeks, but it burned and burned. *We'd might as well been up there spitting on the sonuvabitch, Angus, for all the goddamn good we ended up doing*, Stanley told me after. With the Two Medicine smudge added into the Bitterroot smudge, the sky was saturated with smoke. The day the Northern Hotel caught fire and burned like a tar vat—by a miracle of no wind, not quite managing to ignite the rest of Gros Ventre along with itself—none of us in Scotch Heaven even noticed any smoke beyond usual in the murky direction of town.

On the homestead we went through the days red-eyed, throats and noses raw, nerves worse yet. I felt a disquiet in myself even before the season of smoke honestly arrived. Somehow I had smelled the smoke coming, a full day before the sky began to haze. An odor of char, old and remindful of something I could not quite bring back into mind. No other aroma so silky, acidic. . . . It hung just there at the edge of being remembered, pestering, as each dusky-like day dragged past.

By turns, Varick was wide-eyed and fretful—"It can't burn up all the trees, can it, Dad?"—and entranced by the fire season's undreamt-of events—"Dad, the chickens! They went back in to roost! They think this is night!"

Adair looked done in. How else could she look? these days of soot, of smoky heat seeming to make the air ache as the lungs took it in?

A suppertime in our second or third week of smoke, she said across the table to me:

"How long can this last?"

At first I thought her words were ritual exasperation, as a person

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

will wonder aloud without really wondering, *Isn't this day ever going to end?* But then I saw she was genuinely asking.

"Dair, I'd rather take a beating than tell you this. But a couple or three times since I've been in this country, it didn't rain enough in August to disturb the dust. And it'll take a whopping rain to kill fires as big as these." I had delivered that much bad news, I might as well deliver worse. "They might go on burning until first snow in the mountains, Labor Day or so."

"Really?" This out of Varick, as he tucked away yet another unheard-of prospect. After he went outside to his daily woodpile chore, his mother turned her face to me again. "And yet this is the one place you want to be."

"Times like this, I could stand to be somewhere else a minute or two."

"Angus. I don't want this to sound worse than I mean it. But this country never seems to get any easier."

And anywhere else in life does, does it? Famous places of ease, Adair, such as Scotland and Nether—

Abruptly I knew the smell, the disquieting connection that had been teasing in my mind these weeks of the forest smoke. *Angus, is your sniffer catching what mine is?* That unvarying question from Vare Barclay, Adair and Rob's father, to me there in the Nethermuir wheelshop. *It is, I reply. Better see to it, Angus, best to be sure than sorry.* Out I go into the woodyard to inspect for fire, the wheelshop's worst dread. But as ever, the sawyers merely have halved an ash tree. It is the black heart of an ash when it is split, an inky streak the length of the tree, that gives off the smell so much like burning; like a mocking residue of char. And now in the air of Scotch Heaven and much of the rest of Montana, that old odor from Nethermuir. I wondered if Adair, daughter of that wheelshop, somehow was recognizing the freed aroma of the ash's heartwood, too, in this latest dismay of hers against Montana. I was in no mood to ask.

Instead, levelly as I could:

"Dair, this isn't a summer you can judge by. I know the country is so damn full of smoke you can cut it with scissors. But this is far out of the ordinary. None of us has ever seen a worse fire season and we're not likely to."

"I'm trying not to blame the country for how awful these days are, Angus. I truly am."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

I wonder if you are, ran in my mind. It'd be new of you. But that was smoked nerves squeaking. I made myself respond to her:

"I know. It's just a hard time. They happen. You're perfectly entitled to throw your head back and have a conniption fit, if it'll help."

"Adair would do that," she went that mocking distance from herself, from the moment, "if she thought it would help."

It helped matters none either that a few days later I had traveling to do. With school to begin in not much more than a week and the flood of pupils from the homestead influx that was upon us, the county superintendent was calling all country-school teachers to a meeting in new Valier.

"I'll be back the day after tomorrow," I told Adair. "Any stray rain I see, I'll bring home with me."

"Varick and I will do our best not turn into kippers in the meantime," she gave me in return.

Riding into Gros Ventre just before nightfall—although it was hard to sort dusk from haze any more—I stayed over with Lucas and Nancy, and in the small hours got up and resaddled Scorpion and rode eastward.

The face of the land as dawn began to find it took my breath away. The land I had ridden across so gingerly when Rob and I first came to Gros Ventre, the bald prairie where I had met only the one Seven Block rider in my three days of scouting, now was specked with homestead cabins. Built of lumber, not our Scotch Heaven logs. This was as if towns had been taken apart, somewhere distant, and their houses delivered at random to the empty earth. *The rainbow eyes of memory that reflect the colors of time.* My remembering of a hawk hanging on the wind, steering me with his wings to this prairie that was vacant of people then; these people now in these clapboard cabins, would they in twenty years be recalling when their plump farms were just rude homesteads? And the memories-to-come of the next McCaskill: what tints of any of this change in the land were waiting to happen in Varick's mind? For that matter, if people continued to flock in, if the scheme of earth called Montana grew ever more complicated, where was there going to be room, land, for Varick to root his life and memories into?

With more and more light of the morning, which was tinted gray-green even this far from our smoke-catching mountains, I could see

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

the uploping canal banks of the irrigation project, and machinery of every kind, and then, not far from the Valier townsite, the whitish gray of several tents near a corral.

As I passed that encampment the many colors of horses grew apparent, muted a bit by the hazy air but still wonderfully hued; big workhorses standing like dozens of gathered statues. Quickly I began to meet and greet men walking in from homesteads to their day's work of teamstering, another session of moving earth from here to there in the progress of canals.

I rode on trying not to dwell on those tents and the brand on the hips of those workhorses, Isaac Reese's Long Cross.

At Valier, or what was going to be, a three-story hotel of tan brick sat mightily above the main intersection of almost houseless streets, as though lines had been drawn from the corners of the world to mark where the next civilization was to be built. The other main enterprises so far were lumberyards and saloons. There was something unsettling about coming onto this raw abrupt town sprung from the prairie, so soon after Gros Ventre nestling back there in its cottonwood grove. Valier did not possess a single tree—no, there, one: a whip being watered from a wash tub that a tan-faced woman had just carried out and dumped. I touched my hat brim, the washerwoman gave me a solemn Toussaint-like "morning," and we went our ways. Say this for the fledgling town, Valier was only half as smoky as anywhere else I had been in recent history; the other half of its air was an enthusiastic wind. Squinting, I saw through the scatter of buildings to where the schoolhouse sat alone, and directed Scorpion that way.

The rural teachers from nearer were already there and of course the Valier ones, six in total, more than Gros Ventre's school had. The rounds of hello revealed that four of the Valier contingent were young single women, none so pretty as to make a man break down the door but each unhomely enough that in all likelihood four marriage proposals were around not very distant corners.

If the Valier maiden teachers wanted a lesson in loveliness, she was the next to arrive after me. Anna.

I knew she had been spending the summer here where Isaac's horsework was. For how many years now had I had ears on my ears and eyes on my eyes with the sole specialty of gathering any news of Anna, and the early-June item in the Gros Ventre *Gleaner* had shot out of the page of print at me: *Anna Reese has joined Isaac at*

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Valier. Isaac's crew will be the fortunate beneficiaries of her provender the duration of the summer, as they engage in canal construction on the irrigation project and grading streets in the forthcoming metropolis. She was in the cook tent of that corralside assemblage I rode past, she was here in front of me now as the county superintendent solemnly joked, "Mrs. Reese, you and Mr. McCaskill maybe already have made each other's acquaintance. If not, it is past time you did." For the benefit of the Valier teachers, he further identified us: "These two have been the pillars of education at Noon Creek and the South Fork ever since the foundations of the earth were laid."

"Angus, how are you?" Her half-smile, glorious even when she was being most careful with it.

"Hello again, Anna." *And you know how I am. We both know that, Anna.*

I but half-heard the morning's discussions of school wagons to bring children from the nearest homestead farms into Valier, of country schools to be built east and south of town for the more distant pupils, of the high school to be begun here next year. My mind was ahead, on noon.

When that hour came, picnic dinner was outside in the wind because every new Montana town tries to defy its weather. I got myself beside Anna as we went out the door into the first gust.

"Wouldn't you say we've eaten enough wind at our own schools," I suggested, "without having to swallow this place's?"

The truth of that brought me a bright glance from her, and then her words: "I could say that even without any prompting."

We stepped around the corner of the schoolhouse out of the wind and seated ourselves on the fire-door steps there. Promptly a high-collared young man, more than likely a clerk at the hotel or a lumberyard, strolled by with the most comely of the Valier teachers. There went one.

As Anna and I began to eat, we resorted to conversation confined to our schools.

"Three of my pupils this year are children of some of my first pupils," she noted.

"I have that beginning to happen, too." And after them will it be these children's children in our schoolrooms, and the two of us still separate? By all evidence. I stood up abruptly. Seeing her look, I alibied, "Just a cramp in my leg."

I drew a breath and hoped it had as much resolve in it as it did

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smoke and dust, then sat down beside Anna Ramsay Reese again. Even from our low set of steps, Valier and the irrigation future could be seen being built, a steam dragline shovel at continuous work in the near distance. It was like a squared-off ship, even to the smoke funnel belching a black plume at its middle. Its tremendous prow, however, was a derrick held out into the air by cables, and from the end of the derrick a giant bucket was lifting dirt, swinging and dropping it along a lengthening dike for the lake that would store irrigation water. Handfuls of earth as when a child makes a mud dam, except that the handfuls were the size of freight wagons.

"People come from miles just to watch it work," Anna said.

"It does dig like a banker who's lost a nickel down a gopher hole," I had to grant. "Turning a prairie into Holland. You need to see it to believe."

"Yes. A town built from a pattern," she announced as if storing away the spelling of a fresh word. "They say they are planning for ten thousand people here."

"They've got a ways to go."

"And you don't think they'll get there?" Not disputing me, merely curious to hear so minority an opinion; her instinctive interest in Not Proven.

"Who knows?" Things are famous for not turning out the way I think they will, aren't they. "Maybe all this time we've been living in the Two Medicine grainfield and never realized it."

I forced my attention back into my plate. It was as much as I could do not to turn to Anna, say *Here's something ten thousand Valierians ought to be here to cheer for*, wrap her in my arms and kiss her until her buttons burst.

"Isaac thinks you are right."

I instantly was staring at her, into those direct eyes.

"To have stayed with sheep as you and the others in Scotch Heaven have and not be tempted off into farming or cattle," she went on. "He tells our Noon Creek neighbors that if they want to go on being cowboys, they had better buy some sheep so they can afford their hats and boots."

"Isaac"—my throat couldn't help but tighten on the name—"has always been the canny one."

Now Anna's plate was drawing diligent attention. After a bit she gazed up again and offered, carefully casual: "With Isaac out and around in his work so, we don't see much of Scotch Heaven any-

more. Except at dances, and there's never any real chance to visit during those. I don't feel I even much know Adair and Varick." She paused, then: "How are they this fire summer?"

"They're as well as can be. Varick gets an inch taller every hour."

Her voice was fond of the thought. "Lisabeth and Peter, too. They're regular weeds at that age." But when she turned her face directly to me to ask this next, I saw she was starkly serious. "And you yourself. You really didn't answer when I asked this morning. How is Angus?"

"The same." We looked levelly into each other's eyes, at least we always were capable of honestly seeing each other. "Always the same, Anna."

She drew a breath, her breasts lifting gently. Then:

"How much better if we had never met." What would have been simpering apology in any other woman's mouth was rueful verdict from hers. "For you, I mean."

"Anna, tell me a thing. Do you have the life you want?"

She barely hesitated. "Yes. Given that a person can have only one, I have what I most want. But you don't at all, do you."

I shook my head. "It's never as simple as do and don't. The version I walk around in, there's nothing to point to and say, 'this is so far wrong, this can't be borne.' Adair and Varick, they're as good as people generally come. It's the life I don't lead that is the hard one."

I turned to her, that face always as frank as it was glorious. She *had* hesitated, before answering my question about her life. There was something there, something not even the remorseless honesty of Anna wanted to admit. More than the accumulated firesmell of this summer was in the air around the two of us now. A feel, a tang, of sharpest attention, as if this moment was being devoutly watched to see how it would result.

Anna's intent stillness told me she was as aware of it as I was. I needed to know. Was I alone in the unled life of all these years? Or not alone, simply one separate half and Anna the other?

"I wonder when I'll get used to it," I suddenly was hearing Anna say. But this was not answer, I hadn't yet asked, she had slipped her eyes away from my gaze, past my shoulder to a chugging noise down the street. "Every automobile still is a surprise," she continued. If this coming one was any standard, Valier was going to be a

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

clamorous town. With no patience I waited for the racketing machine to pass by the school.

It didn't pass. The automobile yanked to a stop and sat there clattering to itself while the driver flung himself out. And with a lift of his goggles became Rob.

"Angus!" he tumbled his words out as he came, "there's been—you have to come. There was an accident."

Anna and I were onto our feet without my having known we'd done so, side touching side and her hand now on my arm to help me stand against Rob's words. He stopped halfway to us, the realization of Anna and me together mingling with what he had to report. Dumbly I stared all the questions to his tense bright face: Adair or Varick, Varick or Adair, how bad, alive or—

"It's Varick. He was chopping wood. We got him in to Doc Murdoch. You have to come." He jerked his head almost violently toward the chattering automobile.

"I'm coming." But to what. I pressed Anna's hand in gratitude for her touch, in gratitude for her. "Goodbye."

"One of Isaac's men will bring your horse home for you," Anna said before echoing my goodbye. I climbed into one side of the Ford while Rob banged shut the door of the other, and in a roar we hurled away.

On the rattling ride to Gros Ventre Rob provided me the basic about Varick's accident, and then we both fell silent. In those miles of fire haze and dust from the Ford's tires, I seemed already to know the scene at the homestead that morning, before Adair's words told it to me. *I was just ready to bake bread, before the day got too hot. And I heard the sound. An auhhh, a low cry of surprise and pain. Then the awful silence in her ears told her Varick's chopping at the woodpile had stopped. I ran out, the screen door flying open and crashing shut behind her like a thud of fear. She knew there would be blood somewhere, but she was not ready for the scarlet fact of it on our son's face, on the edge of the hand he was holding over his left eye as he stood hunched, frozen. Varick, let me see, I've got to see, Adair lifting his red wet hand far enough away for the eye to show. Hold still, darling. Perfectly still. The blood was streaming from the outer corner of the tight-shut eye, there was no telling whether the eyeball was whole. The stick of wood, Varick was gasping. It flew up.* she carefully put his hand back in place to staunch

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

the flow. *Sit. Sit right here on the chopping block, Varick, and don't touch your eyeball at all while I go—with water and clean rags she tended the bloody mess, then half-led half-carried the boy big as her into the house. Listen to me now. You have to lie here on the bed until I get back. Hold the rag there against the cut, but don't touch your eye itself. Varick, no matter how it hurts, don't touch that eye.* Varick ice-still as she left him on the bed holding back the red seep, as she went to the barn silently crying and saddled Varick's mare Brownie and swung herself up and still was silently crying when she halted the horse on Breed Butte in front of Rob. Then the Ford journey to Gros Ventre with Varick, past the fenceline where she and I had found Davie Erskine being dragged by his horse, where she and I first learned of the impossibly unfair way life can turn against its young.

"We'll just have to wait," judged Doc Murdoch to Adair and me that night. "To see whether those eye muscles are going to work. I do have to tell you, there's about an even chance they won't." Precisely what we wanted not to hear: flip of the coin, whether Varick would be left with one powerless eye, a staring egg there in its socket. "But the eyeball looks intact," the doctor tried to relent, "and that's a piece of luck."

Luck. Was there any, and if so, where? Had the chunk of wood flown a fraction farther away Varick would have only a nicked cheek or ear, one quick cry and healed in a few days. But a fraction inward and the eyeball would have been speared. The tiny territory between, the stick struck. That must be luck, the territory between.

In the big guest bed at Lucas's house, the same bed where Rob and I had spent our first dazed night in Gros Ventre, Varick lay as still as an eleven-year-old boy ever has for a week. Then the doctor lifted the bandage to examine the left eye and its eyelid as Adair and I and Lucas and Nancy wordlessly clustered to watch.

"Blink for us now," the doctor directed. And Varick did. "Open wide. Close it now. Excellent. Look this way. Good. The other. Good again. Now bat your eyes, that's the boy." All those, too, Varick performed.

"If that eye was any better, my boy," the doctor eventually stepped back and announced, "you'd be seeing through these walls."

Varick regarded him, and the others of us, with his two good

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

eyes. This can only be retrospect, but I swear I already was seeing a Varick considerably further in years than the one I left when I rode off to Valier the week before; a boy who knew some of the worst about life now, and who was inserting some distance, some gauging space, between it and him. Because, when all at once Varick was grinning up at the doctor, the smile maybe was as boyish as ever but that left eyelid independently dropped down to half-shut. As it ever did thereafter when something pleased him; my son's wise wounded squint of amusement and luck.

"Varick is twice the son you deserve, McAngus," Rob acclaimed when I went by Breed Butte to tell him and Judith of Varick's mend. More, he clapped me on the shoulder and walked out with me to the gate where I'd tied Scorpion.

"The fact is, I wish I'd managed to sandwich in a son along with the girls," Rob went on confidentially when we were far enough from the house not to be heard. He gave a laugh and added in the same low tone: "I still could, of course, but I'd have to do it without Judith, she tells me."

"Man, think of all the husky sons-in-law ahead," I assuaged him. "Pretty soon you'll have them wholesale." His and Judith's oldest girl, Ellen, already was out in the world of swains, working at the millinery shop in Choteau.

"They aren't the real item, though, are they," Rob mused in a lamenting way that wrote off any future husbands of Barclay daughters. I was opening my mouth to point out that he and I were real enough in-laws, of the brother-in-law sort, when he went on: "Whether or not you know it, there's no substitute for having a Varick."

"I at least know that much," I affirmed to him lightly. Rob could brood if he wanted to, but on a day such as this my mood was top-notch. I stood there at the gate a moment with Rob beside me, just to enjoy all around. *I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another.* This day supported those lofty homestead-building words of Rob's. The first fresh fall of snow shining in the mountains had sopped the forest fires, the air was cleansed and crisp with autumn now, and the view from Breed Butte was never better nor would be. My own outlook was just as fresh as the moment. Varick's restored eye, another year in my schoolroom about to begin, the Valier minutes spent with Anna so significant in my

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

mind—I felt as life had shed a scruffy skin and was growing a clean new one.

Absorbed, I was about to swing up onto Scorpion when Rob stopped me with:

"Angus, I think it's time you had a talking to."

I turned to him with the start of a grin, expecting he had some usual scold to make about my taking the school again.

"About Anna Reese," he said, destroying my grin.

"Rob. She's not a topic for general discussion."

"But she's one that's generally on your mind, isn't she. Angus, this is no way to be."

"Is that a fact?" It was and it wasn't. By choice I would not be the way I was toward Anna, carrying this love through the years. But choice was not in this. "Rob, who the hell do you think you are, my recording angel?"

Rob had the honesty to look uncomfortable. "I know you maybe think I'm poking my nose in—"

"You're right about that, anyway."

"—but Angus, listen, man. Adair is my sister. I can't just stand by and see you do this to her."

"You're going to have to." My eyes straight into Rob's eyes six feet away, suddenly a gap the size of life. "Dair and I are managing to live with it, it shouldn't be a major problem for you."

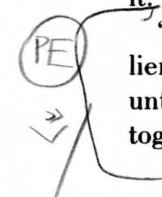
"Living with it, are you? That's what you call this, this infatuation you won't let go of?"

I wanted to shout in his face that there had been a time when he was the expert on infatuation, right enough. That if Lucas had not outwitted him and sent Nancy out of reach and us here to the North Fork, Robert High-and-Mighty Barclay would have taken his own uncle's woman. What had been a quick infection in him had escaped every cure I could try on myself but it was the same ill. Why couldn't he of all people see so, why—

Rob was resuming, "I kick myself—"

"You needn't," I tossed in on him, "I'll be glad to help you at it."

"—Angus, serious now. I kick myself that I didn't see this earlier, why you and Adair aren't more glad with each other. It wasn't until saw you with Anna there in Valier that I put two and two together."



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"Rob, you have a major tendency, when you put two and two together, to come out with twenty-two."

Rob surged on: "I've known you forever but I can't understand this Anna side of you. How is it that you're still smitten with her?" Smitten? I was totally harpooned, and this man was not willing to make himself understand that. Rob stood planted, earnest, waiting. "All I'm asking is how you can let a thing like this go on and on." He meant for this conversation to work as a poultice, I knew. But it wasn't going to.

I had to be sure: "Do you hear any complaints out of Adair about me?"

"She's not the kind to. But—"

"Let me understand this, Rob. You're telling me I owe you more about this than my own wife is content with?"

"Adair is not content with this, how can she be? You moping like a kicked pup, another man's wife always on your mind. What woman can accept that?"

What Barclay? was his real question, wasn't it. Now that I saw where this storm had come from I was sad as well as angry. The old great gulf, life as it came to the McCaskills and as the Barclays expected it to come to them.

But Rob, you. You who indeed had known me forever. You, now, who would not listen and then say, *yes, I see, you have a friend in me for always, if I can help I will and if not I'll stand clear*. You who instead stood here in-lawing me relentlessly. I got rid of sad in a hurry and stayed with angry.

"Rob, I'm telling you. This isn't yours to do. You can't interfere into my life and Adair's this way. So don't even start to try."

"Interfere? Angus, you're not taking this in the spirit it's meant. All I want is for you and Adair not to come apart over—over Anna. Can you at least promise me that?"

"Promise—? Where in all hell do you think you get a right like that—that I have to promise you anything about my own marriage? Listen to yourself here a minute. This is idiots out at play, the pair of us yammering on and on at this, is what this is."

I swung up onto Scorpion and looked down at Rob. "If it'll close you on this topic, I'll tell you this much: Adair and I are not coming apart over Anna Reese. All right?"

Rob as he studied up at me was a mixture of suppressed ire and

obvious discomfiture. I at least thought the decent side, discomfiture, won out when he spoke:

"All right, Angus. We'll leave this at what you just said."

I let my breath out slowly over the next several days. But it seemed to have passed, that notion of Rob's that he had a say in how Adair and I were to manage our marriage. Rob being all he was to me, I was able to forgive him the incident, although not forget it.

One last waft of that summer of smoke did not pass. Instead, it began to spread in the benchland country to the south of Scotch Heaven and Gros Ventre; the wind-blown and slope-skewed landscape where Herbert's freight wagon tilted its way through, twenty years earlier, while a pair of greenlings named Angus McCaskill and Rob Barclay trudged behind. The dry and empty bottom edge of the Two country, which now, who would have ever thought it, was drawing in people exactly because it was dry and empty.

They were a few families at first, and then several, and then more. Homesteaders who were alighting on dry-land claims instead of the irrigated acres of Valier and the other water projects. It took Stanley Meixell to dub them so sadly right. After riding past one or another of their shanties optimistically sited up a wind-funneling coulee or atop a shelterless bench of thin soil and plentiful rock, Stanley bestowed: "Homestead, huh? Kind of looks to me like more stead than home." And that is what they became in Scotch Heaven's askance parlance of them. The 'steaders.

Settlers who were coming too late or too poor to obtain watered land and so were taking up arid acres and trusting to rainfall instead.

Men and women and children who had heard of Montana's bonanza of space and were giving up their other lives to make themselves into farmers instead.

Investors of the next years of their hopes into a landscape that was likely to give them back indifference instead.

Watching the 'steaders come, the first few in 1910 and more in the next summer and the summer after that, I couldn't not ask, if only to myself: Was this what that dry land was meant for—plowed rows like columns on a calendar, a house and chicken coop every quarter of a mile? In homesteading terms, it indubitably was. But

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

when can land say, *enough?* Or *no, not here?* We of Scotch Heaven believed we were doing it as right as could be—you can't live anywhere without some such belief, can you—but then we had the North Fork, water bright and clear on the land. At Valier and the other irrigation projects, those settlers too had water, ditch water. But these ones out on the thirsty benchlands . . . I grant that Rob and I knew next to nothing about homesteading when we came to undertake it. But we were royal wizards compared to many of these freshcomers. Here were people straight from jobs in post offices and ribbon stores, arriving with hope and too little else onto the benchlands and into the June-green coulees. Entire families down to the baby at the breast, four-five-six people living in a shanty the size of a woodshed or in a tent while they tried to build a shanty. And meanwhile were struggling too to break the sod and plant a crop, dig a well, achieve a garden. I suppose these 'steaders had to be as Rob and I were when we began in Scotch Heaven, not daring to notice yet that they were laboring colossal days and weeks for a wage of nothing or less. I suppose there is no other way to be a homesteader. Yet, bargaining yourself against the work and the weather is always going to turn out to be greatly more difficult than you can ever expect. Even in Scotch Heaven we had the absences around us, the Speddersons and Tom Mortensen, to remind how harsh and unsure a bet homesteading was. Yet and again, agog as I might be at the numbers of these incomers and aghast as I often was at how little they knew of what they needed to, I could not deny that the 'steaders on their raw dry quarter-section squares were only attempting the same as we had, trying to plaid new lives into this proffered land.

This was bright June. Winter waited four or five months away yet. Nonetheless I began saying a daily prayer to it: be gentle with these pilgrims.

Not many days later, Rob and Lucas waylaid me when I was in my lower meadow making a peaceful reconnaissance of the hay prospect there. Angling a look into the Ford as it halted briskly beside me, I couldn't help but put the query:

"What's this, now—a war council of Clan Barclay?"

Out they climbed, here they were. "Mark this day, McAngus," Rob proclaimed, Lucas equally sunny beside him. "We're here with the proposition of a lifetime for you."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Wait. Before I hear it"—patting each appropriate neighborhood of my body I recited: "*Testicles, spectacles, wallet, watch.* There's proof I had all my items before the two of you start in on me, just remember."

"Angus, Angus," chided Lucas. "You're as suspicious as one deacon is of the other. Just hear what we've got in mind, ay?"

"That shouldn't take all day. Bring it out."

"There's hope for you yet, Angus," Rob averred with a great smile. "Now here's the word that's as good as money in the bank: 'steaders.'" He cocked his head in that lordly way and waited a moment for my appreciation before proceeding. "You know as well as we do that they're starting to come into this end of the Two country by the hatful and they can barely recognize ground when they're standing on it."

"And?"

Rob's smile greatened more yet. "And we can be their land locators."

Lucas broke in: "Angus, it's something I ought to've listened to when I first came, when I was mining." Into his coat pockets went his stubs, as if he was whole again there at the start of Montana life. "Someone asked old Cariston there in Helena, the same geezer you worked for in his mercantile, Angus, what he did for a living. Do you know what he said? 'I mine the miners, there's where the real money is.' And it's pure true. Every word of it and then some. In a new country the one thing people need is supplies. And what's the supply every homesteader needs first of any? Land, Angus. You and Robbie know all this land around here by the inch. You're just the lads to supply homestead sites."

I studied from Lucas to Rob, back to Lucas again. Usually Lucas was as measuring as a draper, but Rob plainly had him entirely talked into the gospel of land locating. Rob alone I would have given both barrels of argument at once, but for Lucas's sake I went gentler. "Just how does this rich-making scheme work?"

"Simple as a dimple," Rob attested. "I'll meet people right at the depots, in Valier and Conrad and Browning—you know they're pouring in by the absolute trainload." They were that. Just recently an entire colony of Belgians came to the Valier land; men, women, children, grandparents, babes, likely cats and canaries, too. The Great Northern simply was throwing open the

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

doors of freight cars in St. Paul, and Montana-bound families were tossing in their belongings and themselves. "I'll ferry them out to here in the Lizzie," Rob strategized, "and here's where you come in, Angus. You're the man with the eye for the land. You'll locate the 'steaders onto the claims, mark the claim for them, tell them how to file on it, all but give them their homestead on a china plate. Lucas just said it, really. What we'll be is land suppliers, pure and simple."

The arguing point to all this couldn't be ignored any longer. "If we had the goods, I could see your supply idea," I told Rob. Then with a nod toward the south benchlands: "But what land is left around there is thin stuff for homesteading." I paused and gave him a look along with this next: "Concentrate a bit and you'll maybe remember what we thought of it ourselves, when you and I walked into this country behind Herbert."

"By our lights, maybe it isn't the best land there ever was," Rob granted. "But to these 'steaders it's better than whatever to hell they've had in life so far, now isn't it? Man, people are going to come, that's the plain fact of the matter. Whether or not we lead them by the hand, they're going to file homestead claims all through this country. They might as well be steered as right as possible, by knowledgeable local folk. Which is the same as saying us. In that way of looking at it, McAngus, we'll be doing them a major favor, am I right?"

"And charging them a whack for it," I couldn't help saying of Rob's version of favor.

"Are you so prosperous you can do it for free?" came back at me from him. "Funny I don't notice the bulges in your pockets."

"Lads, now," Lucas interceded. "Angus, we're not asking for your answer this very minute. Just put the idea on your pillow for a few nights, ay?"

Had they been asking my answer right then, it would have been No, in high letters. But. The prosperous problem. The perpetual problem with homesteads, with livestock, or maybe just with McCaskills. Working yourself gray, year after year, and always seeing the debt years eat up most of the profit years. To now, Adair had never said boo about the fact that where money was concerned we were always getting by, hardly ever getting ahead. So the dollar thoughts were delaying my No a bit, and I

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

decided to leave matters with the Barclays at: "I'll need to do a lot of that pillow work, and to talk it over with Dair."

"You can save your breath there," Rob tossed off. "She's thoroughly for it."

I gave Rob a look he would have felt a mile away. "You know that already? From her?"

"I happened to mention it to Adair, yes. Angus, she is my sister. I do talk to her once in a blue moon. Not that I'd particularly have to in this case. She's bound to be for anything that'll fetch money the way this will. Who wouldn't be?"

"Angus, I know how you feel about this country and the 'steaders," Adair said that night. By then we had been thoroughly through it all. Adair's point that here was a plateful of opportunity on Varick's behalf, as easy a chance as we would ever have at money for his future, his own start in life and land in the years not far ahead now. My lack of any way to refute that, yet my unease about the notion of making myself into a land locator. "But change always has to happen," she was saying, "doesn't it?"

"The big question is whether it happens for the better or the worse."

"Either case, what can you really do about it?" she responded. "You and Rob came here as settlers. So are all these others."

"If they were bringing their own water and trees and decent topsoil, I'd say let everybody and his brother come. But good Christ, this dry-land craziness—Dair, they say there are 'steaders on the flats out north of Conrad now who haul all their water a couple of miles, a barrel at a time on a stone boat. They strain that cloudy water through a gunny sack as they bucket it into the barrel. My God, what a way to try to live. And these have been wet summers and open winters. What are those people going to do when this country decides to show them some real weather?"

"I suppose some will make it and some won't," she answered in all calmness. "It's their own decision to come here and try. It's not ours for them." The deep gray eyes were steady on me, asking me to reason as she was.

I could do that. What I wasn't able to manage was the waiting conclusion: that I ought to join in, bells, tambourines and all,

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

with Rob and Lucas in putting people onto land that ought not to have to bear any people.

"There's something more, Angus," my wife offered now. "It's not just Varick we need to plan for. It's each other as well."

Her silence, my waiting. Then from her:

"Adair doesn't know if she can stay, after Varick is grown and gone."

So here it was, out. Adair and how long she would reconcile herself to Scotch Heaven, once it became a childless place to her again, had been in my mind with Anna at Valier and so I could not call this an entire surprise. Stunning, yes, now that it was here, openly said. But all the years since *Angus*, *do you ever have any feeling at all to see Scotland again?*, since *Do you still want me for a wife, if?*, all those years led here, if you were Adair.

I reached her to me, but there was too much in me to speak straight to what she had just said. Adair herself, myself, Anna, past, future, now. It all crowded in me beyond any saying of it. No, only the one decision, the one I had to do at once rather than let the next years take care of, came to my tongue. If there were three McCaskill lives ahead that needed finance—mine of Scotch Heaven, Varick's of the Two Medicine country, Adair's of Scotland or wherever—then I had to find money.

"All right, Dair," I whispered. "We're in business with a couple of Barclays."

Squint as hard as you will, you can't see to tomorrow. Had I been told in the wheelwright shop in Nethermuir, *Angus*, *the day will arrive when you trace the hopes of homesteaders onto the American earth with a wagon wheel . . . when the turns of that wheel become the clock that starts dew-fresh families on years of striving . . . when the wheel tracks across the grass single out another square of earth for the ripping plow . . .* I would have looked around from my own dreams and said skeptically, *You have the wrong Angus*. Yet there I was, that summer and the next, on the wagon seat with a white handkerchief tied around a wheelspoke to count revolutions by, counting the ordinations of wheelspin. *Fifty*. Seeing the craft of my unhearing father, the band of iron encircling the spokes, holding all together to write the future of 'steaders onto prairie acres. *That's a hundred*. Conveying, in a single day, lives from what they had abandoned to where they had dreamed of being. *A hundred fifty*. Here is your first

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

corner of your claim, Mr. and Mrs. Belgium. Mr. Missouri bachelor. Miss Dakota nurse. Mrs. Wisconsin widow. Then to the next corner, and the next, and the next, and the square was drawn, here was your homestead utter and complete: *SE 1/4 Sec. 17, Tp. 27 N, Rge. 8 W: the land has been made into arithmetic*. A sort of weaving, wasn't it, these numerated homestead squares, the lives threaded in and out. But these bare dry-land patches amid the mesh of homesteading . . . It was said there were twice as many people in Montana now as five years ago. The growth, the 'steader-specked prairies and benchlands and coulees, the instant towns, they were what Lucas dreamed of and Rob calculated on, and I was earning from. If I could dance ahead into time yet to come, what would I see in this procession of 'steaders that ought not have been let to happen, and what ought to have been encouraged instead? But we never do dance ahead into time; every minute is a tune-step of ours to the past. Say it better, the future is our blindfold dance, and a dance unseen is strangest dance of all, thousands of guesses at once. That was what my 'steaders amounted to, after all. Say that each of these people beside me on the wagon seat was a flip of the coin. Half would turn up wrong. And so for two summers I watched the 'steaders, Rob and Lucas's 'steaders, my 'steaders, and wondered just which of them were wrong tosses, which would meet only distress and failure and maybe worse here on this dry land which was free but not costless, not nearly.

It was a Saturday early the next May that there was the Hebner occurrence.

The family of four was Rob's first delivery to me in this new season of 'steaders. As Rob and the Ford receded back down the road to further depot duty, the newcomers and I sized each other up.

The man was loose-jointed, shambly, with a small chin, a small mouth, small nose, and then a startlingly high and wide forehead. The woman was worn, maybe weary after their journey from wherever to Montana, maybe just weary. Two children thin as sticks, the boy a replica two-thirds the size of his father, the girl small yet. Both children and the man stared at me as openly as hawks. As to what they saw in all this eyework on me, I do not really know, do I.

I introduced myself, and received from the man in just less than a shout: "Our name's Hebner, but you got to call me Otto."

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

I invited them into the wagon, and after an odd blank little pause while the rest of the family glanced at him and he fidgeted an untrusting look at me, up they came.

The ride into the south benchlands was a few miles, and would be longer than that without conversation. I inaugurated:

"Where is it you're from?"

The man peered at me in dumb dismay. Hard of hearing, the poor pilgrim must be. Deaf and a 'steader too ought to be more hardship than any one soul rated. I squared around to the fidgeting Hebner and repeated my question louder and slower.

Relief came over him. In a braying voice, he responded: "Couldn't cut through your brogue, there that first time. A feller gets so used to hearin' American he gets kind of spoiled, I reckon."

I gazed at Hebner hoping that was what passed for a joke wherever to hell he had been spawned, but no. He rattled on: "Anyhow, we come from Oblong, Illinois. Ever hear of it?"

"Illinois, yes."

Having had my fill of conviviality Otto Hebner style, I whapped the team some encouragement with the reins. Delivering this man and his wan family to their 160 acres of delusion couldn't come too soon for me.

Atop the rim of the benchland, I halted the wagon. Beside me Hebner kept his head turned in a gawk toward the mountains and the North Fork for so long that I truly wondered if he and I both belonged in the human race. Now he gesticulated for his family's benefit to the hay-green valley of the North Fork, the newly lambled bands of sheep on its ridges around, the graceful wooded line of the creek and its periodic tidy knots that were our houses and outbuildings.

"Hannah, honey, those're what I been tellin' you about," he resounded to his wife. Noticing that the boy's stare was still fixed in my direction rather than onto the Scotch Heaven homesteads, Hebner added sharp to loud in telling him: "Garland! You listen up to what I'm sayin' here, you hear?" The boy's gaze slowly drifted from me to the North Fork. His father by now had reached his proclamation point: "Those're what our homestead is goin' to be like before you know it."

Bring that moment around to me again and I would utter what I furiously kept myself from uttering at the time. *Hebner, you major fool, you're looking at twenty years of stark work down there. Twenty*

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

years of building and contriving and fixing and starting over again. Twenty lambing times, twenty shearings, twenty hayings. Twenty Montana winters, each of them so long they add far beyond that. You're looking at the stubborn vision of Ninian Duff, you're looking at the tireless ambitions of Rob Barclay, you're looking at the durable routes Scorpion and I have worn into the ground back and forth between sheep and schoolchildren, you're looking at choreworn wives who put up with more isolation and empty distance than anyone sane ought to have to. You cannot judge this country by idle first glance. I am here to tell you, you cannot. But no, I was there to guide the Hebners of the world to available acres, such as they were now. Try to dike this 'steader flood with myself and all I would get was reputation for being all wet.

I drew a steadying breath. My own gaze down into Scotch Heaven helped. On the shoulder of Breed Butte between Rob's homestead and mine, a rider had come into motion: Varick, on his way up to check our sheep, while I was in the midst of this Hebnerian episode. Varick on a horse now looked as big as a man. Already his first year of high school was nearly behind him. His school year of boarding in town with Lucas and Nancy and returning to Adair and me only on weekends was his first footprint away from home, and this summer would bring his next. He had asked Stanley Meixell for, and received, the job of choreboy at the ranger station until school began again in the fall. Not many years now, not many at all, Angus, until this son of yours would need to find his own foothold in this country, and so I swung back to the task of delving with 'steaders.

"Those of us in Scotch Heaven do have a bit of a head start on you, Mr. Hebner, so there's—"

"Otto," he corrected me with a bray.

"Otto, then. As I was setting out to say, there's no real resemblance between a settled creek valley and a dry-land homestead. So I don't want to startle you, but here we are at the available land for you to have a look at."

Hebner hopped down and gawked south now, across the flat table of gravelly earth sprigged with bunchgrass, his son duplicating the staring inspection while I took the girl down from his wife and then helped her out of the wagon. We stood in a covey at the section marker stone, the wind steadily finding ways to get at us under and around the wagon, until Hebner strode off twenty or so paces to-

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

ward the yawning middle of the benchland as if that was the favored outlook. After a long gander and kicking his heel into the soil, what there was of it, a number of times, he marched back and took up a stance beside me. Still scrutinizing the benchland, the shanties and chicken coops and pale gray-brown furrows of the Keever and Reinking and Thorkelson homesteads, he demanded: "You're dead-sure this here is the best piece of new ground?"

Anyone with an eye could see that the benchland was equally stark, stony, unwelcoming, wherever a glance was sent. "None of it is fair Canaan, is it," was all I could answer Hebner. "But if here in this dry-land end of the Two country is where you truly want to homestead, right where we're standing is as good as any."

Not a lot of satisfaction for him to find in my words. He leaned away from me and turned a bit so his silent wife would see the shrewdness of what he asked next: "How deep is it to water?"

The question I had been dreading. "I can only tell you this much. The Keevers and the Reinkings and the Thorkelsons all dug about forty feet to get their wells."

"Forty! Back in Illinois we could dig down ten feet anywhere and get the nicest softest vein of wellwater there is!"

"Then you ought to have brought one of those matchless wells with you." I faced around to his wife, on the chance she might not be so hopeless a case as him. "Mrs. Hebner, you had better know, too—the water up here is hard." She made no reply. "Just so you know, come first washday," I tried to prompt, "and you won't cuss me too much." Still nothing from her except that abject or defeated gaze at her husband. By the holy, if she could stand here wordless and let this Hebner commit her to a homestead eternity of clothes washed out stiff as planks and of a sour grayness in every teaspoon of water she ever used, why then—

"Seems like you ain't overly enthusiastic about this here ground," Hebner now gave me with a suspicious frown.

"Mr. Hebner, listen—"

"Otto," the man insisted thundrously.

"Otto, then. Listen a minute. None of this is going to be easy or certain, for you and your family. Even at its best, homesteading is a gamble, and it's twice that in these benchlands. A dry-land homestead is just what it says it is, dry."

"I didn' notice as how you left us any room back down there

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

along the creek," he retorted, making only small attempt to smile around the resentment.

Roust yourself twenty years ago from Lopside or wherever it is that spawned you, and there was room along the North Fork, along the South Fork, room everywhere across the Two Medicine country. And in the same thinking of that I knew that I would not have welcomed Otto Hebner even then; that anyone who did not come accepting that the homestead life was going to be hard, I did not want at the corner of my eye.

"Let's call this off," I said abruptly. "We're not doing each other any good here."

"Call it off!" Hebner blinked at me, thunderstruck. "This's a funny doggone arrangement you're pullin' on us, seems like," he brayed. "Leadin' us out to this here ground and then givin' us the poormouth about it. This's doggone funny exchange for the money we paid, is what I say."

"I thought you might want to know what you're in for, trying to homestead country such as this. I was obviously wrong. I'll give you your money back and take you in to Gros Ventre. If you're still set on finding a site, someone in town can do your locating for you."

"Nothin' doin'." Hebner did not look toward his wife and children, did not look around at the land again. He fixed his gaze onto my face as if defying me to find any way to say him nay. "This here's what I'm goin' to claim, right where we're at."

"Even against my advice, you want me to mark off the claim?"

"That's what we come all the way out here for."

I wrote HEBNER on four corner stakes, climbed into the buggy and counted the one hundred and fifty wheel revolutions north, east, south, and finally west to the section stone again.

By the time that day was done, I knew my craw could not hold any more Hebners, ever. All 'steaders from here on were going to have to dry-land themselves to death without my help.

In bed that night, I said as much to Adair.

"We're back where we started, then," she said as the fact it was. "Back to just getting by, and putting nothing ahead."

"There may be a way we can yet," I offered to her in the dark. "Dair, if I'm going to get us and Varick anywhere in life, it's going

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

to have to be some way where I savvy and believe in what I'm doing. Something I know the tune of." I could feel her waiting.

"Sheep," I announced. "If we were to take on another band of sheep, the profit from that we could set aside for Varick."

Silence between us. Until Adair spoke softly: "You've never wanted to take on more than the band you and Rob run."

"I'll need to try stretch my philosophy, won't I." Try, for Varick. For you, Dair. For myself?

"Do we have the money for another band of sheep?"

"No. Half enough, maybe."

"Lucas would have it," she contributed.

"Lucas took his turn in backing me with sheep, long since. Besides, he's in up to his neck in land dealings these days. No, I think I know who would be keener than Lucas for this." Although I didn't look forward to hearing it from him: *I never thought I'd see the day, McAngus, when you'd start sounding like me—* *More sheep, that's the ticket we need.* "Dair, I thought I'd see if Rob will partner with us on another band."

Adair spoke what I was counting on, from her, from her brother. "He will."

What I had not counted on was Rob's notion of where we ought to put a new band of sheep. "Angus, I won't go for putting any more sheep up there in Meixell's hip pocket, even if the damn man would let us." If not on the national forest, then we'd have to rent grazing somewhere else, I pointed out to him. Maybe in the Choteau country, not that there was that much open range left there or anyplace, for that matter.

"Give me a couple of days," Rob said. "I just maybe know the place for those sheep, where Meixell or some Choteau geezer either one won't have a hoot in hell to say about them."

The couple of days later, Rob's announcement was pure jubilation.

"The reservation! Angus, you remember that Two Medicine grass. Elephants could be grazed on it! The Blackfeet don't know anything to do with it but sit and look at it."

I stirred. "Rob, hold your water a minute here. You know as well as I do why the Agency fenced the cow outfits out. That old business of 'borrowing' reservation grass—"

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Borrowing?" who said anything about 'borrowing'? We'll be paying good lease money to the Blackfeet. You can ask your pocket whether there's any 'borrowing' to this. No, this is every-dot legal, Angus. The agent will let us on the big ridge north of the Two Medicine River with the sheep the first of the month. Man, you can't beat this with a stick! A full summer on that grass and we'll have lambs fat as butter."

I gave it hard thought, sheep on the Blackfeet grass. Sheep were not plows that ripped the sod; sheep with a good herder were not cattle casually flung Double W style. Prairie that had supported buffalo herds vast as stormclouds ought to be able to withstand a careful load of sheep. If Rob saw this band as a ladle to get at the cream of reservation grass, so be it. With Davie Erskine as herder, I could see to it the summer of leased grazing was kept civil and civic. I wanted it begun right, too.

"Those are some miles, from here to the Two Medicine," I pointed out. Forty or more, in fact.

"Sheep have feet," retorted Rob. As I knew, though, the days it would take to trail the sheep were not going to be his favorite pastime. "I hate like the dickens to lose that many days from the locating business. But I suppose—"

Without needing to think, I said: "I'll take the sheep up. Varick and I can, with Davie along."

I felt Rob study me. Probably it was all too plain that I didn't want to see his next crop of 'steaders. Then from him:

"Angus, you're made of gold and oak. If you can handle the reservation band until shearing, I'll make it right to you when we settle up this fall."

They were a band of beauties, our new sheep; the top cut of ewes and their eight-week lambs from the big Thorsen sheep outfit in the Choteau country. And confident grazers, definitely confident. The morning Varick and Davie and I bunched them to begin the journey from Scotch Heaven to the reservation, making them leave the green slopes above the North Fork was sheer work. You could all but hear their single creed and conviction in the blatting back and forth, *why leave proven grass for not proven?* That first hour or so it seemed that every time I looked around, a bunch breaker was taking off across the countryside at a jog trot, her lamb and twenty others in a scampering tail behind her. Relentlessly Varick and

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415-418

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Davie and I dogged that foolishness out of them, and the band at last formed itself and began to move like a hoofed cloud toward the benchland between the North Fork and Noon Creek, toward the road to the Two Medicine River.

Telling Varick and Davie I'd be with them shortly, I rode back down to the house.

"Varick and I ought to be no more than a week, Dair. Four days to get the sheep there, a day or two to help Davie settle in, and then the ride home."

"I'll look for you when I see you coming," she said.

"We're going a famous route, you know. A wife of mine came into this country by way of it," I said from high spirits. "My expectation is that there'll be monuments to her every mile along the way."

Adair smiled and surprised me with: "I hope there's not one at a certain coulee south of the Two Medicine River." *Coachman*, a so-young Adair to Rob at the reins, *are there any conveniences at all along this route of yours?* Myself ready to throttle Rob as she disappeared to piddle: *Your idea was to get her over here and marry her off to me, wasn't it?* The inimitable Rob: *If it worked out that way . . .* Rob's was the way it had worked out, although whether life after the wedding vow was working out for Adair and me seemed ever an open question.

"Dair?" The impulse of this felt deeper, truer, even as I began to speak it. "Come along with us, why not. To the Two Medicine."

Now the surprise was hers. "To christen the monuments?" she asked lightly.

"I'm talking serious here. You can ride the wagon with Davie, or have a turn on Scorpion whenever you feel like. But just come, why don't you. See all that country again." With me who is your husband, even if the country and I are not what you came expecting. With our son of this country and its namesake Two Medicine River. Come and make us the complete three, the McCaskills of Montana, America.

She watched me as if sympathetic to what I was saying, but then shook her head. "I suppose I think I saw the country as much as I am able to that first time, Angus. No, I'd better stay." She lifted her head in the self-mocking way and pronounced: "Adair will take care of here while you and Varick have to be there."

"Well, I tried. But if you can't be budged without a crowbar—"

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Surprising again, how strong my pang that she wouldn't be sharing this Two Medicine journey with me. "Goodbye, Dair."

This wife of mine came up on tiptoes and kissed me memorably. "Goodbye yourself, Angus McCaskill."

The bell of the lead wether, the latest Percy, led us all. A thousand ewes and their thousand lambs, and Varick and Davie and I and two sheepdogs to propel them across forty miles to the northern grass. By all known rules of good sense there was much that I ought to have been apprehensive about. Weather first and last. The very morning we started, the mountains looked windy, rain-brewing; one of those restless days of the Rockies when a storm seems to be issuing out of every canyon, too many to ever possibly miss us. Well, we of Scotch Heaven had seen weather before. The under-the-sky perils that sheep invite on themselves were another matter. Fatal patches of death camas or lupine could be hiding ahead amid these grass miles that neither Davie nor I had local knowledge of. Alkali bogs that lambs could wander into, which would be their last wander. Of course, coyotes. *Cayuse . . . Coyote. Rob, Angus, is our serenade coming from a coyote?* Badger Creek two days ahead, and Birch Creek a day before that, creeks usually lazily fordable but if spring runoff was still brimming them . . . Things left, right and sideways all could go wrong, but they were going to have to do it over the top of me. I had never in my life felt so troubleproof. *This I know the tune of*, conviction sang in me from the first minute of that sheep drive. This band of sheep was Varick's future, his foothold into Two Medicine life when he would need it. For his sake, if it ended up that I had to carry each and every last wonderful woolly fool of a sheep on my back these forty miles, *this I know the tune of*.

As the first hard drops of rain swept onto us we were shoving the sheep across the short bridge over Noon Creek. In less time than it takes to tell, Varick and Davie and I in our slickers were wet yellow creatures, the ewes and lambs were gray wet ones, as we pressed across creek water through storm water. But the rain was traveling through so swiftly that the lambs did not stay chilled and begin to stiffen too much to walk, and there was the first woe we hadn't met.

This I know the tune of. All of life seemed fresh, sharp, to me as we spread the sheep into a quick grazing pace. The mountains from an angle different than the one I had known every day for more

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than twenty years were somehow an encouraging chorus up there, news that the world is more than the everyday route of our eyes. I could even look west to the Reese ranch nestled in the farthest willow bends of Noon Creek and not crush down under the weight of what my life and Anna's could have been, much. After a last glance west I swallowed away the thought of her, at least away as far as it would ever go, and dogged my wing of the band of sheep into quicker steps, and pointed us north.

Now the rise of the long hills beyond the Double W, their pancake summits the high flat edge of the Birch Creek country ahead. I called out to Davie, and to Adair in my imagination, that these bare ridgelines were in dire need of our shepherd monuments. But there are monuments not just of stone, aren't there. When the sheep were topping that first great ridge north of where the buildings of the Double W lay white and sprawling, there on that divide I climbed off Scorpion, unbuttoned my slicker, and pissed down in the direction of Wampus Cat Williamson.

Overnight at Birch Creek, and then across the ford of the creek at dawn and through the gate of the reservation fence and into the first of the Blackfeet reservation and a land immediately different. Drier, more prairielike, the benchlands flatter and more isolated. Here toward the northern heart of the Two country, every distance seemed to increase, as if giving space to the Blackfeet grassland. The mountains no longer were head-on and near, but marching off northwestward toward the peak called the Chief, which stood out separate as if reviewing them. Benchlands here were bigger and higher and more separate than we were used to, so that cattle and horses looked surprisingly small in the Indian pastures we passed, and when I rode ahead a mile or so to be sure of water for noon, our band of sheep was hard to spot at all.

This I know the tune of. But did I. At the end of that day, bridgeless Badger Creek. Bridgeless and brim full. Time to turn sheep into fish. I had Varick lead Percy across, the wether uneasy about the creek water up to his belly but going through with his leadership role. His followers were none. For an endless hour there on the brink of dark, we relearned that making sheep wade water is a task that would cause a convent to curse in chorus. At last by main strength Varick and I half-led half-hurled enough sheep into the water to give the others the idea, and the community swim began. There was a last mob of lambs, frantic about not being across

with their mamas but also frantic about the rushing water. Varick and Davie and the dogs and I fought them into the creek, lambs splashing, thrashing, blatting, and when there were no more kinds of panic to invent, swimming. *This I know the tune of.*

From dawn of the next day, with not a stormcloud in the Blackfeet sky and a fine solid bridge ahead of us at the Two Medicine River, I could feel our great journey as if it already had happened, as if now we, Varick and I and our poor bent Davie, we incomparable three had only to walk steadily in its tracks. Hour on hour, life sang out to me. Any moment that my eyes were not on the sheep and the land, they were on Varick. More and more he was growing to resemble me. The long frame, the face that was a mustacheless version of mine, probably of all McCaskills back to old Alexander hewing the Bell Rock lighthouse into the sea. *The job was there . . . it was to be done.* We still were living resemblances of old Alexander McCaskill in that, too, this son of mine born attuned to this country's work and I who had spent every effort I knew to learn it. Time upon time that day, I stood in my stirrups and gazed for the sheer pleasure of gazing. The land rolled north with grassy promise in every ridge. The pothole lakes we were passing, with clouds of ducks indignantly rising at the sight of us, seemed a wondrous advent. Even old Scorpion under me seemed more interested in being a horse. By the holy, I was right. Right to have brought these sheep, for Varick's sake. Right, even, to have married Adair and persisted through our strange distanced life together if this strong son was our result.

We came to the Two Medicine River in sunny mid-afternoon and were met by gusts of west wind that shimmered the strong new green of the cottonwood and aspen groves into the lighter tint of the leaves' bottom sides, so that tree after tree seemed to be trying to turn itself inside out. In the moving air as we and the sheep went down the high bluff, a crow lifted off straight up and lofted backwards, letting the gale loop him upward. I called to Varick my theory that maybe wind and not water had bored this colossal open tunnel the Two Medicine flowed through. And then we bedded the sheep, under the tall trees beside the river.

When morning came, I was sorry this was about to be over. All the green miles of May that we had come, the saddle hours in company with Varick, the hand-to-hand contest with the sheep to impel them across brimming Badger Creek, yesterday's sight of the Two

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422 - 426

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Medicine and its buffalo cliffs like the edge of an older and more patient planet. Every minute of it I keenly would have lived over and over again. This I knew the tune of.

The sheep crossed the bridge of the Two Medicine in a series of hoofed stammers. Up the long slope from the river Varick and Davie and the dogs and I pushed them. When they were atop the brow of the first big ridge north of the river, we called ourselves off and simply stood to watch.

On the lovely grass that once fed the buffalo, the sheep spread themselves into a calm cloud-colored scatter and began to graze, that first day of June of 1914.

TWO MEDICINE

With water projects abounding from the Sun River in the south to the Two Medicine River in the north, it is evident that the current creed of our region of Montana is "we'll dam every coulee, we'll irrigate every mountain." But the betterment of nature goes on apace in other ways as well. Anna Reese and children Lisabeth and Peter visited Isaac Reese at St. Mary Lake for three days last week, where Isaac is providing the workhorses for the task of building the roadbed from St. Mary to Babb. Isaac sends word through Anna that the summer's work on this and other Glacier National Park roads and trails is progressing satisfactorily.

—gros ventre weekly gleaner, July 2, 1914

"PRRRRR PRRRRR. Right along, Percy, that's the way, into the chute, earn a brown cracker. Prrrrr prrrrr. Bring them for their haircut, Percy. Prrrrr."

It stays with me like a verse known by heart, that first ever Two Medicine day of shearing and all it brought. Our site of pens and tents atop the arching grass ridge above the river was like being on the bald brow of the earth, with the sunning features of the summer face of the land everywhere below. Three weeks before, Varick and I had left Davie here with his browsing cloud of sheep; when I returned with its shearing crew, the reservation grass had crisped from green to tan, the pothole lakes now were wearing sober collars of dried shore, the bannerlike flow of the Two Medicine River had drawn down to orderly instead of headlong. Even the weather was taking a spell of mildness, a day of bright blue positively innocent of any intention to bring cold rain pouncing onto newly naked and shelterless sheep, and with that off my mind I could work at the cutting gate with an eye to other horizons than the storm foundry of those mountains to the west. A long prairie swooped from our shearing summit several miles

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

north to Browning and its line of railroad, iron thread to cities and oceans. The chasm of the Two Medicine River burrowed eastward to graft itself into the next channel of flow, the Marias, and next after that the twinned forces of water set forth together to the Missouri. Every view from up here was mighty.

Not that any scenery short of heaven's was ever going to ease the hard first hours of shearing. The crew of shearers laboriously relearning the patterns of the work from the year before. The sheep alarmed and anarchic. But I could grin at all that and more. The troubleproof mood I brought here to the Two Medicine when Varick and Davie and I trailed the sheep was still in command of me, still the frame of all I saw and thought as the swirling commotion of a thousand ewes was being turned into the ritual of wool. Life and I still were hand in hand, weren't we, life.

Past noon, whenever I found chance to gaze up from my cutting gate, it was south, the direction of Scotch Heaven and home, that needed my watching. Up from the great trench of the Two Medicine River the Gros Ventre-to-Browning road wove itself in a narrow braid of wheel tracks worn into the ground, but Rob still had not appeared on that road as promised. *First thing after breakfast that first day, Angus, I've got a 'steader to take out to see his claim. But I'll drive up in the Lizzie the minute after that's done. You can get the shearers under way and then I'll be there by afternoon to pitch in. You and the sheep can gimp along without me for that long, can't you?* Aye, yes and yea, Rob. We could do that and were. It was plain as noonday that these Two Medicine sheep were nowhere near Rob's central enthusiasm this summer, but I didn't mind. In the eventual, these sheep were not for his benefit anyway nor for mine, but for Varick's. I thought of my son, man of employment now at the ripe age of fifteen, somewhere beside Stanley Meixell there on distant Phantom Woman Mountain or Roman Reef or other venue of the Two Medicine National Forest, hard at the tasks of summer. *He'll have misfortunes great and small/He'll be a credit to us all.* In summers to come, if Adair and I could make our financial intention come true, Varick could have his own sheep in those mountains, could be as much a master of flocks as Rob or I ever were. So it was befitting that I was here amid earnest sheep, seeing across the miles from the Two Medicine to Varick's future.

What I still was not seeing any clue of was Rob. This was unlike

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Rob Barclay, to not be where he said he would. As time kept passing, it more than once brought the thought, Rob, is that automobile of yours on its side in a gully somewhere and you under it? I would give him until suppertime, and then serious searching would need to commence.

"Prrrrr, Percy, bring them, that's the lad. Follow Percy, ladies. Time to get out of those winter coats. Prrrrr."

As the end of the afternoon neared I at last saw a wagon begin to climb the road from the river toward our shearing operation. This now was possibly Rob, resorting to hoof and wheel if his automobile had disgraced itself in some way, and so I kept watch between my chute duties. Before long, though, I could make out that there were three people on the wagon seat. Most likely a family of Blackfeet going in to Sherburne's trading post at Browning. I dismissed my attention from the ascending wagon and went back to sluicing sheep into the shearers' catch pens.

When I happened to glance down the ridge again, the wagon was less than a quarter of a mile away and it was no Blackfeet rig, not with that pair of matched sorrels and the freshly painted yellow wheelspokes. A gaping moment before I could let myself admit it, the shoulders-back erectness of the driver made me know definitely.

Anna at the reins. Her daughter and son on either side of her.

She brought the wagon to a stop near the shearing pen. I went over to her flabbergasted.

"Anna!" I greeted with more than I wanted to show in front of Lisabeth and Peter, but couldn't help. They were just going to have to take my warm tone as surprised hospitality; in their lack of years, how could they know it as anything more? I made myself speed on to: "You're no small distance from Noon Creek."

"Angus, hello again." Anna provided me her life-giving half-smile. "That husband of mine is even farther," she divulged. "Isaac is building roads in the national park. He'll be away most of the summer, so we're going up to St. Mary to spend some days with him." Except for the light veil of time that had put a few small wrinkles into her forehead and at the edges of those forthright eyes, she could have been the glorious young woman gazing back at me that first instant I stepped into her schoolhouse. Except for whatever propriety that had managed to find me now that I was a hus-

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band and a father, I still was the surprised smitten caller who was perfectly ready to rub my nose off kissing her shadow on that schoolroom wall.

Our eyes held. Was I imagining, or were we both watching this moment with greatest care?

"Angus"—how many thousands and thousands of times, across the past seventeen years, had I missed her saying my name—"how far is it into Browning for the night?"

Eight or ten miles, and I of course put it at ten. This sudden wild chance thumped in me as I said what civility would say but with greatly more behind it: "That's a lot of wagonwork yet, before dark. You're welcome to stay here, do I even need to say." I indicated the shearing camp, our impromptu little tent town, oasis amid the grassy miles if she would just see it that way. "Mrs. Veitch is cooking for the crew. You could share the cook tent with her and have proper company for the night, why not."

"Mother, let's!" from the boy Peter, craning his neck toward the hubbub of the wrangling corral and the rhythmic motions of the shearers at work.

Anna cast her look north across the expanse of prairie to Browning, the girl Lisabeth so much like her in face and bearing as she gauged the miles to Browning, too.

Anna, stay. That same desperate chant in me from the day when Adair and I were wed, yet not the same. This time there was no division in the chorus. This time it wanted only one outcome. *Stay, Anna. I want to see you, here, now, in this least likely place.*

When Anna stated, "It is a distance—I suppose we had better stay here for the night," Lisabeth nodded firmly, a separate but concurring decision. I breathed a thanks to Montana's geography for its helpful surplus of miles. Young Peter yipped his pleasure and asked to go watch the shearing, could he please, and was away.

I helped Lisabeth down from the wagon, then her mother, aware as deep as sensation can go that I was touching the person who might have been my daughter and then the person who might have been my wife.

"We'll of course lend Mrs. Veitch a hand with supper," Anna was detailing to Lisabeth now, "but I don't feel we should impose on her for the night. Under the wagon served us perfectly fine last night and there's no reason why it won't again." Anna sent her gaze around the shearing camp, her eyes eventually coming back across

my face and lingering a bit there. Or was I imagining? "Beth," she spoke to her daughter, "why don't you go see the shearing with Peter, before we pay our respects to the cook tent. Mr. McCaskill can help me with our things from the wagon."

The girl's eyes, the same direct sky-source blue as her mother's, examined the bedrolls and other travel gear in the back of the wagon, then Anna and myself as if weighing the capability of adults in such matters. Evidently satisfied that the tasks were not beyond us, she gave that decisive nod again and went to join Peter at the shearing pen. I watched her go in a gait of grace that was more than a girl's. Lisabeth was, what, fourteen now, and womanhood had its next priestess arriving.

As I lifted out the Reese traveling larder, a venerable chuckbox with cattle brands singed into every side of it, I said to Anna, "She resembles you so much it must be like meeting yourself in the mirror."

"People think we're as alike as eggs, yes. Beth has a mind of her own, though." Anna glanced at me. "But then I suppose there are those who would say an independent child serves me right."

"Send me anybody who says so much as word number one against you and I'll pound the tongue out of him for you."

Her gaze stayed on me. "You would, too, wouldn't you, Angus. In spite of everything, you would."

Yes and then some. I would defend her in any arena, even the one within myself. Every instant of the next few minutes, as I helped Anna unhitch the sorrel team and situate her family's night gear under the shelter of the wagon, and then accompanied her to the shearing pen a discreet adult distance from where Lisabeth and Peter were engrossed in watching the clipwork, it was beyond belief to me that, yet and now, this still could be so. But I felt as thundershook by love for this woman as that first giddy ride home from the Noon Creek schoolhouse when it was all I could do not to fall off the back of Scorpion. Not to fall off the planet, for that matter.

Like a dozen marionettes, the shearers made their patterned motions, stooping, clipping, rising to begin over again. The sheep, betrayed and dismayed, gave up their buttery fleeces with helpless blats. While I was there beside Anna assiduously spectating the shearing pageant, my mind was everywhere else.

I knew I had only moments in which to contrive, before she gathered Lisabeth and they marched off to the cook tent. Yet she wasn't

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431-454

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

showing great sign of going, was she. Watching wool depart from sheep seemed the most absorbing activity either of us could imagine.

"Anna," I finally began, then found nowhere to alight next but onto: "The times we meet up are few and far between."

"Yes, they are. And now you're busy here. I mustn't take up your time, Angus."

"No, I thoroughly wish you would." I signaled to Davie to come up and work the cutting gate for the next batch of ewes into the catch pens. "I've had my fill of wool today, the crew can get along fine without me a bit." As I said it I wondered: did she know I would be here, handy beside her road north? By now everyone in the Two country above nipple age would have heard of the McCaskill-Barclay advent of sheep onto the Blackfeet reservation. But granting that Anna knew, did she come because I would be here on her plausible route to Isaac? Or in spite of it?

I tried to test that water now. "It's glorious to see you. But what's Isaac going to think of you"—I didn't want to say spending the night—"stopping over here?"

"Isaac knows me." I questioned how thoroughly true that could be. How much any skinsack of existence ever can know of what is in another. She went on: "If it'll relieve your conscience, he'll at least know nothing out of order could happen with so many people around." Yes, two of them his own—your and his—children. That was unfortunately so, my yearning told me. Yet I was aware there was something else here with us. Her tang of interest toward me. The air's taste of about-to-happen, that I had caught so clearly during our noon hour together the time in Valier. I was every inch conscious of it again, and so was Anna. She was making every effort to say lightly: "Counting the sheep into the situation, Angus, we have chaperones by the hundred, don't we."

Sheep or not sheep, sentinels were going to have to get up before early to stop me from seeing this woman. *The liquid fire of strong desire.* I gathered it all behind my words and asked her rapidly:

"Anna. Will you do a thing for me?"

She scrupulously kept her eyes on the wool brawl in front of us. "If I can, I will. You know that, Angus. What?"

"See the dawn with me tomorrow."

A blue flash of eyes from her, quicker than quick, then away. I reasoned to her profile: "It'd be our one time to talk alone."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

There was that same narrow hesitation she had shown when I asked her four years before, *Do you have the life you want?* Now her answer:

"Yes. Show me a Two Medicine dawn."

Rob pulled in just before suppertime, the automobile gray with mud halfway up itself like a pig that has been wallowing, Rob himself more than a little dirt-freckled as well.

"See now, McAngus," he called out, "I'm the only land merchant who carries his real estate on his person."

I had to grin a bit. Even when he was abominably late, the man arrived the way olden travelers might have been announced by a drum.

Rob waved a hand toward his automobile.

"Badger Creek," he explained ruefully. "The Lizzie got stuck in the crossing and I had to troop off and find the nearest Blackfeet to pull me out. You can just about guess how involved an enterprise that turned out to be, Angus. A person might as well dicker with the creek, at least it has some motion to it. How those people manage to—" He broke off. The girl Lisabeth was stepping out of the cook tent with a kettle to fill from our milk cans of drinking water. Like the wraith of Anna stepping out of years ago.

Rob rid himself of his look of confoundment as fast as he could, then offered speculatively: "Company, have we. I thought Isaac was somewhere north, contracting roads or some such."

"He is," I affirmed.

Rob scanned around until he found the Reese wagon, plainly parked for the night, and for once seemed not to know what to say. Which of course did not stop him from coming out with: "A girl that age isn't kiting around the country by herself, I hope."

"No," I solemnly assured him.

He gave me a close look that had me on the verge of answering him by hand. By the holy, how did this man think he was the clerk in charge of my life?

"Angus," he began, "I don't savvy what in the hell—" and I didn't want to hear the rest.

"Her brother is with her, Rob. And her mother. She's thoroughly chaperoned," as if I still meant Lisabeth, although we both knew that I meant Anna. I enlightened him about their journey onward to

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Isaac in the morning, and he unruffled considerably. But couldn't help adding:

"It's just a bit odd to have overnight guests in a shearing camp, is all I meant."

"Don't worry about your reputation, Rob," I gave him. "I'll vouch for you."

He cocked his head and adjudged, "You're a trifle touchy, McAngus," which I thought made two of us by that description. "Well, I'd better wash this Blackfeet real estate off me. Supper guests and all that, a person needs to keep up his appearance, doesn't he?"

Steel on grindstone and whetstone, the keen-edged chorus of the shearers sharpening for the day. A wisp of wind, the grass nodding to it.

I leaned over into the corral where the sheep had been wrangled up against the chute mouth by Davie and the shearing crew's choreboy, and felt the wool on three or four ewes' backs for dew. Dry enough to shear, now that the sun had been up for a few hours.

But before beginning the shearing day I cast a look to all the directions, lingering on north and the road to Browning that had taken a wagon with bright yellow wheels and a team of sorrel horses from sight a bit ago. The morning was bright as yesterday and so was I.

"Prrrrr, Percy, you're ready to bring them through, are you? Let's start making wool, Percy, what do you say."

The bell wether blinked idly at me in reproach and stayed where he stood in the mouth of the chute. Well, he was right. I needed to live up to my end of the proposition if I expected him to enter into his, didn't I. Life has its rules of bargaining.

"Here you are, Percy, half a brown cracker. Prrrrr, Percy, come get the rest here at the cutting gate. Prrrrr, sheep, follow Percy, that's the way. Everybody into the chute, prrrrr, prrrrr."

All the while that I was shunting sheep from the chute into the shearers' catch pens, all the while that the crew was taking their places and beginning the snipwork of taking the fleeces off the ewes, all the while I was not truly seeing any of it, but the scene at dawn instead. The barest beginning of light in the east, and Anna materializing from the direction of the shearing camp and joining me under the brow of the ridge, out of sight to all but each other.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Anna, you need to see this with me, that vow from another June morning, the first time I saw this green high bluff above the Two Medicine River, the precipice of the buffalo cliffs, the prairie heaven of grass emerging from the sky's blue-and-silver one. Then as the warming colors of morning came, our words back and forth, my hope and her ver—

I felt the hand drop onto my shoulder just as I finished filling the catch pens. The clamping touch alone told me this was Rob, back from his start-of-day chore of spreading yesterday's shorn sheep along the slope of the ridge to graze. I glanced around at him inquisitively, for I'd assumed he would be taking his place behind the sheep to help Davie with the wrangling.

The face on Rob Barclay was thunderous. He grated out: "What in Christ's name is it between you and her, man? Out there this morning, like a couple of slinking collie dogs."

Again, was this. Rob patrolling my life again, Rob the warden of my marriage again. And again no more able than ever to understand the situation between Adair and me, and therefore Anna and me.

"Put it in the poorbox, Rob," I told him flatly.

But plainly he didn't intend to be dissuaded from giving me what was on his mind. He persisted: "You're not answering—"

"Oh, but I am. I'm telling you what I told you before, Anna isn't a topic of discussion between us. So just save yourself the trouble of trying, all right?" Save us both it. The two of us had been through this backwards and forward, after Valier. That outbreak of in-law from you was more than enough, Rob. Neither of us had one damn least iota of a thing to gain by—"Neither of us has a thing to gain by getting into this again," I kept to. "You know my opinion by heart, and yours is stamped all over you."

"You'd like the trouble saved, all right, wouldn't you. Well, not this time. You're going to hear me on this, goddamn it." Beyond Rob I saw that Davie was watching us wide-eyed, Rob's words loud enough to carry anger above the sounds of sheep and shearing.

"Then it better be away from here," I informed Rob, and I went off enough distance from the chute and corral, him after me.

We faced each other again. Still determined to carry me by the ears, Rob began: "You just won't make yourself stay away from her, will you. Even after that last talking-to I gave you—"

"Try giving me a leaving-alone, why not," I answered. "Anna

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

and I are still none of your business, Adair and I are still none of your business, and climbing out of your bed this morning to spy on me was none of your business either, Rob." Oh, I had known even while it was happening that Anna and I were seen. But not by these Barclay gray eyes that were auguring into me now. No, it was when Anna returned first from our dawn, went to the wagon and had a look at her sleeping children, and then headed on toward the cook tent to begin helping toward breakfast; and I meanwhile came up over the ridge from a deliberately different direction. Beneath the wagon, Lisabeth's head suddenly was up out of the bedroll. She watched her mother go. Then she turned enough to watch me come. Across that distance, I knew she knew. The steady attitude of her head, the gauging way she looked at us both, and then conclusion. That lovely young face in its frame of black hair, like a portrait of Anna gazing from the past, seemed to have seen through the ridge to where her mother and I were together. And there was no explaining I could do to the girl. It was a situation I would make worse if I so much as tried to touch it; Anna would have to be the one to handle it if Lisabeth brought out the question. The truth would have to handle it. The truth, Lisabeth, that I had asked your mother: *Anna, when Lisabeth and Peter and Varick are grown and gone . . . if Adair takes herself back to Scotland then . . . if and when, Anna, is there the chance then of our lives fitting together? Of you answering my love with yours, if and when? And her, Angus, you know how I am. Beyond anyone else, really, you grasp the kind of person I am. So you know all too well, I can only decide as far as I see a situation. The judging hesitation, the click as she gauged. But I can't see ahead to forever, can I. Whether Isaac is there in my life, after the children go—or whether . . .* Her eyes honestly telling me the same as her words. *I'm sorry the words aren't any better than they were, those years ago. You more than deserve better ones from me. But they're the same, Angus. If I ever see that Isaac and I have become wrong together, I'll know in the next minute to turn to you.* Again and yet still: Isaac was not lastingly innocent of the hazard of losing Anna: I was not irredeemably guilty of loving her hopelessly. Not Proven, the verdict one more time. Well, we had life ahead yet to see if proof would come, didn't we. I had lost no ground since our meeting in Valier, I could stay on the compass setting Adair and I had agreed to, getting on in life as best we could for Varick's sake, hers, mine, ours.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"You've utterly got to stop this infatuation of yours," Rob was delivering urgently to me now. "It was one thing when you were just mooning around like a sick calf over her. But this is the worst yet. Meeting her out there to go at it in the grass."

I stared at Rob as if some malicious stranger had put his face on. *Go at it in the grass?* On the one hand, this slander was the worst thing that had come out of him yet today, which was saying a lot. On the other hand, the random stab of what he had just said showed that at least he hadn't slunk out after us this morning close enough to count our pores. All during our meeting of dawn, Anna and I had not so much as touched. We knew we didn't dare. Starved as I was for her—and I recognized, from another morning, long ago, that she was more than a little hungry for me—we didn't appease those cravings. Anna was still Isaac's, I was still Adair's; until those facts managed to change, we did not dare make the remembered touches we wanted to on each other's body, for families and lives would tumble with us.

"Rob," I uttered flat and hard. "You're going way too far."

"Somebody finally has to tell you what a lovesick sap you're looking at in the mirror every morning," he retaliated. "Adair has been too easy on you, all these years."

"Who made you the world's expert on Dair and me?" I burst out. "Man, just what is it you want from the two of us—doves and honey every blessed minute? She and I have what life together we can manage to. And we have Varick. Those are worth whatever Dair and I have cost each other."

The Barclay face bright with anger wasn't changed by my words. I took a last try.

"Rob. Will you just remember that your sister and I are a pair in life you devised yourself. Dair and I knew from early that we weren't perfect for each other, and it's damn far past time for you to accept that fact, too."

"I'm not accepting that you can sniff off after her"—he jerked his head north toward Anna's route to Isaac—"whenever you get the least little chance. Angus, how is it you can't see that when you're the way you are about Anna, you're only half a husband to Adair. And that's not enough."

"ANGUS AND ROB!" Davie had limped halfway our direction to call out worriedly to us. "The shearers are hollering for more sheep."

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

I gave Davie a wave of reply. And then I answered Rob, one last time. "It'll have to be enough. It's as good as I can ever do."

Rob shook his head stonily, at me, at my answer, at the existence of Anna. Each of us had said our all, and we hadn't changed each other a hair. That was that, then. I turned from him to go to the shearing pens, but had to let him know this useless argument couldn't go on perpetually.

"Rob, don't ever give me any more guff about something that's none of your business, all right?"

Behind me, his tone was tighter than ever. "I'm telling you this. I'll give you more than guff if you don't get her out of yourself."

For the rest of the shearing, speaking terms between us were short and narrow. When Rob announced, as soon as we were done loading the woolsacks for hauling to the depot at Browning, that he'd like to get on back to Breed Butte immediately, I nodded and silently applauded. The three or so days before I finished the wool-hauling and made my ride back to Scotch Heaven would give us both some time to wane from the argument about Anna. I just wondered what year it would be on the calendar when Rob Barclay decided he had to get huffy in a major way again.

The third day later, I was atop the divide between Noon Creek and the North Fork when I decided to veer past the ranger station on my way to home and Adair. There was no telling how soon I'd see Varick if I didn't snatch this chance to drop in on him at his summer employ, and I much wanted him to hear the news that as far as our Two Medicine sheep and shearing was concerned, the world was wagging its tail at us.

When I rode over the crest into sight of the ranger station, I was double glad I'd come by. Varick was out behind the building boiling fire camp utensils in a huge tub of lye water, a snotty job if there ever was one, and good news would sound even better amid that.

By the holy, I swear the son I was seeing ahead of me had put another inch on himself during the week and a half I'd been at the Two Medicine. Growing so fast his shadow couldn't keep up with him.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Varick's fire under the lye tub was crackling crisply—odd to hear, this warm almost-July afternoon—and he was judiciously depositing into the boiling murky water a series of camp pots as black as tar buckets. I got down from Scorpion and went over to him. With a grin I said, "When the Forest Service washes dishes, it really means it, ay?"

My tall son stayed intently busy with his lye cauldron until all the pots were drowned, then turned around to me. And delivered:

"You and Mrs. Reese. Is that true?"

The inside of me fell to my shoetops.

Varick's face showed all the strain behind the asking, all the confoundment of a fifteen-year-old not wanting to believe the world was askew. I made myself look back at him steadily before I said: "I suppose that depends on what you've heard."

"What I hear is that you and her get together any chance you can. Out in the grass along the Two Medicine, say."

Mercy I sought, mercy came not. Where had this squall dropped on us from, besides out of the vasty blue? Abruptly my mind saw again the face of the girl Lisabeth, up out of the bedroll beneath the wagon, gazing levelly toward her mother, turning that gaze toward me. No accusation in her look, only judgment: choosing among the three verdicts, innocent or guilty or not proven. But even if she accounted me guilty, why would she have sought out Varick with poison such as this? *Your father and my mother . . .* A person with any of Anna in her, destructive and vindictive to this degree? In that young Anna-like face beneath the wagon, I just could not see—

Accusation still stood here staring at me, waiting, wearing its painful mask of Varick. Pushing the echo of that question at me: *Is that true?*

"Son," a confused sound I added to the thudding of my heart, "I did see Anna, yes, but not—"

Varick's next was on its way: "Is that why you put sheep on the reservation? So you'd have a way to sneak off to her?"

"For Christ's sake, no!"

"Unk says it was."

Disbelief filled me now.

And in a sick terrible surge after it, belief.

The voice I knew as well as any^{own}, following me across the Two Medicine prairie. *I'll give you more than guff if you don't get her*

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

out of yourself. But Rob, why this? Why drag Varick into the middle between Anna and my helpless love for her? Why in all hell did you ever resort to this, Rob?

I struggled to concentrate through my fury at Rob and my anguish toward Varick, fight one welter of confusion at a time.

"Varick. You've heard the worst possible version. Nothing anywhere near wrong happened between Anna and me at the Two Medicine."

"Then what were the two of you doing out there alone that morning?"

"I asked her to watch the dawn with me."

Varick's look said this confounded him more than ever. He swallowed and asked shakily, "What, are you in love with her?"

Truth, were you going to be enough in this situation? Maybe so, maybe no.

"Yes." An answer that needed to go back seventeen years had to start somewhere. "This is hard to find the words for. But yes, I've always been in love with her, in spite of myself. Varick, this goes back farther in my life than you. Farther than your mother, even. She's known how I feel toward—"

"She knows?"

"Ask her. If you're intent on the history of this, you'd better get all sides of it." Not just that meddling bastard Rob Barclay's version. I tried again to swallow Rob away and say what was needed to make Varick understand. "Son, your mother and I—"

"I don't savvy any of this!" he blurted.

"Listen to me half a minute, will you. What—"

"You and mother aren't—" the words broke out of him. "You don't—"

"If you're trying to say your mother and I don't love each other, all I can tell you is we come close enough. Otherwise you wouldn't be here." Wouldn't be here challenging the years we had spent trying to have you, and then to raise you, Varick. "Let's get a grip of ourselves here, and I'll try again to make you see how this is. What I feel for Anna Reese has nothing to do with your mother. That's the utter truth, son. It began before her, and nothing she or I have ever been able to do has changed it any. It's something I have to live with, is all. And I pretty much do, except when that god-damned uncle of yours shoves his size twenty nose into the situation."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

My words didn't have effect. There wasn't a semblance of understanding on Varick's face. A hurt bafflement instead. My son who could so readily comprehend the land and its rhythms and its tasks, could not grasp my invisible involvement with a woman not his mother. Those stormy countries of the mind—love, loss, yearning—were places he had not yet been. And what words were strong enough to bring him there, make him see.

"Varick, there is just no way to undo the way I've always felt for Anna. I know you're upset about your mother and me, you've every right in the world to be. But we'll go on as we have been. She and I will stay together at least until you're grown and gone from home, I promise you that on all the Bibles there are."

But I could see I was losing. I could see from Varick's pained stare at me that whatever I said, my son was going to look on me from here forward as someone he had not really known. Even that realization, though, nowhere near prepared me for what came now from him.

"You don't have to stay together on my account. Not any more, you don't."

I eyed Varick and tried not to show how his words made me come undone inside. "Meaning what, son?"

"I'm not coming home at the end of this summer. Or any other time."

The clod of realization choked my throat. Any other boy-man, man-boy, whichever this son of mine was, might have been pretending the determination behind that statement. But you could collect all the pretense in Varick on an eyelash; he was like Adair in that. He meant his declaration.

He had gulped in enough breath for the rest, and now was rushing it out: "I'll board in town for school, but weekends and summers I'm going to be working here for Stanley."

"Varick, you're making this a whole hell of a lot worse than it needs to be."

"I'm not the one who started making it worse, am I. I don't want to be"—his gaze said *be around you*—"be part of this situation, as you call it."

If only the tongue had an eraser on the end of it as a pencil does, this terrible set of minutes wouldn't need to be called anything. Rob would unsay his monstrous slur, Varick would never need to blurt, *Is that true?* I would not have to frantically search for how to keep

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

what little was left after my son's declaration. "You can't just walk out on your mother"—I swallowed miserably—"and me."

"I don't see how you're going to stop me from it."

"By stirring your head with a stick, if I have to. Varick, behave toward me the way you feel you need to. But not your mother. Go to her and tell her you take her side in all this, tell her you're on the outs with me, tell her whatever the hell. But don't pull away from her." I tried to will into him the urgency of what I was saying, tried to hold in the loss this was costing me. "If you'll keep on terms with her, stay the same as ever with her, you can ignore me or throw rocks at me when you see me coming or whatever will make you feel any better. If you'll do that, I won't stop you from staying on with Stanley as much as you want." Until you get your dismay at me out of your system. If you ever do.

With a wordless nod, my son took that bargain. And turned away from me to his boiling task.

He was on his porch waiting when I rode to Breed Butte.

I climbed down from Scorpion and tied his reins to the gate while Rob came across the yard to me.

"McAngus, you've got a face on you that would curdle cream," he began on me. "But man, something had to hammer it home to you about your foolishness over that woman. Maybe this will finally do the job."

The job? As if the life of my family was some task for him to take into his hands, bang us this way and that, twiddle our parts around—

"If I know you," his words kept soiling the air, "you're going to drag out that old argument of yours that I don't have any right to do anything about the mess you're making of your marriage. But I told you before, and I'll tell you till the cows come home. Adair is my sister and she's my right to stop you from making a fool of yourself, any way it takes to do that."

Any way? Even by costing me my son? Was that the crazy gospel you still believed, Rob—sonless yourself, you were wishing on me the worst spite you could by tearing my son out of my life? After you had returned from the Two Medicine and hotly spilled your words to Varick, didn't you want them back, want them unspoken? Want yourself not to have been the tool of anger that jealously ripped between Varick and me? I stared into you, needing to know.

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Your face again now had as much anger as it could ever hold. But Rob, your eyes did not have enough of red emotion. Or of any other. Your tranced look, your helmeted mood when you had put yourself where it all could not but happen. And so I knew, didn't I. Your own belief in your sabotage wasn't total now, you had to trance yourself now against the doubt. Not let yourself bend now, from the angle you had talked yourself into. And now was too late. Doubt and trance didn't count in your favor now. Nothing did.

"You sanctimonious sonofabitch." My fist following my words, I swung to destroy that Barclay jaw.

Rob was ever quick, though. My haymaker only caught him pulling away, staggering him instead of sending him down. Which only meant he was still up where I could hammer at him. The single message thrummed in me, it had built in my blood from the instant I left Varick to come here and fight Rob. *Will I kill him? How can I not, deserving as he is.* He tried to set himself to return my blows, but I was onto him like fire, punching the side of his head, his shoulders, forearms, any available part of him. I beat that man as if he was a new drum. He took it grimly and struck back whenever he could manage. We struggled there, I see now, and fought through the years into our pasts, into the persons we had been. A Rob stands lordly and bright-faced on the Greenock dock, and my Angus of then pummels him in search of the being who hides inside that cocked stance. Rob on the sly with Nancy, and in Lucas's behalf the me whirling in from my first-ever North Fork day pounds him with the hands for both of us. The exultant Rob of the depot at Browning, *He never guessed! Adair, we did it to the man!* and the Angus who only ever has wanted Anna smashes the words back down his throat. The Rob of his homestead site aloof above the rippling North Fork, of ever more sheep, of the 'steaders, I at last was finding them all with my fists. The final one, the monster Rob who had betrayed by turning my son against me, I wanted to butcher with my bare hands. In that Rob's eyes, here, now, amid the thuds of my blows bringing blood out of him, there was the desperate knowledge that I was capable of his death.

How many times Rob Barclay went down from my hitting of him, I have no idea. Not enough for my amount of rage against him and what he had done. Eventually he stayed down, breathing brokenly. The sound of him, ragged, helpless at last, came up to me as if it was pain from a creature trapped under the earth.

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449-452

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

A corner of my mind cleared and said, "You're not worth beating to death. You're worse off living with yourself."

I left him there in the dirt of his Breed Butte.

"I wish Rob hadn't bothered."

"Bothered? Dair, bothered doesn't begin to say it. The damn man has set Varick against me. Nobody has the right to cost me my son."

"I suppose Rob thought he was doing what he did for my sake." Her glance went from me to the rimline of mountains out the window. "As when he brought me over here from Scotland."

"That's as may be." I drew a careful breath. "In both cases he maybe thought he had you at heart, I give him that much. But he can't just glom into our lives whenever something doesn't suit him. We're not his to do with."

"No." She acknowledged that, and me, with her gray eyes. "We're our own to do with, aren't we." She stayed her distance from me across the kitchen, but her voice was entirely conversational, as if today's results were much the same as any other's. I almost thought I had not heard right when she quietly continued: "I'll have to live in town with Varick when school starts." Then, still as if telling me the time of day: "We'll need to get a house in town."

Her words did worse to me than Rob's fists ever could. On every side, my life was caving in. Varick. Rob. Now her. Our marriage had never been hazardless, but abrupt abandonment was the one thing we had guarded each other against.

Suddenly my despair was speaking. Suddenly I desperately had to know the full sum against me, even if it was more severe than I had imagined.

"Dair. Are you leaving me? Because if you are, Let's—let's do the thing straight out, for once."

"Leaving?" She considered the word, as if I had just coined it. "All I've said is that I had better live in town with Varick during the school year." She looked straight at me now. "Angus, in all these years you've never really been able to leave Anna. So do you think leaving is something that can be done, just like that?"

"What do you call this, then, whatever it is you intend?"

"I call it living in town with our son while he goes to school, so that he has at least one of us in his life."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

My wife, the ambassadress to my son. How does a family get in such kinks? Trying to keep the shake out of my voice, I asked Adair next: "And summers?"

"Summers I'll come back here with you, of course." Of course? Seventeen years with Adair and I still didn't recognize what she saw as the obvious. She was adding: "If you want me to."

"I want you to," I answered. And heard myself add: "Of course."

Lucas tried to invoke peace. The first time I stopped in at the Gros Ventre mercantile after Rob and I divided, the message was there that Lucas needed to see me. That didn't surprise me, but his absence at the Medicine Lodge when I went across to it did. "Luke just works Saturday nights now," I was told by the pompadoured young bartender. Around to the house I went for my next Barclay war council.

"Angus, I'll never defend what Robbie did to you. We both know there was a time he was half into the honey jar himself."

Lucas inclined his head to the kitchen doorway. Nancy could be heard moving about in there, the plump woman of middle age who had been the curvaceous girl at the stove when I walked in on Rob and her. Her lifted front lip, inquiring my verdict on them. Rob quick to ask my hurry, to blur the moment with his smile. So long ago, yet not long at all. "That lad needs some sense pounded into him every so often," Lucas was going on, then paused. "As I hear you undertook to do, ay?"

"I was too late with it."

"Maybe more of it sank in than you think," Lucas speculated behind a puff of his pipe. Does humankind know enough yet, Lucas, to determine what has and hasn't sunk in to a Barclay skull? Enough of that thought must have come out in my gaze at him, for Lucas now went to: "None of this has to be fatal, Angus. It's one pure hell of a shame Varick got dragged into this, but he'll get over it sooner or later, I hope you know."

"I don't know that at all. Nothing I've tried to say to him does a bit of good. He has that edge to him. That way of drawing back into himself, and the rest of the world can go by if it wants."

"But in the eventual, Angus, he'll—"

Lucas, Lucas. *In the eventual* was time I could not spare. *In the eventual* lay the only possible time-territory of Anna and myself,

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

when our lives would find their way together if they were ever going to. No, it was in the *now*, in these years before the possibility of Anna and myself, that I had to regain my son. To have him grow up understanding as much of me as he could. But the impossibly knotted task of that, so long as Varick refused to come near me in mind or self. My father, in his iron deafness. Myself, encased in my love for Anna. They look at us, our fleeceless sons do, and wonder how we ever grew such awful coats of complication. To understand us asks so much of sons—and for all I knew, daughters—at the precise time when they least know how to give.

“Angus, I know that what’s between you and Varick, the two of you will have to work out,” Lucas was onto now. “But maybe I’m not without some suasion where Robbie is concerned. Or where you are either, I hope.” He peered at me in his diagnostic way, and wasn’t heartened by the signs. “By Jesus, lad”—Lucas threw up his hands, or what would have been his hands at the empty ends of those arms—“I tell you, I just don’t see how it helps the situation any for you and Robbie to be reaming the bones out of each other this way.”

I shook my head. No, it helped nothing for Rob and me to be in silent war, and no, I would do nothing to change it. The hole in my life where Varick had been was a complication I wouldn’t have but for Rob. In exchange, he could have my enmity.

Lucas’s last try. “Angus, all those years of you and Robbie count for something.”

I looked steadily at Lucas, the age on him gray in his beard and slick on his bald head. Here was a man who knew time, and I wanted to answer him well about those years of Rob and myself: our lives, really.

“The trouble is, Lucas, they don’t count for the same in each of us. Maybe they never have, with Rob and me. He sees life as something you put in your pocket as you please. I never find it fits that easily.”

“That’s as may be, Angus,” he said slowly, deliberately, when I was done. “But those differences weren’t enough to put you at each other’s throats, in all the time before.” He gave me one more gaze that searched deep. “I just can’t think it’s forever, this between the two of you.”

“If it’s not forever, Lucas,” I responded, “it’s as close as can be.”

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

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In less time than is required to tell it, Rob and I took apart twenty-four years of partnership.

With Adair and Judith, each of them silent and strained, on hand to restrain us, everything went. He took my share of the Two Medicine sheep, I took his share of the band we had in the national forest. I bought his half-ownership in the sheep shed we had built together at the edge of my homestead nearest his. Oh, I did let him know he still had watering freedom on my portion of the North Fork whenever he had sheep at Breed Butte—my grudge was not against his animals, after all—if he wanted, and while he most definitely did not want so, he had no choice when the situation was water or no water. But of all else, we divvied everything we could think of except Scorpion. There, Rob would not touch the money I put on the table for his long-ago grand insistence that he stand half the price of my saddle horse. Bruised and scabbed as he was from my beating of him, Rob still wore that disdainful guise. There could not be more contempt than in the wave of his hand then, and his banishing words: “Keep your goddamn Reese horse, as a reminder.”

Or so I thought, about the limits of disdain, until that September. When there was the morning that I looked up from my ride to school and saw teams of horses and earth equipment coming across the shoulder of Breed Butte. It seemed too many for road work, but then who knew what royal highroad Rob Barclay had to have to travel on.

Riding home at the end of that schoolday, I saw what the project was. The soil was being scraped, hollowed, beneath the spring at the west edge of Rob’s homestead.

“Rop’s ressavoy,” Isaac Reese confirmed to me when I went up to see closer. “Ve build him deep.”

Rob had always said I would see the day he would build a reservoir here. As I stood beside Isaac, watching the fresnoes and teams of big workhorses with the Long Cross brand on their sides as they scraped the hillside down into a dam, it seemed to me one last barrier was going up between Rob and myself. Spurning my offer that he could use my portion of the North Fork for his sheep, he was choosing to store up the spring’s trickle instead. Choosing to create water of his own. That was Rob for you.

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

As the reservoir rose, it changed the face of the North Fork valley. A raw dirt pouch beneath the silver eye of the Breed Butte spring; a catchment inserted into a valley built for flow. Then when Rob brought the Two Medicine sheep home from the reservation for the winter, each few days I would see him on horseback pushing the band back and forth across the top of the earthen dam to pack down the dirt, a task which the sharp hooves of sheep are ideal for. Him and his gray conscript column, marching back and forth to imprison water. I know I had an enlarged sense of justice, where Rob Barclay was concerned. But that private earthen basin of his up there on Breed Butte only proved to me, as if I needed any more proof, the difference in the way he saw the planet and the way I did.

As those sheep tamped and tamped the Breed Butte reservoir into permanence, I tried to settle myself into the long seasons without Adair and Varick that Rob had inflicted on me. Back across time's distance, when America and Montana began for me at the Greenock dock, I thought the Atlantic was worth fear. But the Atlantic was a child's teacup compared to the ocean that life could be. The unexpected ferocities of family I now was up against, their unasked hold on me, were as implacable in their way as the seawater ever was. This too was a sick scaredness of the kind that gripped me in the steerage compartment of the *Jemmy*, down in the iron hole in the water. Suddenly again my life was not under my own control, now that everyone I had tried to stretch myself toward had yanked away from me. I felt so alone on the homestead that if I had shouted, I would have made no echo. When I tried to occupy myself with tasks and chores, even time was askew. Hours refused to budge, yet days went to no good use. I did not even have the usual troublesome company of sheep, for after Rob and I went our separate ways, that autumn at shipping time I sold my band of the sheep to provide for Adair and Varick living in town; somehow two households cost three times as much to run as one did. I told myself I would soon have heart enough again to go back into the sheep business, but I did not. Back there in my ocean fear, the worst that could happen was that my life might promptly end that way. Now the worst was that my life, without Varick at all, without Adair most of the time, without Anna yet, my so-called life might go on and on this way.

I believe this: my South Fork schoolhouse saved my sanity, gave

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

me a place to put my thoughts and not have them fly back shrieking into my face. Day after day I was mentally thankful for the classroom distraction of Paul Toski and his tadpoles in a jar; thankful, too, that he hadn't quite figured out how to jug up skunks, coyotes, bears. There was the slow circling intelligence of Nellie Thorkelson to watch, and to wonder where it would alight. There was Charlie Finletter's war cry at recess-time disputes with Bobby Busby, *you whistledick!* There was the latest generation of Roziars, none as lethal as Daniel but formidable enough, formidable enough.

During that school year and then next after that, Scotch Heaven saw Adair ensconced in a rented house in town with Varick and of course assumed that she and I had had a falling out and Rob was aloof to me because of that. But then glance out some sunny start-of-summer day and here Adair was, like the turn of the calendar from May into June each year, at the homestead with me again, wasn't she. And Varick nearby, working for Stanley at the ranger station or up in the national forest.

The McCaskills dwelt in some strange summer truce, did they? I knew not much more of it than you did, Scotch Heaven. I turned my brain inside-out with thinking, and still none of it came right. Varick, Adair, Rob, Anna as ever—each had extracted from my life whatever portions of themselves it suited them to, and I knew nothing to do but try to trudge along with whatever was left.

These were years, 1915 and 1916, when it seemed downright unpatriotic not to be thriving. I could stay as sunk as a sump if I wanted, but the homestead boom was rollicking along. 'Steaders were not only retaining those dry-land footholds of theirs that I thought were so flimsy and treacherous, they were drawing in more 'steaders; Montana in these years attracted like a magnet amid iron filings. And while the dry-land acres of farming extended and extended, even the weather applauded. The winters were open and mild. Each spring and summer, rain became grain. There was even more to it: thanks to the endless appetite of the war in Europe, the price of anything you could grow was higher than you had ever dreamed. I had been dubious about whether prairie and benchland ought to be farmed, had I? Obviously I didn't know beans from honey.

The other person who did not join in the almost automatic prosperity was named Rob Barclay. Not for lack of trying, on his part. But to my surprise, he sold the Two Medicine band of sheep even

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

before lambing time of the next spring after our split. Rob's decision, I learned by way of Lucas, was to put all his energy into land-dealing. *See now, there's just no end to people wanting a piece of this country:* I could hear him saying every letter of it. His misfortune in deciding to become a lord of real estate was that the buying multitudes had their own ideas. When Rob took the plunge of purchasing every relinquished homestead he could lay his hands on, under the notion of selling land to 'steaders as well as delivering them onto it, he then found that the next season's seekers were seeking elsewhere, out in the eastern sweeps of the state where there still was fresh—"free"—land for homesteading. When he decided next to enter the sod-breaking business, buying a steam tractor half the caliber of a locomotive and the spans of ripping plows and hiring the considerable crew for the huge apparatus, that was the season he discovered he was one of many new sodsters, so many that there wasn't enough /breaking business to go around. No, the more I heard of Rob's endeavors in these years, the more he sounded to me like a desperate fisherman trying to catch a bait grasshopper in his hat—always at least one jump behind, and sometimes several.

Hearsay was my only version of Rob Barclay now, and that was plenty for me. He and I had not spoken to one another since the day of severing our partnership, we tried not even to lay eyes on each other. This was the other side of the mirror of the past twenty-five years; the two of us who had built ourselves side by side into the Two Medicine country now were assiduously separate existences.

"Angus, it's not for me to say so," Ninian began once, "but it seems unnatural to see Robert and you—"

"—then don't say it, Ninian," I closed that off.

"Angus, lad," from Lucas toward the end of that time, "Robbie is losing his shirt in his land dealing, and he'd go all the way to his socks if I'd let him. By Jesus, I don't mind telling you it's time I straightened his head around for him again. So I'm going to back him in buying maybe fifteen hundred head of prime ewes. These prices for wool and lambs are just pure glorious. If I can talk Robbie into it, I wonder if you'd consider coming in with us on the deal."

"You can stop wondering, Lucas," I said, "because I won't do any considering of that sort."

And then it was our own war year, 1917. Wilson and America had been saying long and loud that they never would, but now

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

they were going into Europe's bloody mud with both feet. That first week of April, I put down the *Gleaner* with its declaration-of-war headline, I thought of the maw of trenches from Belgium all across France, and I felt as sick as I ever had. This was the spring Varick would finish high school in Gros Ventre. If the war did not stop soon, a war that had so far shown no sign it would ever stop, Varick in all soldier-age inevitability would go to it or be sent to it.

"Angus?" from Adair, one of that year's first summer evenings, the dusk long and the air carrying the murmur of the North Fork flowing high with runoff from the mountains. Her first evening at the homestead with me, now that the school year was done. Now that our son no longer had the safety of being a schoolboy. "I need to tell you. There's something terrible I wish. About Varick."

This was new. I have to truthfully say that each other June, Adair reappeared here in this house just as if she had never been away from me. The homestead simply seemed to take on a questioning air, the same as it had when she first came here, straight from our Breed Butte wedding. But this was open agitation of some sort.

"What's this now, Dair? I don't believe the terrible in anything you could—"

"I wish he'd lost that eye." She gazed at me steadily, her voice composed but sad. "When the stick of kindling flew up, that time, I wish now it had taken his eye, Angus."

"Because, because of the war, you mean."

"Is that wrong of me, Angus?" To wish a son saved, from the army, from the trenches, from metal death? When Samuel Duff enlisted, Ninian subscribed to the daily newspaper from Great Falls and the war news came to us in that, the battle for some French hill in one headline, the sinking of half a convoy in another, in pages worn from reading as they traveled up the North Fork valley. As if tribes were fighting in the night, and messengers were shouting guesses at us. A person had to wonder. Was this what all the effort, the bringing of yourself around the bend of the world to another life, the making of homesteads, raising of children, was this what it all came to? Our armies trading death with their armies?

"No," I answered my wife. "No, I can't see that you're wrong at all, Dair. You brought him into the world. You ought to have every right to wish the world wouldn't kill him."

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