

Only a night later, Adair and I had just gone to bed when the scuff of hooves arrived in the yard, then the creak of a saddle being dismounted from. I pulled clothes on, went and opened the door. To Rob.

Our stiff looks met one another. "I have something to say to Adair," was as much as he let me know.

From behind us, Adair's voice: "Anything you ever say to me, you say to Angus as well."

Rob stepped in around me, toward his sister. He began huskily, "Lucas—"

His voice cut off, swallowed by the emotion of his news. He did not really need to wrench out the rest; Adair and I knew the sentence.

"Do you know, Angus," Lucas's death spoke itself in Toussaint's words the afternoon of the funeral, "we thought he was funning us. Saturday night, everybody in the Medicine Lodge. Luke pouring drinks left, right, sideways. All at once, he says: 'My hands hurt. They're like fire.' We didn't know. To laugh or not. He rubbed both his stubs slow on his chest, like so. Then he fell. Doc was right there. But no use. Luke's heart went out, Doc says."

Lucas's funeral brought everyone. In its way, Gros Ventre itself seemed to attend, the town and its tree columns of streets at a respectful distance from the green graveyard knoll. Around me at his graveside, the years' worth of faces. Anna and Isaac. Rob and Judith. Duffs, Erskines, Frews, Findlaters, Hahns, Petersons, the rest. Varick arrived with Stanley Meixell, a faded but clean work-shirt on each of them, and strode across to join his mother and me, saying nothing to me. Nancy with us, too, not wearing widow's weeds . . . All of us, except the one whom death had chosen for this first whittle into us, Lucas's slit in the earth.

I blinked when Ninian Duff stepped from amid us to the head of the grave.

"I have asked Robert whether I may say some words over Lucas," he announced. The feedbag beard looked even mightier now that it had cloudswirls of gray in it. I could see in my mind how that asking went. Not even Rob could turn down Ninian.

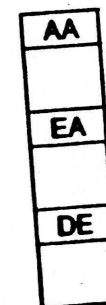
"It is no secret that Lucas and I did not see eye to eye about all of life." *Lad*, Lucas's voice to me in the Medicine Lodge that year

Rob and I arrived to Gros Ventre and the Two Medicine country, *how many Bibles do you suppose old Ninian's worn the guts out of?* "I bring no Bible here today," Ninian was all but thundering now, "yet there is one passage that I believe even Lucas would not overly mind to hear, if said in its proper light. It is of sheep, and those of us who make them our livelihood. One of the most ancient livelihoods, for as you will remember, Adam's first son Abel was a keeper of sheep." *Ninian, you're as spry as King David up on his hind feet.* "The old treasured words come to us from ancient Israel, where the tending of sheep was a work far different from the sort we know. The flocks of that ancient time were small in number and each sheep possessed its own name, and answered to that name when the familiar voice of his shepherd called forth." May we all go out with the timbre of a Ninian accompanying us; a voice such as that would shut down Hell. "Ay, and a shepherd of Israel did not herd his little flock from behind, as we do with our bands of a thousand and more. Rather, that shepherd of old went before his flock, finding out the safer ways, and his sheep followed him in confidence, depending upon him to lead them to safe watering places and to good pasturage." *The North Fork there, that's sinfully fine country. I'll tell you lads what may be the thing, and that's sheep. As sure as the pair of you are sitting here with your faces hanging out, sheep are worth some thinking about.* "And too, that same shepherd of Israel carried certain items necessary to the guarding and care of his sheep. His rod was a club of some heft, nailed through at one end, and was used for fighting off wild creatures and robbers. His staff was a longer, lighter tool, used to beat down leaves from trees and shrubs for his sheep to eat when the grass was short, and it had too a crook in one end, for the rescuing of sheep caught in the rocks or tumbled in a stream. Ay, very like our own sheephooks, they were." *I'll go with you on them. I'll partner the two of you in getting sheep. What do you say to the idea, Angus? Can I count on you both?*

Ninian paused, as if to let the wind carry his words where it wanted before he gave it more to transport. Then he resumed:

"Lucas was stubborn as a stone. They seem to be like that in Nethermuir. But he was no bad man. And like the others of us, all of us who draw breath, he is part of the flock who in one way or another speak through time in the words of the Twenty-third Psalm." Ninian's beard rose as he put his head back to recite:

"The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie



down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters . . . Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

*By Jesus, the woollies do make a lovely sight. If we could just sell them as scenery, ay?*

As the funeral crowd began to disperse, and Adair was taking condolences, I singled out Rob. I would rather have been made to pull my own toenails out one by one, but this I needed to do.

"Rob," I stepped in while several others were around him and his family, so that he had no private chance to ignore me, "see you a minute, I need to."

He aloofly followed down the slope of the graveyard after me, far enough where we wouldn't be heard.

I began with it. "I've a thing to ask of you."

"You can always try," issued back from him, wintry.

"The remembrance of Lucas for the *Gleaner*. I, I'd like to write it.

"You would, wouldn't you." It didn't come from Rob as any kind of commendation. "When all is done, you come prissing around wanting to have the saying of it, don't you. That's been a failing in you since—" Since the dock at Greenock, Rob, do you mean? Since the moment you and I put foot into Helena? Gros Ventre? Scotch Heaven? Where and when did I become something other than the Angus you have known the length of your life? Specify, Rob. If you can, man, specify. I'm here waiting.

He didn't finish, but went to: "Well, you've asked. And I'm telling you no, in big letters. I'll write that remembrance myself. It's for a Barclay to have final say about a Barclay. And Christ knows, you've never even come close to being one."

Two days from then, in the lawyer Dal Copenhever's office up over the First National Bank of Gros Ventre, Rob sat at one end of the arc of chairs in front of the lawyer's desk, I at the other with Adair and Nancy between us. Gros Ventre's streets of cottonwood trees had grown up through the years until they now made a shimmering green forest outside this second-story window, and I stared out into the lace of leaves while trying to collect my mind. The reading of Lucas's will was just over, and its effect was beginning.

"Dal, is this some sort of joke lawyers make?" Rob broke out. "To see if they can rile up the audience? If so, you've damn well succeeded in that."

The lawyer shook his head. "I've only read you what's on the paper. It's an unusual document, I'm the first to admit."

Unusual, he said.

*I, Lucas Barclay, being of sound and disposing mind and memory and mindful of the uncertainty of human life . . . do hereby make, publish and declare this to be my last will and testament . . .*

*First: I give and bequeath to Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks my residence in Gros Ventre, Teton County, Montana, and all my household furniture, linen, china, household stores and utensils, and all personal and household effects of whatsoever nature. Further, I direct that my business property, the Medicine Lodge Saloon, shall be sold, at public or private sale, by my executor; and that said executor shall pay over the proceeds of that sale, together with all funds on deposit under my name in the First National Bank of Gros Ventre, to Nancy Buffalo Calf Speaks in such monthly sums as may reasonably be expected to sustain her for the remainder of her life . . .*

Well and good, Lucas. Even Rob, after his involuntary grimace at the news of all that was being bequeathed to Nancy, did not seem unduly surprised. But the rest of that piece of paper.

*Second: I direct that my share of the sheep, approximately one thousand five hundred head, either owned outright by me or with my personal lien upon them, that are operated in partnership with Robert Burns Barclay, shall be conveyed thusly: said sheep I give and bequeath to Robert Burns Barclay, Adair Sybil McCaskill née Barclay, and Angus Alexander McCaskill, share and share alike, provided that they operate said sheep in partnership together for three years from the effective date of this will. I expressly stipulate that within that same period of time said sheep cannot be sold by the beneficiaries, nor the proceeds of any such sale derive to them, unless all three beneficiaries give full and willing agreement to such sale. In the event that said beneficiaries cannot operate in partnership and cannot agree unanimously to sell said sheep, my executor is directed to rescind said sheep and all rights thereunto from said beneficiaries and sell said sheep forthwith, with all proceeds of that sale to be donated to the*

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

municipality of Gros Ventre, Montana, for the express purpose of establishing a perpetual fund for the care and upkeep of the Gros Ventre cemetery.

. . . I hereby nominate and appoint Dalton Copenhaver to be the executor and trustee of this my last will.

← too much space?

"The three of us couldn't pet a cat together," from Rob now, thoroughly incredulous, "and Lucas full well knew that! So how in the hell are we supposed to run fifteen hundred head of sheep?"

With the supreme patience of a person being paid for his time, the lawyer stated: "If it's indeed the case that you can't cooperate in a partnership, then Lucas left you the remedy here in plain sight. The three of you only need to agree to sell, and the money from the sheep holdings can be split among you in equal shares."

From his face, Rob evidently didn't know which to be at this prospect of getting only a third of what he'd been anticipating, enraged or outraged. But at least he could be quickly rid of me by agreeing on sale of the sheep. "That's readily enough done," he spoke with obvious effort not to glare in my direction. I nodded sharp agreement. With all that lay between us, there was no way known to man by which the two of us could work as sheep partners again.

"No."

That from Adair. Rob cast her an uncomprehending glance and asked what my mind was asking too: "No what?"

"Just that." She returned Rob's gaze, gray eyes to gray eyes. "No."

Silence held the law office. Then the three male tongues in the room broke into wild chorus.

"Dair," I chided—

"Adair," Rob blurted—

"Mrs. McCaskill," the lawyer overrode us, "we must be very clear about this. You refuse to divide these sheep?"

Adair gave him a floating glance as if he was the biggest silly in the world, talking about dividing sheep as if they were pie pieces. "I refuse, yes, if that's what it has to be called."

In any other circumstance, I would have sat back and admired.

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

My wife looked as though she had a lifetime of practice at being an intractable heiress. Small, slim, she inhabited the big round-backed chair as if it were a natural throne. Not a quiver in the ringlets above her composed face. How many times had I seen this before. Wherever Adair was in that head of hers, she was firmly planted there. But as rich as the value was in watching Rob goggle at his sister, this was going to be expensive entertainment. Unless her *no* could be turned around, neither she nor I nor Rob was going to get so much as a penny from the sale of Lucas's sheep.

Rob gamely began on her. "Adair, what's this about? Unless you agree, the cemetery gets it all when the sheep are sold." Try his utmost, the look on Rob and the strain in his voice both told what a calamity he saw that as. *Robbie is losing his shirt in his land dealing, and he'd go all the way to his socks if I'd let him.* Well, well. The skin of Rob's feet were closer to touching disaster than I'd even thought. He was urging Adair now, "And surely to Christ that isn't what you want to happen, now is it?"

"Of course it isn't," she responded. "And you don't either." She regarded Rob patiently. "We can keep that from happening by the three of us running the sheep."

That brought me severely upright. Rob and I exchanged glances of grim recalcitrance.

"See now, Adair"—credit him, Rob sounded valiantly reasonable under the circumstances—"we can all grant that Lucas intended well with this piece of paper of his. But you know better than anyone that Angus and I—we'd just never jibe, is all. The two of us can't work together."

"You did," she said, cool as custard. "You can learn to again."

"Dair, it'd be craziness for us to even try," I took my turn at reasoning with her, past my apprehensions that reasoning and Adair weren't always within seeing distance of each other.

"Trying is never crazy," she reported as if telling me the weather. "Lucas wished us to try this together, and that's what we're going to do."

Rob shifted desperately around in his chair to confront the lawyer again. "Give us a bit of mercy here, why not. All that rant in the will about 'sound mind' and what is it, 'disposing memory' and such; surely to Christ this sheep mess Lucas came up with can't be called sane, am I right?"

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"It was up to Lucas to dispose of those sheep as he saw fit," responded Copenhaver. "All I can tell you is, this will is plainly legal in its language." He pushed the paper toward Rob. "And here's Lucas's signature validating it." Even from where Adair and I and Nancy sat, that royal coil of signature could be recognized. Lucas's stubs propelling a pen, proudly saying to Scotland, *This place Gros Ventre is a coming town*, leading Rob and me from Helena with its loops and swirls. *Why did I write it, after these years? Matters pile up in a person. They can surprise you, how they want out.* They were out now, weren't they, Lucas. You saying with this last signature of yours that Rob and Adair and I must make ourselves look at reconciliation, must face it if only to reject it.

"Moreover," the lawyer was asserting to Rob, "the will has been attested by the requisite two witnesses"—he glanced closer at the pair of much smaller ragged scrawls—"Stanley Meixell and Bettina Mraz."

Rob shot the accusatory question to Adair and me, but neither of us knew the name Bettina Mraz either.

"Bouncing Betty," said Nancy quietly.

The other four of us swung to Nancy in stupefaction. Her dark eyes chose Rob to look back at. The lifted middle of her lip made it seem as if she was curious to know what he would make of her news to him. "Wingo's 'niece,' once. A year, two, ago. Stanley's favorite. Young. Yellow hair. And—" Nancy brought her hand and arm up level with her breasts, measuring a further six inches or so in front of them. "Bouncing Betty," she explained again.

Rob was out of his chair as if catapulted now, his knuckles digging into the lawyer's desktop as he leaned forward to half-demand half-plead: "Dal, man, a will witnessed by a forest ranger and a whore can't be valid, can it?"

Adair faced around to Rob reproachfully. "Really now, Rob. Just because Stanley Meixell is a forest ranger doesn't give you reason to question—"

"Mrs. McCaskill," the lawyer put up a hand to halt her, "I imagine your brother has reference to the competency of Miss"—he checked again the bottommost signature on the will—"Mraz as a witness. But unless she has ever been convicted of practicing her purported profession, she is as competent to witness as any of us. And convictions of that sort are hardly plentiful in Montana, I would point out to you. No, there really isn't much hope of con-

testing this will on the basis of its witnesses, in my opinion. Nor on any other that I'm aware of."

Rob looked as if he'd been kicked on both shins. "Adair," he intoned to her bleakly, "you've got to get us out of this sheep mess Lucas put us in."

"You know how much I hate to admit it, Dair," I chimed in at my most persuasive, "but for once in his life Rob happens to be right."

She stated it for us once more. "No."

There was a long moment of silence except for the rattle of the breeze in the cottonwood trees. But everything in my mind was as loud as it could be and still stay in there. *Adair*, it banged again and again, *what now?*

"Gentlemen," the lawyer summed, "Mrs. McCaskill is entirely within her rights. If and when you three heirs decide to divide the sheep, I can draw up the necessary papers. But until that decision is reached, you are in the sheep business together."

At home that night, I tried again.

"Dair, I don't know what it is you want, in this matter of Rob and me."

"I want the two of you to carry out Lucas's wish."

"It's not as if I want to go against something Lucas had his heart set on."

"Then you won't," she said.

"If you want us back in the sheep business so badly, I'll find the money somewhere to buy a band of our own."

"We already have sheep," she instructed me, "as of today."

"Dair. Dair, you know as well as I do that there's every reason under the sun for me to say a *no* of my own." *No* to her hopeless notion that Rob and I together could ever run that band of sheep, *yes* to the perpetual upkeep of the green bed, ay, Lucas? *Yes* to a ruination of Rob, as glad a *yes* as I could utter.

"I'm hoping you won't. I'm asking you not to."

"Because why?"

"Because this is another chance, for each of the three of us. Angus, I've never asked you these words before, but I am now. Will you do this for me?"

Put that way, this notion of hers resounded. Put that way, it had an inescapable echo. Here was the other end of the bargain she

quietly broached to me those years ago: *You would still have a life to look ahead to.* Her acceptance, her grant, all through our marriage that I still loved Anna. And now this asking, that I make a demented try to partner with Rob again. Because why? Because for better or worse, Adair and I had each other, our marriage, until time told us otherwise. The Atlantic itself was a field of battle now; there could be no Scotland for Adair until the war wore itself out. Anna's Lisabeth was grown now, I had heard that she was going away to the teachers' college at Dillon in the fall, but Peter was still a few years from homeleaving. All the hinges that life turns on. And in the meantime Adair at last asking a thing of me, repeating it gently as if wondering aloud to herself:

"Will you, Angus?"

How many times had I seen this, now. A Barclay locked into an iron notion. Lucas becoming a builder of the Montana that had torn his hands from him. Rob so outraged toward me about Anna that he pried my son away from me. And now Adair bolting Rob and me into impossible partnership.

"Dair, I don't even want to be around the man. How under thunder am I supposed to run sheep with him?"

"The sheep won't care whether you and Rob have anything to say to one another."

I studied her. "Does Adair? Do you care?"

"In my way, I do."

I went to Breed Butte to begin lockstep sheep-raising.

The sheep were grazing complacently on the shoulder of the butte nearest Rob's reservoir. As I rode Scorpion across the narrow top of the dam I saw that Rob had been packing its dirt down again with the sheep, their small sharp hoofprints leaving every inch of it as pocked as a grater. The damn man and his damn dam.

Rob came out into his yard looking baleful in the extreme. I planted myself to face his harsh silence.

Nothing, from either of us.

Then some more of it.

Eventually I asked:

"How are we going to do this, by signal lamp?"

"Don't I wish."

"Rob, wishing isn't going to help this situation."

"You're one to tell me not to toss away life by wishing, are you. Surprising."

"We'd better stick to the topic of sheep."

Rob looked bleakly past me, down the slope of Breed Butte to the sheep shed that had been ours and now was mine. Then he shifted his gaze to the contented cloud of sheep. I followed his eyes there with my own. At least neither of us was new to the sheep part of this; after nearly thirty years, we could be said to have commenced at starting to make a stab at a beginning toward knowing a thing or two about the woollies.

After enough stiff silence, he made himself say it. "What brings you? Shearing?"

I confirmed with a nod.

He rapped back, "You know my thoughts on it. Or at least you goddamn ought to, after all these years."

"That doesn't mean I agree with them a whit," I pointed out. "I'm for shearing at the end of this month, to be as sure as possible of the weather."

"That's just the kind of pussyfoot idea you'd have, right enough. I say shear now and get the sheep up on the forest grass."

"You've said it, and I don't agree."

The next jerked out of him savagely, not simply at me but at the situation. "Goddamn it all to hell, this can never work. We both know Adair means well, but a half-assed situation like this, neither of us able to say a real yes or a real no—how to hell are we ever going to settle anything about the sheep?"

He was right about one matter. Nothing he or I could provide was going to ordain anything to the other. I reached in my pocket and showed him what Adair had handed me before I left the house.

Rob stared down at my hand, then sharply up into my eyes. "What's this, now?"

"What it looks like. A deck of cards. Adair says when we can't agree, we're to cut for who gets to decide."

"Jesus' suffering ass!" Rob detonated. "We couldn't run a flock of chickens on that basis, let alone fifteen hundred goddamn sheep!"

"Adair has one more stipulation," I informed him. "Low card always wins."

You never know. Adair's second stipulation so dumbfounded Rob

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

that his howl of outrage now dwindled to the weary mutter, "It'd take that sister of mine to think of that."

"Anyway it's a change from letting magpies decide," I reminded him. Turning around to Scorpion, I used the seat of his saddle to shuffle the cards on three times, then held the deck toward Rob: "Your cut."

He produced the five of diamonds.

Grabbing the deck as if he wanted it out of sight of him, he shuffled it roughly, then thrust it out to me.

I turned up the ten of clubs.

"Well, then," Rob ground out. "We'll shear now, won't we."

I nodded once, and left.

The summer went that way. The thousand and a half sheep and Rob and I and our goddess of chance, also known as Adair. To ask myself how I had got swallowed into all this was to bewilder myself even more, so I tried instead to set myself to wait it through. Waiting was what I had practice in by now.

The deck of cards did me one inadvertent favor. In early August, when I was trying to finish the last of haying, Rob and I cut cards to see who had to campend Davie that week, and I lost. Nothing to do but pocket my exasperation and begin the journey on Scorpion up into the national forest with the pack horse of Davie's supplies behind.

It was one of those mornings of Roman Reef looming so high and near in the dry summer air that my interest wandered aloft with it rather than toward the barbwire gate of the boundary fence I was nearing. When I came to earth and glanced ahead and discovered the person off his horse at the gate, performing the courtesy of waiting for me to ride through too before he closed it, at first his brown Stetson made me hope it was Varick. I saw in my next minute of riding up, no, not quite that tall and far from that young. Stanley Meixell.

"Hullo, Angus," the ranger spoke up as I rode through and stopped my horses on the other side of the gate. "What do you know for sure?"

Never nearly enough, Stanley. But aloud: "I know we could use rain."

"That we could. There's never enough weather in Montana except when there's too much of it."

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Both of us knew I had stopped for more than a climate chat. I threw away preamble and asked:

"How's Varick doing for you?"

"Just topnotch. He's about a man and a half on anything I put him to. Regular demon for work, and what he can't do a first time he learns before a next time gets here. I tell you, the Yew Ess Forest Service is proud of him." Stanley paused, then casually tacked on: "You maybe heard, he's getting to be just quite a brone stomper, too."

I had heard, unenthusiastically. The Sunday gatherings of young riders at the Egan ranch on Noon Creek were no longer complete without Varick atop a snorty horse, the report was.

Stanley studied me, then Roman Reef, as if comparison was his profession. "I guess you'd kind of like to know his frame of mind about you, Angus. It ain't real good."

"I wish that surprised me." What I went on to say did startle myself: "You know what it's about, this between Varick and me?"

"I do, yeah. Him and me had a session right after the blowup first happened between you two." Stanley regarded me thoughtfully for a moment before saying: "The ladies and us. Never as tidy as you'd think it ought to be, is it."

Definitely not for some of us, Stanley. Others of us, and I could name you one quick, the Bouncing Bettys ricochet soundlessly off of and never leave a whisper in the world.

"Angus, I've tried and tried to tell Varick to let it drop, the ruckus between him and you. And I'll keep on trying. But I've got to say, Varick ain't easy to budge, wherever he gets that from." Stanley paused again, then: "This probably don't help none, but my guess is it ain't just you that's burring him, Angus. It's him wanting to be away from home, get out in the world a little."

"He can be out in the world and still have a father."

"Yeah, I suppose. It's a whole hell of a lot easier for you and me to see that than it is for him, though."

It was my turn to glance away at Roman Reef. This deserved to be said, Stanley in his Stanley way had earned the hearing of it:

"Stanley. If I can't have Varick around me at this time of his life, there's nobody I'd rather he was with than you."

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

The only answer from under the brown hat was a brief session of throat-clearing. After a considerable moment: "Yeah, well, I better get on up the mountain. See you in choir practice, Angus."

At shipping time that fall, for once in our yoked partnership Rob and I did not need to cut the cards to find a decision.

"Ones like these, I'm going to take leave of my senses and go up to 20½ cents on," the lamb buyer offered. "However you Scotchmen manage to do it, you grow goddamn fine lambs."

While keeping a careful straight face Rob glanced at me. I was already glancing implacably at him. When we both nodded and got out ritual admissions that we supposed we could manage to accept such a sum of money, the flabbergasting deal was done. Eighty-five pounds per lamb × 1500 lambs × 20½¢. In the years of '93, Rob and I and all other sheepmen would have gone through life on our knees to get five cents a pound for our lambs instead of four, and now these unasked lofty prices of wartime. Life isn't famous for being evenhanded, is it.

"This doesn't mean one goddamn bit that I want to go through another year of this with you," Rob lost no time in imparting to me outside the stockyard as we were pocketing our checks. "If you had the least lick of sense, you'd go home right now and ask Adair if she won't let us sell the ewes this fall, too."

"I already asked," I gave him in identical tone. "She won't."

The next two months of numbers on the calendar, I hated to see toll themselves off. Why can't time creep when you want it to instead of when you don't. I stood it for half the toll, then on a mid-October Sunday afternoon I told Adair I was riding up into the foothills to see where our firewood was for this winter and instead rode across the shoulder of Breed Butte to Noon Creek.

Elderly Scorpion being pointed now to the country where I bought him: *Skorp Yun, lad, what about that?* What about it indeed. A woman looking up from the teacher's desk, a woman with the blackest of black hair done into a firm glossy braid, a glory of a woman: *I am called Anna Ramsay.* How long had it been in horse years, Scorpion? How long since Anna, at her schoolhouse or at the old Ramsay place, began being my automatic destination at Noon Creek? My destination anywhere in life, for that matter. But not

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

now, not today, not yet, when I was reining Scorpion instead toward the round corral at the Egan ranch.

He was there atop a corral pole with the other young Sunday heroes when I arrived. Varick, whom I had come to lay eyes on before the eleventh day of the next month made him eighteen years of age. Before he became war fodder.

He saw me across the corral as I dismounted. I gave him a hello wave, he nodded the minimum in return, and with public amenities satisfied, we left it at that. Maybe more would eventuate between us later, but I did not really expect so. No, today I simply was bringing my son my eyes, the one part of me he could not turn away from on such a public afternoon as this.

As I tied Scorpion where he could graze a little, I heard a chuckle from the passenger on a horse just arriving. "You are here to ride a rough one, Angus?"

I looked up, at the broad-bellied figure in the saddle. "That I'm definitely not, Toussaint. A bronc has to bring me a note of good behavior from his mother before I'll go near him. But you. What fetches you down from the Two Medicine?"

"The riding. The young men riding." As if such a sight was worth traveling all distances for. Well, I had come no small way myself, hadn't I, to peruse Varick.

I chatted with Toussaint about the fine green year, his job as ditch rider on the reservation's new Two Medicine irrigation canal—"Did you know a man can ride a ditch, Angus?"—the war in Europe—"those other places," he called the warring countries—until I saw the arrival of a buckboard drawn by a beautiful team of sorrels. My breath caught. But this time the Reese wagon was not driven by Anna but by Isaac, with the boy Peter beside him. I might have known that wherever horses were collected, here would be Isaac.

"Toozaun, Annguz," he greeted us benignly, and headed on toward the corral. Peter's eyes registered me but didn't linger, flew on to the happenings within the circle of poles. I felt relief that he didn't dwell on me. Yet some pang, too, that the immensity of the past between his mother and me did not even generate a speculative gaze from this boy. Add inches to him for the next year or two, 1918, 1919, and he would be out into life. About the time when

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Adair and Rob and I would have done our duty to Lucas's will and could all go our separate ways. I had thought through the arithmetic of these next few years a thousand times: the Reese nest would be empty and Anna would be able to judge just on the basis I had waited so long for, Isaac or me.

"That Isaac," declared Toussaint. "He knows."

I could feel my face going white or red, I couldn't tell which. I stared at Toussaint. "Knows?"

"He knows horses like nobody's business, that Isaac."

I recovered myself, told Toussaint it was time I became a serious spectator and found a place along the corral. Men *helloed* and *Angused* me in surprise as they passed. Quite a crowd in and on the corral by then. Besides Varick and Pat Egan's son Dill and other local sons, riders from the Double W and Thad Wainwright's Rocking T abounded here today, and just now, the last one they had been waiting for before starting was arriving with a whoop and a grin, young Withrow from the South Fork.

"Angus, good to see you here," Pat Egan called out as he came over to me. "Heard about the special attraction, did you?"

When my blank look said I'd heard no such thing, Pat told me that after the bronc riding there was to be a bucking exhibition of another sort. "Some guy from Fort Benton brought over this critter of his. Claims he's trained the thing to toss any rider there is. Our boys are going to have to show him how real riding is done, don't you think?"

Away went Pat, as he said, to get the circus started. Across the pole arena from me, the Withrow lad had climbed onto the fence beside Varick. "How you doing, Mac?"

"Just right, Dode. How about you?"

"Good enough, if they got some real horses here for us."

"They're rank enough, probably. I see you're dressed for the worst they can do, though." Withrow was always the dressiest in a crowd, and for today's bronc riding he sported a pair of yellow-tan corduroy trousers with leather trim at the pockets, new as the moment. Except for his habit of dressing as if he owned Montana, he was an engaging youngster, of a sheep-ranching family that had moved to the South Fork from the Cut Bank country in the past year or so. I perched there, watching Varick and Dode, listening to their gab of horses. Aching at the thought of how much of Varick I had not been able to know, these years of his climb into manhood.

Shortly the afternoon began to fill with horsehide and riders. Even just saddling each bronc was an exercise in fastening leather onto a storm of horse. The animal was snubbed to a corral post by a lasso tight around his neck while the saddlers did their work. Any too reluctant horse or a known kicker was thrown onto his side in the corral dirt and saddled while down. The rider would poise over him and try to socket himself into the saddle and stirrups as the horse struggled up. It looked to me like a recipe for suicide.

My throat stoppered itself when I saw that Varick had drawn one of the saddle-in-the-dirt rides.

"Watch out for when this sonofabitch starts sunfishing," I heard Dode counsel him, "or he'll stick your head in the ground."

Varick nodded, tugged his hat down severely toward his eyes, and straddled with care across the heaving middle of the prostrate pinto horse. Then said to the handlers: "Let's try him."

The pinto erupted out of the dirt, spurts of dust continuing to fly behind his hooves as he bucked and bounced, querously twisting his spotted body into sideways crescents as if determined to make his rump meet his head. While the horse leapt and crimped, Varick sat astride him, long legs stretched mightily into the stirrups. My blood raced as I watched. What son of mine was this? Somehow this bronc rider, this tall half-stranger, this Sunday centaur, was the yield of Adair and me. I was vastly thankful she was not here to see our wild result.

When Varick had ridden and the other braves of the saddle tribe had taken their turns at rattling their brains, Pat Egan hollered from beside the corral gate: "Time for something different, boys!"

Pat swung the gate open and in strolled a man and a steer.

At first glimpse, the Fort Benton critter looked like a standard steer. Red-brown, haunch-high to a horse, merely beef on the hoof. But when you considered him for a moment, this was a very veteran steer indeed, years older than the usual by not having gone the route to the slaughterhouse. An old dodger of the last battle, so to say. He was uniquely calm around people, blinking slow blinks that were halfway toward sleep as the onlookers gathered around him. The circle gave way considerably, however, when he lifted his tail like a pump handle and casually let loose several fluid feet of manure.

For his part, the Fort Benton man was a moonface with spectacles; a sort you would expect to see behind the teller's wicket in a





## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

bank instead of ankle deep into a corral floor. The fiscal look about him was not entirely coincidental. He was prepared, he announced, to provide twenty-five dollars to anyone who could ride this steer of his. He also would be amenable, of course, to whatever side bets anybody might care to make with him about his steer's invincibility.

At once, everybody in the corral voted with their pockets. All the young riders wanted a turn at the steer, or professed to. But the Fort Bentonian shook his head and informed the throng that was not how steer riding worked, it was strictly a one-shot proposition. One steer per afternoon, one rider per afternoon: what could be more fair? Then he set forth the further terms of steer riding, Fort Benton mode: the rider had to stay astride the steer for a total of three minutes in a ten-minute span. Naturally this Sunday assortment of bronc conquerors was free to choose the best rider among them—the bland spectacles suggested there had been a lot of other claims of “best” that came and went—and if the rider could stay on the steer the required sum of time, the twenty-five dollars was his.

Somebody spoke up: surely the steer impresario didn't mean three minutes straight, uninterrupted, aboard the animal, did he?

He did not. The rider could get off and on again any hundred number of times he wanted to during the overall time span. Did he need to add, he added, that the steer would be glad to help the rider with the offs.

What about a hazer, to even the odds for the rider getting back on?

The eyebrows lifted above the moonface in surprise. But the Fort Bentonian allowed that one man hazing on foot maybe wouldn't do lasting harm to his cherished pet.

I saw Isaac come into the corral, stoop, sight along the steer's backbone—I could all but hear him mentally compare it to a horse's—and then step over and gabble something to Varick, Dode Withrow and the others. They surveyed the territory for themselves, then somebody put it to the Fort Bentonian. How were they supposed to saddle something with as square a back as that?

Any old which way they desired, came the answer.

The young riders conferred again. Discussion bred inspiration. Could they tie on the saddle as well as cinch it?

They could entwine the steer a foot thick in rope if that was their way of doing things, the steer's spokesman bestowed, but they had better decide soon, as darkness was only hours away.

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

At last the terms of the contest were as clear as tongue could make them, and all bets were laid. Someone called out the next conundrum:

“Who's gonna climb on the thing?”

Faces turned toward Varick and the Withrow lad. Varick looked at young Withrow, and young Withrow at him. “Toss you for him, Dode,” offered my son.

“Heads, Mac. Let her fly.”

The silver dollar that spun into the air, I tried to exert to come down heads; not to send danger toward another man's son, simply away from my own. Name me one soul who could have done different. But I had my usual luck where Varick was concerned.

“You got on the wrong pants for riding a male cow anyway,” Varick consoled Dode after the coin fell tails. Then, “I guess I'm ready for this if your steer is, Mister Fort Benton.”

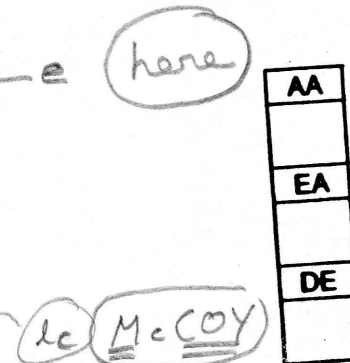
Varick and his adherents gathered around the steer. The steer blinked at them. As Dode Withrow approached with the saddle, someone moved from behind the steer to watch. The steer's right rear leg flashed, the hoof missing the pedestrian by an inch.

“Now, now, McCoy,” the Fort Bentonian chided his pet. “That's no way to act towards these boys.” He scratched the steer between its broad eyes as if it were a gigantic puppy, and it stood in perfect tranquility while Dode and the others saddled and trussed. The kick had done its work, though, as now both Varick and Dode, who was going to be his hazer, knew they would have to avoid the steer's rear area during the corral contest.

When the saddlers had done, a rope ran around the steer's neck and through the forkhole of the saddle. Two further ropes duplicated the route of the saddle cinch encircling, if that was the word for such a shape, the steer. And it had been Dode Withrow's ultimate inspiration to run a lariat around the animal lengthwise, chest to rump and threaded through the rigging rings of the saddle, like the final string around a package. “You people over her sure do like rope,” observed the Fort Bentonian.

Dode Withrow gripped the halter with both hands at the steer's jaw while someone passed the halter rope up to Varick. He took a wrap of it in his right hand and put his left into the air as if asking an arithmetic question in my classroom. He called to Pat Egan and the Fort Bentonian, the two timekeepers: “Let's try him.”

The moonface boomed out, “GO, MCCOY!” and the steer writhed



## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

his hindquarters as if he were now a giant snake. A giant snake with horns and hooves. Varick's head whipped sideways, then to the other side, like a willow snapping back and forth. Then the steer lurched forward and Varick whipped in that direction and back.

MURRRRAWWW issued out of McCoy, a half-bellow, half-groan, as he and Varick began storming around the circle of the corral. It was like watching a battle in a whirlwind, the steer's hooves spraying the loose minced dirt of the arena twenty feet into the air.

I watched in agony, fear, fascination. So I wanted to know about Varick's Sunday life, did I. We spend the years of raising children for this, for them to invent fresh ways to break their young necks?

At about McCoy's dozenth MURRRRAWWW, Varick continued left while the steer adjourned right.

"That was fifty-one seconds!" Pat Egan shouted out as Varick alit in the corral earth.

His words still were in the air when Dode dashed beside the steer to grab the halter rope. As he reached down for it, the animal trotted slightly faster, just enough to keep the rope out of reach. Dode speeded up. McCoy speeded up even more, circling the corral now at a sustained pace that a trotting horse would have envied. As the seconds ticked by in this round race between Dode and McCoy, it became clear what they used for brains in Fort Benton. Before the considerable problem of climbing onto McCoy and staying on, there was going to be the trickier problem of catching him each time.

Varick by now had scrambled to his feet and joined the chase. "I'll cut across behind the sonofabitch, you run him around to me," Dode strategized in a panting yell.

He started his veer behind McCoy. Sudden as a clock mechanism reaching the hour, McCoy halted in his tracks and delivered a flashing kick that missed Dode by the width of a fiddlestring.

But while McCoy was trying to send his would-be hazer into the middle of next week, Varick managed to lay hands on the halter rope and hold the steer long enough for Dode to gain control of the halter. Time sped as Dode desperately hugged McCoy by the head and Varick remounted, then the writhing contest was on again. The steer bounced around the arena always in the same direction, with the same crazy seesaw motion, and I thought Varick was beginning to look a bit woozy. Then MURRRRAWWW again and my son flew into the dirt another time.

"Another forty-six second!" shouted Pat. "That's five and a half

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

minutes," chimed the Fort Bentonian. Away went McCoy, away went the puffing Dode after him, in a repeat race until Varick managed to mount again and the bucking resumed.

They rampaged that way, McCoy and McCaskill, through three further exchanges, man onto steer, steer out from under man. Each time, Varick's tenancy atop McCoy was briefer; but each time added precious toward the three minute total of riding, too.

Now McCoy sent Varick cloudchasing again, and I half-hoped my stubborn son would find enough sense to give up the combat, half-wished his heavy plummet into the arena would conk him hard enough that he had to quit. But no, never. Varick was one long streak of corral dust, but he was onto his feet again, more or less. Gasping as if he'd been running steadily in tandem with McCoy ever since their bout began, he cast a bleary look around for his adversary. Over by the corral gate Dode Withrow had McCoy by the halter again, snugging the animal while urging Varick: "Now we got the sonofabitch, Mac! One more time!"

The steer casually studied young Withrow, then tossed his head and slung Dode tip over teakettle into the expanse of fresh green still-almost-liquid manure he had deposited just before the riding match commenced. The dazzling corduroy trousers and most other fabric on Dode abruptly changed color. While he slid and sloshed, the steer started away as if bored. But Varick had wobbled close enough to grab the halter rope as it flew from Dode, and now somehow he was putting himself aboard McCoy again.

The steer shook him mightily, but whatever wild rhythm McCoy was cavorting to, Varick also had found. The clamped pair of them, creature and rider, MURRRRAWWW and gritting silence, shot around the corral in a steady circle, if up-and-down isn't counted. Varick grasped the halter rope as if it was the hawser to life. McCoy quit circling and simply spun in his tracks like a dog chasing its tail. Varick's face came-went, came-went . . .

"Time!" yelled Pat Egan. "That's three minutes' worth! And still half a minute to the limit!"

"Whoa, McCoy," the Fort Benton man called out sourly. At once the steer froze, so abruptly that Varick pitched ahead into its neck. With a great gulp of air, Varick lowered himself from McCoy's back, held out the halter rope and dropped it.

Blurily my son located the figure, manure-sopped but grinning, of young Withrow.

"Dode," Varick called out, "you're awful hard on a pair of pants."

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*It is now one year, a year with blood on it, since America entered the war in Europe. Any day now, the millionth soldier of the American Expeditionary Force will set foot into France. Nothing would be less surprising, given the quantities of young men of Montana who have lately gone into uniform, than if that doughboy who follows the 999,999 before him in the line of march into the trenches should prove to be from Butte or from Hardin, from Plentywood or from Whitefish—or from here in our own Two Medicine country. We can but pray that on some future day of significance, a Pasteur or a Reed or a Gorgas will find the remedy to the evil malady of war.*

—GROS VENTRE WEEKLY GLEANER,  
APRIL 11, 1918

“*AS SURE as thunder falls into the earth and becomes stone,*” cried the king the next morning, “*I am struck dumb by what you are saying, Remembrancer! You can stand there in truth’s boots and say time will flee from us no matter what we do? The sparks as they flew upward from the fireplace last evening were not adding themselves into the stars? The whipperwhew of the night bird did not fix itself into the dark as reliably as an echo? The entire night that has just passed is, umm, past? Where’s the sense in all this remembering business, then?*”

“*Those things yet exist, sire. But in us now, not in the moments that birthed them.*”

“*If that is so, we’ll soon overflow! Puddles of memory will follow us everywhere like shadows! Think of it all, Remembrancer! The calm of a pond lazing as it awaits the wink of a skipping stone. The taste*

← increase type size to match other chapter headings--  
p. 1, p. 35, etc.

repeats from  
last line of p. 322

*pond lazing as it awaits the wink of a skipping stone. The taste of green when we thumb a summer pea from its pod. The icicle needles of winter. The kited fire of each sunrise. How can our poor heads hold the least little of all there is to remember? Tell me that, whoever can.”*

“Let’s stop there for today, Billy, thank you the world,” I called out from my perch at the rear of the classroom to the boy so earnestly reading aloud at my big desk.

Blinking regretfully behind his round eyeglasses, like a small owl coming out of beloved night into day, Billy Reinking put the place marker carefully into the book of stories and took his seat among my other pupils. “Now tomorrow,” I instructed the assortment of craniums in front of me, “I want your own poor heads absolutely running over with arithmetic when you walk into this schoolhouse, please.” Then out they went, to their saddle horses or their shoe-worn paths, Thorkelsons and Keevers and Toskis and the wan Hebner girl and the bright Reinking boy to their ’steader families in the south benchlands, the Van Bebber and Hahn girls up the South Fork, the Busby brothers and the new generation of Roziers and the Finletter boy down the main creek.

After watching them scatter like tumbleweeds, I picked my own route through the April mud to my new mount, a lively bay mare named Jeannette. Scorpion I’d had to put out to pasture, he was so full of years by now. I felt a little that way myself—the years part, not the pastured one—as I thought of the lambing shed duties waiting for me before and after supper. Of Rob, scowling or worse, telling me in fewest words which of the ewes were adamant against suckling their newborn and needed to be upended so their lambs could dine. I would like to see the color of the man’s hair who could look forward to ending his day with stubborn ewes to wrestle and Rob Barclay as well.

Prancy Jeannette and I entered the wind as soon as we rounded the base of the knob hill and were in the valley of the North Fork, but it was not much as Montana breezes go. Reassuring, in a way. The waft felt as if it was loyally April and spring, not a chilly left-over of winter. My mood went up for the next minutes, until I rode past the Duffs’, where Ninian was moving a bunch of ten-day lambs and their mamas up the flank of Breed Butte onto new grass. Across the distance I gave him a wave, and like a narrow old tree with one



warped branch Ninian half-lifted an arm briefly in return and let it drop.

I rode up on the North Fork, in the mix of fury and sorrow that the sight of Ninian stirred in me. Scotch Heaven now had its first dead soldier, Ninian and Flora's son Samuel. Long-boned boy fascinated with airplanes and wireless. Little brother of the immortal Susan. Heir to all that Ninian and Flora had built here in the North Fork the past thirty years. Corpse in the bloody mud of France. A life bright against the dark/but death loves a shining mark. Samuel was our first casualty but inevitably not our last. Suddenly every male in Montana between milkteeth and storeteeth seemed to have gone to the war. Was it happening this drastically in all of America? A nation of only children and geezers now? Why wouldn't Europe sink under the Yankee weight if our every soldier-age man was arriving over there? Of my own generation, only Allan Frew was young enough to enlist, and he of course figured on settling the war by himself. But our sons, our neighbors, boy upon boy upon boy who had been pupils of mine, were away now to the war. Maybe that was my yearfull feeling, the sense of being beyond in age whatever was happening to those who were in the war. Yet, truthfully, who of us were not in it? Here at our homestead that I was riding into sight of, Adair would be in her quiet worry for Private Varick A. McCaskill of Company C, 361st Regiment, 181st Brigade, 91st Division, in training at Camp Lewis in the state of Washington. And Anna, invisible but ever there, on the other side of Breed Butte from me Anna was doubtless riding home now from the Noon Creek school just as I was from mine, maybe with her own thoughts of pupils who already were in the trenches of France but definitely with the knowledge that her own son Peter was destined into uniform, too, if the war went into another year. Like the inescapable smoke of the summer of 1910, the war was reaching over the horizon to find each of us.

"Hello, you," I gave to Adair as spiritedly as I could when I came up from the lambing shed to supper.

She knew my mood, though. She somehow seemed to, these days. The winter just past was the first that Adair and I had spent together since Varick turned his face from me. The first, too, of trying to live up to this horn-locked partnership with Rob. To my

surprise, when he and I had begun feeding hay to the sheep, she insisted on getting into her heavy clothes and coming with me. *I can drive the sled team for you*, she said, and did. Of course the reason was plain enough. She was putting herself between the slander Rob and I could break into at the least provocation. And it had worked. Seeing her there at the front of the hayrack, small bundled figure with the reins in her hand, seemed to tell both her brother and me that we may as well face the fact of her determination and plod on through this sheep partnership. At least that was my conclusion. I could never speak for Rob these days. By midway through the winter I was able to tell Adair she could abstain from her teamstering. *Rob and I are never going to be a duet, but we can stand each other for that long each day*. She scrutinized me, then nodded. *But you'll let me know if you need me again?* I hoped it would never be again that I needed her between myself and Rob, but I answered, *Dair, I'll let you know. I most definitely will*.

"How many today?" Adair asked as she began putting supper on the table.

"Forty," I gave the report of the day's birth of lambs.

She gave me a smile. "I'm just as glad you didn't bring them all in for the oven at once." I had to laugh, but I was still hearing her *how many?* question. This was the first lambing time Adair had ever asked that, night after night, the first time she had shown interest in the pride and joy of any shedman, his daily tally of new lambs. A new ritual, was this. Well, I would take it. Anything that emphasized life, I would gladly take.

At the end of May came our news of where Varick would be sent next by the army.

*It's going to look just a whole lot like where I've been*, he wrote in the brief letter to Adair. *Maybe because it's the same place*.

He was staying stationed at Camp Lewis, he explained, in a headquarters company. *They think they found something I can do, without me jeopardizing the entire rest of the army, so for now they're going to keep me here to do it. So here I stay, for who knows how long. I sure as h— don't, and I think maybe the army doesn't either*.

As they did each time, Varick's words on the paper brought back the few that had passed between him and me before he went off to the army. He had ridden into the yard just after I had come home

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from the school. I stepped out of the house to meet him. He dismounted and said only, *I came to see Mother.*

*Unless you close your eyes quick, you'll see me, too,* I tried.

No grin at all from him. Well, that could be because of the war rather than just me. But for three years it hadn't been.

*Your mother's out at the root cellar,* I informed him. But I couldn't stand this. Since time out of mind, Varick was the first McCaskill to wear the clothes of war. A ticket of freedom had let my great-grandfather shape the blocks of stone at the Bell Rock rather than face the armies of Napoleon. Neither my Nethermuir grandfather nor my deaf father were touched by uniform, nor was I. Which led inexorably to the thought that Varick was bearing the accumulated danger for us all.

*Varick. Son. Can't we drop this long enough to say goodbye? Who knows when—if, I thought—I'll see you again.*

*Sure, we can say that much.* And that was going to be all, was it. Varick held no notion that this could be our last occasion. He was at that priceless age where he thought he was unkillable. He drew a breath, this man suddenly taller than I was, and came to me and thrust out his hand. *Goodbye then.*

*Goodbye, Varick. Your mother . . . and I . . . you'll be missed every moment.*

I saw him swallow, and then he went off around the house to the root cellar. I felt my eyes begin to stream, tears that have been flowing since the first man painted blue fought the first man painted green and still have not washed away war.

Now Adair was putting Varick's letter in the top drawer of the sideboard with his others. Without turning, she asked, "And which do we hope for now, Angus? That they keep him and keep him in that camp, or that they ship him to France?"

I knew what was in her mind, for it was abruptly and terribly at the very front of mine as well. The army camps were becoming pestholes of influenza. Generally that was not something to die of, but people were dying of it in those camps. We had heard that the oldest son of the Florians, a 'steader family south of Gros Ventre, was already buried at a camp in Iowa before his parents even had word that he was ill. And now there in the midst of it at Camp Lewis was going to be our son, the child who came down with something in even the mildest of winters; Varick would be a waiting can-

didate for influenza as the months of this year advanced. But to wish him into the shrapnel hell of the fighting in France, no, I never could. Twin hells, then, and our son the soldier being gambled at their portals.

In earliest June, Rob and I met to cut the cards for a shearing time. This year mine was the low card, contradictory winner in Adair's order of things, and so we would shear later in the month, when I thought the weather was surest. Rob looked as sour as usual at losing, but before I could turn away to leave, he broke out with: "Any word from the Coast lately?"

By that he meant the Pacific Coast and Camp Lewis and Varick, and I stood and studied him a moment. We would never give each other the satisfaction of saying so, but he and I at last did have one thing we agreed on, the putrid taste of the war. *They're rabid dogs fighting in a sack, England and Germany and France and all of them,* I had heard him declare in disgust to Adair. *Why're we jumping in it with them?* Yet I knew, too, that the war's high prices for wool and lambs were the one merit he found in this partnership of ours. Well, nobody ever said Rob Barclay was too insubstantial to carry contradictions.

"Nothing new," I said shortly, and turned from him.

In the Fourth of July issue of the *Gleaner* was published the Two Medicine country's loss list thus far in the war.

THE MEN WHO GAVE ALL

*Adams, Theodore, killed in action at Cantigny.*

*Almon, John, fought in the taking of Boureches, died of wounds.*

*Duff, Samuel, killed by a high explosive shell in the Seicheprey sector.*

*Florian, Harold, contracted influenza and died at Camp Dodge, Iowa.*

*Jebson, Michael, while returning from a furlough, was killed in a train wreck between Paris and Brest.*

*McCaul, George, saw service in France, taken ill with influenza, died in hospital of lobar pneumonia.*

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

*Ridpath, Jacob, killed in action at Château-Thierry.*

*Strong Runner, Stephen, entered the service at Salem Indian Training School in Oregon, died of tuberculosis at the Letterman General Hospital, San Francisco.*

*Zachary, Richard, killed in action at Belleau Wood.*

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A hot noon in the third week of August, the set of days that are summer's summer. I had my face all but into the washbasin, gratefully swashing off the sweat of my morning's work with cupped handfuls of cool well water, when Adair's hand alighting on my back startled me.

"Angus," she uttered quietly, "look outside. It's Rob coming. And Davie."

The first of those was supposed to be taking his turn at camptending our herder with the sheep up in the mountains, and the other was that herder. They could not possibly both be here, because that would leave the sheep abandoned and—yet out the west window, here they both came, slowly riding.

I still was mopping myself with the towel as I flung out to see what this was, Adair right after me. At the sight of us, Rob spurred his horse ahead of the lagging Davie and dismounted in a hurry almost atop Adair and myself.

"Davie's come down ill," he reported edgily. "I didn't know what the hell else to do but bring him out with me. It's all he can do to sit on that horse." Rob looked fairly done in himself, showing the strain of what he'd had to do. His voice was rough as a rasp as he went on: "Davie has to be taken on home to Donald and Jen, but one of us has got to get up there to those sheep, sharp. Do we cut to see who goes?"

"No, I'll go up. You tend to Davie." I stood planted in front of Rob, waiting for what he would be forced to tell me next.

"The sheep are somewhere out north of Davie's wagon, a mile or so more. I threw them into the biggest open patch of grass I could." He told it without quite managing to look at me. If you ever wanted to see a man cause agony in himself, here he was. Leaving a band of sheep to its own perils went against everything in either of us. I could all but see the images of cliff, storm, bear, mountain lions, coyotes, stampeding in Rob's eyes; and for a savage moment I was glad it was him and not me who'd had to abandon that band to bring Davie.

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

I went over to the sagging scarecrow on the horse behind Rob's. "Davie, lad, you're a bit under the weather, I hear."

His feverish face had a dull stricken look that unnerved me more than had his bloody battered one beneath the horse's hooves, the day of that distant spring when Adair and I jolted across the Erskine field to him; that day. Now Davie managed in a ragged near-whisper, "Couldn't . . . leave the . . . sheep."

"I'm going up to them this minute. The sheep will be all right, Davie, and so will you." If saying would only make either of those true.

As Rob and his medical burden started down the valley toward Davie's parents' place, I headed for the barn to saddle the bay mare. I hadn't gone three steps when I heard: "Angus. I'm coming with you."

I turned to my wife, to the gray eyes and auburn ringlets that had posed me so many puzzles in our years together. "You don't have to, Dair. I'll only be a day or so, until Rob can fetch another herder up."

"I'm coming anyway."

I hesitated between wanting her along and not wanting her to have to face what might be waiting up there, a destroyed band of sheep. The wreck of all our efforts since the reading of Lucas's will. "The sheep are a hell of a way up onto the mountain, Dair." I jerked my head to indicate Roman Reef standing bright in the sun, its cliffs the color of weathered bone. "It's a considerable ride."

"Adair knows how to ride, doesn't she."

True. But true enough? The saddle hours it would take to climb Roman Reef, through the sunblaze of the afternoon heat, to the grim search for adrift sheep—I recited the reasons against her coming, then asked: "Do you still want to?"

I swear she said this, as if the past twenty-one years of her avoidance of the Two Medicine country's mountainline were unceremoniously null and void. She said, "Of course I want to."

All afternoon Adair and I went steadily up and up, not hurrying our saddlehorses but keeping them steady at the pace just short of hurry. At midpoint of the afternoon we were halfway up Roman Reef, the valley of the North Fork below and behind us, Scotch Heaven's log-built homesteads becoming dark square dots in the





## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

distance. Our own buildings looked as work-stained as any. Then a bend of the trail turned us north, and the valley there was Noon Creek's, with the Reese ranch in easy sight now. Easy sight to where Anna was. Anyone but me would not have known the years and years of distance between.

At the next climbing turn of the trail I glanced back at Adair. She had on Varick's old brown Stetson he had left home when he went away to the army, and her riding skirt, and a well-worn blouse that had begun as white and now was the color of cream. My unlikely wife, an unlikely mote of light color against the rock and timber of the mountain. I wondered if she at all had any of the division of mind I did on this journey of ours. Part of me saw, desperately, that if the sheep had found a way to destroy themselves since Rob left them atop this mountain, Adair and I would possess what we had on our backs and that homestead down there and the rest you could count in small coins. Yet if the sheep were gone, stampeded all over the hemisphere, eaten, dead a myriad of ways, that also would mean the end of my teeth-gritting partnership with Rob. As we climbed and climbed, there was a kind of cruel relief for me in the fact that the sheep in their woolheaded way were doing the deciding, whether this enforced pairing of Rob and myself was to be the one thing or the other.

Atop, with the afternoon all but gone, Adair and I urged our horses toward where Davie's sheepwagon showed itself like a tall canvas igloo on wheels. Rob had shut Davie's dog in the sheepwagon so that he wouldn't follow down the mountain. When I unjailed him he came out inquisitive as to why I was not Davie, but otherwise ready to participate. I climbed back on my horse, leaned down from the saddle and called, "Come up, Scamp. Come up, boy."

The dog eyed me a moment to see if I really meant such a thing, then crouched to the earth and sprang against my leg and the stirrup leather, scrambling gamely as I boosted him the rest of the way into my lap. There across my thighs between the saddle horn and my body he at once lay quiet, exactly as if I had told him to save all possible energy. If the sheep were not where Rob had left them, this dog was going to have to work his legs off when we found them. If we found them. If we found them alive.

Adair and I and my border collie passenger in about a mile found

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

what I was sure was the meadow Rob had described, and no sheep. An absence of sheep, a void as stark as a town empty of people. We sat on our horses and listened. Except for the switching sounds of our horses' tails, the silence was complete. I put the dog down. "Find them, Scamp." But the sheep had been over so much of the meadow that the dog could only trace out with his stymied dashes what I already knew, that some direction out of this great half-circle of grass they had quit the country.

Below us the last sunshine was going from the plains, the shadow of these mountains was now the first link of dusk. This meadow in the fading light looked like the most natural of bedgrounds for sheep. Tell that to the sheep, wherever the nomadic bastards had got to. Here Rob had made his decision that flung the sheep to their own wandering. Now I had to make mine to consign them to their own perils for the night.

"We'll take up the looking in the morning, Dair. It won't help anything for us to tumble over a cliff up here in the dark."

Back at the sheepwagon, Adair began fixing supper while I picketed our horses and fed Davie's dog. Then I joined her in the round-topped wagon, inserting myself onto the bench seat on the opposite side of the tiny table from the cooking area. That was pretty much the extent of a sheepwagon, a bench seat along either side, cabinets above and below, the bunk bed across the wagon's inmost end and the midget kitchen at its other. I suppose a fastidious cook would have been paralyzed at the general grime of Davie's potwear and utensils. Adair didn't seem to notice. She gave me a welcoming smile and went on searing some eggs in a black-crustied frying pan.

I sat watching her, and beyond her, out the opened top half of the wagon's Dutch door, the coming of night as it darkened the forest trees. So here we are, Dair. The McCaskills of Montana. After twenty-one years of marriage, cooped in a mountaintop sheepwagon. Sheepless. All the scenery we can eat, though. Not exactly what you had in mind for us when you contrived that will of yours, ay, Lucas? Somewhere out there in the prairie towns, Rob was scouring for a herder in these hireless times, at Choteau or Conrad if none was to be had in Gros Ventre, as there likely wasn't. Everyone in the war effort, these days. It was an effort, they were most definitely right about that.



## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

After we had eaten, I leaned back and looked across at this wife of mine. Those twin freckles, one under each eye, like reflections of the pupils. Flecks of secondness, marks of the other Adair somewhere within the one I was seeing. I asked, "How do you like shepherding, so far?"

"The company is the best thing about it."

"You have to understand, of course, this is the deluxe way to do it. Usually there are a couple of thousand noisy animals involved." *Sheep sound like the exact thing to have*, Rob responding to Lucas's suggestion of our future in my newfound valley called the North Fork. *Now if we only had sheep.*

"Tomorrow will tell, won't it," she answered my spoken and unspoken disquisitions on sheeplessness.

Well, if today was its model for revelation, it would. Adair volunteering herself into these mountains: I could have predicted forever and missed that possibility.

My curiosity was too great to be kept in. "Dair, truth now. Coming up here today where you could see it all, what did you think of it?"

In the light of the coal-oil lantern, her eyes were darker than usual as she searched into mine.

"The same as ever," she told me forthrightly, maybe a bit regretfully. "There is so much of this country. People keep having to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much. Distance. Weather. The aloneness. All the work. This Montana sets its own terms and tells you, do them or else. Angus, you and Rob maybe were made to handle this country. Adair doesn't seem to have been."

"For someone who can't handle that"—I inclined my head to the sweep of the land beneath our mountain—"you gave a pretty good imitation today."

"Such high praise," she said, not at all archly, "so late at night."

"Yes, well." I got up and stepped to the door for one last listen for the sheep. The dark silence of the mountains answered me. I turned around to Adair again, saying "Night is what we'd better be thinking about, isn't it. That bed's going to be a snug fit."

Adair turned her face toward me in the lanternlight. She asked as if it was the inquiry she always made in sheepwagons: "Is that a promise?"

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

The buttons of that creamy blouse of hers seemed to be the place to begin answering that. Then my fingers were inside, on the small pert mounds of Adair's breasts, and eventually down to do away with her riding skirt. Her hands were not idle either; who has said, *the one pure language of love is Braille*? If no one else, the two of us were inscribing it here and now. We did not interrupt vital progress on one another even as I boosted Adair into the narrow bunk bed and my clothes were shed beside hers. Two bodies now in the space for one, she and I went back and forth from quick hungers of love, our lips and tongues with the practice of all our years together but fresh as fire to each other, too, to expectant holidays of slow soft stroking. Maybe the close arch of canvas over us cupped us as if in a shell, concentrating us into ourselves and each other. Maybe the bachelor air, the sheepwagon's accumulated loneliness of herders spending their hermit lives, fed our yearning. Maybe the desperation of the day, of the marriage we somehow had kept together, needed this release. Who knew. It was enough for Adair and me that something, some longing of life, had us in its supreme grip. Something drives the root, something unfolds the furrow: its force was ours for each other, here, now.

As ever, Adair's slim small body beneath mine was nothing like Anna's the single time it had been under mine; as ever, our love-making's convulsion was everything like Anna's and mine. Difference became sameness, there in our last straining moments. This was the one part of life that did not care about human details, it existed on its own terms.

At first hint of dawn, we had to uncoil ourselves from sleep and each other. No time for a breakfast fire, either; the two of us ate as much dried fruit from Davie's grocery supply as we could hold, and then we were out to our saddle horses and the eager dog. As we set off into a morning that by now was a bit fainter than the darkness of night, my hope was that we were getting a jump on the sheep of maybe an hour.

That hour went, and half of another, before we had sunrise. Adair and I tied the horses and climbed up to an open outcrop of rock where we could see all around. As we watched, the eastern sky converted from orange to pink. Then there was the single moment, before the sun came up, when its golden light arrived like spray



for two

above a waterfall. The first hot half of the sun above the horizon gave us and the rock outcroppings and the wind-twisted trees long pale-gray shadows. Scrutinize the newly lit brow of the mountain as we did, though, there were no shadows with sheep attached to them.

"All this," Adair said as if speculating, "you'd think something would move. Some motion, somewhere."

I took her arm to start us down from the vantage point. "We're it, Dair. Motion is our middle name until we catch up with those goddamn sheep."

We worked stands of timber. Sheep sifted out of none of them.

We cast looks down over canyon cliffs. No wool among the harsh scree below.

We found at least three meadows where the grass all but shouted invitation to be eaten by sheep. All three times, no least trace of sheep.

Two hours of that. Then another. Too much time was passing. I didn't say so, but Adair knew it, too. The day already was warm enough to make us mop our brows. If we didn't find the sheep by ten o'clock or so, they would shade up and we would lose the entire hot midpart of the day without any bleats of traveling sheep to listen for.

Now Adair and I were ears on horseback, riding just a minute or two and then listening. How could there be so much silence? How could the invisible ligaments that bound the sky to the earth not creak in tense effort at least once in a while?

But nothingness, mute air, answered us so long and so steadily that when discrepancy finally came, we both were unsure about it.

I shot a glance to Adair. She thought she had heard it, too, if you could call that hearing. A sliver of sound, a faintest faraway *tink*.

Or more likely a rock dislodging itself in the morning heat and falling with a *clink*?

The dog was half-dozing in my lap. One of his ears had lifted a little, not enough to certify anything.

Adair and I listened twice as hard as before. At last I had to ask, low and quick, "What do you think, Dair?"

She said back to me in a voice as carefully crouched as my own: "I think it was Percy's bell."

By now we were past mid-morning, not far short of ten. We could

nudge our horses into motion toward the direction where we imagined we'd heard the *tink* and risk losing any repeat of it in the sounds of our riding. Or we could sit tight, stiller than stones, and try to hear through the silence.

With her head poised, Adair looked as if she could sit where she was until the saddle flaked apart with age. I silently clamped myself in. I say silently. Inside me my willed instructions to the bell wether clamored and cried. *Move, Percy, I urged. Make that bell of yours ring just once, just one time, and I promise I'll feed you graham crackers until you burst. If you're up, don't lie down just yet. If you're down, for Christ's sake get up. Either case, move. Take a nice nibble of grass, why not, make that bell—*

The distant little clatter came, and Davie's dog perked up in my lap. I put him down to the ground and away he went, Adair and I riding after him, in the direction of the bell.

But for the dog, we still would have missed the sheep. They were kegged up in a blind draw just beneath a rimrock, as if having decided to mass themselves to make an easy buffet for any passing bear. The dog glided up the slope and over into the draw, we followed, and there they were, hundreds of gray ghosts quiet in the heat, contemplating us remorselessly as we rode up.

Adair anxiously asked, "Is it all of them?"

"I can't tell until I walk them. Make the dog stay here with you, Dair."

I went slowly on foot to the sheep, easing among them, moving ever so gradually back and forth through them, a drifting figure they did not really like to accept but did not find worth agitating themselves about. All the while I scanned for the band's marker sheep. Found Percy, with his bell. Found nine of the ten black ewes, but not the tenth. Found the brownheaded bum lamb with the lop ear, but did not find the distinctive pair of big twin lambs with the number brand 69 on their sides.

When I had accounted for the markers that were and weren't there, I went back down the slope to Adair.

"Most of them are here," I phrased it to her, "but not quite all."

It was noon of the next day before Rob appeared with a herder in tow, a snuff-filled Norwegian named Gustafson. "And I had to go all the way to Cut Bank even to come up with him," Rob





## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

gritted out. His eyes were on the sheep, back and forth across them, estimating. "Much loss?"

"At least a couple of hundred, maybe a few over."

"Lambs, do you mean? Or that many ewes and lambs together? Spit it out, man."

And so I did. "That many of each, is what I mean."

Rob looked as if my words had taken skin off him in a serious place. In a sense, they had. He knew as well as I did that such a loss would nick away our entire year's profit. But dwelling on it wasn't going to change it, was it. I asked him, "How's Davie?"

"Sick as a poisoned pup." Rob cast a wide gaze around, as if hoping to see sheep peeking at him from up in the treetops, out the cracks in rocks, anywhere. "Let's don't just stand here moving our mouths," he began, "we've got to get to looking—"

"Dair and I have done what looking we could," I informed him, "and now that you're here, the three of us can try some more. But there hasn't been a trace of the rest of the sheep. Wherever the hell those sheep are, they're seriously lost."

We never found them. From that day on, the only existence of those four hundred head of vanished sheep was in the arithmetic at shipping time; because of them, our sheep year of 1918 subtracted down into a break-even one. Not profit, not loss. Neither the one thing nor the other.

"Sweet suffering Christ," Rob let out bitterly as we stuffed the disappointing lamb checks into our shirt pockets. "What does it take, in this life? I put up with this goddamn partnership Adair keeps us in, and for no pay whatsoever?"

"Just think of all the exercise we get out of it, Rob," I answered him wearily.

By that September day when we shipped the lambs and turned toward the short weeks before winter, Davie had recuperated. His malady stayed on among us, however. Doc Murdoch could not account for how the illness had found Davie, as remote and alone on his mountainside as a person could ever be, but he was definite in his dire diagnosis: this was the influenza which had first bred in the army camps. Here in its earliest appearance in Scotch Heaven, it let Davie Erskine live, barely, while it killed his father.

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

From all we heard and read, the influenza was the strangest of epidemics, with different fathoms of death—sudden and selective in one instance, slow and widespread in another. Donald Erskine's fatality was in the shallows, making it all the more casual and awful. One morning while he and Jen were tending Davie, he came down with what he thought was the start of a cold, and by noon he was feeling a raging fever. For the first time since childhood, he went to bed during the day. Two days after that, the uneasy crowd of us at the Gros Ventre cemetery were burying that vague and generous man.

*Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.* Donald Erskine and Ninian Duff were the first who homesteaded in Scotch Heaven, and now there was just Ninian. I only half heard Ninian's grief-choked Bible words, there at graveside. I was remembering Adair and myself, our night together in Davie's sheep-wagon, our slow wonderful writhe onto and into each other, there on his bedding. Davie had not been in that wagon, that bed, for some days before his illness, tepeeing behind the sheep as he grazed them on the northern reach of the mountain. Had he been, would one or both of us now be down with the influenza? Or be going into final earth as Donald was? *Ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken . . .* My thoughts went all the way into the past, to my family's house of storm in Nethermuir. To Frank and Jack and Christie, my brothers and sister I never really knew, killed by the cholera when I was barely at a remembering age. To the husk that the McCaskill family was after that epidemic; my embittered and embattled parents, and the afterthought child who was me. Thin as spiderspin, the line of a family's fate can be. *Or the pitcher can be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern . . .* And now another time of abrupt random deaths? What kind of a damn disease was this influenza, a cholera on modern wings? With everything medicine can do, how could all of life be at hazard in such a way? Maybe Ninian had an answer, somewhere in the growlings of John Knox that a fingersnap in heaven decided our doom as quick as we were born. I knew I didn't have one. *Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was . . .*

Adair and I were silent on our wagon ride home from Donald's funeral. I supposed her thoughts were where my own were, at

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Camp Lewis. Winter was not far now, Varick's frail season. What chance did he have, there in one of the cesspools of this epidemic?

What chance did anyone have, the question suddenly began to be. You couldn't turn around without hearing of someone having lost an uncle in Chicago, a cousin in Butte, a sister on a homestead east of Conrad. Distant deaths were one thing. News of catastrophe almost next door was quite another. At a homestead on the prairie between Gros Ventre and Valier a Belgian family of six was found, the mother and four children dead in their beds, the father dead on the floor of the barn where he had tried to saddle a horse and go for help.

People were resorting to whatever they could think of against the epidemic. Out on the bare windy benchlands, 'steeper families were sleeping in their dirt cellars, if they were lucky enough to have one, in hope of keeping warmer than they could in their drafty shacks. Mavis and George Frew became Bernarr Mcfadden believers, drinking hot water and forcing themselves into activity whenever they felt the least chill coming on. Others said onion syrup was the only influenza remedy. Mustard plasters, said others. Whiskey, said others. Asafetida sacks appeared at the necks of my schoolchildren that fall. When a newspaper story said masks must be worn to keep from breathing flu germs, the Gros Ventre mercantile sold out of gauze by noon of that day. The next newspaper story said masks were useless because a microbe could pass through gauze as easily as a mouse going through a barn door.

During all the precautions and debates, the flu kept on killing. Or if it didn't manage to do the job, the pneumonia that so often followed it did. Not more than ten days after our burial of Donald Erskine, it was being said that more were dying of the flu than of combat on the battlefields in Europe.

Odd, what a person will miss most. As the flu made people stay away from each other, Adair and I had our end of the North Fork valley to ourselves. Except for my daily ride to the schoolhouse, we were as isolated as if the homestead had become an island. An evening when Adair had fallen silent, but in what seemed a speculating way, I waited to see whether she would offer what was on her mind.

When Adair became aware I was watching her, she smiled a bit and asked: "Worth a halfpenny to you, is it?"

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"At least," I answered, and waited again.

"Angus, I was thinking about our dances. And wondering when there will ever be one again."

Adair in the spell of the music, light and deft as she glided into a tune. Yes. A sharp absence to her, that the epidemic had made a casualty of the schoolroom dances. I missed them, too, for they meant Anna to me. Seeing her across the floor, gathering her anew each time in the quickest of looks between us, remembering, anticipating.

I looked across the room at Adair. If our senses of loss were different, at least they were shared. I got to my feet.

"We'd better not forget how, had we," I said to my wife. My best way to carry a tune is in a tub, but I hummed the approximate melody of *Dancing at the Rascal Fair* and put out my hands to Adair.

"Angus, are you serious?"

"I'm downright solemn," I said, and hummed another batch.

She gave me a gaze, the Adair gray-eyed glint that I had encountered in the depot at Browning all the years ago. Then she came up into my arms, her head lightly against my shoulder, the soft sound of her humming matching itself to mine, and we began the first of our transits around the room, quiet with each other except for the tune from our throats.

Less than two weeks after the beginning of school that autumn, every schoolhouse in the county had to close because of the influenza peril. It seemed that the last piece of my life that I could count on to be normal was gone now. At the homestead the next week or so, I went restlessly from chore to chore, rebuilding my damnable west fence that always needed it, patching the sheep shed roof, anything, everything, that could stand to have work done to it.

How Adair was managing to put up with me, I don't know. It must have been like living with a persistent cyclone, and one whose mood wasn't improved by how achy and stiff he felt from all his labors.

She persevered with me, though. "There's just one item on the place you haven't repaired lately," she told me one noon, "and that's you. Let me give you a haircut."

"What, in the middle of the day? Dair, I've got—"



## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Right now," she inserted firmly, "while the light is best. It won't take time at all. Go get yourself sat, while I find the scissors."

I grumpily took my place by the south window. The mountains were gray in the thin first-of-October light. The year was waning down toward winter every day now. Toward another season of feeding hay with Rob, ample justification for gloom if I needed any further reason.

Over my head and then up under my chin came a quick cloud of fabric, Adair snugly knotting the dish towel at the back of my neck. "Stop squirming," she instructed, "or the lariat is next." From the edge of my eye I could see the dark-brown outline of the barn, and impatiently reminded myself I'd better go repair harness as soon as Adair had trimmed me to her satisfaction.

Her scissorwork and even the touch of her fingers as she handled my hair were an annoyance today. After I flinched a third or fourth time, Adair ruffled my hair with mock gruffness as she used to do to Varick when he was small and misbehaving, and said questioningly, "You're a touchy one today."

"It's not your barbering. I've got a bit of a headache, is all."

The scissors stopped on the back of my neck, the blades so cold against my skin I felt their chill travel all through me. "Angus, you never get headaches."

"I'm here to tell you, I've got a major one now," I stated with an amount of irritation that surprised me. But it genuinely did feel as if a clamp was squeezing the outer corner of each of my eyes, the halves of my head being made to press hard against each other.

"Dair, let's finish making me beautiful," I managed to say somewhat civilly. "I need to get on with the afternoon work."

It wasn't an hour from then when she found me in the barn, sitting on a nail keg with my head down, trying to catch my breath.

When Adair asked if I was able to walk, I sounded ragged even to myself when I told her of course I could, any distance.

"The house, Angus," she answered that, her voice strangely brave and frightened at once. "Hold onto me, we're going to the house."

*House*, the distant echo of the woman's voice said. But we were in a wagon, weren't we, at the edge of a cliff. River below. *Those*

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

*Blackfeet, Angus. The Two Medicine. Those Blackfeet put their medicine lodge near. Two times. Wait: the horses didn't answer to the reins. I yanked back but they were beginning to trot, running now. The cliff. I fell through life . . . The woman beside me clung to my arm. Bodies below. Bigger than sheep, darker. Cows, no, bigger. Buffalo. The buffalo cliff, Angus. It was a good one. The river was so far, so far down. Harness rattling. She clung to me. The cliff. I could see down over the edge, the buffalo were broken, heaped. Fell through life. She clung to me, crying something I couldn't hear. The horses were going to run forever. Our wagon wheels were inches from the cliff, I had to count the wheelspoke with the white knot of handkerchief one as it went around two count the wheelspin three as the ground flew . . . What. She was crying something. Hooves of the horses, wagon bumping. Hang on, I tell the woman, we've got to . . . Count the wheelspoke, start over. One, no, two. Tell the woman, you count. While I . . . what. Helpless. They don't answer the reins. Quiet now, horses run silently. But so close to the cliff. Two Medicine. Those Blackfeet. Two times. Count, I tell her. Too late. The spoke is coming loose. Rim breaking from the wheel. Can't, I tell her. A wheel can't just . . . Wheel breaking apart now, nearest the cliff. Iron circle of the rim peeling off, the spokes flying out of the hub. Hold on, tell the woman. Tipping, falling. I shout into her staring face: Anna! Anna! ANNA!*

The bedroom was silent except for the heaviness of my breathing. "You decided to wake up, did you."

Adair's voice. Her face followed it to the bed and me. The back of her small hand, cool and light, rested on my forehead a long moment, testing. "You're a bit fevery, but nothing to what you were a few days ago. And if you're finally well enough to wonder, the doctor says you don't have any pneumonia." Adair sat on the side of the bed and regarded me with mock severity. "He says you're recovering nicely now, but it'll be a while before you're up and dancing."

I felt weak as a snail. "Dair," I croaked out. "Did I . . . shout . . . something?"

A change flickered through her eyes. And then she was looking at me as steadily as before. "You do know how to make a commotion." She got up from the bedside and went out of the room.

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My head felt big as a bucket, and as empty. It took an effort to lick my lips, an exertion to swallow.

In a minute or several, Adair was back, a bowl of whiteness in her hands.

"You need to eat," she insisted. "This is just milk toast. You can get it down if you try a bit."

The spoon looked too heavy to lift, the bowl as big as a pond. I shook my head an enormous inch. "I don't want—"

"Adair doesn't care," stated Adair, "what you don't want. It's what you're going to get." And began to spoonfeed me.

In a few days I was up from bed in brief stints, feeling as pale as I looked. My body of sticks and knobs was not the only thing vigor had gone out of. It was gravely noticeable how quiet Scotch Heaven seemed. No visiting back and forth, no sounds of neighbors sawing wood for winter.

As my head cleared, thoughts sharp as knives came. Donald Erskine being put into his grave, gone of the same illness I had just journeyed through. Those reports of the epidemic's efficient carnage in the army camps. Varick. No, Adair would have told me if—yet could she have, deeply ill as I was, wobbly as I still was? She had said nothing about our son, was saying nothing. That was just Adair. Or was it what I could not be told.

"Dair," I at last had to ask, "this influenza. Who else—?"

The gray eyes of my wife gave me a gauging look. "I've been keeping the newspaper for you. Maybe you're as ready to see it as you'll ever be. It has the list."

I pushed the prospect away with a wince. "If it's so bad they have to have a list, I don't want to see it."

Adair gauged me again. Then she went over to the sideboard, reached deep in a drawer and brought me the *Gleaner*.

#### VICTIMS OF THE EPIDEMIC

My eyes shot to the bottom of the page.

*Munson, Theodore, homesteader. Age 51. Died at his homestead east of Gros Ventre, Oct. 11.*

Not anyone I knew; but more *M* names were stacked above

that one. My scan of the list fled upward through them—*Morgan*

... *Mitulski* ... *Mellisant*—toward the dreaded *Mcs*:

*McWhirter* ...

*McNee* ...

*McCorkill* ...

*McCallister* ...

And then *Jorgensen* ... *Kleinsasser* ... Varick was safely absent from this list, among the living. *Mercy I sought, mercy I got*. I was as thankful as any person had ever been. But while Adair and I still had a son, a name known to me even longer than Varick's came out of the list at me.

*Frew, Allan, soldier of the American Expeditionary Force. Age 45. Died in a field hospital near Montfaucon, Sept. 26.*

Allan in the shearing contest I had let him win. Allan dancing with Adair afterward, the two of them the melody of my hope that she would find a husband and a Montana niche for herself, in that far ago summer, while Anna and I—life isn't something you can catechize into happening the way you intend, is it. I looked up now at Adair, whose marriage could have been with Allan, for better or for worse but surely for different than all she had been through with me. "It's too bad about Allan," I offered to her, and she nodded a slight nod which was agreement but also instruction for me to look at the list again.

*Erskine, Jennie, widow of Donald, mother of David* ... "Not Jen," I squeezed out of my constricted throat. "Not old Jen, too, after poor Donald ..."

"Yes. It's an awful time, Angus," Adair answered in a voice as strained as mine.

My thoughts were blurred, numb, as my eyes climbed the rest of the list. *Benson* ... *Baker* ... Between them would have been Rob's slot, if Barclays were susceptible to the mere ills of the rest of the world. What would I be feeling now, if his name stood in stark print there? Or he, if mine was in rank back down there in the *Mcs*? I did not know, you never can except in the circumstance, but I could feel it all regathering, the old arguments, the three angry years apart from Rob after the Two Medicine and the angry time with him since then in this benighted damn sheep partnership—I was too weary, done in, to go where that train of thought led. I fast

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DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

read the rest of its list to the first of its names, *Angutter, Hans, homesteader . . .* and put the *Gleaner* away from me.

"Angus." I heard Adair draw a breath. The newspaper was back in her hand, thrust to me.

"Dair, what?" I asked wearily. "I read the damn list once, I'm not going to again."

Then I saw. Beside Adair's thumb there on the page, was that name at the bottom of the list, *Munson, Theodore*; but there was also the small print beneath that. *List continues on p. 3.*

"Angus," my wife said with a catch in her voice, "you have to."

No.

No no no.

But I did have to. Did have to know. The newspaper shook in my hands as I opened it to the third page, as I dropped my eyes to the end of the remainder of the list and forced them, the tears already welling, back up to the Rs.

*Reese, Anna, wife of Isaac, mother of Lisabeth and Peter. Age 44. At the family ranch on Noon Creek, during the night of Oct. 12.*

1919

*Times are as thin in Montana as they can get. No one needs telling that this has been a summer so dry it takes a person three days to work up a whistle. But we urge our homesteading brethren to hold themselves in place on their thirsty acres if they in any way can, and not enlist in the exodus of those who have given up heart and hope. As surely as the weather will change from this driest of times, so shall the business climate.*

—GROS VENTRE WEEKLY CLEANER, AUGUST 21, 1919

LET IT TELL ITSELF, THAT SEASON OF LOSS.

By first snowfall, as much of me as could mend was up and out in the tasks of the homestead, of the sheep, of the oncoming winter. Had I been able, I would have filled myself with work twenty-four hours a day, to have something in me where the Anna emptiness always waited. Yet even as I tried to occupy myself with tasks of this, that, and the other, I knew I was contending against the kind of time that has no hours nor minutes to it. Memory's time. In its calendarless swirl the fact of Anna's death did not recede, did not alter. Smallest things hurt. A glance north to read the weather, and I was seeing the ridge that divided the North Fork from Noon Creek, the shoulder of geography between my life and hers. A chorus of bleats from the sheep as they grazed the autumn slope of Breed Butte, choir of elegy for the Blackfeet grass and the moment when I recognized Anna at the reins of the arriving wagon. And each dawn when I went out to the first of the chores, the slant of lantern light from the kitchen window a wedge between night and day—each was the dawn of Anna and myself and the colors of morning beginning to come to the Two Medicine country. Each time, each memory, I

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

told myself with determination that it would be the last, that here was the logical point for the past to grow quiet. But no known logic works on that worst of facts, death of someone you loved, does it.

By Armistice Day, when the wax pox in Europe finally ended, the influenza epidemic was concluding itself, too. In the Gros Ventre cemetery the mounded soil on the graves of Anna and its dozens of other victims was no longer fresh. When the schools reopened and Ninian came to ask if I was well enough to resume teaching, I told him no, he would need to make a new hire. Whether it was my health or not that lacked the strength, I could not face the South Fork schoolroom just then. Anna dancing in my arms there the first time ever, my voice asking, *And we'll be dancing next at Noon Creek, will we?* and hers answering, *I'll not object.* Before Ninian could go, I had to know: "What's being done about the Noon Creek school?" He reported, "Mrs. Reese's daughter is stepping in for them there." Lisabeth. In younger replica, the same beautiful face with an expression as frank as a clock, still in place at Noon Creek. But not.

By Christmas week, Rob and I were meeting wordlessly each day at a haystack to pitch a load onto the sled and feed the sheep. Maybe the man knew how to keep a decent silence in the face of a sorrow. Maybe he thought the hush between us added cruel weight to his indictment of me and my hopelessness about Anna. Who knew, and who cared. Whatever I was getting from Rob, cold kindness or mean censure, I at least had mercy from the weather. There was just enough snow to cover the ground, and only a chill in the air instead of deep cold. Day upon day the mountains stood their tallest, clear in every detail, cloud-free, as if storm had forgotten how to find them. Any number of times in those first days of feeding, I saw Rob cock his head up at this open winter and look satisfied.

On New Year's Day of 1919, Varick came home.

He was taller, thinner, and an eon older than the boy-man I had fearfully watched ride the Fort Benton steer. To say the truth, there was a half-moment when I first glanced down from the haystack at the Forest Service horse and the Stetsoned person atop it, that I thought he was Stanley Meixell.

"Lo, Dad," he called up to me. His gaze shifted to Rob, and in another tone he simply uttered with a nod, "Unk."

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"Varick, lad," Rob got out. I watched him glance at me, at Varick, confusion all over him. When no thunderbolt hit him from either of us, he decided conversation could be tried. "You're looking a bit gaunt. How bad was the army life?"

Varick gave him a flat look. "Bad enough." It was not until the weeks ahead that I heard his story of Camp Lewis. *Christamighty, Dad, the flu killed them like flies. Whole barracks of guys in quarantine. You'd see them one day, standing at the window looking out, not even especially sick, and the next day we'd be packing them out of there on stretchers to the base hospital. And a couple of days after that, we'd be burying them. A truckload of coffins at a time. I didn't figure you and Mother needed to know this, but I was doing the burying. They found out on the rifle range this eye of mine only squints when it takes a notion to, so they decided I wasn't worth shipping to France to get shot. Instead they put a bunch of us guys who knew which end of a shovel to take hold of onto the graveyard detail. The Doom Platoon, we were called. That was the war I had, Dad. Digging graves for the all the ones the flu got.* But now, in the first moments of his homecoming, Varick moved his gaze from Rob, not saying anything more to him but somehow making a dismissal known. My breath caught, as I waited for the version I would get from him.

Varick swung down from the borrowed horse. Reins at the ready to tie to the haystack fence, he called up to me: "Can you stand a hand with that hay?"

"Always," I said.

When the sheep were fed and Rob went off alone and silent to Breed Butte, Varick rode home with me on the hay sled, his horse tied behind, and we talked of the wonderful mild winter, of his train journey from Seattle to Browning with his discharge paper in his pocket, of much and of nothing, simply making the words bridge the air between us. I am well beyond the age to think all things are possible. I had been ever since Anna's name on the death list in the *Gleaner*. But going home, that first day of the year, my son beside me unexpected as a griffin, I would have told you there is as much possibility in life as not.

As the crunching sounds of our sled and the team's hooves halted at the barn, Varick cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted toward the house:

"MOTHER! YOUR COOKING IS BETTER THAN THE ARMY'S!"

AA
EA
DE



Adair flew out and came through the snow of the yard as if it wasn't there. She hugged the tall figure, saying not a word, not crying, not laughing, simply holding and holding.

Ultimately Varick said down to the head of auburn ringlets, "You better get in out of the weather. We'll be right along, as soon as I help this geezer unharness the horses."

Amid that barn chore, Varick's voice came casual above the rattle and creak of the harnesses we were lifting off. "I hear we just about lost you."

"As near to it as I care to come." I hung my set of harness on its peg. When my throat would let me, I said the next painful words: "Others didn't have my luck."

"Dad, I heard about Mrs. Reese." Varick stood with his armful of harness, facing me. His eyes were steady into mine. They held no apology, no attempt at reparation for the years he had held himself away from me; but they conceded that those years were ended now. The Varick facing me here knew something of the storm countries of the mind, latitudes of life and loss. Now he said with simple sympathy: "It must be tough on you."

"It is," I answered my son. "Let's go in the house to your mother."

At long last now, Varick's life took its place within comfortable distance of mine and his mother's. Stanley Meixell provided him work and wage at the ranger station through the next few months of that shortest and mildest of winters, then in calving time the job of association rider for the Noon Creek cattlemen came to him.

"I don't remember raising a cow herder," I twitted Adair. "He must be yours."

"And I don't remember doing him by myself," she gave me back, with a lift of her chin and a sudden smile.

The other climate kept getting warmer, too. Spring came early and seemed to mean it. By lambing time the last of the snow was gone from even the deepest coulees. Rob and I shed our overshoes a good three weeks earlier than usual, and the nights of March and on into April stayed so mild that Adair did not even have to have lamb guests in her oven.

So if I was never far from the fact that Anna was gone, that fact which stood like a stone above all tides, at least now I had the

shelter of Varick and Adair. What I did not have, as spring hurried its way toward the summer of 1919, was any lessening of Rob.

At first I figured it was simply a case of seasonal bachelorhood. Now that their girls were grown and gone, Rob had installed Judith and himself in a house in Gros Ventre—or quite possibly Judith in her quiet way had done the installing—and so during the feeding time of winter and the start of lambing, Rob had been staying by himself at the Breed Butte place. With just one more year ahead of us to the fulfillment of Lucas's will and the sale of the sheep, you'd have thought he would have been gritting hard and putting all his energy into enduring the next dozen months. You'd have been as wrong in that expectation as I was. A day soon after lambing began in mid-March, when I asked him something he at first didn't answer all, simply kept on casting glances out the shed door to the valley and the ridges around. Eventually he rounded on me and declared as if lodging a complaint: "There isn't enough green in this whole goddamn valley this spring to cover a billiard table."

Despite his tone, I forbore from answering him that the wan spring wasn't my fault, that I knew of. "It's early yet," I said instead. "There's still time for the moisture to catch up with the season."

But when the rest of March and all of April brought no moisture, I became as uneasy as he was. It ought to have been no bad thing, to have us joined in concern about the scantiness of the grass and the grazing future of the sheep. The air around us could stand a rest from our winter of silent antagonism. But Rob took that spring's lackings as an affront to him personally.

"Sweet Jesus!" he burst out in early May when we were forced to throw the sheep back onto a slope of Breed Butte they had already eaten across once, "what's a man supposed to do, pack a lunch for fifteen hundred sheep?"

Before thinking, I said to him the reassurance I had been trying on myself day after day. "Maybe we'll get it yet."

It. A cold damp blanket of it, heavy as bread dough. It had happened before; more than a few times we had known mid-May snowfalls to fill this valley above our shoe tops. Normally snow was not a thing Scotch Heaven had to yearn for, but we wildly wanted it now, one of May's fat wet snowstorms, a grass bringer. Let that soak the ground for a week, then every so often bestow a slow easy rain, the

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

kind that truly does some good, and the Two country's summer could be salvaged.

Not even so much as a dour retort from Rob. He simply sicced the dog after a lagging bunch of ewes and their lambs and whooped the rest of the sheep along. I swung another look to the mountains, the clear sky above them. What was needed had to begin up there. No sign of it yet.

On through the moistureless remainder of May, I wanted not to believe the mounting evidence of drought. But the dry proof was everywhere around. Already the snowpack was gone from the mountains, the peaks bare. Hay meadows were thin and wan. The worst absence, among all that the drought weather was withholding from the usual course of spring, was of sound from the North Fork. The rippling runoff of high water from the mountains was not heard that May.

The creek's stillness foretold the kind of summer that arrived to us. With June the weather turned immediately hot and stayed that way.

The summer of 1918 had been dry. This one of 1919 was parched.

"Fellows, I hate like all hell to do it," Stanley Meixell delivered the edict to Rob and me when we trailed the sheep up onto our national forest allotment. "But in green years when the country could stand it I let you bend the grazing rules a little, and now that it's a lean year we got to go the other way. I like to think it all evens out in the end."

Rob looked as if he'd been poked in a private place. I did a moment of breath catching, myself. What the forest ranger was newly rigorous about was the policy of moving our band of sheep onto a new area of the scant grass every day. Definitely *moving* them, not letting them graze at all in the previous day's neighborhood.

"We can't fatten sheep by parading them all over the mountains every day!" Rob objected furiously. "What you're asking is damn near the same as not letting them touch the grass at all. So what in the goddamn hell are we supposed to do, have these sheep eat each other?"

"It's a thought," Stanley responded, looking at Rob as if in genial

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

agreement. "Lamb chops ought to taste better to them than grass as poor as this."

"Just tell me a thing, Meixell," Rob demanded. "If we can't use this forest for full grazing now when we most need it, then what is it you're saving it for?"

"The idea is to keep the forest a forest. Insofar as I can let you run sheep on it—or Wampus Cat Williamson or the Noon Creek Association run cattle on it—I do. But I think I maybe told you somewhere before along the line, my job is to not let any of you wear it out."

"Wear it out?" burst from Rob. "A forest as far as a person can see?"

"It all depends," answered the ranger, "how far you're looking."

What do you do when the land itself falls ill with fever?

Throughout that summer in Scotch Heaven and the rest of the Two country, each day and every day the heat would build all morning until by noon you could feel it inside your eyes—the wanting to squint, to save the eyeballs from drying as if they were pebbles. And the blaze of the sun on your cheekbones, too, as if you were standing too near a stove. Most disquieting of all, the feel of the heat in your lungs. Not even in the fire summer of 1910 had there been this, the day's angry hotness coming right into you with every breath.

Then after the worst of the heat each day, the sky brought the same disappointment. Clouds, but never rain. Evenings of July, as sundown neared, the entire sky over the mountains would fill with thick gray clouds. While the clouds came over us they swirled into vast wild whorls, as if slowly boiling. Then there would be frail rainlike fringes down from the distant edges of the cloud mass; if those ever reached the ground, it was not in the valley of the North Fork or anywhere else near. Ghost showers.

The first to be defeated by the hot brunt of the summer were the 'steaders. With no rain, their dry-land grain withered day by day. The high prices of the war were gone now, too; Last year's \$2-a-bushel wheat abruptly was \$1-a-bushel or less. By the first of August, the wagons of the 'steaders and their belongings were beginning to come out of the south benchlands. The Thorkelsons were somehow managing to stay, and to my surprise, the Hebners; but



then there was so little evidence of how the Hebners made a living that hard times barely applied to them. The others, though, were evacuating. The Keevers, family and furniture. ~~The wagonload of the Toskis.~~ Billy Reinking rode down to return the copy of *Kidnapped* I had lent him and reported that his family was moving into Gros Ventre, his father was taking a job as printer at the *Gleaner* office.

~~I watched the wheel tracks of the 'steaders now undoing the wheel tracks when I marked off their homestead claims.~~ And I watched Rob for any sign that he regretted the land locating we had done. I saw none in him, but by now I knew you do not glimpse so readily into a person.

It was midsummer when I rode up onto Roman Reef on a camp-tending trip and heard a dog giving something a working-over. The barking was not in the direction of our herder and sheep, but farther north; unless I missed my guess, somewhere in the allotment of the Noon Creek cattle. At the next trail branch in that direction, I left the pack horse tied to a pine tree and rode toward the commotion.

I met the red-brown file of Double W cattle first, lolloping down the mountainside. Then the dog who was giving close attention to their heels. Then the roan horse with Varick in its saddle.

My son grinned and lifted a hand when he saw me. "That's enough, Pooch," he called to the dog.

"That's not very charitable of you," I observed as I rode up and stopped next to Varick. "All Warren Williamson wants is your grass as well as his."

"We go through this about once a week, Dad," he told me with a laugh. "Wampus Cat sends somebody up to sneak as many cattle as he can here onto the Association's allotment. As soon as I find them, I dog them back down the countryside onto his allotment. Those cows are going to have a lot of miles on them before the summer's over."

Watching the last tail-switching rumps disappear into the forest, I was doubly pleased—at the thought of Wampus Cat Williamson having to contend with a new generation who pushed back as quick as he pushed, and at this impromptu chance to visit with Varick. "Other than having the Double W for a neighbor, how is cow life?"

"About as good as can be expected." Varick's tone was a good

deal more cheerful than the words. In fact, he looked as if this was high summer in Eden instead of stone-dry Montana. He lost no time in letting me know why.

"Dad, there's something you better know about. I'm going to marry Beth Reese."

Everything in me went still, as if a great wind had stopped, gathering itself to hurl again. Across the plain of my mind the girl—almost woman—Lisabeth looking at me in that steady gauging way, the Two Medicine morning. Knowing there had been something between her mother and me, something, but having no way to know that from my direction it was deepest love. Maybe worse if she did know, if she had asked Anna, for Anna would have told her it all. That springtime pairing, Anna and I, that had come unclasped. And now the two resemblances of us, about to clasp?

I managed to say to Varick: "Are you. When's all this to happen?"

He grinned. "She doesn't quite know it yet."

I stared at this son of mine. Doesn't any generation ever learn the least scrap about life from the—

"Don't give me that look," Varick said. "Beth and I aren't you and—her mother. All this got started at a dance last spring when we kind of noticed each other. I didn't know what the hell else to do, so I just outright tried her on that. Told her that I hoped whatever she thought of me it was on my own account, not anything that had to do with our families. She told me right back she was born with a head with her own mind in it, so there was no reason why she couldn't make her own decisions. You know how she has that Sunday voice when she gets going." Like Anna. "Christamighty," Varick shook his head, "I even love that voice of hers."

Varick won where I had not. Beth said yes to his proposal, they were to be married that autumn after shipping time. Alongside my gladness for the two of them was my ache where Anna had been. Solve that, Solomon. How do you do away with a pang for what you have missed in life, even as you see it attained by your son?

If you are me you don't do away with it, you only shove it deeper into the satchel of that summer's hard thoughts. The latest worry was waiting for me in the hay meadows beside the trickle of the North Fork. I knew this was the thinnest hay crop I'd ever had, but until I began mowing it there was no knowing how utterly paltry it

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was. This was hay that was worth cutting only because it was better to have little than none. I could cover the width of each windrow with my hat.

I stood there with the sweat of that summer on me, dripping like a fish, and made myself look around at it all. The ridges rimming the valley, the longsail slopes of Breed Butte, the humped foothills beneath the mountains, anywhere that there should have been the tawny health of grass was instead simply faded, sickly-looking. The stone colonnades of the mountains stood out as dry as ancient bones. There was a pale shine around the horizon, more silvery than the deeper blue of the sky overhead. The silver of heat, today as every other day.

But the sight that counted was the one I was avoiding looking down at, until at last I had to again. The verdict was written in those thin skeins of dry stalks that were purportedly hay. Now the summer, the drought, had won. Now there was a *yes* I absolutely had to get.

When I came into the house for supper at the end of that first day of cutting hay, Adair looked drained. Cooking over a hot stove on such a day would boil the spirit out of anybody, I supposed. I took a first forkful of sidepork, then put it back down. I had to say what I had seen in the scantiness of the hayfield.

"Dair, Lucas's sheep. We've got to sell them this fall."

"The lambs, you mean. But we always—"

"I mean them all. The ewes too, the whole band."

She regarded me patiently. "You know I don't want us to."

"This isn't that. This time I don't mean because of Rob and me. I can go on with it for as long as he can and a minute longer, you know that. No, it's the sheep themselves. There's just not enough hay to carry them through the winter. We won't get half enough off our meadows. We can buy whatever we can find, but there isn't any hay to speak of, anywhere, this summer." She still looked at me that same patient way. "Dair, we dasn't go into winter this way. That band of sheep can't make it through on what little feed we're going to have, unless we teach them to eat air."

"Not even if it's an open winter?"

"If it's the most open winter there ever was and we only had to feed the least bit of hay, maybe, they might."

"Last winter was an open one, Angus."

"That was once, Dair. Do you really want to bet Lucas's sheep on it happening twice in a row?"

She studied her plate, and then gave me her grave gray-eyed look. "Those sheep will die?"

"Dair, they will. A whole hell of a bunch of them, if not all. They and the lambs in them. We've never had so poor a grass summer, the band isn't going to be as strong as it ought to be by fall. And you know what winter can be in this country. I realize this is sudden, but I figured if I pointed it out to you now we'd still have time to get out of this sheep situation with our skins on. All I ask is that you start thinking this over and—"

"I don't need to," she answered. "Sell the sheep, Angus."

"Sell the sheep now?" Rob repeated in disbelief. "Man, did you and Adair check your pillows this morning, to see whether your brains leaked out during the night?"

He may have been right. Certainly I felt airheaded at this reaction of his to my news of Adair's willingness to sell. This person in front of me, Robert Burns Barclay as far as the eye could attest, from the first minute in the lawyer's office had been the one for selling Lucas's sheep, and now—

"There's not money to be made by selling while prices are as low as they are," he was saying to me contemptuously. "A babe coming out of his mother could tell you that. No, we're not selling."

"Christ on a raft, Rob! You don't remember the years of '93? Four years in a row, and prices stayed sunk the whole while."

"That was then, this is now." When that didn't brush me away, he gave the next flourish. "I remember that we hung on without selling, and we came out of it with full pockets."

"We didn't start off with a summer like this."

"Will you make yourself look at the dollars of this situation?" he resorted to. "For once in your life, will you do that?" He cocked his head, then resumed: "The first year of these goddamn sheep of Lucas's, we made decent money. Last year, we only came out even. This year we're not making a penny on the wool or the lambs, either, and if we sell the ewes at these prices we're all but giving them away, too. It'd mean we've spent three years for no gain, man. And I want a hell of a lot better pay than that, for having to go through this goddamn partnership with you."

AA
EA
DE

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

"You can want until you turn green with it and that still doesn't mean it'll happen. Rob, for Christ's sake, listen—"

"Listen yourself," he shot back. "Prices are bound to come back up. All we've got to do is wait until next year and sell the whole outfit, ewes and lambs and all."

"And what about this winter, with no more hay than we've got?"

"We've never seen a winter in this country we couldn't get through. I even got through one under the same roof with you, somehow. If we have to buy a dab of hay, all right, then we'll trot out and buy it. You'd worry us into the invalids' home if you had your way."

I shook my head and took us back around the circle to where this had begun. "Adair and I want to sell now."

"Want all you please. I'm telling you, I'm not selling. Which means you're not."

I had pummeled him down to gruel once, why not pound him again now? And again every day until he agreed to sell the sheep? I was more than half ready to. But the fist didn't exist that could bring an answer out of Rob that he didn't want to give. I withheld my urge to bash him and said: "Rob, you're not right about this. I hope to Christ you'll think it over before winter gets here."

"Try holding your breath until I do, why don't you." He looked both riled and contemptuous now. "In the meantime, I'm not hearing any more mewling from you about selling the sheep."

What walloped me next was Ninian Duff's decision to leave the North Fork.

"Ay, Angus, I would rather take a beating with a thick stick." For the first time in all the years I had known this man he seemed embarrassed, as if he was going against a belief. "But I know nothing else to do." Ninian stared past me at the puddled creek, the scant grass. "Had Samuel not been called by the Lord, I would go on with the sheep and say damn to this summer and the prices and all else. But I am not the man I was." Age. It is the ill of us all. "So, Flora and I will go to Helena, to be near Susan."

That early September day when I rode home from the Duffs' and the news of their leaving, the weather ahead of me was as heavy as my mood. Clouds lay in a long gray front, woolly, caught atop the peaks, while behind the mountains the sky was turning inky. All the

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

way from the South Fork to Jericho Reef, a forming storm that was half a year overdue.

Despite the homestead houses and outbuildings I was passing as I rode, the valley of the North Fork seemed emptier to me just then than on the day I first looked down into it from the knob hill. Tom Mortensen and the Speddersons, gone those years ago. The Erskines taken by the epidemic. The year before last the Findlaters had bought a place on the main creek and moved down there. Allan Frew, gone in the war. And now the Duffs. Except for George Frew, Rob and I now suddenly were the last of Scotch Heaven's homesteaders; and George, too, was talking of buying on the main creek whenever a chance came.

A person could count on meeting wind at the side road up Breed Butte to Rob's place, and today it was stiff, snappy. In minutes it brought the first splatting drops of rain. The first real rain in months and months, now that the summer of 1919 had done us all the damage it could.

Beside me on the wagon seat Adair said, "I wish they had a better day for it."

I put an arm around her to help shelter her from the wind. Only the start of October, and already the wind was blowing through snow somewhere. Above the mountains the sky looked bruised, resentfully promising storm. It had rained almost daily ~~now~~ since that first September gullywasher, and today didn't seem willing to be an exception. Below Adair and me now as our wagon climbed the shoulder of Breed Butte before descending the other slope to Noon Creek, we could see Rob's reservoir brimming as if it had never tasted drought; a glistening portal of water in the weary autumn land.

By the time we were down from the divide and about to cross Noon Creek, clouds like long rolls of damp cotton were blotting out the summits of the mountains. Weather directly contrary to Adair's wish. She'd had her original moment of staring startlement, too, about the daughter of Anna Reese being spliced into our family. But as quick as she could, she granted that if Lisabeth was Varick's choice in life, so be it. I tried to muster cheer for her against the sky's mood: If you can remember so far back, the night of this counts for more than the day."

AA
EA
DE

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Her arm came inside my sheepskin coat and around my back, holding me. "Adair remembers," she declared.

How dreamlike it seemed, when we arrived at the old Ramsay place and stepped into the wedding festivities of Varick and Lisabeth. I had not put foot in that house since my time of courting Anna. In my memory I saw again the vinegar cruet that was Meg Ramsay. *So, Mr. McCaskill, you too are of Forfar. That surprises me.* Plump Peter Ramsay, silent as a stuffed duck. Not only were they gone now, but so was the one I saw everywhere here: Anna.

She came to the door now on the arm of Varick to greet Adair and me. She was in every line of Lisabeth, Anna was; the lovely round cheeks, the eyes as blue and frank as sky, the lush body, even the perfect white skin hinting down from her throat toward her breastbone. *Beauty bestowed upon her full receipt, vouching her in every way complete.*

"Mother, Dad," Varick greeted us. "You came to see if Beth is going to come to her senses before the knot gets tied, I guess?"

"We came to gain Beth," Adair said simply and directly. Our daughter-in-law-to-be gave her a gracious enough look, but in an instant those steady blue eyes were gauging me. I got out some remark I hoped wasn't damaging, then Adair and I were moving on into the house out of the way of the other wedding-comers arriving behind us.

Glad as I was for Varick and Beth, this event of theirs was a gauntlet I had to make myself endure. Over there was Isaac. Despite the efforts of that concealing mustache and the unreadable crinkles around his eyes, the year since Anna's death was plainly there in the lines of his face. His son Peter was hovering near him, still too young to quite believe marriage was a necessity in life but enough of a man now to have to participate in this family day. Then over here was Rob, with Judith beside. For once he was not as brash as brass, whatever was on his mind. I saw him glance every so often toward Varick and Beth. I hoped he was seeing the past there, too, and I hoped his part of it was gnawing in him. Probably remorse would break its teeth if it even tried to gnaw him, though.

Then through the throng of the wedding crowd I saw with relief that Stanley Meixell had come in. While Adair was occupied accepting congratulations for the union of the McCaskills and the Reeses, I crossed the room to him.

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Stanley was at the window that looked west to the mountains, a glass in his hand. Since the inanity called Prohibition, we were reduced to bootleg whiskey; I had to admit, whoever Isaac's source was, the stuff wasn't bad.

After we had greeted, I asked: "What's this I hear about you aiding and abetting matrimony here today?"

"Yeah, when Mac asked me to be best man I told him I would." He paused and resumed his window vigil. "Though it's closer to a preacher than I promised myself I'd ever get."

"Maybe it's not catching," I consoled him.

"I'm trying to ward it off with enough vaccine," Stanley remarked a bit absently with a lift of his glass. The major part of his attention was still gazing outside, away from the hubbub of the room. He said, "Angus, take a look at this, would you."

I stood beside Stanley at the window and saw what he was keeping vigil on. The mountains by now were entirely concealed under clouds, but along the ragged bottom of the curtain of weather occasional patches of the foothills showed through. Patches of startling white. First snow.

"It's christly early for that, seems to me," Stanley mused. "You ever know it to come already this time of year?"

"No," I had to admit. "Never."

Stanley watched the heavy veil of weather a long moment more, then shrugged. "Well, I guess if it wants to snow, it will." He started to lift his glass, then stopped. "Actually, we got something to drink to, don't we." He looked across the room toward Varick and Beth, and my eyes followed his. I heard the clink of his glass meeting mine, then Stanley's quiet toast: "To them and any they get."

I was returning around the room to Adair when the picture halted me. Just inside the open door into the bedroom, it hung on the wall in an oval frame the size of a face mirror. I had never seen it, yet I knew the scene instantly. The wedding photo of Anna and Isaac.

I stepped inside the bedroom to see her more closely. A last visit, in a way. She was standing, shoulders back and that lovely head as level as ever, gazing forthrightly into the camera. Into the wedded future, for that matter. I stood rooted in front of the photo, gazing now not only at Anna but at the pair there, Isaac seated beside and below her in the photographic studio's ornate chair and seeming en-

AA
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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

tertained by the occasion, and I thought of the past that put him in the picture instead of me.

The presence behind me spoke at last. "It's a good likeness of them, isn't it," Beth said.

I faced around to her. My words were out before I knew they were coming.

"Beth, I'm glad about you and Varick."

She regarded me with direct blue eyes. Her mother's eyes. Then said: "So am I."

Operas could be made from all I could have told this young woman, of my helpless love for her mother, of what had and had not happened that morning above the Two Medicine when she registered her mother and then me. Of her mother's interest in me, of the verdict that was never quite final. But any of it worth telling, this about-to-be Beth McCaskill already knew and had framed her own judgment of. She was thoroughly Anna's daughter, after all.

By her presence in front of me now, was Beth forgiving me for having loved her mother? No, I think that cannot be said. She would relent toward me for Varick's sake, but forgive is too major. Probably more than anyone except Anna and myself, Beth knew the lure I was to her mother. The daybreak scene at the Two Medicine would always rule Beth's attitude toward me.

Hard, but fair enough. For twenty-one years I endured not having Anna as my wife. For however long is left to me, I can face Beth's opinion of me.

"Beth. I know we don't have much we can say to each other. But maybe you'll let me get this in. To have you and Varick in a life together makes up for a lot that I—I missed out on." I held her gaze with mine. "May you have the best marriage ever."

She watched me intently for another long moment, as if deciding. Then she gave me most of a familiar half-smile. "I intend to."

Beth and Varick said their vows as bride and groom ever do, as if they were the first to utter those words. The ritual round of congratulations then, and while those were still echoing, George Frew was tuning his fiddle, the dancing was about to begin. Adair here on my arm in a minute would be gliding with me, so near, so far, as the music took her into herself. Music and Adair inside the silken motion I would be dancing with, the wife-mask with auburn ringlets on the outside. Well, why not. There was music in me just now as well,

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

the necessary song to be given our son and daughter-in-law, in the echoing hall of my mind.

*Dancing at the rascal fair,  
Lisabeth Reese, she was there,  
the answer to Varick's prayer,  
dancing at the rascal fair.  
Varick's partnered with her there,  
giving Beth his life to share,  
dancing at the rascal fair.  
Devils and angels all were there,  
heel and toe, pair by pair,  
dancing at the rascal fair.*

Winter was with us now. The snow that whitened the foothills the day of Varick and Beth's wedding repeated within forty-eight hours, this time piling itself shin-deep all across the Two country. We did the last of autumn chores in December circumstances.

That first sizable snowstorm, and for that matter the three or four that followed it by the first week in November, proved to be just the thin edge of the wedge of the winter of 1919. On the fifteenth of November, thirty inches of snow fell on us. Lacelike flakes in a perfect silence dropped on Scotch Heaven that day as if the clouds suddenly were crumbling, every last shred of them tumbling down in a slow thick cascade. From the windows Adair and I watched everything outside change, become absurdly fattened in fresh white outline; our woodpile took on the smooth disguise of a snow-colored haystack. It was equally beautiful and dismaying, that floury tier on everything, for we knew it lay poised, simply waiting for wind the way a handful of dandelion seeds in a boy's hand awaits the first flying puff from him. That day I did something I had done only a few times in all my years in Scotch Heaven; I tied together lariats and strung them like a rope railing between the house and the barn, to grasp my way along so as not to get lost if a blizzard blinded the distance between while I was out at the chores.

The very next day I needed that rope. Blowing snow shrouded the world, or at least our polar corner of it. The sheep had to be fed, somehow, and so in all the clothes I could pile on I went out

AA
EA
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to make my way along the line to the barn, harnessed the work-horses Sugar and Duke, and prayed for a lull.

When a lessening of the blizzard finally came, Rob came with it, a plaster man on a plaster horse. He had followed fencelines down from Breed Butte to the North Fork, then guided himself up the creek by its wall of willows and trees. Even now I have to hand it to him. Here he was, blue as a pigeon from the chill of riding in that snow-throwing wind, yet as soon as he could make his mouth operate he was demanding that we plunge out there and provide hay to the sheep.

"Put some of Adair's coffee in you first," I stipulated, "then we'll get at it."

"I don't need—" he began croakily.

"Coffee," I reiterated. "I'm not going to pack you around today like a block of ice." When Adair had thawed him, back out we went into the white wind, steering the horses and hay sled along the creek the way Rob had done, then we grimly managed to half-fling half-sail a load of hay onto the sled rack, and next battled our way to my sheep shed where the sheep were sheltering themselves. By the time we got there they were awful to hear—a bleated chorus of hunger and fear rending the air. Not until we pitched the hay off to them did they put those fifteen hundred woolly throats to work on something besides telling us their agony.

That alarming day was the sample, the tailor's swatch, of our new season. The drought of that summer, the snow and wind of that winter: the two great weathers of 1919. Through the rest of November and December, days were either frigid or blowy and too often both. By New Year's, Rob and I were meeting the mark of that giant winter each day on our route to the sheep's feedground. At a place where my meadow made a bit of a dip, snow drifted and hardened and drifted some more and hardened again and on and on until there was a mound eight or ten feet deep and broad as a low hill there. "Big as the goddamn bridge across the Firth of Forth," Rob called it with permissible exaggeration in this case. This and other snow bridges built by the furrowing blizzards we could go right over with the horses and hay sled without breaking through, they were so thickly frozen. *Here winter plies his craft, / soldering the years with ice.* Yes, and history can say the seam between 1919 and 1920 was triple thickness.

Thank heaven, or at least my winning cut of the cards, that we had bought twice as much hay as Rob wanted to, which still was not as much as I wanted to. Even so, every way I could calculate it now—and the worried look on Rob said his sums were coming out the same as mine—we were going to be scratching for hay in a few months if this harsh weather kept up.

It kept up.

As the chain of frozen days went on, our task of feeding the sheep seemed to grow heavier, grimmer. There were times now when I would have to stop from pitching hay for half a minute, to let my thudding heart slow a bit. The weariness seemed to be accumulating in me a little more each new time at a haystack; or maybe it was the sight of the hay dwindling and dwindling that fatigued me. In those catchbreath pauses I began to notice that Rob, too, was stopping from his pitchfork work for an occasional long instant, then making the hay fly again, then lapsing quiet for another instant. Behavior of that sort in him I at first couldn't figure. To look at, he was as healthy as a kettle of broth. No influenza had eroded anything of our Rob. But eventually it came to me what this was. Rob's pauses were for the sake of his ears. He was listening, in hope of hearing the first midair roar of a chinook.

From then on, my lulls were spent in listening, too. But the chinook, sudden sweet wind of thaw, refused to answer the ears of either of us.

Maybe I ought to have expected the next. But in all the snip and snap that went on between Rob and me, I never dreamt of this particular ambush from him.

Usually I drove the team and sled to whatever haystack we were feeding from and Rob simply met me there, neither of us wanting to spend any more time than necessary in the company of the other. But this day Rob had to bring me a larger horse collar—Sugar's was chafing a sore onto his neck, which we couldn't afford—before the team could be harnessed, and so he arrived into my barn just as I was feeding Scorpion.

No hellos passed between us these days, only dry glances of acknowledgment. I expected Rob to pass me by and step straight to the workhorses and their harness, but no, anything but.



He paused by Scorpion's stall. "This horse has seen his days, you know."

What I knew was the hateful implication in those words. To close off Rob from spouting any more of it, I just shook my head and gave Scorpion's brown velvet neck an affectionate rub as he munched into the hay.

Rob cocked a look at me and tried: "He's so old he'd be better off if you fed him your breakfast mush instead of that hay."

I turned away and went on with my feeding of Scorpion.

"The fact is," Rob's voice from close behind me now, "he ought to be done away with."

So he was willing to say it the worst he could. And more words of it yet: "I can understand that you're less than keen to have him done away with. It's never easy. The old rascals get to be like part of us." They do, Rob, my thought answered him, which is why I am keeping Scorpion alive this winter instead of putting the bullet you suggest into the braincase behind his ear. "But," that voice behind me would not stop, "I can be the one to do away with the old fellow, if you'd rather."

"No. Neither of us is going to be the one, so long as Scorpion is up and healthy. Let's put a plug in this conversation and go feed the sheep."

But Rob blocked my way out of the stall. "Do you take telling?" he snapped. "We can't spare so much as a goddamn mouthful of hay this winter, and you're poking the stuff into a useless horse as if we've got worlds of it. Give yourself a looking-at, why don't you, man. This winter is no time for charity cases. Any spear of hay that goes into Scorpion doesn't go into one of those ewes half-starving, out there."

I knew that. I knew, too, that our hay situation was so wretched that Scorpion's daily allowance mattered little one way or the other. We needed tons of the stuff, not armfuls. We needed a chinook, we needed an early spring, we needed a quantity of miracles that the killing of one old horse would not provide. I instructed Rob as levelly as I could:

"I know the word doesn't fit in your ears, but I've told you no. He's my horse and you're not going to do away with him. Now let's go, we've got sheep waiting for us."

He didn't move. "I have to remind you, do I. He's the horse of us both."

Then I remembered, out of all the years ago. The two of us pointing ourselves down from Breed Butte toward Noon Creek on my horse-buying mission; that generous side of Rob suddenly declaring itself, clear and broad as the air. *Angus, you'll be using him on the band of sheep we own together, so it's only logical I put up half the price of him, am I right?*

And now the damn man demanded: "Get out the cards."

Those cold words of his sickened me. How could he live with himself, as sour as he had become? None of us are what we could be. But for Rob to invoke this, to ask the sacrifice of Scorpion and all the years this tall horse had given me, when it was his own blind gamble that delivered us into this hay-starved winter—right then I loathed this person I was yoked to, this brother of Adair's whom I had vowed to persist with because she wanted it so. Enduring him was like trying to carry fire in a basket.

I choked back the disgust that filled me to my throat. I turned so that Scorpion was not in my vision, so that I was seeing only this creature Rob Barclay. I slowly got out the deck of cards.

Rob studied the small packet they made in the palm of my hand. As if this was some teatime game of children, he proclaimed, "Cut them thin and win," and turned up the top card. The four of diamonds.

I handed the deck to him. He shuffled it twice, the rapid whir of the cards the only sound in the barn. Now the deck lay waiting for me in his hand.

I reached and took the entire deck between my thumb and first finger. Then I flipped it upside down, bringing the bottom card face-up to be my choice.

The two of us stood a moment, looking down at it. The deuce of hearts.

Rob only shook his head bitterly, as if my luck, Scorpion's luck, was an unfair triumph. As we turned from the old brown horse and began harnessing the workhorses, he stayed dangerously silent.

Near the end of January I made a provisioning trip into town. Every house, shed, barn I passed, along the North Fork and the main creek, was white-wigged with snow. Gros Ventre's main street was a rutted trench between snowpiles, and no one was out who didn't have dire reason to be. All the more unexpected, then, when

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I stomped the white from my boots and went into the mercantile, and the person in a chair by the stove was Toussaint Rennie.

"What, is it springtime on the Two Medicine?" I husked out to him, my voice stiff from the cold of my ride. "Because if it is, send some down to us."

"Angus, were you out for air?" he asked in return, and gave a chuckle.

"I thought I was demented to come just a dozen miles in this weather. So what does that make you?"

"Do you know, Angus, this is that '86 winter back again." *No deer, no elk. No weather to hunt them in. West wind, all that winter. Everything drifted east. I went out, find a cow if I can. Look for a hump under the snow. Do you know, a lot of snowdrifts look like a cow carcass?* "That '86 winter went around a corner of the mountains and waited to circle back on us. Here it is."

"As good a theory as I've heard lately," I admitted ruefully. "Just how are your livestock faring, up there on the reservation?"

Toussaint's face altered. There was no chuckle behind what he said this time. "They are deadstock now."

The realization winced through me. Toussaint had not been merely making words about that worst-ever winter circling back. Again now, humps beneath the vast cowl of whiteness; carcasses that had been cattle, horses. The picture of the Two Medicine prairie that Toussaint's words brought was the scene ahead for Scotch Heaven sheep if this winter didn't break, soon.

I tried to put that away, out of mind until I had to face it tomorrow with a pitchfork, with another scanty feeding of hay by Rob and me. I asked the broad figure planted by the warm stove: "How is it you're here, Toussaint, instead of hunkered in at home?"

"You do not know a town man when you see him, Angus?"

I had to laugh. "A winter vacation in temperate Gros Ventre, is this. Where are you putting up?"

"That Blackfeet niece of Mary's." Nancy. And those words from Lucas, echoing across three decades: *Toussaint didn't know whether he was going to keep his own family alive up there on the Two Medicine River, let alone an extra. So he brought Nancy in here and gave her to the DeSalises.* "She has a lot of house now," Toussaint was saying. "That Blackfeet of mine"—Mary—"and kids and me, Nancy let us in her house for the winter." He chuckled. "It beats eating with the axe."

Before leaving town I swung by Judith's house for any mail she wanted to send out to Rob. She handed me the packet and we had a bit of standard conversation until I said I'd better get started on my ride home before the afternoon grew any colder. The question came out of Judith now as quietly as all her utterances, but it managed to ask everything: "How are you and Rob getting by together?"

To say the truth, the incident over Scorpion still burned like a coal in me. But I saw no reason to be more frank than necessary in answering her. "It's not good between us. But that's nothing new."

Judith had known Rob and me since our first winter in Scotch Heaven, when I still thought the world of him, so it was not unexpected when she said in an understanding voice, "Angus, I know this winter with him is hard for you." What did surprise me was when this loyalest of wives added: "It's even harder for Rob with himself."

February was identical to the frigid misery of January. At the very start of the last of its four white weeks, there came the day when Rob and I found fifteen fresh carcasses of ewes, dead of weakness and the constant cold. No, not right. Dead, most of all, of hunger.

Terrible as the winter had been, then, March was going to be worse. Scan the remaining hay twenty times and do its arithmetic every one of those times and the conclusion was ever the same. By the first of March, the hay would be gone. One week from today, the rest of the sheep would begin to starve.

A glance at Rob, as we drove the sled past the gray bumps of dead sheep, told me that his conclusion was the same as mine, with even more desperation added. He caught my gaze at him, and the day's words started.

"Don't work me over with your eyes, man. How in hell was I supposed to know that the biggest winter since snow got invented was on its way?"

"Tell it to the sheep, Rob. Then they'd have at least that to chew on."

"All it'd take is one good chinook. A couple of days of that, and enough of this snow would go so that the sheep could paw down and graze a bit. That'd let us stretch the hay and we'd come out of this winter as rosy as virgins. So just put away that gravedigger look of

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EA
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yours, for Christ's sake. We're not done for yet. A chinook will show up. It has to."

You're now going to guile the weather, are you, Rob? Cite Barclay logic to it and scratch its icy ears, and it'll bounce to attention like a fetching dog to go bring you your chinook? That would be like you, Rob, to think that life and its weather are your private pets. Despite the warning he had given me, I told him all this with my eyes, too.

The end of that feeding day, if it could be called so, I was barning the workhorses when a tall collection of coat, cap, scarf, mittens and the rest came into the yard atop a horse with the Long Cross brand. If I couldn't identify Varick in the bundle, I at least knew his saddlehorse. I gave a wave and he rode through the deep snow of the yard to join me inside the barn's shelter.

"How you doing?" asked my son when he had unwrapped sufficiently to let it out.

"A bit threadbare, to say the truth. Winter seems to be a whole hell of a lot longer than it ever used to be, not to mention deeper."

"I notice the sheep are looking a little lean." Lean didn't begin to say it, Varick. They were getting to resemble greyhounds. "You got enough hay to get through on, you think?"

"Rob and I were just discussing that." I scanned the white ridges, the white banks of the North Fork, the white roof of the sheep shed. Another week of this supreme snow sitting everywhere on us and we had might as well hire the coyotes to put the sheep out of their hungry misery. "Neither of us thinks we do have anywhere near enough, no."

Varick was plainly unsurprised. He said, part question and part not, "What about that Dakota spinach they've got at Valier?" Trainloads of what was being called hay, although it was merely slewgrass and other wiry trash, were being brought in from North Dakota to Valier and other rail points and sold at astounding prices.

"What about it?" I nodded to the east, across more than thirty miles. "It's in Valier and we're here."

"I could get loose for a couple days to help you haul," offered Varick. "Even bring my own hay sled. Can't beat that for a deal, now can you?"

I said nothing, while trying to think how to tell him his generosity was futile, Rob and I were so far beyond help.

Eyeing me carefully, Varick persisted: "If you and Unk and me each take a sled to Valier, we can haul back a hell of a bunch of hay, Dad."

"Varick, our workhorses can't stand that much journey. This winter has them about done in." *As it about has me, too*, I kept to myself.

"How about if I get you fresh horses?"

Well and good and fine but also impossible. Every horse in Scotch Heaven and anywhere around was a sack of bones by now. There wasn't a strong set of workhorses between here and—abruptly I realized where Varick intended to get fresh teams.

"Yeah, they'd be Isaac's," he confirmed.

Isaac. My nemesis who was never my enemy. In a better world, there would have been an Anna for each of us.

"Don't worry, Dad. He'll loan you the horses."

Why would he? Although I said it to Varick as: "What makes you so sure of that?"

"I already asked him. The old boy said, 'I hate for anyvun to get in a pince. Tell Annguz the horses is his.'"

A pinch definitely was what winter had us in, you were purely right about that, Isaac. I stared east again, to the white length of Scotch Heaven, the white miles beyond that to the railroad cars of hay in Valier. Why try, even. A sled journey of that sort, in a winter of this sort. *There is so much of this country, Angus*. That quiet mountaintop declaration of Adair's. *People keep having to stretch themselves out of shape trying to cope with so much. This Montana sets its own terms and tells you, do them or else*.

Or else. There in the snow of the valley where Rob and I had just pitched to them half the hay they ought to have had, the sheep were a single gray floe of wool in the universal whiteness. I remembered their bleating, the blizzard day we were late with the feeding; the awful hymn of their fear. Could I stand to hear that, day after day when the hay was gone?

Finally I gave Varick all the answer I had. "All right, I'm one vote for trying it. But we'll need to talk to Rob."

"He'll be for it. Dead sheep are lost dollars to him. He'll be for it, Dad."

In the winter-hazed sky, the dim sun itself seemed to be trying to find a clearer look at our puzzling procession. A square-ended craft

with a figurehead of two straining horses was there in the white nowhere, plowing on a snow sea. Then an identical apparition behind it, and a third ghost boat in the wake of that.

Three long sleds with hay racks on them, Varick at the reins of the first, myself the next driver, Rob at the tail of this sled-runner voyage toward Valier, our convoy crept across the white land. But if slowly, we moved steadily. The big Reese horses walked through the snow as if they were polar creatures. Copenhagen and Woodrow, my pair was named. Even Isaac's horses had the mix of his two lands. Horse alloys, strong there in the dark harness in front of me.

We stopped at the Double W fenceline, half the way between Gros Ventre and Valier, to eat from the bundle of lunch Adair had fixed us. Rob and I stomped some warmth into ourselves while Varick cut the barbed wire strands so we could get the sleds through. Of the four-wire fence, only the top two strands were showing above the snow. While Varick was at that, I gazed around at the prairie. Cold and silence, stillness and snow. Once upon a time there were two young men, new to Montana, who thought they were seeing snow. *This is just a April skift*, was the freighter Herbert's croaking assessment. That April and its light white coverlet sounded like high summer to me now. That flurry that had taken the mountains and the wheel tracks from our long-ago trek toward Lucas and his nowhere town was a pinch of salt compared to this. And Rob and I of then, how did we compare with what we are now? The journeys we had made together, across thirty years. Steamship and railroad and horse and foot and every kind of wheel. And by ash sled runners, enmity accompanying us. What, were we different Rob and different Angus, all the time before? Else how did the enmity manage to come between us? In all likelihood I am not the best judge of myself. But I can tell you, from trudging through the days of this winter beside the unspeaking figure known as Rob Barclay, that this was not the Rob who would throw back his head and cockily call up to the hazed sun, *Can't you get the stove going up there?*

Onward from the fence, the marks of our sled runners falling away into the winter plain behind us. Silence and cold, snow and stillness. The murmurs within myself the only human sound. Adair asking, when Varick and I went into the house with his offer to make this hay trip: *Do both of you utterly have to go?* Reluctant *yeah* from her son, equally involuntary *yes* from her husband. From her:

*Then I have to count on each of you to bring the other one back, don't I.* Toussaint, when I arranged for him to feed the sheep while we were gone, saying only: *This winter. You have to watch out for it, Angus.* And myself, here on this first ground I ever went across on horseback, scouting for a homestead site. Did I choose rightly, Scotch Heaven over this prairie? That farmhouse there on the chalky horizon. If I had chosen that spot those years ago, I would right now be in there drinking hot coffee and watching hay-hungry sheepmen ply past on their skeleton ships. No, not that simple. In the past summer of drought and grasshoppers and deflated prices, that farm, too, was bitter acres. The year 1919 had shown that farming could be a desperate way of life, too. Maybe everything was, one time or another.

It was dusk when we came around the frozen length of Valier's lake and began to pass the stray houses of the outskirts. Valier did not have as much accumulation of winter as Scotch Heaven or Gros Ventre, but it still had about as much as a town can stand. The young trees planted along the residential streets looked like long sticks stuck in to measure the snowfall. The downtown streets had drifts graceful as sand dunes. Stores peeked over the snowbanks. Pathways had been shoveled like a chain of canals, and at the eastern edge of town we could see the highest white dike of all, where the railroad track had been plowed.

Along the cornices of the three-story hotel where we went for the night, thick icicles hung like winter's laundry. When we three numb things had managed to unharness the teams at the stable and at last could think of tending to ourselves, Varick gave his sum of our journey from Scotch Heaven: "That could've been a whole hell of a lot worse."

And Rob gave his. "Once we get those sleds heavy with hay, it will be."

At morning, the depot agent greeted us with: "I been keeping your hay cool for you out in the icebox."

When no hint of amusement showed on any of the three of us, he sobered radically and said: "I'll show you the boxcar. We can settle up after you're loaded."

We passed a dozen empty boxcars, huge husks without their cargo, and came to a final one with a stubbly barricade of hay behind its slatted side. The agent broke ice from its door with a black-

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

smith hammer, then used a pinch bar to pry the grudging door open. "All yours," he stated, and hustled back inside the warmth of the depot.

The railroad car was stacked full of large bales like shaggy crates. Rob thrust a mitten under his armpit, pulled out his hand and thrust it into a bale. The handful he pulled out was brown crackly swamp-grass, which only in a winter of this sort would qualify as hay at all. "Awful stuff," Rob proclaimed.

"The woollies won't think it's as awful as starving," I told him. "Let's load and go." The weather was ever over our shoulder, and this was a lead-colored day that showed no intention of brightening. First thing of morning, I had taken a look out the hotel window to the west for the mountains and they were there, white-toothed as if they had sawed up through the snow prairie. As long as the mountains stayed unclouded we had what we needed from the weather today, neutrality.

Our work was harsh, laboring the bales from their stacks in the boxcar to the sleds alongside, as if we were hauling hundreds of loaded trunks down out of an attic. Oftener and oftener, Rob and I had to stop for breath. The smoke of our breathing clouded between us, two aging engines of work. To say the truth, without Varick's limber young strength I do not know how we ever would have loaded those three hay sleds.

When the last bale was aboard, even Varick looked close to spent, but he said only, "I guess that's them." A marker in our journey, that final bale; with it, the easy half of our hay task was over. Now to haul these loads, and ourselves, all the miles to Gros Ventre before nightfall, and on to Scotch Heaven the next day. Rob and I headed for the depot with our checkbooks to pay an outlandish price for this god-awful hay that was the only hay there was, and then we would have to get ourselves gone, out onto the prairie of winter.

We had our own tracks of yesterday to follow on the white plain west of Valier, smooth grooves of the sled runners and twin rough channels chopped by the horses' hooves. The Reese horses strained steadily as they pulled our hay loads. With every step they were rescuing us a little more, drawing us nearer to Scotch Heaven and out of this width of winter.

All was silence except for the rhythm of the horses' labor, muscle

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

against harness, hooves against snow. Existence crept no faster than our sleds, as if time had slowed to look gravely at itself, to ponder what way to go next, at what pace. I know I had thoughts—you can't not—but the lull we were traveling in held me. Keeping the team's leather reins wrapped in my mittened hands was the only occupation that counted in the world just then.

The change in the day began soon after we were beyond Valier's outlying farms and homesteads, where our tracks of yesterday went on into the prairie of the Double W range. At first the mountains only seemed oddly dimmed, as if dusk somehow had wandered into midday. I tried to believe it as a trick of light, all the while knowing the real likelihood.

In front of me I could see Varick letting only his hands and arms drive the team, the rest of him attentive to those dimming mountains. Behind me Rob undoubtedly was performing the same.

So the three of us simultaneously watched the mountains be taken by the murk. As if a gray stain was spreading down from the sky, the mountains gradually became more and more obscure, until they simply were absorbed out of sight. We had to hope that the weather covering the western horizon was only fog or fallow cloud and not true storm. We had to hope that mightily.

The wind, too, began faintly enough. Simply a sift along the top of the snow, soft little whiffs of white dust down there. I turtled deeper into the collar of my sheepskin coat in anticipation of the first gust to swoosh up onto the sled at me. But a windless minute passed, then another, although there were constant banners of snow weaving past the horses' hooves. I could see Varick and his sled clear as anything; but he and it seemed suspended in a landscape that was casually moving from under them. A ground blizzard. Gentle enough, so far. A breeze brooming whatever loose snow it could find, oddly tidy in its way. Another tease from the weather, but as long as the wind stayed down there at knee-high we were out of harm.

I believed we were nearly to our halfway mark, the Double W fence, yet it seemed an age before Varick's sled at last halted. I knew we were going to feed our teams, and for that matter ourselves, at this midpoint. But when Rob and I slogged up to Varick, we found he had more than replenishment on his mind.

"I don't know what you two think," he began, "but I figure we



## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

better just give up on the notion of going back the same route we came by."

Rob gave a grimace, which could have been either at Varick's words or at the sandwich frozen to the consistency of sawdust which he had just taken first bite of. "And do what instead?" he asked skeptically.

"Follow this fence," Varick proposed with a nod of his head toward it, "to where it hits the creek." Half a fence, really, in this deep winter; only the top portions of the fenceposts were above the snow, a midget line of march north and south from our cluster of hay sleds and horses. "Once we get to the creek," Varick was postulating, "we can follow that on into Gros Ventre easy enough."

"Man, that'd take twice as long," Rob objected. "And that's twice as much effort for these horses, not to mention us."

Varick gave me a moment's look, then a longer gaze at Rob. "Yeah, but at least this fence tells us where the hell we are," he answered. He inclined his head to the prairie the other side of the fence, where the wind's steady little sift had made our yesterday's tracks look softened. "It won't need a hell of a lot more of this to cover those tracks."

"Even if it does, Varick, we know that country," Rob persisted. "Christ, man, the hills are right out there in plain sight." The benchlands north of Noon Creek and the Double W were like distant surf above the flow of the blown snow.

"We won't know an inch of it in a genuine blizzard," Varick insisted. "If this starts really storming and we get to going in circles out there, we'll end up like the fillyloo bird."

Rob stared at him. "The which?"

"The fillyloo bird, Unk. That's the one that's got a wing shorter than the other, so that it keeps flying in littler and littler circles until it disappears up its own rear end."

Rob gave a short harsh laugh, but credit him, it was a laugh. I chortled as if I was filled with feathers. Were we all going giddy, the cold stiffening our brains? Would they find us here in the spring-time, with ice grins on our faces?

"All right, all right," Rob was conceding, as much to the notion of the fillyloo bird as to Varick. If I had been the one to broach the fence route to him, Rob would have sniffed and snorted at it until

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

we grew roots. But here he was, grudging but giving the words to Varick. "Lead on to your damn creek."

We began to follow the Double W fenceline south. The low stuttered pattern of the fenceposts could be seen ahead for maybe a quarter of a mile at a time, before fading into the ground blizzard. Occasionally there was a hump, or more often a series of them, next to the barbed wire—carcasses of Double W cattle that had drifted with the wind until the fence thwarted them. I wondered if Wampus Cat Williamson in his California money vault gave a damn.

A tiny cloud caught on my eyelash. I squinted to get rid of it and it melted coldly into my eye.

I blinked, and there were other snowflakes now, sliding across the air softly.

The stillness of their descent lasted only a few moments, before the first gust of wind hit and sent them spinning.

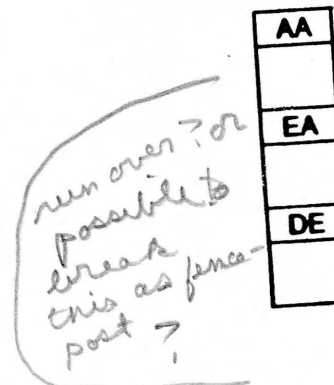
Quickly it was snowing so hard there seemed to be more white in the air than there was space between the flakes. In front of me Varick's sled was a squarish smudge.

The wind drove into us. No longer was it lazing along the ground. From the howl of it, this blizzard was blowing as high as the stars.

The Reese horses labored. Varick and I and Rob got off and walked on the lee side of our hay sleds, to lessen the load for the teams and to be down out of the wind and churning whatever warmth we could into ourselves. I had on socks and socks and socks, and even so my feet felt the cold. This was severe travel, and before long the ghostly sled in front of me halted, and Varick was emerging from the volleys of wind and snow to see how we were faring. Rob promptly materialized from behind. A gather seemed needed by all three of us.

The wind quibbled around our boots even in the shelter of my hay sled. There we huddled, with our flap caps tied down tight over our ears and scarves across our faces up to our eyes. Bedouins of the blizzard. One by one we pulled down our scarves and scrutinized each other for frostbite.

"We're doing about as good as we can, seems to me," Varick assessed after our inspection of each other. In the howl of the wind, each word had to be a sentence. "I can only see a fen-



cepost or two at a time in this," Varick told us, "but that'll do. Unk, how's it going with you, back there?"

"Winterish," was all Rob replied.

"How about you, Dad—are you all right?"

That question of Varick's was many in one. I ached with cold, the rust of weariness was in every muscle I used, I knew how tiny we three dots of men, horses and hay were in the expanse of this winter-swollen land. But I took only the part of the question that Varick maybe had not even known he was asking: was I afraid? The answer, surprise to myself: I was not. Certainly not afraid for myself, for I could make myself outlast the cold and snow as long as Rob Barclay could. If one of us broke, then the other might begin to cave. But our stubbornnesses would carry each other far. We would not give one another the satisfaction of dying craven, would we, Rob.

"I'm good enough," I answered my son. "Let's go see more snow."

Trudge and try not to think about how much more trudging needed be done. Here was existence scoured down as far as it could go. Just the flecked sky, filled with fat snowflakes and spiteful wind; and us, six horse creatures and three human. Hoof-prints of our horses, sliced path of our sled runners, our boot-prints, wrote commotion into the snow. Yet a hundred yards behind Rob you would not be able to find a trace that we had ever been there. Maybe winter was trying to blow itself out in this one day. Maybe so, maybe no. It had been trying something since October. I felt pity for Woodrow, the horse of my team who was getting the wind full against his side. But being a Reese horse, he simply turned his head and persevered with his work.

I pounded my arm against my side and trudged. The wind whirled the air full of white flakes again. *Old mad winter/with snow hair flying.* This must be what mesmerism is, every particle of existence streaming to you and dreamily past. A white blanket for your mind. A storm such as this blew in all the way from legendary times, other winters great in their fury. The winter of '83. *The Starvation Winter, these Blackfeet call that, and by Jesus they did starve, poor bastards them, by the hundreds. Pure gruesome, what they went through.* Gruesome was the apt word for such winters, Lucas, yes. The winter of '86, Toussaint's telling of it. *That winter. That winter,*

*we ate with the axe.* And Rob saying, *A once in a lifetime winter.* It depended on the size of the lifetime, didn't it.

The wind blowing, the snow flowing. Try to pound another arm's worth of warmth into myself and keep trudging. Every so often Varick, tall bundle of dimness ahead in the blowing snow, turned to look for me. I did the same for Rob. Rob. Rob who was all but vanished back there. Say he did vanish. Say he stumbled, sprawled in the miring snow, could not get up in time before I missed him, next time I glanced back. Say Rob did vanish into the blizzard, what would I feel? Truth now, Angus: what? As I tried to find honest reply in myself, a side of my mind said at least that would end it once and all, if Rob faltered back there in the snow and Varick and I could not find him, the poisoned time that had come between us—this entangled struggle between McCaskill and Barclay—would at last be ended. Or would it.

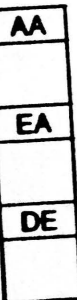
Whether it was decision or just habit, I kept watching behind me periodically to Rob. The team he had were big matched grays, and against the storm dusk they faded startlingly, so that at a glance there simply seemed to be harness standing in the air back there, blinders and collars and straps as if the wind had dressed itself in them. And ever, beside the floating sets of harness, the bulky figure of Rob.

We were stopped again. Varick came slogging to me like a man wading surf, and reported in a half shout that the fenceline had gone out of sight under a snowdrift that filled a coulee. We would need to veer down and around the pit of snow, then angle back up once we were past it to find the fenceline where it emerged from the coulee.

"If we've got to, we've got to," I assented to Varick, and while he returned to his sled I beckoned for Rob to come up and hear the situation. He looked as far from happy as a man could be, but he had to agree that the detour was all there was to do.

The horses must have wondered why they had to turn a corner here at the middle of nothingness, but they obediently veered left and floundered down the short slope.

Now the problem was up. The slope on the other side of the coulee was steep and angling, the top of it lost in the swirling snow, so that as the horses strained they seemed to be climbing a stormcloud. This was the cruelest work yet, the team plunging a few steps at a time and then gathering themselves for the next lunge, all the while





DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

the loaded sled dragging backward on them. It hurt even to watch such raw effort. I sang out every encouragement I could, but the task was entirely the horses.'

Up and up, in those awful surges, until at last the snow began to level out. The horses' sides still heaved from the exertions of getting us here, but I breathed easier now that we were atop the brow of the coulee and our way ahead to the fenceline would be less demanding.

Varick had halted us yet again. What this time?

One more time I waved Rob up to us as Varick trudged back from the lead sled.

"This don't feel right to me," Varick reported. He was squinting apprehensively. "I haven't found that fenceline yet and we ought've been back to it by now."

"We must not have come far enough to hit it yet, is all," Rob said impatiently, speaking what was in my mind, too.

Varick shook his head. "We've come pretty damn far. No, that fence ought to be here by now. But it isn't."

"Then where to Christ is it?" demanded Rob belligerently into the concealing storm. Our faces said that each of the three of us was morally certain we had come the right way after veering around the coulee. Hop with that first leg of logic and the second was inevitable: we ought to have come to the fence again. But no fence, logical or any other kind, was in evidence.

For a long moment we peered into the windblown snow, our breath smoking in front of our faces like separate small storms. Without that fence we were travelers with nowhere to go. Nowhere in life, that is. Bewilderment fought with reasoning, and I tried to clear my numb mind of everything except fence thoughts. Not even a blizzard could blow away a line of stoutly set posts and four lines of wire. Could it?

"There's just one other place I can think of for that fence to be," Varick suggested as if he hated to bring up the idea. "The sonofabitch might be under us."

With his overshoe he scuffed aside the day's powdery freshfall to show us the old hardened snow beneath. Rob and I stared down. Oh sweet Christ and every dimpled disciple. A snow bridge, was this? If it was, if we were huddled there on a giant drift where the snow had built and cemented itself onto the brow of the coulee all winter, fenceposts and barbed wire could be buried below us, right

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

enough. Anything short of a steeple could be buried down there, if this truly was a snow bridge. And if we were overshooting the fenceline down there under the winter crust, we next were going to be on the blind plain, in danger of circling ourselves to death.

"Damn it," Rob seemed downright affronted by our predicament, "who ever saw snow like this?"

Varick had no time for that. Rapidly he said, "We can't just stand around here cussing the goddamn situation. What I'd better do is go out here a little way"—indicating to the left of us, what ought to be the southward slope of the long hump of drift we were on, if we were—"and take a look around for where the fence comes out of this."

His words scared my own into the air. "Not without a rope on you, you won't."

"Yeah, I'm afraid you're right about that," Varick agreed. The three of us peered to the route he proposed to take. Visibility came and went but it was never more than a few dozen strides' worth. I repeated that Varick was not moving one step into the blizzard without a rescue rope to follow back to us, even though we all knew the cumbersome minutes it would cost us to undo the ropes that were lashing the hay to the sled racks, knot them together, affix them around his waist—"It won't take time at all," I uttered unconvincingly.

Hateful as the task was, stiff-fingered and wind-harassed as we were, we got the ropes untied from each of our hay loads. Next, the reverse of that untying chore. "Rob, you're the one with the canny hands," I tried on him. He gave me a look, then with a grunt began knotting the several ropes together to make a single lifeline for Varick. One end of the line I tied firmly around Varick's waist while Rob was doing the splice knots, then we anchored the other end to Varick's hay rack.

"Let's try it," Varick said, and off he plunged into the blizzard. Rob and I, silent pillars side by side, lost sight of him before he had managed to take twenty effortful steps.

With my son out there in the oblivion of winter, each moment ached in me. But I could think of no other precaution we might have done. If Varick didn't come back within a reasonable time, Rob and I could follow the rope into the blizzard and fetch him. I would do it by myself if I had to. It might take every morsel of

run back;  
break it, fence-  
line

AA
EA
DE

energy left in me, but I would get Varick back out of that swirling snow if I had to.

The rope went taut.

It stayed that way a long moment, as if Varick was dangling straight down from it instead of out across a plain of snow. Then the line alternately slackened and straightened, as Varick pulled himself back to us hand over hand.

His face, strained and wincing, told us before his words did. "I didn't make it to the fence. Ran out of rope."

Rob swore feelingly. I tried to think. We needed more rope, more line of life, to explore again into that snow world, and we did not have more rope. We just had ourselves, the three of us.

"Varick," I began. "Can you stand another try at it?"

"Floundering around out there isn't really anything I want to make a career of," he admitted, breathing as if he'd been in a race. "But yeah, I can do it again if I have to."

"Then this time I'll go out with you, for however far he can still see me." I jerked my head to indicate Rob. "You give us a yell when we're just about out of sight, Rob. Then you go out beyond me, Varick, while I hold the rope for you. What do you think? It would gain us that much distance"—I nodded to the edge of visibility out there—"for looking, at least."

"That sounds as good as any," Varick assented. Rob only bobbed his head once; we McCaskills could take it for yes if we wanted.

Varick and I set out, the wind sending scythes of snow at us. The cold sawed at us through every seam in our clothing. Quickly we were up to our knees in a fresh drift. Varick broke the way and I thrashed after him. A drift atop a drift, this latest dune of snow would be. And other layers beneath that as we slogged. October snow. November on top of that. And Décembre atop that, and January, and February . . . How many tiers of this winter could there be. This wasn't a winter, it was geologic ages of snow. It was a storm planet building itself layer by layer. It was—

Abruptly I stopped, and reaching a hand ahead to Varick's shoulder brought him to a halt, too. When he turned, the apprehension in my manner made words unnecessary.

We looked back. Nothingness. The white void of snow, the blizzard erasing all difference between earth and sky. No glimpse of Rob. No sound in the air but the wind.

We stood like listening statues, our tracks already gone into the

swirling snow we had come out of. Again, yet, no voice from the safety of there.

The bastard.

The utter betraying triple-slippery unforgiving bastard Rob had let us come too far. I ought to have killed him with my own hands, the day we fought there on Breed Butte, the day it all began. He was letting the blizzard eat us. Letting Varick and me vanish like two sparks into the whirl of this snow. Letting us—

Then sounds that were not quite the wind's.

. . . *arr* . . .

. . . *ough* . . .

The blizzard swirled in a new way, and the wraith figure of Rob was there, waving both arms over his head.

"*Far enough*," his voice faintly carried to us. "*Far enough*."

Varick's heavy breathing was close to mine. "He always was one to press the luck, wasn't he," my son uttered. "Particularly when it's somebody else's."

We breathed together, marking the sight and sound of Rob into our senses, then turned ahead to squint for any sign of the fenceline. None.

"You ready to go fishing?" asked Varick, and away he plunged again, the rope around his waist and in my mittened hands.

Through my weariness I concentrated on the hemp in my hands. *To see a world in a grain of sand* . . . Would grains of snow do? By the dozens and hundreds they fell and fell, their whiteness coating my sleeves and mittens. . . . *Hold infinity in the palm of your hand* . . . Would mittened palms be deft enough, for that? I had to force my cold claw of a hand to keep making a fist around the moving line of rope. The rope paying out through my grip already had taken Varick from sight, into the snow cyclone. Thoughts swarmed to fill his absence. What if he stumbled out there, jerking the rope out of my stiff hands? Hold, Angus. Find a way to hold. I fumbled the end of the rope around my waist, clutching it tightly belted around me with my right hand while the left hand encircled the strand going out to Varick. If he fell I would fall, too, but nothing would make me let go of this rope. I would be Varick's anchor. Such as I was, I would be that much. A splice knot caught in my grip an instant before I let it belly out and away. The knots. Rob's knots. Lord of mercy, why hadn't I done them myself? What if he

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

hadn't tied them firmly, what if just one began to slip loose? No. No, I could trust Rob's hands even if I couldn't trust him.

Only a few feet of rope left. If Varick did not find the fenceline now, we never would. My heart thundered in me, as if the enormity of clothing around it was making it echo. A quiver of chill went through me each time the wind clasped around my body. If we couldn't go on we would need to try to hide ourselves in caves of the hay, try to wait out the blizzard. But if this cold and wind went on through the night, our chances were slim. More likely they were none. If any one of us could live through, let it be Var—

Tugs on the rope, like something heavy quivering at the end of the hempen line. Or something floundering after it had fallen.

"VARICK!" I shouted as loud as I could. The wind took my words. I might as well have been yelling into a bale of that Dakota hay.

The tugs continued. I swallowed, held firm, clutching the jerking rope around me. I resisted a hundred impulses to plunge forward and help Varick in his struggle. I resisted another hundred to whirl around in search of Rob, to see whether he still was there as our guidemark. The distance back to him and the hay sleds was the same as it ever had been, I had to recite to my bolting instincts, only the snow was in motion, not the white distance stretching itself as it gave every appearance of. Motion of another wild sort at the invisible end of this rope, the tugs continuing in a ragged rhythm that I hoped had to be—

Varick suddenly coming hand over hand, materializing out of the whirl. A struggling upright slab of whiteness amid the coiling swirl of whiteness.

He saved his breath until he was back to me, my arms helping to hold him up.

"It's there!" he panted. "The fenceline. It comes out of the drift about there"—carefully pointing an angle to our left, although everything in me would have guessed it had to be to our right. "The sleds are actually on the other side of the sonofabitch. We about went too far, Dad."

Fixing ourselves on the figure whose waves and shouts came and went through the blowing flakes, we fought snow with our feet until we were back beside Rob. Varick saved him the burden of asking. "We got ourselves a fence again, Unk."

Laboriously we retied the ropes across the hay loads, as well as men in our condition could. Then Varick turned his team to the

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

left—they were glad enough to, suffering in the wind as they had been—and I reined Woodrow and Copenhagen around to follow them, and Rob and his grays swung in behind us. Once our procession was down off the mound of snow, the tops of fenceposts appeared and then the topmost single strand of barbwire, the three strands beneath it in the accumulated white depth. This white iron winter, with a brutal web in it. That single top strand, though. That was our tether to the creek, to survival. I had never known until then that I could be joyously glad to see barbed bramble.

Now how far to the creek? We had to keep going, following the line of fence, no matter what distance it was. There was no knowing the hour of the day, either. The storm had made it all dusk. The complicated effort of trying to fumble out my pocket watch for a look, I couldn't even consider. Slog was all we needed to know, really. But how far?

Another laborious half-mile, mile. Who knew. This day's distances had nothing to do with numbers.

Then thin shadows stood in the snowy air.

Trees, willows of the creek. Dim frieze that hung on the white wall of weather. But as much guidance as if it was all the direction posts on earth, every one of them pointing us to Gros Ventre and safety.

A person is never too weary to feel victory. Blearily exultant, I stood and watched while Varick halted his sled and began to slog back to meet Rob and me. Now that we had the creek, consultation wasn't really needed any more. But maybe he simply had to share success with us, maybe—then as I squinted at the tree line of the creek, something moved in the bottom corner of my vision, there where the fence cornered into the creek.

I blinked and the something still moved, slowly, barely. A lower clot of forms beneath the willow shadows: Double W cattle, white with the snow coated onto them, caught there in the fence corner.

"The two of you go ahead and take your sleds across the creek, why not," my son said as nonchalantly as if our day of struggle was already years into the past. "I'll snip the fence for these cows and give them a shove out into the brush, then catch up with you."

"Man, why bother," Rob spoke bitterly. He still wore that bleak look, as if being prodded along by the point of an invisible bayonet. "They're goddamn Williamson's."





"That isn't their fault," Varick gave him back. "Head on across, you two. I won't be long."

I made my tired arms and tired legs climb atop the hay on the sled, then rattled the reins to start Copenhagen and Woodrow on their last few plodded miles to town, miles with the guarantee of the creek beside us. When we had crossed the narrow creek and made our turn toward Gros Ventre, Rob and his gray team copying behind us, I could hear faintly above the wind the grateful moans of the cattle Varick was freeing from the blizzard.

In the morning, our procession from Gros Ventre west toward home was a slow glide through white peace. New snow had freshened everything, and without the wind the country sat plump and calm.

As we passed the knob ridge at the mouth of the North Fork valley, branchloads in the tops of its pine trees were dislodging and falling onto the lower branches, sending up snow like white dust. The all-but-silent plummets of snow in the pines and the sounds of our teams and sleds were the only things to be heard in Scotch Heaven.

We went past the empty Duff homestead, and then the empty Erskine place, and what had been Archie Findlater's homestead, and the silent buildings of Allan Frew's. The lone soul anywhere here in the center of the valley was George Frew, feeding his sheep beside the creek. George's wave to us was slow and thoughtful, as if he was wondering whether he, too, would soon be making such a journey as we had.

And now we were around the final turn of the valley to my homestead, mine and Adair's, and there on their feedground beside the North Fork were the sheep in their gray gather, and the broad bundled figure of Toussaint distributing dabs of hay. For a long minute he watched our tiny fleet of bale-laden sleds, Varick in the lead, next me, Rob at the tail. Then Toussaint gripped his pitchfork in the middle of the handle, hoisted it above his head and solemnly held it there as if making sure we could see what it was, as if showing us it was not an axe.

We had hay now, but we still had the winter, too.

Each day was one more link in the chain of cold. For the first

week after our Valier journey, Rob and I were men with smoke for breath as we fed the sheep in the frozen glistening weather.

Memory takes a fix from landmarks as any other traveler will. That week of bright silver winter after our hay journey was a time when Scotch Heaven never looked better. The mountains stood up as white majesties in the blue and the sun. The long ridgelines wore scarves of fresh snow that made them seem gentle, content. Every tree of the timbered top of Breed Butte stood out like a proud black sprig. Sunshaft and shadow wove bold wild patterns amid the willows along the North Fork. Only an eyeblink of time ago Montana was at its worst, and here it was at its best.

I would like to say that the clear weather and the Dakota hay and our survival of the blizzard made a poultice for the tension between Rob and me. That we put aside the winterlong wrangling—the yearslong enmity—and simply shouldered together toward spring. I would like to say that, but it would be farthest from the truth.

Maybe Rob would have been able to hold himself in if sheep had not continued to die. We found a few every day, in stiffened collapse; weak from the long winter and the short ration of hay, they no longer could withstand the cold and simply laid down into it and died. You could look on the hay journey as having saved the great majority of the sheep, as I did. Or you could look on the fact that in spite of that journey and its expensive hay, some of the sheep still insisted on dying, as Rob did.

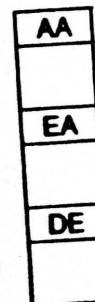
It was about the third time he muttered something about "this Dakota hay of yours" that I rapped back, "What, you think we ought to have let the whole damn band just starve to death?"

"Goddamn it, you didn't hear me say that."

"If it wasn't that, it was the next thing to it."

"Up a rope, why don't you," he snapped back. It occurred to me we really ought not be arguing while we had pitchforks in our hands.

Wordlessly we shoveled the rest of the day's hay, and wordlessly I headed home to Adair and he to Breed Butte. By now I was not in my best mood. Overnight the clear weather had faded and gone, today's was a milky indecisive overcast, neither one thing nor another. The feedground wasn't far behind me when I heard the KAPOW of Rob's rifle as he blazed away, as he lately had begun doing, at some coyote attempting to dine on one of our



DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

dead sheep. The Winchester thunder rolled and rolled through the cold air, echoing around in the white day that had no horizon between earth and sky for it to escape through. Myself, I was not giving the coyotes any aggravation this winter. As long as they were eating the dead ones maybe they weren't eating the live ones, was my wishful theory. But apparently Rob had to take his frustration out on something, and as a second KAPOW billowed through the winter air, the coyotes were the ones getting it at the moment.

When I reached home with the hay sled, Varick's horse was in the barn. These visits of his through all the deep-drifted country between here and Noon Creek were more than outings, they were major pilgrimages. For Adair's sake, I was greatly glad that he came across the divide to us as often as he did. In full honesty, I was just as glad for my own sake.

Stiff and weary and chilly to the bottom sides of my bones, I clomped into the house. My wife and my son were at the table keeping coffee cups company. "Easy life for some people," I chattered out.

Greatly casual, Varick remarked: "There's news on Noon Creek. I been keeping this table warm for you until you could get here to hear it."

Hot coffee was all I wanted to hear of. Adair reached to the stove for the pot and poured me a cup as I thumped myself into a chair and began to unbuckle my overshoes. "If the news has winter in it," I expelled tiredly to Varick, "I can stand not to hear it."

"Yeah, well, maybe winter had a little something to do with it." Our son grinned all the grin a face could. "Beth's going to have a baby."

Adair stood up. Her face spoke *take care of her*, while her voice was saying: "Varick, that's fine!"

"You're ready to be grandma, are you?"

She hugged him from behind and declared: "It's bound to be easier than raising you ever was."

In her encircling arms our son turned his head to me. "If, ah, if he's a he"—Varick laughed at his word tangle—"Beth and I are going to give him that *Alexander* someplace in his name. Both of us figure maybe we can stand that much of the old country in any son of ours."

DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

A bit dizzily I said, "Thank you both," which of course didn't come within a million miles of saying it enough. Then from Adair: "And if it's a girl?"

Varick paused. "Then we'd name her after Beth's mother."

There was nothing I could say. Not of Anna, not to this family of mine that had put itself through so much because of my love for her. It was Adair who moved us beyond the moment, put something major behind us. "That's an apt name, too," she said quietly to Varick. "You and Beth are honoring both families."

The second week in March, the chinook at last came. It arrived in the night, as if guilty about how tardy it had been, and when I realized from the changed feel of the air that this was a warm gush of wind instead of yet another icy one, I slid out of bed and went to the window.

Already there were trickles of melt, like running tears, down through the frost pattern on the glass. The warm wind outside was a steady swoosh. I looked back to the bed and my sleeping wife. In a few hours, at her end of our shared night, Adair would wake up into spring.

That morning at the feeding, I wished Rob was still in hibernation somewhere.

"Where the hell was this six weeks ago, when it would have saved our skins?" was his bitter welcome to the thaw.

His mood didn't sweeten in the next few days of warmth, either. Now that there was melt and slop everywhere, he grumbled against the thaw's mess as fervidly as he had against the snow it was dispelling. Maybe the chinook air itself was on his nerves—the change from winter coming so sudden that the atmosphere seemed charged, eerie. Or maybe this simply was the way Rob was anymore—resentful against the world.

Whatever his case was, it was not easy to be around. Not far from where we had stacked the Dakota hay there was a pile of dead sheep we had skinned throughout the winter and I had dragged off the meadow when the chinook came, and the boldest of the coyotes sometimes came to eat away at those corpses now that they were thawing. Rob took to bringing the rifle with him on the hay sled, to cut loose a shot if he saw a flash of coyote color there at the dead

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

pile. The first time he yelled at me to hold the team while he aimed and fired, I had all I could do to keep the workhorses under control.

"Why don't you give the artillery a furlough until we're done feeding?" I tried on him. "The horses don't like it, the sheep don't like it, and I hereby make it unanimous."

He didn't even deign to answer, unless you can call a cold scowl an answer. He simply hung the rifle by its sling, back onto the upright of the hay rack where he kept it while we pitched hay, in a way designed to tell me that he would resume combat with the coyotes whenever he damn well felt like it.

Where had this Rob come from, out of the years? Watching him at this kind of behavior, I couldn't help but remember another Rob, of another spring, of another hard time. A lambing time, back in the years of '93. It had been one of those days to wonder why I didn't just walk away from the sheep business and join other certified lunatics in the asylum. The bunch herder we'd hired had lost thirty lambs in the past ten days, and another five had died on him that day. At that rate, by shipping time Rob and I were going to need to buy him a total new supply of lambs if we wanted to have any lambs to ship.

*We've got to send this geezer down the road,* I said to Rob that remembered day.

*I know, I know,* he agreed glumly. *The man is a mortal enemy to sheep. I'll take the band while you trundle him to town, why not. Hire the nearest breathing body in the Medicine Lodge, McAngus. You can't do any worse than we did with this disgrace to the race.*

*What if the nearest is Lucas?* We both had to laugh.

*Then the sheep would hear in a hurry what's expected of them,* Rob vouched. *Lads and lasses, his voice so very like Lucas's, that's pure wonderful grass you're walking around on, so I want to see your noses down in it, ay? Do you know how much money you're costing me by your silly habit of dying? So let's have no more of that, you woollies, and we'll all get along together grand.*

As I had gone off, still laughing, I stopped to call back: *Rob, do you ever wonder if we're in the right line of work?*

His cocked head, his bright face. *There's an occasional minute when I don't, McAngus.*

In those times I would have walked into fire for Rob, and he for me. Yet that was the Rob who eventually cost me Varick, those years after the Two Medicine. Yet again, that was the Rob who had

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

gained me Adair, all but brought her with frosting and candles on. Done that, and then put a boot through my family because of Anna. Where was the set of weights to measure such things; where was balance when you tried to align the different Robs. If they were different ones.

Going home that day, I heard another clap of Rob's Winchester thunder. He wasn't getting much done in life except trying to ambush coyotes. The man had me worried.

I had some downright dread the next morning. I knew this was the day we were going to have to move the sheep to a new and higher feedground, the chinook having made a soggy mess of where we had been feeding them in my hay meadow. In other times it would have been a task as automatic and easy as scratching an ear, but I could already hear Rob in full bay about having to work the sheep to a fresh site ~~for their hay~~. Then, too, there was the small chore of liberating Scorpion out onto the coming grass, and Rob had already made himself known on the topic of the old horse and his menu.

And so I asked Adair. "What about coming with us today?"

"You want me to, do you?"

I smiled to the extent I could. "It can't hurt, and it might help."

"All right then," she agreed readily. "I'd better come see spring while it's still here, hadn't I."

"Then why don't you ride Scorpion out and we'll turn him loose to graze up there where the sheep are going to be—he and the woollies will be some company for each other, that way. I'll saddle him for you, all right?"

"No," she informed me. "I've known how to saddle a horse ever since five minutes after I married you. You get your old workhorses ready, Scorpion and I will take care of ourselves."

A good sight to see, Adair atop Scorpion as the pair of them accompanied alongside the hay sled and myself. If she pressed me to the hilt, I would have had to say that the day's most enchanting vision was the rivulets of melt running from beneath every snow-drift we passed. Glorious, the making of mud where winter had stood. But definitely this wife of mine and the tall brown horse, elderly and stiff as he was, made the second finest scene today.

Try tell that or anything else to Rob, though.

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"What's this, a mounted escort for us on our way to the poorhouse?" he met us with at the haystack.

Degraded as that was, it seemed to be the top of his mood this day. I told him shortly that Scorpion was on his way out to pasture, which drew only Rob's scornful study of the elderly horse. At least he didn't start a recapitulation of how mawkish I was in keeping Scorpion among the living. But then as soon as I suggested that we needed to move the sheep from the muddy feedground in my meadow, the Rob response to that was hundred-proof sarcasm.

"So that hay can be grown to be fed to sheep that are worth less than the hay, do you mean? That definitely sounds like the McCaskill high road to wealth, I can be the first to vouch."

"Rob, there's no sense in being owly about a little thing like this. Christ, man, we always put the sheep onto a fresh feedground after a chinook. You know that as well as I do." Or you would if you'd let your Barclay mind rule your Barclay mouth, for a change. "They can at least get a little grass into them if we move them onto the butte there," I went on, indicating with a nod the slope beside his reservoir, where broad swathes of ground themselves amid the melting patches of snow. The earthwork of the reservoir itself was already clear of snow, a chocolate pocket on the mottled slope of Breed Butte.

"Put the bastards up the backside of the moon, for all I care," Rob grumped next, and turned his back on me. He climbed onto the hay rack and hung his rifle by its sling onto the upright. "Let's get this damn feeding done," was his next impatient pronouncement.

Adair's gaze seemed to silence him after that, at least during our effort of loading the hay onto the sled rack. When we were done and standing there puffing, she announced she would drive the team for us now rather than ride Scorpion up the slope. "Adair needs the practice," she stated. Scorpion could follow, his reins tied to the back of the hay rack as they were; no problem to that. The problem anywhere in the vicinity went by the name of Rob, and I knew as well as Adair that the true need for her to be on the sled was to stay between her brother and me when he was this sulphurous.

The sheep were curious about the sled going up the slope instead of toward the meadow and them. *Prrrrr prrrrr*, I purred as loudly as

I could, and the bell wether Percy and the first few ewes began to get the idea and started toward the slope.

The siege of winter was withdrawing but not yet gone. Gray snowdrifts still clutched the treeline of Breed Butte and any swale of the broad slope. The entire country looked tattered and hungry. Up here above the still-white valley our sled runners were passing across as much muddy ground as they were snow, and in those bare damp patches the sickly grass from last year lay crushed, flattened by the burden of a hundred and fifty days of winter. Yet under the old clots of stems there was a faint almost-green blush, even today, after just this half-week of chinook and thaw, that said new grass was making its intentions known.

"Where to, gentlemen?" Adair called back to us from her position at the team's reins.

I asked Rob, "What do you think, maybe here?"

He said acidly, "It's the same muck everywhere, so this is as good as any."

He was going to be thoroughly that way today, was he. Then the thing to do was to get this hay flung off the sled and the sheep up here onto their new venue and be done with the man and his red mood. That curative for today—tomorrow would have to contrive its own Rob remedy as needed—could begin just as soon as Scorpion was turned loose out of the path of the hay, and so I climbed swiftly down to take his saddle and bridle off. I was untying Scorpion's reins from the back of the hay rack when Rob's voice slashed above me.

"Angus."

The first time in years he had used my name. And now it snapped out quick and bitter, as if he wanted to be rid of it.

I swung around to see what this fusillade was going to be.

"Don't turn that geezer of a horse loose yet," Rob directed. "I just saw something I need to do with him."

"What's that, now?" I said up to him in surprise.

"My reservoir. This is a chance to tamp it." There atop the hay, he was gazing in a stony way along the slope to the long narrow mound of the dam and the ice-skinned impoundment behind it. Rob aiming his chin down at the valley and its creek, now and that first time I had watched him do it: *By damn, I didn't come all the miles from one River Street to live down there on another.* "The sheep have

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

got to come up here anyway," he was saying, "the bastards might as well tromp across the dam and do me some good while they're at it. I'm going to ride old horsemeat here down and start shoving them to the reservoir."

"Why don't you wait with that until the next time we move the band," I tried. "The ground will be drier by then and the tamping will go better."

"Rob, yes," Adair interceded. "Angus is right about waiting for another day. Let's just get on with the feeding."

That brother of hers shook his head, his gaze still fixed across at the reservoir and its watery gray disc of ice. So far as I could see, winter and spring were knotted together there, ice and slush in the swale behind the dam versus mud on its sides and top; whatever moment of opportunity Rob Barclay thought he was viewing there made no sense whatsoever to me. But then we had made our separate decisions about water, about Breed Butte and the North Fork, a full thirty years ago, so when had we ever seen with the same eyes?

One thing I was determined to enforce: "Scorpion isn't the best horse for this, after all winter in the barn. You'd be as well off on foot. I'll walk down with you to the sheep, what about, and the two of us can—"

Rob came down off the hay sled. But I saw he hadn't come anywhere toward my line of thinking. His face was tight as a drumhide, and I suppose my own was taut enough. His tone was its most scornful yet, as he unloaded the words onto me:

"Pushing the sheep across that dam is a minute's work, is all. This goddamn horse has been gobbling up hay and doing not one thing to earn it all winter long. And you'd let it be that way." His helmeted look, his high-and-mighty mood when he wouldn't hear any words but his own. He gave me a last lash: "Your heart always has been as soft as your head."

Through it all, he still scanned with determination the reservoir, the sheep, the saddle horse. He would not so much as glance at me. Heart, mind, tongue, and now eyes, the last of Rob that was left to turn from me.

"Rob, Angus," Adair spoke up from the front of the hay sled where she had been waiting for this to abate. "You know how you're supposed to settle these things."

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

I hated to toss Scorpion to chance one more time. But if that's what it took . . .

"All right," I said with disgusted resignation, "we'll cut the cards for it, then," and reached into my coat pocket for the well-worn deck. "If I draw the low, Scorpion gets turned loose here and now. If you draw it—"

"No."

Before I knew it he had Scorpion's reins out of my hand, snatched into his.

"This horse has been living beyond his time ever since you won that other card cut." The face in front of me was cocked to one side, a tilt with anger and the abrupt spill of declaring it. "He can do this one bit of work, and he's by Christ going to." With that, Rob shoved his overshoed foot into the stirrup and swung heavily up onto Scorpion, the horse grunting in surprise at the force of the rider clamping onto him.

I managed to grab hold of Scorpion's bridle and kept Rob from reining the brown head around as he was trying to do.

"Rob, I'm telling you, once," I delivered my own cold anger to this situation. "Behave yourself with this horse or I'll talk to you by hand."

There was a startled whinny from Scorpion as Rob jammed his heels into him and spun the horse out of my grasp, down the slope toward the approaching straggle of sheep.

"Go operate a pitchfork," Rob flung back at me without looking. "It's what you're good for."

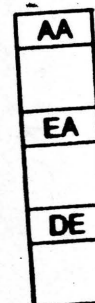
So we had reached this, had we. Rob storming off, breaking the last of the terms I knew for enduring him. How in the name of anything were we going to survive lambing, shearing, summering the sheep in the national forest, all the steps that needed decision, if the damn man wouldn't hew to any way of deciding? We had come through the winter and now here was winter coming out of Rob as a white rage.

I climbed onto the back of the hay sled. His coyote rifle hung there on the upright from its sling.

I reached and unslung it, the grip of the wooden stock cold in my hand.

I could feel Adair's eyes on me.

I met her gaze as I jacked the shells out of the rifle one by one



and pocketed them. When I had checked the breech to be thoroughly sure the weapon was empty, I hung the Winchester back where Rob had left it. "Just in case that temper of his doesn't know where to quit," I said to Adair.

"I'll talk to him, Angus," Adair said. "Let him get today out of his system, and I'll talk to him."

"I'm afraid his case is more than today, Dair."

"We'll just have to see. Why don't we get on with the feeding. It'll bring the sheep up here that much faster if they see the hay."

She was right. This day and Rob Barclay in it should be sped along, any way possible. I nodded to her to start the team, and began breaking the bales and pitching the dry brown Dakota hay off the sled. I cast glances along the slope as Rob commenced to work the sheep up to the embankment of the reservoir. They were not keen for the scheme. Recalcitrant sheep weren't going to help his mood at all. I would have to try every way in me to steel myself to let this behavior of Rob's pass until tomorrow, as Adair was asking of me. Because I knew, as if it was a memory in my fists, that I would pound Rob if I saw him mistreat Scorpion down there. With the rifle empty, he would be able to do nothing but take my beating, if it came to that. I would try not let it come to fists again, but given the mood the damn man was in, the trend wasn't promising.

I kept a watchful eye on Rob's doings while I kept at the feeding task. At last the sheep were skittishly filing across the top of the dam, a first few, then several, then many, the avalanche of behavior by which they went through life. Even now that the sheep were crossing the dam in maximum numbers, Rob kept reining Scorpion back and forth impatiently close behind the waiting remainder of the band. Scorpion was performing creakily but gamely, like an octogenarian going through remembered steps on a dance floor. The wind blew, the hay flew, and for a bit I had to take my attention from the escapade at the reservoir to feed some bales off the lee side of the sled.

When I looked again, the last of the sheep were halfway across the dam and Rob was right on top of them with Scorpion, shoving them relentlessly. Half that much commotion would gain him twice the results. *There are so goddamn many ways to be a fool a man can't expect to avoid them all*, and our Rob was determined to try them all out today, ay, Lucas? By Jesus, I missed Lucas. If he were alive,

Rob would not be down there in a major pout, furiously performing the unnecessary and making an overage horse labor like a—

I saw Scorpion make his stumble, then his hindquarters slip off the edge of the embankment toward the reservoir as he tried to find his footing there at the middle of the dam.

Rob did not even attempt to vault off him to safety. Instead he yanked the reins and stood back hard into the stirrups, seeming to want to stiffen the horse back into steadiness with the iron line of his own body. But Scorpion still was not able to scramble back securely onto the muddy rim of the dam. He tottered. There was an instant of waver, as if the horse's sense of balance was in a contest with his aged muscles. Then Scorpion began to flounder backwards down the brown bank, sliding, skidding.

It took a moment for the sound to travel to me—a crisp clatter, thin iceskin breaking as horse and man tumbled through. The sheep ran, heads up in alarm, never looking back.

"DAIR!" My shout startled her around to me. "Turn the team! Get us to the reservoir!"

She jerked the team and sled in a quick half-loop as I plunged through the hay to the front of the rack. There beside her I grabbed the rack frame with one arm and held Adair upright with my other as she whipped the team with the loose ends of the reins and the hay sled began to trundle and jolt. The sled seemed monumentally awkward, slow, although I knew it was going faster than I ever could on foot through the mud and snow.

Ahead of us there in the reservoir I kept expecting Rob to throw himself out of Scorpion's saddle and lunge or swim his way the eight or ten feet to the embankment. But he and the horse continued to be a single struggling mass amid the shattered ice. Scorpion was thrashing terrifically while Rob clung down onto his back and brown-maned neck. The stubborn fool, to be trying to maul Scorpion out of that water instead of getting himself to the shore.

The top of the reservoir was too narrow for the hay sled. Where the embankment began, Adair jerked the team to a halt and I leaped down from the sled, running as I alit. Adair's cry, "Angus, be careful!" followed me.

Rob and Scorpion were thrashing even worse now, Scorpion tipping far down onto one side with all of Rob except head and arms under him, struggling together like water beasts fighting. The god-

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

damn man, why didn't he leave the horse and start toward—Rob's face, shining wet, appeared for an instant between Scorpion's jerking neck and the murky water. His expression was perplexed, as if the world had rolled over beneath him and left him hanging horizontal this way. Then I heard his hoarse gasped shout of the word. "STIRRUP!"

*Good Christ, he's caught in the stirrup, those overshoes of his.* Rob was not stubbornly staying with Scorpion, he was trapped on the underside of the off-balance horse.

I ran and ran, slipping, sliding, at last slewing myself on one hip down the bank to where they had tumbled in.

The star-jagged circle of broken ice. Brown roily water. Scorpion's head and neck and side, crazily tilted as if he was trying to roll in a meadow and dark water had opened under him instead.

The water, waiting, welling in steady arcs toward me from the struggling pair. I had to force myself not to back away, up the bank away from the awful water of the reservoir. If Varick were here. If anyone who could swim, could face water without my blood-deep fear of it, were here. It all returned into me—the black steerage gut of the *Jemmy* where I lay in sick scared sweat, the ceaseless waiting sea, the trembling dread of having water over me. *You ask was I afraid,* the McCaskill family voice ever since the treacherous work on the Bell Rock lighthouse. *Every hour and most of the minutes, drowning was on my mind. I was afraid enough, yes.* Out in the water Scorpion floundered in fresh frenzy, Rob's arms clenching his wet-maned neck.

I swallowed as much fear as I could and made myself start to wade.

The reservoir embankment was ungodly steep. My first step and a half, I abruptly was in the cold filthy water up to my waist. Eight feet out from me, no, ten, the splashing fight raged on, Scorpion for all his effort unable to right himself with Rob's weight slung all on one side of him, Rob not able to pull free from the thrashing bulk of the horse angled above him.

"ROB! TRY PULL HIM THIS WAY! I CAN'T REACH—"

I was in the shocking cold of the water to my breastbone now. Down in the hole in the water. Chips of ice big as platters bumped my shoulders. Frantically I pushed them away. The horse and man still were six feet from me. If I could manage another step toward

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

the struggle, if Rob would let go his death grip around Scorpion's neck and reach toward me—"ROB! THIS WAY! REACH TOWARD—"

More sudden than it can be said, they went over, Scorpion atop Rob.

The water-darkened brown of the horse's hip as it vanished. The brand glistening wet there.

Now only the agitated water, the splintered ice.

The reservoir's surface burst again, Scorpion's head emerging, eyes white and wild, nostrils streaming muddy water, ears laid back. I could not see Rob, the horse was between us, I was reaching as far as I could but the water was at my collarbone. I arched my head as high out of the clutching water as I could, struggling to keep my feet planted on the reservoir bottom. If I slid, out there under under them, the water—Scorpion's splashes filled my eyes and mouth. Through that wet new fear I managed to splutter, "Reach around him to me, Rob, you've got to!" Scorpion still could not find footing, could not get upright to swim, could not—abruptly the horse went under again.

The hammering in my chest filled me as I waited desperately for Scorpion to come up.

Neck deep, I waited, waited. The water was not so agitated now. The ice shards bobbed gently.

For as long as I could, I refused the realization that Scorpion was not coming up. Then I made myself suck in breath, and thrust my head under the water.

Murk. Nothing but murk, the mud and roil of the struggle between trapped Rob and burdened Scorpion.

My head broke the surface of the reservoir again and I spewed the awful water. Adair's voice from the embankment was there in the air.

"Angus! You can't! They're gone, you can't—"

I lurched myself backward toward the sound of her, fighting the clawing panic of the water pulling down on me, the skid of my footing on the slant of the reservoir bottom.

Then somehow I was on my side, mud of the reservoir bank under me, the water only at my knees. Adair was holding me with her body, clutching me there to the safety of the embankment. Gasping, shuddering with cold, I still stared out at the broken place in the ice, the silent pool it made.

Seven days now, since Rob's drowning.

More thaw has come. I saw in my ride up to Breed Butte yesterday to check on the sheep that the reservoir has only a pale edge of ice here and there. Today will shrink those, too. From here in the kitchen I have been watching the first of morning arrive to the white-patterned mountains, young sunlight of spring that will be honestly warm by noon.

A week. Yet it seems not much more than moments ago. Stanley Meixell galloping off to summon men from the main creek and the South Fork and Noon Creek, while Adair and I headed on from the ranger station to town with the ugly news for Judith. Then while Adair stayed with her, I returned to the reservoir and the men gathering there. It was Varick who plunged and plunged until he managed, just before dusk, to secure the hook-and-cable around Scorpion's hind leg. Isaac Reese's biggest team of horses, struggling on the muddy footing of the dam to draw their hidden load out of the reservoir. At last the burden broke up through the water and onto the bank, Scorpion's body bringing the other with it. Rob's overshoed foot was jammed through the stirrup so tightly we had to cut the stirrup leather from the saddle. I was the one who put my hat over Rob's face, after closing his eyes forever, while we worked at freeing him.

A person has to sit perfectly still to hear it, but the sound of the North Fork's water rattling softly over stones is in the air these mornings. The creek's lid of ice has fallen through in sufficient places to let the sound out. After so much winter, the constant evidence of spring is a surprise. Grass creeps its green into the slopes and valley bottom of Scotch Heaven noticeably more each day. And the first lambs were born the night before last. The sheep we have left I can handle by myself this lambing time, with a bit of help now and then from Varick. Judith made her decision while still in widow black there at Rob's funeral, asking me to run the sheep until they have lambed and then sell them all for whatever we can get. It was there at the graveside, too, that Judith asked me to write the *Gleaner* remembrance about Rob.

So, here at dawn, the shining mountains up there are the high windows of memory. My night thoughts were a stopless procession, thirty years returning across their bridge of time, to here and now. I was told once I am a great one for yesterdays, and I said back that

they have brought us to where we are. In a blue Irish harbor the bumboat women leap away like cats over the side of the steamship, and the rest of us bring our hopes to America. At a nowhere town with the name of Gros Ventre, a saloonkeeper with a remembered face and voice puts on the bar his arms with no hands. Below a stonecliff skyline, a rider with feedbag whiskers looms as the sentry of a calm green valley. A wedding band goes onto an unintended finger. On the trail to the Two Medicine River a thousand lambs go down on their knees to suckle from their thousand mothers, the prayerful noon of the sheep kingdom. A son stands baffled and resentful in a blazing day. Out of all the hiding places in the head, they return.

And so I have thought through the past and words ought to come now, oughtn't they. But which ones. *The word is never quite the deed.* How can I write what you can read? Whichever words will make all the truth, of course. But there is so much of that, starting so far back. The dock at Greenock, where one far figure turns to another with the words *Are we both for it?* and that other makes himself say *Both*. What began there has not ended yet. This autumn, luck willing, there will be Varick and Beth's child. Luck willing, maybe other McCaskills in other autumns. And there will be Adair and me, here where we are. This morning as I began to get up in the dim start of dawn, she reached across the bed and stopped me. I had not been the only one with night thoughts processioning through. Adair's grief for Rob was deep but quick; after all, she is a Barclay, and life hasn't yet found how to make them buckle. Now she has put this winter away. As Adair held me she told me she will stay in Scotch Heaven as long as I do—which I suppose is the same as saying as long as I have breath in me. It makes everything ahead less hard, hearing that decision from her. How long before the sheep business and the Two Medicine country and for that matter Montana recuperate from the drought and winter of 1919, there is just no telling. What is certain is that I will be buying another band of the woollies at the earliest chance. And the teaching job at the South Fork school this autumn is mine for the asking. Fritz Hahn of the school board has informed me. I will ask. It seems that the McCaskills will get by. We start at the next of life in another minute: "Adair will come right out and cook you her famous sidepork for breakfast, old Angus McCaskill," she has just advised me from

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## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

Montana kid, who I'm sorry did not live to see this book of the era he was born into. Malone and Roeder's *Montana: A History of Two Centuries* has been my guide as I've tried to make the lives of my characters respond to what might be called the laws of historical gravity; and Rich Roeder deserves full due for his homestead research reflecting the fact that more land was homesteaded in Montana than any other state, and that the peak of the Montana homestead boom was remarkably late in "frontier" history, 1914-1918.

As usual in the long birth of a book, a considerable community of friends and acquaintances provided me encouragement, hospitality, information, advice, or other aid. My appreciation to John Roden, Tom Chadwick, Abigail Thomas, Kathy Malone, Orville Lanham, Howard Vogel, the Lang family of Clancy, blacksmith Richard Connolly, Marilyn Ridge, Richard Maxwell Brown, Gail Steen, Nancy Meiselas, Edith Brekke, the Arnst-Bonnet-Hallingstad-Payton clan of Great Falls, Clyde Milner, Burt Weston, Mick Hager, Kathlene Mirgon, Bob Roripaugh, Solomon Katz, George Engler, Rodney Chapple, Dick Nelson, Sue Mathews, Chris Partman, Marshall Nelson, Ted and Jean Schwinden, Merlyn Talbot, Patti Talmadge, Lois and Jim Welch, Annick Smith, Juliette Crump, Bill Bevis, Joy and Brad Hamlett, Walker Wyman, Mark Wyman, Art Watson, Eric Ford, Bill Kittredge, Caroline and Ron Manheimer, William W. Krippaehne Jr., Mary Farrington, Ken Weydert, and Rae-Ellen Hamilton.

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Once again, Liz Darhansoff, Tom Stewart, and Jon Rantala in their distinctive inspiring ways have been entirely essential to bringing this book to life.

"The stillness, the dancing": this book and I have benefited immeasurably from the keen poetic eye of Linda Bierds.

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The dedication of this book speaks a general thanks to Vernon Carstensen for the past twenty years of knowing him; but I also owe him specific gratitude for so generously sharing his insights into the history of the American West, any time I've ever asked.

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A few words about derivations and inspirations. Scholars of Robert Burns may be mystified by a number of the lines mentally quoted by Angus McCaskill herein. Some of Angus's remembered verse is indeed Burns; some is Burns and Doig; and some is, alas, merely Doig. In all instances, I've used words in their form more readily recognized on this side of the Atlantic—"you" instead of "ye," "old" instead of "auld," for instance. The quote in chapter three from the "*Choteau Quill*," "You can fight armies or disease or trespass, but the settler never," the *Quill* and I owe to John Clay, *My Life on the Range*. Details of wheelwrighting came from George Sturt's fascinating memoir, *The Wheelwright's Shop*. Whenever I needed to know how the sheep business was

## DANCING AT THE RASCAL FAIR

doing in any particular year, I had only to resort to Alexander Campbell McGregor's meticulous account of his family's history in the business, *Counting Sheep*. The Crofuttian advice early in chapter one to emigrate "with no divided heart" I fashioned from a similar paragraph in *The Emigrants' Guide*, 1883 edition; the rest of *Crofutt* I made up.

Finally, I wish to thank the National Endowment for the Arts for its grant of a fiction fellowship, and the members of that 1985 selection panel: Alice Adams, David Bradley, Stanley Elkin, Ivy Goodman, Tim O'Brien, Walker Percy, Elizabeth Tallent, and Geoffrey Wolff.

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Ann Nelson

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