This time of year, the report from the dust counties ~~of northeastern Montana~~ in the northeastern part of the state customarily has it that Lady Godiva could ride through the streets there without even the horse seeing her. But ~~even over east~~ this spring's rains are said to have thinned the air sufficiently to give the steed a glimpse.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 1

That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my life until then I had never seen the sidehills come so green, the coulees stay so spongy with run-off. A wet May evidently could sweeten the universe. Already my father on his first high patrols was encountering cow elk drifting up and across the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side. They, and the grass and the wild- hay meadows and the benchland ~~barley~~ alfalfa, all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which of course accounted for the fresh mood everywhere across the Two, --as it's said, spring rain in range country is as if ~~someone is handing around~~ halves of ten-dollar bills ~~with the remainder~~ are being handed around, with the other halves promised at shipping time. And so in the sheepmen, the cowmen, ~~the Forest Service people,~~ the storekeepers of Gros Ventre, ~~in Gros Ventre,~~ our Forest Service people, in just everyone that start of June, hope was up and

would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Talk could even be heard that maybe Montana at last had seen the bottom of the Depression ~~--a site, Bill Reinking once wrote in the Gleaner, that tends to move around like a mirage.~~ After all, the practitioners of this bottomed-out notion went around pointing out, last year was a a bit more prosperous, or anyway a bit less desperate, than the year before. A nice near point of measurement which managed to overlook that for the several years before last, the situation of people on the land out here had been ~~pretty damn~~ purely godawful. I suppose I ought not to dwell on dollar matters when actually our family was scraping along better than a good many. Even though during the worst years the Forest Service did lay off some rangers--Hoovered them, the saying went--my father was never among them. True, his salary was jacked down from ~~000~~ $120 to ~~000~~ $100 a month and Christ only knew when it might ever go back up again, but we were getting by. Nothing extra, ~~but~~ just getting by. But it has always graveled me that stock market players who happened to lose their paper fortunes are the remembered figures of those times. The eastern professors who write as if the Depression set in the day Wall Street tripped over itself in 1929 seem not to know it, but by then Montana already had been on rocky sledding for ten entire years. The winter of 1919--some of the men my father's age and older still just called it that sonofabitch of a winter-- was the one that delivered hard times ~~to the stockmen.~~ Wholesale. As Dode ~~Spencer~~ Withrow, who had the ranch farthest up the south fork of English Creek, used to tell: I went into that '19 winter with four thousand head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to five hundred. Trouble never travels

lonesome, so about that same time livestock and crop prices nosedived because of the end of the war in Europe, and right along with that, drought and grasshoppers showed up to take over the dry-land farming. It began to be just a hell of a situation, my father always summed up those years when he and my mother were trying to get a start in life. Then when drought circled back again at the start of the Thirties and joined forces with Herbert Hoover, bad progressed to worse. That is within my own remembering. Rancher after rancher and farmer after farmer, a getting in deeper with the banks. Gang plow and ditcher, work horses and harness, haymow and cream separator: everything on those places was mortgaged except the air. And then foreclosure, and the auctioneer's sale. Nor, from what we heard, was the situation here in the Two country as dire as what was going on along the High Line to the north and east of us. Autumn upon autumn, to take just one further example from a possible many, the exodus stories kept coming out of the High Line country, right down here on the highway which runs through Gros Ventre anybody who looked could see for himself the truth of those tales, the furniture-loaded jitney trucks with farewells to Montana painted across their boxboards in big crooked letters: GOODBY OLD DRY and AS FOR HAVRE YOU CAN HAVE 'ER.

So it was time hope showed up.

#

Jick! Set your mouth for it!

Supper, and my mother. It is indelible in me ~~I remember~~ that all this began there right at the very outset of June, because I was out working over ~~getting~~ my saddle ~~ready,~~ and lengthening the stirrups to account for how much I had grown in the past year, for the ride up with my father on the counting trip the next morning. I can even safely say what the weather was, one of those brockle late afternoons under the Rockies when tag-ends of storm cling in the mountains and sun is reaching through wherever it can between the cloud piles. Tell me why it is that details like that, saddle stirrups a notch longer than last year or sunshine dabbed

around on the foothills some certain way, seem to be the allowance of memory while the bigger points of life hang back. At least I have found it so, particularly now that I am at the time where I try to think what my life might have been like had I not been born in the Two Medicine country and into the McCaskill family. Oh, I know what's said. How home ground and kin together lay their touch along us as unalterably as the banks of a stream direct its water. But that doesn't mean you can't wonder. Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. Or whether some other place of growing up might have turned you wiser or dumber, more contented or less. Here in my own instance, some mornings I will catch myself with a full cup of coffee yet in my hand, gone cold while I have sat here stewing about whether my years would be pretty much as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say, China or California instead of northern Montana.

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not Going Around with our Heads Stuck in Yesterday. Provocation for it, I will say, came from my father as reliably as a dusk wind out of a canyon. Half a ~~day~~ night at a time he might spend listening to ~~old~~ Ronnie Toussaint tell of the roundup

of 1882, when the cowmen fanned their crews north from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian line and brought in a hundred thousand head. Or the tale even bigger and earlier than that, the last great buffalo hunt, Toussaint having ridden up into the Sweetgrass Hills to see down onto a prairie that looked burnt, so dark with buffalo, the herd pinned into place by the plains tribes. Strange, but I can still recite the tribes and where they pitched their camps to surround those miles of buffalo, just as Toussaint passed the lore of it to my father: Crows on the southeast, Gros Ventres and Assiniboines on the northeast, Piegans on the west, Crees along the north, and Flatheads here to the south. Something to see, that must've been, my father would say in his recounting to the rest of us at supper. Varick, somebody already saw it, my mother would come right back at him. What you'd better Put Your Mind To is the Regional Forester's Visit Tomorrow. Or if she didn't have to work on my father for the moment, there was Alec when he began wearing a neck hanky and considering himself a cowboy. That my own particular knack for remembering, which could tuck away entire grocery lists or whatever someone had told me in innocence a couple of weeks before, made me seem likely to round out a houseful of men tilted to the past must have been the final stem on her load. Jick, I can hear her yet, there isn't any law that says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody else. Just because your father and your brother--

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do. In the time after, it was her more than anyone who would return

and return her thoughts here to where all four of our lives made their bend. The summer when--she would start in, and as if the three-note signal of a chickadee had been sung, it told me she was turning to some happening of that last English Creek summer. She and I were alike at least in that, the understanding that such a season of life provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

JICK! Are you coming, or do the chickens get your share? I know with all certainty too that that call to supper was double, because I was there at the age where I had to be called twice for anything. Anyway, that second summons of hers brought me out of the barn just as the pair of them, Alec and Leona, topped into view at the eastern rise of the county road. That is, I knew my brother as far as I could see him by that head-up way he rode, as if trying to ~~peer over~~ see beyond a ridgeline in front of him. The way a young king might ride going home from his crowning ceremony. Leona would need to be somewhat nearer before I could verify her by her blouseful, but those days if you saw Alec you were pretty sure to be seeing Leona too.

Although there were few things ~~surer~~ more certain to hold my eyes than a rider cresting that rise of road, with all ~~the~~ level eastern horizon under him as if he was traveling out of the sky and then the outline of him and his horse in gait down and down and down the steady slow slant toward the forks of English Creek, almost a mile of their combined parading figure approaching, I did my watching of Alec and Leona as I crossed the yard to the ranger station. I knew better than to have my mother call me time number three.

I went on in to wash up and I suppose was a little more

deliberately offhand than I had to be by waiting until I'd dippered water into the basin and added hot from the kettle before announcing, Company.

The word always will draw an audience. My father looked up from where he was going over paperwork about the grazers' allotments, and my mother's eyebrows drew into that alignment that let you know you had all of her attention and had better be worth it.

Alec and Leona, I reported through a face rinse. Riding like the prettiest one of them gets to kiss the other one.

You seem to know a remarkable lot about it, my mother said. Actually, that sort of thing was starting to occur to me. I was fourteen. Fourteen, hard on to fifteen, as I once heard one of the beerhounds around the Medicine Lodge saloon in Gros Ventre describe that complicated age. But there wasn't any of this I was about to confide to my mother, who now instructed: When you're done there you'd better bring in that spare chair from your bedroom. She cast the pots and pans atop the stove a calculating look, then as if having reminded herself turned toward me and added: Please. When I left the room she already had rattled a fresh stick of wood into the kitchen range and was starting in on whatever it is cooks like her do to connive food for three into a supper for five.

Remind me in the morning, I could overhear my father say, to do the rest of this Uncle Sam paper.

I'll serve it to you with breakfast, promised my mother.

Fried, he said. Done to a cinder would suit me, particularly

Van Bebber's allotment. It'd save me arguing the Section Twenty grass with him one more time.

You wouldn't know how to begin a summer without that argument with Ed, she answered. Are you washed?

By the time I came back into the kitchen with the spare chair which had been serving as my nightstand, Alec and Leona were arriving through the doorway, him inquiring Is this the McCaskill short-order house? and her beaming up at him as if he'd just recited all of Shakespeare. I will always admit, they were a pair to look on, Alec and Leona. By now Alec was even taller than my father, and had the same rich red head of hair; ~~atop each of them,~~ a blood-sorrel flame which several hundred years of kilts and skirts being flung off must have fanned into creation. Same thin thrifty McCaskill nose. Same deep upper lip, with the bottom of the face coming out to meet it in stubborn support; with mouth closed, both Alec and my father had that jaw-forward look which meets life like a plow. Resemblance isn't necessarily duplication, though, and I see in my mind's eye that there also was the message of that as promptly as ~~my father and~~ my brother and my father were in the same room that evening. Where my father never seemed to take up as much space as his size might warrant, Alec somehow took up his share and more. I noticed this now, how Alec had begun to stand in that shambly wishbone way a cowboy adopts, legs and knees spraddled farther apart than they need to be, as if hinting to the world that he's sure longing for a horse to trot in there between them. Alec was riding for the Double W ~~big WW~~ ranch, his second summer as a hand there, and it had caused some ruction -- his going back to cowboying instead of taking a better-paying job ~~this summer,~~ such as driving truck for Adam Kerz as my mother particularly suggested. But the past year or so he had had to shut

off his ears to a lot of opinions my parents had about his cowboy phase. Last Fourth of July when Alec showed up in rodeo clothes which included a red bandanna around his neck, my father asked him: What, is your Adam's apple cold?

Not that you could ever dent Alec for long. I have told that he ~~that he~~ had a head-up, nothing-in-life-has-ever-slowed-me-up-yet way of riding. I maybe should amend that to say that on horseback Alec looked as if he was riding the world itself, and even afoot as he was here in the kitchen he seemed as if he was being carried to exactly where he wanted to go. Which, just then, I guess you would have to say he was. Everything ~~had been~~ was coming up aces for ~~him~~ Alec that year. Beating Earl Zane's time with Leona. Riding for the Double W this green high-grass summer. And in the fall he would be headed for Bozeman, the first McCaskill to manage to go to college. My parents had been piecing together the financing like quiltwork--whatever savings the household could spare, plus a loan from my mother's brother Pete Reese, plus a part-time job which my father had set up for Alec with a range management professor at the college who knew us from having spent some time up here studying the Two--since my own haying wages later this summer would go into the general household kitty, even I felt I had a stake in the enterprise. Plus of course Alec's own wages from this summer, which was another reason why his choice of the Double W riding job at $30 a month again was less than popular. Launching Alec to college took some exerting by the whole family, but we none of us held a doubt that four years from now he would step out of Bozeman as an engineer, if he listened to my father, or as an architect, if my mother's ambition for him prevailed. Yes, Alec was a doer, as people said of him. My own earliest memory of this brother of mine was the time--

I must have been four and him eight--when he took me into the pasture where the ranger station's saddle horses were grazing and said Here's how you mooch them, Jick. He eased over to the nearest horse, waited until it put its head down to eat grass, then straddled its neck. When the horse raised its head Alec was lifted, and slid down the neck into place on its back and simultaneously gripped the mane to hang on and steer by. Now you mooch that mare he called to me, and I went beside the big chomping animal and flung my right leg over as he had, and was elevated into a bareback rider just as he was.

'Lo, Jicker, Alec said across the kitchen to me now after his greeting to my mother and father. How's the world treating you?

Just right, I said back automatically. 'Lo, Leona.

Leona too was a horseperson, I guess you'd call it these days. When Tollie Zane held his auction of fresh-broke saddle horses in Gros Ventre every year he always enlisted Leona to ride them into the auction ring because there is nothing that enhances a saddle pony more than a good-looking girl up there on his back. Right now, though, entering my mother's kitchen Leona's role was to be milk and honey. Which she also was first-rate at. A kind of pause stepped in with Leona whenever she arrived somewhere, a long breath or two or maybe even three during which everyone seemed to weigh whether her hair could really be so gold, whether her figure actually lived up to all it advertised on first glance. I ~~noticed~~ managed to notice once that her chin was pointier than I like, but by the time any male looked Leona over enough to reach that site, he was prepared to discount that and a lot more.

We still were getting used to the idea of Leona, the three of us in the family besides Alec. His girls before her were from the ranch families in here under the mountains or from the farm folks east of Gros Ventre. Nor was Leona in circulation at all for the past few years, going with Tollie Zane's son Earl as she had been. But this past spring, Alec's last in high school and Leona's next-to-last, he somehow cut Earl Zane out of the picture. Swap one cowboy for another, she might as well have stayed put, my mother said at the time, a bit perturbed with Alec anyway about his intention for the Double W job again. Her saying that, and Leona's horse interest, brings to mind a comparison that maybe makes the point I have been ~~seeking~~ after: amid the other four of us on hand that evening, Leona stood out like a palomino among blood bays.

Anyway ~~how~~, there in the kitchen we went through that pause period of letting Leona's looks bask over us all, and on into some nickel-and-dime gab between Alec and my father--

Working hard?

Well, sure, Dad. Ever see me do anything different?

Just times I've seen you hardly working.

The Double W sees against that. Y'know what they say--nobody on the Double W ever gets a sunburn, they don't have time.

--and then my mother was satisfied that she had multiplied the food on the stove sufficiently, and said: I expect you brought your

appetites with you? Let's sit up.

I suppose every household needs some habited way to begin a meal. I have heard the Lord thanked in some of the unlikeliest ~~households~~ homes, and for some of the ~~unlikeliest~~ unholiest food. And seen whole families not lift a fork until the patriarch at the head of the table had his plate full and his bread buttered.

Ours, though, said grace only once every three hundred sixty-five days, and that one a joke--my father's New Year's Day invocation in that Scotch-preacher burr he could put on: Hogmanay that's born today, gi' us a year o' white bread and nane o' your gray--and other than that, a McCaskill meal started at random, the only tradition to help yourself to what was closest and pass the food on clockwise.

How's cow chousing? My father was handing the mashed potatoes to Leona, but looking across at Alec.

It's all right. Alec meanwhile was presenting the gravy to Leona, before he realized she didn't yet have spuds on her plate. He colored a little, but notched out his jaw and then asked back: How's rangering?

When my father was a boy a ~~piece~~ stick of kindling flew up from the axe and struck the corner of his left eye. The vision was saved but ever after, that eyelid would droop to about half-shut whenever amusement made him squint a little. It descended now as he studied the meal traffic piling up around Leona. Then he made his reply to Alec: It's all right.

I had the bright idea this conversation could benefit from my help, so I chimed in: Counting starts tomorrow, Alec. Dad and I'll be up there a couple three days. Remember that time you and I were along with him and Spencer's herder's dog Moxie got full of porcupine quills and we both--

Alec gave me a grin that was tighter than it ought to have been from a brother. Don't let all those sheep put you to sleep, sprout.

Sprout? Evidently there was no telling what might issue from a person's mouth when he had a blond girl to show off in front of, and the look I sent Alec told him so.

Who's this week's cook at the Double W? My mother, here. Leona, take some more ham and pass it on to Jick. He goes through food like a one-man army these days. I might have protested that too if my plate hadn't been nearly empty, particularly of fried ham.

A Mrs. Pennyman, Alec reported. From over around Havre.

By now it's Havre, is it. Wendell Williamson will keep on, he'll have gone through every cook between here and Chicago. My mother paused for Alec's response to that, and got none. So? she prompted. How does she feed?

It's--filling. The question seemed to put Alec a little off balance, and I noticed Leona provide him a little extra wattage in her next gaze at him.

So is sawdust, said my mother, plainly awaiting considerably more report.

Yeah, well, Alec fumbled. I was beginning to wonder whether cowboying had dimmed his wits, maybe driven his backbone up through the judgment part of his brain. You know, it's usual ranch grub. He sought down into his plate for further description and finally proclaimed again: Filling, is what I'd call it.

How's the buttermilk business? my father asked Leona, I suppose to steer matters off Alec's circular track. Her parents, the Tracys, ran the creamery in Gros Ventre.

Just fine, Leona responded along with her flash of smile. She seemed to be on the brink of saying a lot more, but then just passed that smile around to the rest of us, a full share to my father and another to my mother and then one to me that made my throat tighten

a little, then letting it rest last and coziest on Alec. She had a natural ability at that, producing some pleasantry then lighting up the room so you thought the remark amounted to a whole hell of a lot more than it did. I do envy that knack in a person, though likely wouldn't have the patience to use it myself even if I had it.

How's this, how's that, fine, all right, you bet. If this was the level of sociability that was going to go on, I intended to damn promptly excuse myself to get back to working on my saddle, the attractions of Leona notwithstanding. But then just as I was trying to estimate ahead to whether an early piece of rhubarb pie could be coaxed from my mother or I'd have to wait till later, Alec all at once put down his fork and came right out with:

We got something to tell you. We're going to get married.

This kicked the conversation in the head entirely. My father seemed to have forgotten about the mouthful of coffee he'd just drunk, while my mother looked as if Alec had announced he intended to take a pee in the middle of the table. Alec was trying to watch both of them at once, and Leona was favoring us all with one of her searchlight smiles.

How come?

Even yet I don't know why I said that. I mean, I was plenty old enough to know why people got married. There were ~~times~~ recently, seeing Alec and Leona mooning around together, when I seemed to savvy more than I actually had facts about, if that's possible.

Focused as he was on how our parents were going to respond, the philosophy question from my side of the table jangled Alec. Because,

because we're--we love each other, why the hell do you think?

Kind of soon in life to be so certain on that, isn't it? suggested my father.

We're old enough, Alec shot back. And meanwhile gave me a snake-killing look as if I was going to ask old enough for what, but I honestly didn't intend to.

When's all this taking place? my father came up with next.

This fall. Alec looked ready to say more, then held on to it, finally just delivered it in one dump: ~~Walt~~ Wendell Williamson'll let us have the Foster place house to live in.

It was up to my mother to cleave matters entirely open. You're saying you'll stay on at the Double W this fall?

Yeah. It's what I want to do. The unsaid part of this was huge, more colossal than anything I had ever felt come into our kitchen before. Alec was choosing against college. Against all the expectation riding on him. Against--

Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle Stiff, and I for one Will Not--

More out of samaritan instinct than good sense my father headed my mother off with a next query to Alec: How you going to support yourselves on a cow chouser's wages?

You two did, at first.

We starved out at it, too.

We ain't going to starve out. Alec's grammar seemed to be cowboyifying too. ~~Walt'll~~ Wendell'll let me draw ahead on my wages for a few heifers this fall, and winter them with the rest of the outfit's.

It'll give us our start.

My father finally thought to set down his coffee cup. Alec, let's keep our shirts on here--language can be odd; I had the vision just then of us all sitting around the table with our shirts off, Leona across from me in full pure double-barreled display--and try see what's what.

I don't see there's any what's what about it, Alec declared. People get married every day.

So does the sun rise, my mother told him, without particular participation by you.

Mom, now damn it, listen--

We all better listen, my father tried again. Leona, we got nothing against you. You know that. Which was somewhat short of true in both its parts, but I'll delve into that situation a little later. It's just that, Godamighty, Alec, cattle have gone bust time after time these last years. That way of life just has changed. Whether anybody'll ever be able to start off from scratch in the cow business and make a go of it, I don't see how--

Alec was like any of us, he resisted having an idea pulled from under him. Rather have me herding sheep up on one of your allotments, would you? There'd be something substantial to look forward to, I suppose you think, sheepherding.

My father seemed to consider. No, most probably not, in your case. It takes a trace of common sense to herd sheep. He said it lightly enough that Alec would have to take it as a joke, but there was a poking edge to the lightness. Alec, I just think that whatever the

hell you do, you need to bring an education to it these days. That old stuff of banging a living out of this country by sheer force of behavior doesn't work. Hasn't for almost twenty years. This country can outbang any man. Look at them along this creek. Spencer, Ed Van Bebber, the Busbys, Withrow, ~~your Uncle Pete.~~ Farrell They've all just managed to hang on, and they're as good a set of stockmen as you'll find in this whole goddamn state. You think any of them could have got underway, in years like there've been?

Last year was better than the one before, Alec defended with that litany of the local optimists. This one looks better than that.

And if about five more come good back-to-back, everybody'll be almost to where they were fifteen or twenty years ago.

Dad--Dad, listen. We ain't starting from fifteen or twenty years ago. We're starting from now, and we got to go by that, not whatever the hell happened to--to anybody else.

You'll be starting in a hole, my father said. And an everlasting climb out.

That's as maybe. But we got to start. Alec looked at Leona as if he was storing up for the next thousand years. And we're going to do it married. Not going to wait our life away.

#

If I ever get old enough to have brains, I will work on the question of man and woman.

All those years ago, the topic rode with me into the next morning as my father and I set off from the ranger station toward the mountains.

Cool but cloudless,
It was a decent enough day, ~~really~~, except for wind. Our ride led up the north fork of English Creek, which actually angled S mostly west and northwest to its source there in the mountains, and where the coulee of the North Fork opened ahead of us the backdrop of the mountains filled it like a towering dam. Lift the eyes just above that, and there the first summits of the Rockies sat on the horizon like stupendous sharp boulders. Only when our first hour or so of riding carried us above that edge of the coulee would we see the mountains in total, their broad bases of timber and rockfall gripping into the foothills. Even now, though, the blue-gray hover of it all caused my father to
appreciatively
turn and call over his shoulder to me: Nothing the matter with that.

Not one thing, I agreed because I was expected to. The load of thoughts in me meanwhile combined into a single great momentary wish: if only the outlook for the McCaskills was as settled and serene as the Two country this morning. Last night's rumpus continued to bother me from whatever angle I could find to view it. The slant at which Alec and my parents were diverging from each other. In cold light of hindsight it may not

seem so ~~great~~ Vast an issue, whether Alec was going to choose college the wedding band/riding job combination. or ~~a wedding band and the riding job.~~ But I suppose my father and mother believed that a lot of their hopes rested on him, especially given all that we and the Two country and even the nation had been through in the years just past. That ~~he~~ Alec seemed not to want to step up in life, when the chance at last was there, went against my parents' thinking as much as if he'd declared he ~~was going~~ was going to go out on the prairie and dig a hole and live a gopher's existence. Why not give college a year and then see? my father reasoned to him. Bozeman isn't the moon, you'll be back and forth some times during the year. The two of you can see how the marriage notion holds up after that. Alec wasn't about to have time bought from him. We're not waiting our life away, was his constant response.

And there, that convergence of Alec and Leona and the enthusiasm which none of the rest of us had realized they were bringing to their romance. Well, it will happen: two people who have been around each other for years and all of a sudden finding that nobody else in history has

ever been in love before, they're inventing it all themselves. Yet my actual grasp of their mood could be only limited, for to me then, marriage seemed about as distant as death. Nor did I understand much more about the angle of Leona and--I was going to say, my parents, but actually the other three of us, for I somehow did feel included into the bask she aimed around our kitchen. I will admit, it was an interesting sensation, collecting an occasional gleam off Leona as if I'd abruptly been promoted beyond fourteen-year-oldhood. A battlefield commission, so to speak. Not the least of last ~~night's~~ evening's marvels was how much ground Leona had been able to ~~convey in~~ hold with only a couple of honest-to-goodness sentences. When my father and mother were trying to argue delay into Alec and turned to her to test the result, she said just We think we're ready enough. And then at the end of the fracas, going out the door Leona turned to bestow my mother one of her smiles and say, Thank you for supper, Beth. And my mother saying back, just as literally, Don't mention it.

#/ Then finally, ~~and~~ the most startling ~~offshoot~~ line of thought of all, the sharpness between my father and Alec.

If I'd had to forecast, say at about the point Alec was announcing marriage intentions, my mother was the natural choice to bring down the house on him. She of course did make herself fully known, but the ~~awful~~ finale of that suppertime was all-male McCaskill: You're done running my life, flung by Alec as he stomped out with Leona in tow, and Nobody's running it, including you, from my father to Alec's departing back.

Put that way--the stark moment of an argument breaking off into silence--it may sound like something concluding itself; a point at which contention has been expended. But the fracture of a family is not a thing that happens clean and sharp, so that you at least know that from here on it will begin to be over with. No, it is like one of those worst bone breaks, a shatter. You can mend the place, peg it and splint it and work to strengthen it, and while the surface maybe can be brought to look much as it did before, it always remains a spot that has to be favored. So if I didn't grasp much, I at least held the realization that last night's rift in our family was nowhere near over.

#

Except for what was marching around in review in my head, our first stint of riding on the road up the North Fork was broken only by the sound of our horses' hooves or one or the other of us muttering a horse name and urging the creature to step along a little livelier. And even those blurts of sound were pretty pallid, because where horse nomenclature was concerned, my father's imagination took a vacation. A black horse he invariably named Coaly, a blaze-face was always Star. Currently, he was riding a big mouse-colored gelding who, bore the name of Mouse. I was on a short-legged mare called Pony. Frankly, high among my hopes about this business of growing up was that I would get a considerably more substantial horse out of it. If and when I did, I vowed to give the creature as much name as it could carry, such as Rimfire or Chief Joseph or Calabash.

Mouse and my father were halted ahead of me now. We had come to where a set of rutted tracks--in flattery, it could have been called almost a road--left the North Fork road and crossed the coulee and creek and traced on up the side of Breed Butte to where a few log buildings could be seen.

How about you taking a look at Walter's place? my father said. You can cut across then and meet me at the road into the Hebner tribe.

All right, I of course agreed. And turned Pony to follow the ruts down and across the North Fork swale. Walter ~~Craig~~ Gillilan always summered in the mountains as herder of his own sheep, and so my father whenever he rode past veered in to see that everything was okay at the empty ranch. This was the first time he had delegated me, which I took to be an indication that he too had a burdened mind--also that question of man and woman? at least as it pertained to Alec McCaskill and Leona Tracy?--and wanted to saunter alone a while as he sorted through it.

No sooner had my father and I set off our separate ways than my hat sailed off on yet a third route. I hopped off Pony and just managed to retrieve it before it skittered into the creek. I suppose there are a number of matters about the Two country that I never have nor will be able to savvy--one life is not enough to do so--and a main one is why in a landscape with hills and buttes and benchlands everywhere, you can so seldom find a spot of shelter from the everlasting damn wind. This just naturally plays on the nerves. Someone like Ed Van Bebber, whose ranch lay just up the South Fork of English Creek from the ranger station,

couldn't even be said hello to until he positioned himself with a building between him and the wind, and then he would cuss about how much of it was following him around the corner. Of course not everybody was quite that touchy. I like to think that I'm not, quite. But I do believe it is incontestable that if that wind could be done away with, the Two would be a hundred per cent more comfortable place of the world.

Yet, wind and all, what a swath of country the Two truly is, as the ride up Breed Butte toward Walter Gilfillan's place made me more and more aware. The very name of the region is broad, restless, insistent. Only the northmost portion of the Two Medicine National Forest actually has anything at all to do with the Two Medicine River or Two Medicine Lake--the vicinity, that is, where the forest joins onto the south boundary of Glacier National Park and fits in there, as a map shows it, like a long straight-sided peninsula between the park and the Continental Divide and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The Two Medicine itself, the river that is, honestly is not even in sight to most of the Two country. Like all the water of this region it has its source up in the Rockies but then cuts a considerable canyon east through the plains as it pushes to meet the Marias and eventually the Missouri; burrows

its way through the prairie, you might almost say. So apparently it is just the ring of the words, Two Medicine, that has carried the name all the way south along the mountains to our English Creek area. The derivation as I've heard it is that in distant times the Blackfeet made their medicine lodge two years in a row near the lake that is the river's source, and the name lasted from that. By whatever way Two Medicine came to be, it is an interesting piece of language, I think.

The Two country offers the eye some tricks, too. From most places you can see Chief Mountain standing distinct, even though it is a full 00 miles to the north, like a mooring peg at the end of the long chain of mountains. Nearer, Heart Butte is no great piece of geography, yet it too stands separate enough from the mountain horizon that it can be perpetually seen and identified. And Breed Butte, smaller yet, can be picked out from all around as the summit of the English Creek area. In fact, [redacted] one further stunt of vision that I was aware of just then was that from Walter Gilfillan's summer range up there in the mountains, on top of 00 Reef,

by fieldglasses his actual house and outbuildings here on Breed Butte could be seen. Not that I figured there was much chance that Walter would be studying down here at that exact moment, but the fact that it was possible interested me. As did the fact of Walter himself, being up there on the mountain, ancient as he seemed to me at the time. Although he was the most elderly of all the English Creek ranchers Walter also was much the newest to the area. Only three or four years ago he had moved here from down in the Ingomar country in the southeastern part of the state, where he had run several bands of sheep. I have never heard of a setup like it before or since, but Walter and a number of other Scotch sheepmen, dedicated bachelors all, lived there in the Ingomar Hotel and operated their sheep outfits out of their back pocket and hat, you might say. Not a one of them possessed a real ranch, just grazing land they'd finagled one way or another, plus wagons for their herders, and of course sheep and more sheep. Away each of those old Scotchies would go once a week, out from that hotel with boxes of groceries in the back of a Model T to tend camp. For whatever reason, Walter pulled out of hotel sheep tycooning--my father speculated that one morning he turned to the Scotchman next to him at the table and burred, Jock, for thirrty yearrs ye've been eating yourr oatmeal aye too loud, got up and left for good--and bought the old Lewis place here for next to nothing.

Thinking about something of that sort speeds up time, and before quite I knew it Pony was stopping at the barb-wire gate into Walter's yard. I tied her reins to the fence and slid myself through between the middle two strands. Walter's place looked hunky-dory. But I did a circle of the tool shed and the low log barn and the three-quarter shed sheltering Walter's old Reo, just to be sure, and then went to the front of the house and took ~~down~~ out the key from behind the loose piece of chinking which hid it. The house too was undisturbed; except for that stale feel that unlived-in rooms get, Walter might just have been down ~~at~~ there on the North Fork fishing a beaver dam.

Pony and I now went west along the flank of Breed Butte, which would angle us through Walter's field and one of Merle Torrance's to where we would rejoin the North Fork road and my father. Up there ~~over~~ above the North Fork ~~[illegible]~~ coulee the outlook was more rugged, the mountains in full view and the foothills bumping up below them. If the English Creek valley was considered to be the western edge of the Two's habitable country, the people of the North Fork had sited themselves up on the lip of

If the foothills of the Two were the edge of habitable country, the people of the North Fork of English Creek some of English Creek's people had sited themselves up on the lip of the edge. Merle Torrance, a bachelor who had the place farthest in under the mountains, original homestead land which butted right against the national forest line, faced almost combat conditions. In winter the wind slammed through there like you wouldn't believe, and snow drifted up and up and up until it covered Merle's fenceposts and left him guessing its depth beyond that. Summers, though, came Merle's turn to retaliate against nature, on three fronts. His days he spent ransacking the ranch for hay, mowing every coulee that showed enough grass to fill a sheep's belly. Then each dusk he went over to the North Fork with his shotgun and sat sentry for beaver. His contention with beaver about the North Fork--Merle of course wanting water for his hay coulees, the beaver insisting they deserved it for their dams and lodges--was never-ending. Mink have got all the reputation, but these buggers outbreed them all to hell, Merle claimed in half-admiration.

But Merle's third chosen foe made the beaver battle look like a washcloth fight skirmish. Bears. Merle was a burly man with a big low jaw which his neck sort of bagged up into, in a way that always reminded me of a picture of a pelican. The notion of him out after a bear was strange enough to be entertaining, that pelican jaw in pursuit of, say, a half-ton grizzly. I suppose the bears never saw any amusement the entertainment in the situation, though, for Merle trapped them with no remorse. More than once my father veered off from some little stand of timber where Merle had laid poles to keep livestock out and nailed up a sign saying WATCH OUT BEAR TRAP to warn humans in there

would be a can of bacon grease dangling over a huge steel trap, or if the pole pen showed disturbance, in there would be the bacon grease bait and the trap and a damned perturbed bear. No man's land, my father called Merle's neighborhood of the Two, and gave it the widest berth he could.

Next to Merle's place, up a draw a little north and west where I was now riding, George and Aggie Emrich ran a shirt-tail outfit, a few cattle and a little hay and a broken-backed barn for the benefit of both. I can't tell you a whole lot about the Emrichs because they lived ~~The Emrichs lived~~ on terms no one else could penetrate, let alone savvy. About 99 99/100ths of the talking for the two of them was done by Aggie, and none of that could really be called definitive. ~~It was all pretty general. Whatever~~ Anything that might have been going on in George's head got translated by her. They could be standing side by side in front of you and Aggie would declare in her near-baritone George figured this time we'd ought to try two-inch lumber on that shed roof that keeps blowing off as if George were dead and his wisdom was being recalled. Which may, in fact, just have been habit with Aggie, for she'd been a widow when she married George, and her first husband, Tom Felton, she always referred to as the other one.

The general opinion was that the isolation up here under the mountains had bent the North Fork people, as a prevailing wind will hunch a tree. Rumor liked to carry around the news, for instance, that Walter ~~Craig~~ Gilfillan would have nothing to do with banks. the theory ran that whatever money he had was planted around his place in Mason jars. (Although, as my father pointed out, who's to say Walt's not just a helluva lot smarter about banks than the rest of us.) and Merle's beaver and bear fixations, George and Aggie's one-tongued conversation: they ~~could~~ were be spoofed at, but generally by persons who had no idea what it took to survive in the very shadow of the Two's mountains. Why wouldn't anybody's mind need to put up a few shields between it and the power of that horizon of the summits of the continent?

My father was waiting at another rutty offshoot from the North Fork road. This one had so many cuts of track, evidently some of them dating from the era of wagon wheels, that it looked like a kind of huge braid across the grassland. My father turned his gaze around from the twined ruts to me and asked: Everything under control at Walter's?

Uh huh, I affirmed.

All right. Let's go do it. And we set off into the weave of tracks toward the Hebner place.

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No matter what time of day you approached it, the Hebner place ~~perpetually~~ looked as if demolition was being done and the demolishers were just now taking a break for lunch. An armada of abandoned wagons and car chassis and decrepit farm equipment--even though the Hebners farmed not so much as a vegetable garden--lay around and between the brown old buildings. A root cellar was caved in, a tool shop had only half a roof left, the barn looked distinctly teetery. In short, not much ever ~~was~~ functioned on the Hebner place except gravity.

Out front of the barn now as we rode in stood a resigned-looking bay mare with two of the littler Hebner boys astraddle her swayed back. The pair on the horse must have been Roy and Will, or possibly Will and Enoch, or maybe even Enoch and Curtis. The way they were so frequent through life, there was no keeping track of which size Hebner boy was who unless you were around them every day.

I take that back. Even seeing them on a constant basis ~~probably~~ necessarily wouldn't have been a foolproof guide to who was who, because all the faces in that Hebner family rhymed. I don't know how else to put it. Every Hebner forehead was a copy of Good Help's wide-crimped-in-the-middle version, a pale bony expanse centered with a kind of tiny gully which widened as it went down, as if the nose had avalanched out of there.

Across most of the left side of this divided forehead a cowlick flopped at a crooked angle. The effect was as if every male Hebner wore one of those eyepatches shown in pictures of pirates, only pushed up higher. Then from all that forehead any Hebner face simply sort of dwindled down, a quick skid of nose and a tight mouth and a small ball of chin.

The tandem horsebackers stared us the length of the yard. It was another Hebner quality to gawp at you as if you were some new species on earth. My father had a not entirely ironic theory to explain that: They've all eaten so goddamn much venison their eyes have grown big as deers'. For it was a fact of life that somewhere up there in the jackpines would be a woolsack hanging from a top limb. The bottom of the sack would rest in a washtub of water, and within the sack, being cooled nicely by the moisture as it went wicking up through the burlap, would be a hind quarter or two of venison. Good Help Hebner liked his deer the same way he preferred his eggs--poached.

On the face of the law, one good search ~~of the Brood Butte~~ through there jackpines should have ~~put~~ clapped Good Help Hebner behind bars. Yet that search was never made, either by my father or by the game warden, Joe Rellis. For if ~~Hebner's~~ Good Help's use of the Two forest as a larder was ~~the~~ a known ~~answer~~ outcome, the question part of the situation was where the next square meal for the Hebner kids would come from if Good Help was shut away for his deer proclivities.

years of long

several sentence patterns

"Actually, I don't mind Good Help snitching a deer every so often," my father put it, "or even that he's so damn lazy he can barely breathe. But when he starts in on that goddamn oughtobiography of his--how he ought to have been this, ought to have done that--"

Morning, ranger! Hello there, Jick." I don't know about my father, but that out-of-nowhere gust of words startled me just a little. Of course the greeting hadn't issued from the staring boys on the mare but from behind the screen door of the log house. "Ought to have been paying attention to the world so I'd seen you coming and got some coffee going."

"Thanks anyway, Garland," said my father who had heard years of Hebner protocol and never yet seen a cup of coffee out of any of it. "We're just dropping off some baking Beth came out long on."

"We'll do what we can to put it to good--" Commotion in front of the barn interrupted the voice of Good Help. The front boy atop the old horse was whacking her alongside the neck with the reins, while the boy behind him was kicking the mount heartily in the ribs and piping, "Giddyup, goddamn you horse, giddyup!"

Giddyup, hell! Good Help's yell exploded across the yard. It was always said of him that Good Help could talk at a volume which would blow a crowbar out of your hand. The pair of you giddy off and giddy over to that woodpile!

We all watched for the effect of this on the two would-be jockeys, and when there was none, Good Help addressed my father through the screen door again: Ought to have taken that pair out and drowned them with the last batch of kittens, way they behave. I don't know what's got into kids these days.

With The profundity of that, materialized Good Help from behind the screening and out onto the decaying railroad tie which served as the front step to the Hebner house.

Like his place, Good Help Hebner himself was more than a little ramshackle, a tall yet potbellied man with one bib of his overalls usually frayed loose and dangling, his ~~pudgy~~ sloping face ~~abristle with a~~ made even more pale by a gray-white ~~grizzle~~ chevron of ~~whiskers~~ grizzle which mysteriously never matured into a real ~~beard~~ mustache. Garland Hebner: nicknamed Good Help ever since the time, years back, when he ~~had~~ volunteered to ~~help~~ join the Noon Creek cattlemen ~~brand~~ when they branded their calves and thereby get in on a free supper afterward.

In Dill Egan's corral, the branding crew at one point looked up to see Hebner, for no reason that ever ~~was~~ became clear, hoisting himself onto Dill's skittish iron-gray mare. Almost before he was really aboard, the gray ~~mare~~ slung him off and

then tried to pound him apart while everybody else ~~got to hell~~ bailed out of the corral. Hebner proved to be a moving target; time and again the hooves of the outraged horse missed the rolling ball of man, until finally Dill managed to reach in, ~~got~~ grab hold of a Hebner ankle, and snake him out under the corral poles. Hebner wobbled up, ~~looked~~ blinked around at the crowd, then sent his gaze on to the sky and declared, as if piety was natural to him: "Well, I had some Good Help getting out of that, didn't I?"

Some extra stickum was added to the nickname, of course, by the fact that Good Help had never been found to be of any use whatsoever on any task anybody had been able to think up for him. He has a pernicious case of the slows, Dode Withrow reported after he made the error of hiring Good Help for a few days of fencing haystacks.

"Ranger, I been meaning to ask ~~whether~~ if it might'n't be possible to cut a few poles to fix that corral up with, Good Help was ~~saying~~ blaring now. The Hebner corral looked as if a buffalo stampede had passed through it, and translated out of Hebnerese, Good Help's question was whether he could help himself to some National Forest pine without paying for it. Ought to have got at it before now, but my back--

That allergy to work, however, was the one characteristic in which the rest of the family did not emulate Good Help. They didn't

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~~In this Home, however, the rest of the family did not emulate him. Good Help. They didn't~~ dare. Survival depended on whatever wages the squadron of Hebner kids could earn by hiring out at lambing time or through haying season. Up and down English Creek at those times of year, on almost any ranch you would find a Hebner boy bucketing water in the lambing shed or driving a scratch rake in the hayfield, a Hebner girl kitchen-choring for the ranch wife. Then at some point in their late teens each Hebner youngster somehow would come up with a more serious job and use it as an escape rope out of that family. The oldest boys, Harvey and Sanford, and the daughter just younger than them, Norena, all were out in the world one place or another. I have told that among my thinking routes now is that question of whether I'd be much the same person if my lineage and birthsite had been altered a bit. Whenever I was around the Hebners a variation of that always shot to mind, as it did now while Good Help nattered to my father about his intentions of repair: Christamighty, what if I had tumbled into life as a member of this family instead of my own?

For Alec and I had accidentally been on hand for one of the Hebner chapters of life, the launching of Sanford, and it always stuck with me. It occurred a couple of springs before, when Ed Van Bebber came by the station one Friday night and asked if the pair of us could help out with lambing chores that

weekend. Neither of us much wanted to do it, because Ed Van Bebber is nobody's favorite person except Ed Van Bebber's. But you can't turn down a person who's in a pinch, either. When Alec and I rode into Ed's place early the next morning we saw that Sanford Hebner was driving the gutwagon, even though he was only seventeen or so, not all that much older than Alec at the time. And it had been a rugged lambing season at Van Bebber's, the hay was used up getting through the winter and the ewes now thin as shadows and not particularly ready to become mothers. Ed had thrown the drop band clear up onto the south side of Wolf Butte to provide any grass for them at all, which meant a mile and a half drive for Sanford to the lambing shed with each gutwagonload of ewes and their fresh lambs. With the ewes dropping eighty and ninety lambs a day out there, Sanford was working every horse on the ranch, saddle horses and everything, to pull that heavy wagon on that slope and make those long shed trips--walking in to the ranch as many as three times a day to trade a played-out team for different horses. All in all, Sanford was performing about two men's work and doing it damn well. The day this happened, dark had almost fallen, Alec and I were up on the hillside above the lambing shed

helping Ed Van Bebber corral a bunch of mother ewes and their week-old lambs, and we meanwhile could see Sanford driving in with his last load of lambs of the day. We actually had our bunch under control just fine, the three of us and a dog or two, but Ed always had to have a tendency toward hurry. So he cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled down the hill to Sanford: HEY-YOU-THERE-HEBNER! COME-UP-HERE-AND-HELP-US-CORRAL-THESE-EWES-AND-LAMBS! I still think if Ed had asked properly, Sanford probably would have been fool enough to have climbed up and joined us, even though he already had put in his workday and then some. But after the season of man's labor he had done, to be yelled at to come up and help a couple of milk-tooth kids like us chase lambs; worse than that, to not be awarded even his first name, just be shouted to the world as a Hebner--I still can see Sanford perched on the seat of that gutwagon, looking up the slope to us, and then cupping his hands to his mouth the same way Ed had, and hear yet his words carry up the hill: YOU-GO-PLUMB-TO-HELL-YOU-OLD-SON-OF-A-BITCH! And he slapped his reins on the rumps of the team and drove on to the lambing shed. At the supper table that night, Sanford's check was in his plate.

Sanford and that money, though--to me, this is the barb of the story--did not travel back up the North Fork to this Hebner household. When Alec and I headed home that night Sanford rode double behind me--I didn't think of it at the time, but I have seen ever since that that must have been one more mortification, straddling a saddle behind a shavetail kid like me after he'd been a full-fledged gutwagon driver all spring--and when we dismounted at the ranger station, Sanford trudged into the dark straight down the English Creek road, asking at every ranch on the way whether a job of any sort could be had. Anything. I'll clean the chicken house. The Busby brothers happened to need a bunch herder, and Sanford had been with them ever since; this very moment, was herding one of their bands up in the mountains of the Two. To me, the realization of Sanford's situation that evening when Ed Van Bebber canned him, knocking at any door rather than return home, having a family, a father, that he would even clean chicken houses to be free of; to me, ~~that~~ the news that life could deal such a hell of a situation to someone about the age of Alec and me came as a sobering revelation.

--Missus! Having failed to cajole my father out of free timber, Good Help evidently had decided to settle for the manna we'd come to deliver. Got something out here.

The screen door opened and closed again, producing Florene Hebner and leaving a couple of the very littlest Hebners--Garlena and Jonas? Jonas and Maybella?--gawping behind the mesh. Since the baked goods were tied in a dish towel on my saddle, I did the courteous thing and got off and took the bundle up to Florene. Florene was, or had been, a fairly good-looking woman, particularly among a family population minted with the face of Good Help. But what was most immediately noticeable about her was how worn she looked; as if she'd been sanded down repeatedly. You'd never have guessed it by comparing the two, but Florene and my mother went through grade school at Noon Creek together. Florene though never made it beyond the second year of high school in Gros Ventre because she already had met Garland Hebner and promptly was pregnant by him and, a little less promptly on Garland's part, was married to him. She gave a small downcast smile as I handed her the bundle, said to me Thank your ma again, Jick, and retreated back inside.

Funny to see Alec not with you, Good Help was ~~saying~~ declaiming to my father as I returned from the doorway to Pony. But they do grow and go.

So they do, my father agreed without enthusiasm. Garland, we got sheep waiting for us up the mountain. Ready, Jick? My father touched Mouse into motion, then ~~offered~~ uttered to Good Help in parting, purely poker-faced: Take it easy.

Good Help's face was equally straight as he responded: Any way I can get it.

I know that I have yammered on about the Hebners, but it will now be seen why. I watched what I knew would happen, what always happened when my father paid a visit to this place. At the top of the rise he halted his horse and turned for a last look down at the Hebner hodgepodge; then shook his head, said Jesus H. Christ, and reined away. For in that woebegone log house down there, and amid those buildings before neglect had done its handiwork on them, my father was born and brought up.

All right, then, she said. Jick, I need another armload of firewood. And you, Stanley--she drilled him with ~~her look~~ that stare of hers --you have Doc Spence look at that hand.

Bet! Stanley called. I would have given any odds that my mother would not stop. But she did. Then I never expected she would turn around to him, but she did that, too.

Jick done good, Stanley said in a quiet voice. I couldn't have got along up there without him.

my boots, which were laced as far as my insteps and then gaping out like the tops of two big funnels, and on up the legs of my pants where there was the grime from my sidehill excursion with Bubbles, and next to my shirt, which at least was clean but we both knew was also newly bobtailed, and finally just a stare at my face. I can't really say whether she managed to delve all the places in my eyes where bloodshotness from my hangover might have been lingering, but she studied there hard enough to.

The Return of the Prodigals, she said at last. I suppose, Jick, you can Explain How You Look?

A throat was cleared in back of me. Hullo, Bet, Stanley came out with. I had never heard anyone but my father and her brother Pete call my mother Bet.

Hello, Stanley, she acknowledged kind of grudgingly.

We rode in alongside the west wall of the ranger station, fortunately the end farthest from the kitchen and my mother, and I eased off Pony as noiselessly as I could without being too obvious about it in front of Stanley. I needed all the time possible to muster myself for this homecoming. All my thinking on the ride down from the mountains had not produced any surefire approach to my mother. The only policy firmly in my mind just then was that I wanted to sure not to start off with my sacrificial shirt as an issue, so while I mulled my entrance into the station I ~~pulled~~ tugged out what was left of the tail and unbuckled and unbuttoned myself to tuck it in deep as I could.

I don't know yet how it is possible to feel someone staring at your shirt tail. But feel it I most definitely did, as if someone lightly but firmly had hold of me back there.

I turned to face ~~my mother~~ her. There at the back corner of the house where she had just come around from the woodpile, split sticks of pine bright in her arms.

'Lo, Mom, I managed, and tried to think of anything more.

My mother's next look I not only could feel, I could watch it unfold, gain strength and scope and set to work on me: her eyes aiming down to

Stanley had said as we were saddling the horses that he hoped I didn't mind too much about missing the rest of the trip with my father, to the Billy Peak lookout and all. I hope you don't feel hard done by. Which of course was exactly how I did feel. Yet when I weighed it all out, what did my apprenticing days with Stanley amount to? I had skinned some sheep, delivered grub to a sheepherder, contended with a pack horse: I couldn't call it any great total of accomplishment. I mean, just any sad sonofabitch could come along and do that much. So I answered Stanley shortly: No, no. It's all been an education.

was foreshadowing my own. It was like looking through the Toggery window at a fancy suit of clothes and saying, by the christ, they'll never catch me dead in those, but at the same time noticing that they seem to be your fit.

Stanley was into his repertoire again, this time warbling about somebody who was wild and wooly and full of fleas and never'd been curried above her knees. But my mind was on the summer, the situation of it so far and what might be coming in the time ahead. None of it was easy thinking. First off, I had to try to realize that the English Creek station somehow was a different place this summer, or we McCaskills somehow seemed to be different people under its roof than we had been. I tried to track how any of this had happened. Went back through that supper the night before my father and I rode up on the counting trip. Godamighty, that wasn't even a week ago. One notion did seep through to me, about what I had asked that night. Instead of "How come?" what I intended maybe was what my parents really were asking of Alec, too: something like "Already?" What was the rush? How could marriage and all be happening so soon? My mother and father I suppose were looking at Alec's announcement as the loss of a son--although moony as Alec had been most of this year of Leona, I personally could not see that he was all that much loss. As for me, though, what I felt, or at least sensed and was trying to draw into focus, was the unsettling suggestion that Alec's recent dippy course of behavior in some way

I ~~had~~ swarmed on to the last bite or so of this feast until it occurred to me to ask. "Where'd you get these eggs?"

"Aw, I always carry a couple small lard pails of oats for the horses, and the eggs ride okay in the oats."

My sister is Suzie,

She's got a doozy.

At least so the boys say.

I had a dark brown taste in my mouth, and the ~~several~~ various pieces of my head above there ~~didn't seem to fit~~ weren't fitting together right, seemed to be poking ~~sort of were conglomerated~~ sharp edges into each other ~~at odd angles~~.

more

Stanley was at the stove. "Morning," he ~~said~~ sang out. "Wash down your insides with this." He handed me a tin cup of coffee turned tan with canned milk. Evidently he had heated the milk along with the coffee, because the contents of the cup were all but aflame, the heat went up my nose in search of my brain as I held the cup in front of my lips.

Stanley said over his shoulder as he fussed at something on the stove top, "No guarantee on this left-handed grub, but how do you take your eggs?"

"Uh, flipped."

Stanley hovered at the stove another minute or two, then turned and presented me a plate. Left-handed they may have been, but the eggs were fried to a crisp brown lace at their edges, while their pockets of yolk were not runny but not solidified either. Eggs that way are perfection. On the plate before me they were fenced in by ~~wide~~ tan strips of sidepork, and within a minute or so, Stanley was providing me slices of bread fried in the pan grease.

more

In the summer of '16 one of the large sheep outfits of eastern Washington shipped in five thousand ewes and lambs to graze the extreme north end of the Two. I'd spent the night in Browning, in a goddamn flea palace there, so as to get out to the pens early for the count on those Washingtoniacs' band. But even before the count out of the Browning railroad pens was done, it was being altered. Hungry from 18 hours in the stock cars, the sheep had been allowed to fan out and graze, and drifted onto a flat blooming with deathcamas and lupine. By the time it dawned on the herders, animals were dying by hundreds. Stanley sent men to roust out the druggist not only in Browning but those in Cut Bank and Conrad and Gros Ventre, emptying those pharmacies of all possible pinanginated potash and sulfate of aluminum. We mixed the stuff in wash tubs, and throughout that day Stanley and the Washington sheepman and his herders and helpers scrabbled from town dosed stricken sheep. Most of the dosed ones pulled through. It was too late though for about a thousand of them others. At last Stanley put part of his crew to dragging carcasses together and part to fetching dry dead brush from the nearest stream, and all that night brush and sheep burned on the prairie.

Just then Valier was being built, and all the homesteads on the new irrigation project, making the market for lumber such a temptation that more than one enterpriser sheared timber off the edge of the Two under a homesteading provision. Along the south fork of English Creek especially, claim after claim was being listed as farmstead, logged off and then abandoned. Stanley invited Regional Forester Silcox over from Missoula for a look. He led him to the top of a clearcut sidehill and let him look down the massacred slope. Gus Silcox asked, You mean to tell me this is a homestead listing?

Yeah, responded Stanley, a pumpkin homestead.

A which?

A pumpkin homestead, Stanley repeated patiently.

Ranger, what in all hell are you talking about?

Well, Gus, I can't see what anybody'd use land this steep for unless they was to grow pumpkins on it and then when the pumpkins got ripe, why they'd just go along and cut them loose and let them roll down to the bottom of this hill and harvest them from there. Don't you figure?

Rangering was like nothing Stanley had ever done or heard of. One day it was his responsibility to hire a wolfer, the next morning to telegraph off to the Missoula Business College for a secretary. The wolfer presented himself first, and half-drunk, leading a bony roan he called Scorpion. Stanley studied the horse. He don't look as bad as his name, I said. The wolfer said, Naw, I call him that for his brand. On the roan's left hip was the Mankato Cattle Company's fancified M--M--which the cowboys of eastern Montana and the Dakotas had nicknamed for its legs and tail. Stanley decided against asking how a Mankato horse had got this far from home, made sure his new employee's rifle was empty, shoved four boxes of 30.06 ammunition so deep amid the packsack of wolf traps that it would take some degree of sobriety to find them, and sent the wolfer and Scorpion off into the hills. In a few days the secretary, a pale young man in a high collar, climbed off the stage wanting to know where he could take a bath. Stanley pointed. There's English Creek, sixty miles of her, you can pick your choice.

In May of 1906 Stanley took the forest ranger's examination. "What ~~probably~~ must have had something to do with my interest in the Forest Service was the fires of that December of my first year in Kalispell. They burned along the mountains from Big Fork to Bad Rock Canyon and even further north than that and I remember how people used to go out on the hills east of Kalispell at night to see the fire running wild on the mountains. Green kid I was, I asked why somebody didn't do something about it and was told that was public domain and belonged to the government, not anybody around here. Damn it to hell, though, Jick, when I saw that timber being burned up, it just never seemed right to me."

through it. It was part of all I could remember, hearing my father and the other Forest Service men of his age mention those original rangers, the ones who were sent out in the first years of the century with not much more than the legal description of a million or so acres and orders to transform them into a national forest. The forest arrangers, the men of my father's generation nicknamed them. Glen Smith down on the Custer National Forest, Ellers Koch on the Bitterroot, Brady Coover on the Libby, Joe Quisenberry on the Beaverhead; the tales of them still circulated, refreshed by the comments of the younger rangers wondering how they'd managed to do all they had. I could imagine that once, young officers in blue and gray had talked in similar tones about Grant and Lee. Everybody in the Forest Service told forest arranger stories at any chance. But that Stanley Meixell, wronghanded campjack and frequenter of Doctor Al K. Hall, had been the original ranger of the Two Medicine National Forest, I had never heard a breath of; and this was strange.

habit under the scissorbill to get away from the barn late as 8 or 9 o'clock and then trot those horses out about ten miles to Lake Blaine. Well, hell, by the time they got out there to the lumber mill naturally they were all warmed up and then would stand there and get cold during the loading and so of course were all getting sick and losing flesh. All I did was to make the drivers walk those teams both ways, and we never had a sick horse all that winter.

Teamstering, river pigging, foremanning: all this history of Stanley's was unexpected to me. I'd supposed, from my distant memory of him having been in our lives when I was so small, that he was just another camp tender or maybe even the association rider back when this range was occupied ~~by~~ mostly cattle instead of sheep. Then something else peeped in a corner of my mind. You said when we got here that you'd been to this cabin before?

Lots of times. I go back farther than it does: I seen it being built. We were sighting out that fenceline over there when ~~Bode~~ Les Spencer's daddy started dragging in the logs for it.

Being built? Sighting the boundary fenceline? The history was skipping to ancient times of the Two now, and it and the whiskey together were compounding my confusion. What, were you up here with a Geological Survey crew or something?

The look Stanley fastened on me now was the levelest thing in that cabin.

Jick, I was the ranger that set up the Two.

Surely my face hung open so far you could have trotted a cat

the first train of his life. From someone he had heard about Montana and a go-ahead new town called Kalispell. Two days and two nights on that train. The shoebox full of fried chicken one of those Kansas girls fixed for me didn't quite last the trip through. As the train descended from the Rockies to the Flathead Valley Stanley became curious as to what kind of country he was getting into. Just in east of Columbia Falls I went out on the back platform and stood there all the way to Kalispell, and you'd never believe it now, Jick, but it was solid timber across that valley, forest and more forest just whirling past that train. Two or three times, I saw cabins in little clearings. The sight is still clear in my mind because it was early in the morning and each one of those cabins had a thread of smoke rising out of it, people having just got up and started their day's fire.

In Kalispell then, you could hear hammers going all over town. For the next few years Stanley grew up with the community. He worked mill jobs, driving a sawdust cart, sawfiling, foremanning a lumber piling crew. Another spell, he even was a river pig, during one of the log drives on the north fork of the Flathead. Then in '02, a fellow came to me and wanted to know if I would manage his outfit that winter. He had a contract for hauling lumber from Lake Blaine into Kalispell. Had a bunch of four-horse teams, about half a dozen of them, on this job, and the scissorbill he'd had in charge was inclined to hang around the saloons and poker tables and let the setup go to general hell. So right away I made it t~~h~~aw that the drivers had to be at the barn 6:30 every morning so as to hitch up and be on that road by 7. It'd been their

back toward the corral that way. We finally got him up within about a quarter of a mile of the dehorning. Then each of us roped an end and tied him down and went into the ranch and hitched up a stoneboat and loaded him on and boated him in in high old style. The foreman was waiting for us with five silver dollars in his hand.

I was surprised at how interesting I found all this. As Stanley talked my cup had drained itself without my really noticing. When Stanley stopped to tip another round into his cup, I followed suit. The whiskey was weaving a little bit of wooze around me, so I was especially pleased that I was able to dredge back from something I'd overheard yet another toast. I offered it heartily:

Here's lead in your pencil!

That one made Stanley look at me sharply for a moment, but he said only as he had the first time, How, and tipped his cup.

As happens, Stanley's story went on, something came along to dislodge him from that cowboying life. It was a long bunkhouse winter, weather just bad enough to keep him cooped on the ranch. I'd go give the cows a ~~little~~ jag of hay two times a day and otherwise all there was to do was sit around and do hairwork. Each time he was in the barn he would pluck strands from the horses' tails, then back he went beside the bunkhouse stove to braid horsehair quirts and bridles and eventually even a whole damn lasso. By the end of that hairwork winter the tails of the horses had thinned drastically, and so had Stanley's patience with Kansas.

On the 17th of March of 1898, to be real exact, Stanley boarded

Stanley Meixell originated in Missouri, on a farm east of St. Joe in Daviess County. As he told it, the summer he turned thirteen he encountered the down-row of corn--that tumbled line of cornstalks knocked over by the harvest wagon as it straddled its way through the field. Custom was that the youngest of the crew always was put on the down-row, and Stanley was the last of five Meixell boys. Ahead of him stretched a green gauntlet of down-row summers. Except that by the end of the first sweltering day of stooping and ferreting for ears of corn, Stanley came to his decision about further Missouri life. Within the week I was headed out to the Kansas high plains. If you're like me you think of Kansas as one eternal wheatfield, but actually western Kansas then was cattle country; Dodge City was out there, after all.

Four or five years of ranch jobs ensued for Stanley, and also a reputation for being able to cope. We were dehorning these Texas steers one time. There was one old ornery sonofabitch of a buckskin steer we never could get corralled with the rest. After so long the foreman said he'd pay five dollars for anyone that would bring this steer in. Another snot-nose kid and I decided we'd just be the ones and bring him on in. We come onto him about three miles away from the corral, all by himself, and he was really on the prod. Tried to drive him and couldn't. Well, then we figured we'd rope him and drag him in. Then we got to thinking, three miles is quite a drag, ain't it? So we each loosed out our lariat, about ten feet of it, and took turns to get out in front of him and pop him across the nose with that rope. When we done that he'd make a hell of a big run at us and we'd dodge ahead out of his way, and he choused us

While I was at this, Stanley meanwhile had got up to shove wood into the stove.

So what do you think? he inquired. Will it ever replace water?

I didn't know about that, but the elixir of Doctor Hall did thaw my tongue. Before long I heard myself asking, You haven't been in the Two country the last while, have you?

Naw.

Where you been?

Oh, just a lot of places. Stanley seemed to review them on the cabin wall. Down in Colorado for awhile. Talk about dry. Half that state was blowing around chasing after the other half. And Wyoming. I was association rider in that Cody country a summer or two. Then Montana here again for a while, over in the Big Hole Basin. A couple of haying seasons there. He considered, summed: Around. Which moved him to another drag from his cup.

I had one from mine, too. What're you doing back up in this country?

Like I say, by now I been every place else, and they're no better. Came back to the everloving Two to take up a career in tending camp, as you can plainly see. Don't you know, Jick, they advertise in those big newspapers for one-handed raggedy-ass camptenders? You bet they do.

He seemed sort of sensitive on that topic, so I switched around to something I knew would take him in a different direction. Are you from around here originally?

Not hardly. Not a Two Medicine man by birth. He glanced at me. Like you. Naw, I--

I cleared my throat to make way for the words of it. Then:

I believe maybe I'll have me one, too.

Stanley had put his cup down on the table but was resting his good hand over the top of it as if there was a chance it might hop away. One what?

One of those--doctor visits. A swig.

This drew me a considerable look from Stanley. He let go of his cup and scratched an ear. Just how old 're you?

Fifteen, I maintained, borrowing the next few months.

Stanley did some more considering, but by now I was figuring out that if he didn't say no right off the bat, chances were he wouldn't get around to saying it at all. At last: Got to wet your wick sometime, I guess. Can't see how a swallow or two can hurt you. He transferred the bottle to a place on the table nearer me.

Copying his style of pouring, I tilted the cup somewhat at the same time I was tipping the bottle. Just before I thought Stanley might open his mouth to say something, I ended the flow. Then went over to the water bucket and dippered in a splash or so the way he had.

It is just remarkable how a little piece of memory can come to your aid at the right time. I recalled something I'd heard once when I went into the Blue Eagle saloon to ask my father about something or other, and repeated it now in salute to Stanley:

Here's how.

How, Stanley recited back automatically.

Evidently I swigged somewhat deeper than I intended. Or should have gone a little heavier on the splash of water. Or something. By the time I set my cup down on the board table, I was blinking hard.

One chore remained. I went over to the bunks, reached into my bedroll and pulled out my clean shirt. The remainder of the tail of it, I jackknifed off. Stanley's hand didn't look quite so hideous this time when we rewrapped it, but still was no prize winner.

Well, Stanley announced now, you got me nursed. Seems like the next thing ought to be a call on the doctor. And almost before he was through saying it, last night's bottle reappeared over the table, its neck tilted into Stanley's cup.

Before Stanley got too deep into his oil of joy, there was one more major point I wanted tended to. Diplomatically I began, Suppose maybe we ought to give some thought--

--to supper Stanley finished for me as he dippered a little water into his prescription. I had something when I got back from Preston's camp. But you go ahead.

It dawned on me that now that we had tended the camps the packs were empty of groceries, which meant that we--or at least I, because so far I had no evidence that Stanley ever required any food--were at the mercy of whatever was on hand in Stanley's own small supply pack. I dug around in there, but about all I saw that looked promising was an aging loaf of bread and some Velveeta cheese. So I made myself some sandwiches out of that and mentally marked up one more charge against my father.

When I'd finished it still was only twilight, and Stanley just had applied the bottle and dipper to the cup for a second time. Oh, it looked like another exquisite evening ahead, all right. A regular night at the opera.

Right then, though, a major idea came to me.

Creek, so I embarked on the chores of wood and water again, at least salving myself with the prospect that tomorrow I would be relieved of Stanley. We would rise in the morning--and I intended it would be an early rise indeed--and ride down out of here and I would resume my summer at the English Creek ranger station and Stanley would sashay on past to the Busby brothers' ranch and that would be that.

When I stumped in with the water pail, that unlaced left boot of mine all but flapping in the breeze, I saw Stanley study the situation. Too bad we can't slice up Bubbles for bootlaces, he offered.

That'd help, I answered shortly.

I never like to tell anybody how to wear his boots. But if it was me, now--

I waited while Stanley paused to speculate out the cabin window to where dusk was beginning to deepen the color of the peaks. But I wasn't in any mood to wait very damn long.

You were telling me all about boots, I prompted kind of sarcastically.

Yeah. Well. If it was me now, I'd take that one shoestring you got there, and cut it in half, and lace up each boot with a piece as far as it'll go. Ought to keep them from slopping off your feet, anyhow.

I did the halving, and the boots then laced firm as far as my insteps. The high tops pooched out like funnels, but at least now I could get around without one boot always threatening to slop off.

any, and his lambs are looking just real good. Plain as anything, then, there was one sore thumb up here on the Busby's allotment and it went by the name of Canada Dan.

Stanley extended the thought aloud. Looks like Dan's asking for a ticket to town.

I didn't follow that. In all the range ritual I knew, and even in the perpetual wrestle between Dode Withrow and Sam Hoy, the herder always was angling to provoke a reason for quitting, not to be fired. Being fired from any job was a taint; a never-sought smudge.

The puzzle pursued me on into the cabin. As Stanley stepped to the stove to try rev the fire a little, I asked: You mean Canada Dan wants to get canned?

Looks like. It can happen that way. A fellow'll get in a situation and try make it worse so he'll get chucked out of it. My guess is, Dan's feeling thirsty and is scared of this timber as well, but doesn't want to admit either one to himself. Easier to blame onto somebody else. Stanley paused. Question is, whether to try disappoint him out of the idea or just go ahead and can him. I will say that Canada Dan is not such a helluva human being that I want to put up with an entire summer of his crap.

This was a stiffer Stanley than I had yet seen. This one you could imagine giving Canada Dan the reaming out he so richly deserved. The flash of backbone didn't last long, though. But I guess he's the Busby boys' decision, not mine.

Naturally the day was too far gone for us to ride home to English

noticed me slopping along with one boot unlaced. But once he'd checked through the groceries I'd brought to make sure that a big can of coffee and some tins of sardines were in there, and his weekly newspaper as well--Norwegian sheepherders seemed to come in two varieties, those whose acquaintance with the alphabet stopped stubbornly with the X they used for a signature and those who would quit you in an instant if you ever forgot to bring their mail copy of Nordiske Tidende--Andy seemed perfectly satisfied. He handed me his list of personals for the next camptending--razor blades, a pair of socks, ~~Bull Durham~~ Copenhagen snoose--and away I went.

Where a day goes in the mountains I don't know, but by the time I reached the cabin again ~~it was almost the end of afternoon.~~ the afternoon was almost done. Stanley's saddle sorrel and the black packhorse were picketed a little way off, and Stanley emerged to offer me as usual whatever left-handed help he could manage in unsaddling Bubbles.

He noticed the spliced cinch. See you had to use a little wildwood glue on the outfit.

I grunted something or other to that, and Stanley seemed to divine that it was not a topic I cared to dwell on. He switched to a question: How's old Gufferson?

He said about three words total. I wouldn't exactly call that bellyaching. This sounded pretty tart even to me, so I added: And he had his sheep in a nice Wyoming scatter, there west of his wagon.

~~Preston's~~ Sanford's on top of things, too, Stanley reported. Hasn't lost

I was greeted by a little stampede of about a dozen lambs toward me. They are absent-minded creatures and sometimes will glance up and run to the first moving thing they see, which was the case with these now. When they figured out that Pony and Bubbles and I were not their mommas, they halted, peered at us a bit, then rampaged off in a new direction. Nothing is more likable than a lamb bucking in fun. First will come that waggle of the tail, a spasm of wriggles faster than the eye can follow. Then a stiff-legged jump sideways, the current of joy hitting the little body so quick there isn't time to bend its knees. Probably a bleat, byeahhh, next, and then the romping run. Watching them you have to keep reminding yourself that lambs grow up, and what is pleasantly foolish in a lamb's brain is going to linger on to be just dumbness in the mind of a full-size ewe.

Andy Gustafson had no trove of dead camased ewes, nor any particular complaints, nor even much to say. He was wrinkled up in puzzlement for awhile as to why it was me that was tending his camp, even after I explained as best I could, and I saw some speculation again when he

for whoever invented bootlaces.

Andy's band was spread in nice fashion along both sides of a timbered draw. If you have the courage to let them, sheep will scatter themselves into a slow comfortable graze even in up-and-down country. But it takes a herder who is sure of himself and has a sort of sixth sense against coyotes and bear. Dode ~~Lee~~ Withrow claimed that the best herder he ever had on the Two, prior to ~~Pete~~ Sam Hoy, was an irrigator he'd hired in one of the war years when he couldn't find anybody else. The guy never had herded before and didn't even take much interest in the band of sheep; What he did was ride the canyon and shoot at everything that was just a little suspicious. If it was black, a burnt stump, he'd have to blaze away at it. Tending his camp this one time, I happened to look up over onto the opposite ridge and I said, "Say, there's something over there that kind of resembles a bear." Jesus, he jumped for that rifle and BOOM! BOOM! After he got those touched off he stopped to take a look. "No," he says, "no, I guess it ain't, it didn't run." While he terrorized anything shaggy the sheep did pretty much as they pleased, and Dode ~~Lee~~ said that year's lambs were just beautiful, averaging 91 pounds. These sheep of Andy's in contentment along this draw were going to yield the Busby brothers some dandy poundage, too. They would need to, to offset Canada Dan's jumpy band.

slope. Balk again, and let himself slide back down the slope a little. Sneeze, then fart another series. Shake the packs in hope the splice would let go.

I at last somehow worked his head up level with the trail and then simply leaned back on the lead rope until he exhausted his various acts and had to look around at where he was. When the sight of the trail registered in his tiny mind, he pranced on up as if it was his own idea all along.

I sat for awhile to recover my breath--after tying Bubbles to the biggest tree around, with a triple square knot--and sort of take stock. There's this to be said for exertion, it does send your blood tickling through your brain. When I was through resting I directly went over to Bubbles, thrust an arm into the pack with the canned goods and pulled cans out until I found the ones of tomatoes. If I ever did manage to get this ~~expedition~~ menagerie to Andy Gustafson's camp I was going to be able to say truthfully that I'd had lunch and did not need feeding by one more sheepherder. Then I sat back down, opened two cans with my jackknife, and imbibed tomatoes. One thing about canned tomatoes, my father every so often said during a trail meal, if you're thirsty you can drink them and if you're hungry you can eat them. Maybe, I conceded, he was right once in his life.

By the time I reached Andy Gustafson's camp my neck was thoroughly cricked from the constant looking back over my shoulder to see if the packs were staying on Bubbles. They never shifted, though. Thank God

let go of Bubbles while I went to get them; having taken up mountaineering so passionately, there was no telling where Bubbles would crash off to if I wasn't there to hang onto him.

I started in to look myself over for possibilities. Hat, joseph coat, shirt: no help. Belt--though I hated to think of it, I maybe could cut that up into leather strips. Yet would they be long enough if I did. No, better, down there: my forester boots, a bootlace: a bootlace just by God might do the trick.

By taking a wrap of Bubbles' lead rope around the palm of my left hand I was more or less able to use the thumb and fingers to grasp the last cinch while I punched holes in it with my jackknife. When I had a set of them accomplished on either side of the break, I threaded the bootlace back and forth, back and forth, and at last tied it to make a splice. Then, Bubbles' recent standard of behavior uppermost in my mind, I made one more set of holes farther along each part of the cinch and wove in the remainder of the bootlace as a second splice for safety's sake. I now had a boot gaping open like an unbuckled overshoe, but the cinch looked as if it ought to lift a boxcar.

Now there remained only the matter of ~~getting~~ negotiating Bubbles back up where he had launched from.

Probably the ensuing ruckus amounted to only about twenty minutes of fight-and-drag, though it seemed hours. Right then you could not have sold me all the packhorses on the planet for a nickel. Bubbles would tak a step and balk. Balk and take a step. Fright or exasperation or obstinance or whatever other mood can produce it had him dry-farting like the taster in a popcorn factory. Try to yank me back down the

Choices about like Canada Dan's menu of mutton or sheep meat, those. Stanley by now was miles away at ~~Preston Rozier's~~ Sanford Helmer's camp. Besides, with his hand and his thirst both the way they were, I wasn't sure ~~he would be much~~ how much he would be of a repairer anyway. Or I could climb on Pony, head back down the trail all the way to the English Creek station, and tell that father of mine to come mend the fix he'd pitched me into.

That second notion held appeal of ~~several~~ numerous kinds. I would be rid of Stanley and responsibility for him. I'd done all I could, ~~it was~~ in no way was it my fault that Bubbles had schottisched off a mountaintop. Most of all, delivering my predicament home to English Creek would serve my father right.

Yet when I came right down to it, I was bothered by the principle of anyone coming to my rescue. There was that about this damned in-between age, too. I totally did not want to be in the hell of a fix I was. Yet somehow I just as ~~totally~~ much did not relish resorting to anybody else to pluck me out of it. Have you ever been dead-centered that way? Hung between two schools of thought, neither one of which you wanted to give in to? Why ~~a~~ the human ~~being~~ mind doesn't positively split in half in such a situation, I don't know.

But instead I got to wondering. There ought to be some way in this world to contrive that damn cinch back together. <u>If you're going to get by in the Forest Service you better be able to fix anything but the break of day,</u> my father said every spring when he set in to refurbish all the English Creek equipment. Not that I was keen on taking him as an example just then, but--

No hope came out of my search of Bubbles and the packs; any kind of thong or spare leather was absent. The saddlestrings on my saddle up there where Pony was I did think of, but couldn't figure how to

his feet. Not only up, but showing a greater total of vigor than he had during the whole pack trip so far. So Bubbles was in one piece, I seemed to be intact, and the main damage I could see on the packs was a short gash in the canvas where something snagged it on our way down. Sugar or salt was trickling from there, but it looked as if I could move a crossrope over enough to pinch the hole shut.

I delivered Bubbles a sound general cussing, meanwhile working along the lead rope until I could grab his bridle and then reach his neck. From there I began to pat my way back, being sure to make my cussing sound a little more soothing, to get to the ruptured spot on the pack.

When I put my hand onto the crossrope to tug it across the gash, the pack moved a bit. I tugged again in a testing way, and all the load on Bubble's back moved a bit.

Son of a goddamn sonofabitch, I remember was all I managed to come out with to commemorate this discovery. That wasn't too bad under the circumstance, for the situation called for either hard language or hot tears, and maybe it could be pinpointed that right there I grew out of the bawling age into the cussing one.

Bubble's downhill excursion had broken the lash cinch, the one that holds the packs into place on a horse's back. So I had a packhorse whole and healthy--and my emotions about Bubbles having survived in good fettle were now getting radically mixed--but no way to secure his load onto him. I was going to have to ride somewhere for a new cinch, or at the very least to get this one repaired.

out in your mind, such as whether you are most likely to come down on top of or under the horse below you and which part of you you can best afford to have broken and how long before a search party and why you ever in the first place--

I landed more or less standing up, though. Upright and ~~Standing~~ about shin-deep into the sidehill, which had been softened by all the rain.

Horse nostrils could be heard working overtime nearby me, and I discovered the lead rope still was taut in my hand, as if the plunge off the trail had frozen it straight out like a long icicle. What I saw first, though, was not Bubbles but Pony. A horse's eyes are big anyway, but I swear Pony's were the size of Lincoln Zephyr headlights as she peered down over the rim of the trail at Bubbles and me all the way below.

Easy, girl! I called up to her. All I needed next was for Pony to get excited, jerk her reins loose from that stump and quit the country, leaving me down here with this tangled-up packhorse. Easy, Pony! Easy, there. Everything's gonna be--just goddamn dandy.

Sure it was. On my first individual outing I had rolled the packstring, even if it was only one inveterate jughead of a horse named Bubbles. Great wonderful work, campjack McCaskill. Keep on in this brilliant ~~way~~ fashion and you maybe someday can hope to work your way up to moron.

Now I had to try to sort out the situation. A little below me on the sidehill, Bubbles was floundering around a little and snorting a series of alarms. The favorable part of that was that he was up on

windfall. Be right back with that other crowbait, I assured her as I looped her reins around the leftover limb of a stump.

Bubbles was standing with his neck in the one position he seemed to know for it, stretched out like he was being towed, and I had to haul hard on his lead rope for enough slack to untie my knots.

Come on, churnhead, I said as civilly as I could--Bubbles was not too popular with me anyway, because if he originally hadn't kicked Stanley I wouldn't have been in the camptending mess--and with some tugging persuaded him into motion.

Bubbles didn't like the prospect of the downed tree when we got there. I could see his eyes fix on the shaggy crown limbs overhead, and his ears lay back a little. But one thing about Bubbles, he didn't lead much harder when he was being reluctant than when he wasn't.

I had him most of the way past the windfall when somehow he managed to get a hoof too close in against the hillside, where it brushed against a broken branch dangling straight down from the tree trunk. The branch whisked along that side of him and then in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch, and Bubbles went straight sideways off the mountain.

He of course took the lead rope with him, and me at the end of it like a kite on a string.

I can't say how far downslope I flew, but I was in the air long enough to get good and worried. Plummeting sideways as well as down is unnerving, ~~as hell,~~ your body trying to figure out how to travel in those two directions at once. And a surprising number of thoughts fan

Some winters ago Isidor and his brother Gabe, a noted packer in his own right, and my father brought out the pilot and co-pilot from the airplane crash above the north fork of English Creek. My mother and Alec and I heard that plane as it buzzed past west of the ranger station, then when we heard the motor noise again we looked at one another, as if confirming that a machine could be circling in the overcast next to these mountains, and then my mother spun to the telephone and rang the airport in Great Falls. All the passengers had been taken off there because of how the weather looked, but the plane was trying to go on to Spokane with the mail. Evidently its instruments went wrong, for it slammed directly into the east side of Spring Mountain like a sagehen hitting a truck windshield. The next day a National Guard search plane managed to spot the wreckage, and then a couple more days ensued while a postal inspector trotted out from Spokane to see to the salvage of the mail, and after all that was concluded it was up to my father and Isidor and Gabe to bring down the two bodies. Both of course were frozen stiff in the positions they had been flung into. So the packers wrapped them in a manti ~~piece~~ apiece as they were and slid the bundles on the snow down the mountain to the trail and that night's camp. The intention was the next morning to fold each body face-down across a pack saddle. That night turned clear and cold, however, and in the morning the bodies couldn't be bent at all. Isidor proclaimed that, by the God, of all the packing he ever had done, this problem was a new one on him. He saw no choice though, except tie both bodies on one horse, one lengthwise along each side. And that is the way we saw them arrive, with that balanced cargo of what had been men, to the English Creek station where a hearse from Great Falls was waiting.

top of the Catholic steeple there amid the Gros Ventre grove, but realistically that was mostly imagination.

I and my horses went up and up, toward the angle of slope beneath the center of the reef. Eventually a considerable sidehill of timber took the trail from sight, and before Pony and Bubbles and I entered the stand of trees, I whoaed us for a last gaze along all the mountains above and around. They were the sort of thing you would have if every cathedral in the world were lined up along the horizon.

Not much ensued for the first minutes of the forested trail, just a sharpening climb and the route beginning to kink into a series of switchbacks. Sunbeams were threaded down through the pine branches and with that dappled light I didn't even mind being in out of the view for the next little while.

The constancy of a forest is an illusion, though: trees too are mortal and they come down. About in the middle of one of the straight tilts of trail between switchbacks, there lay a fresh downed one poking out over our route, just above the height of a horse. Because of the steep hillside it made an awkward place to try any chopping and I didn't have a saw of any sort. Besides, I was in no real mood to do trail maintenance for my father and the United States Forest Service. I decided I'd need to get off and lead Pony and Bubbles through. But given the disposition of Bubbles, I knew I'd damn well better do it a horse at a time.

I tied Bubbles' lead rope to a middle-sized jackpine--doubling the square knot just to be sure--and led Pony up the trail beyond the

See you back here for beans, Stanley said, and as he reined north toward ~~Preston's~~ Sanford's camp Pony and I headed west up the mountain, Bubbles grudgingly behind us.

I suppose now hardly anybody knows that horseback way of life on a trail. I have always thought that horseback is ~~an~~ the ideal way to travel, if you just didn't have to deal with the damn horse, and one thing ~~almost~~ to be said for Pony was that she was so gentle and steady you could almost forget she was down there. As for the trail itself--even in the situation I was in, that morning was a scene to store away. Pointed west as I was, the horizon of the Rockies extended wider than my vision; to take in the total of peaks I had to move my head as far as I could to either side. It never could be said that this country of the Two didn't offer enough elbow room. For that matter, shinbone and cranium and all other kind, too. Try as you might to be casual about a ride up from English Creek into these mountains, you were doing something sizable. Climbing from the front porch of the planet up into its attic, so to speak.

And here this was a morning I was on my own. Atop my own horse and leading a beast of burden, even if the one was short-legged and pudgy and the other too amply justified the term of beast. The twin feelings of aloneness and freedom seemed almost to lift me, send me up over the landscape like a balloon. Of course I know it was the steady climb of the land itself that created that impression. But whatever was responsible, before long I could look back out onto the plains and see the blue dab of Lake Frances, and the water tower of Valier on its east shore--what would that be: fifty miles away, sixty? Somewhat closer was the bulge of trees which marked where Gros Ventre sat in the long procession of English Creek's bankside cottonwoods and willows. I liked to think I could single out a tiny toothpick-point which was the

that'd work. You know this piece of country pretty good. Take the rifle. If any bear starts eating on me, he'll pretty soon give up on account of gristle. Stanley pondered some more to see whether anything further came to mind, but nothing did. So, yeah. Which yahoo do you want, Gufferson or ~~Preston Rozier~~ Sanford Helmer?

I thought on that. ~~Preston Rozier~~ Sanford was ~~a young hotdog~~ in his second or third ~~year~~ summer in these mountains. Maybe he had entirely outgrown the high-country whimwhams of the sort Canada Dan was showing, and maybe he hadn't. Andy Gustafson on the other hand was a long-timer in the Two country and probably had been given the range between Canada Dan and ~~Preston~~ Sanford for the reason that he was savvy enough not to let the bands get mixed.

more?

I'll take Andy.

Okay. You know he's in west of here, about under the middle of the reef. Let's go see sheepherders.

more directions?

Outside in the wet morning I discovered the possible drawback to my choice, which was that Andy Gustafson's camp supplies were in the pack rig that went on Bubbles. That bothered me some, but when I pictured Stanley and his bandaged hand trying to cope with Bubbles for a day, I figured it fell to me to handle the knothead anyway. At least in my father's universe matters fell that way. So I worked the packs onto the mare for Stanley--she was so tame she all but sang encouragement while the load was going on her--and then faced the spotty-nosed nemesis. But Bubbles seemed ~~no~~ not particularly more snorty and treacherous than usual, and with Stanley taking a left-handed death grip on the bridle again and addressing a steady stream of threats into the horse's ear and with me staying well clear of hooves while getting the packsacks roped on, we had Bubbles loaded in surprisingly good time.

not particularly more ...

about a third. Telling myself Stanley could starve to death in bed for all I cared, I fashioned breakfast for myself, heating up a can of peas and more or less toasting some slices of bread by holding them over the open stove on a fork.

Eventually Stanley did join the day. As he worked at getting his boots on I gave him some secret scrutiny, but couldn't see that he assayed much better or much worse than the night before, Maybe he just looked that way, sort of absent-mindedly pained, all the time. I offered to heat up some peas for him but he said no, thanks anyway.

At least he seemed ready for camptending again, and I figured it was time to broach what was heaviest on my mind: the calendar of our continued companionship.

How long's this going to take, do you think?

Well, you seen what we got into yesterday with Canada Dan. Herders have their own quantities of trouble. Stanley could be seen to be calculating, either the trouble capacities of our next two herders or the extent of my impatience. I suppose we got to figure that it could take most of a day apiece for this pair, too.

Two more days of messing with herders, then the big part of another day to ride back to English Creek--it loomed before me like a career.

What about if we split up? I suggested as if I was naturally business-like. Each tend one herder's camp today?

Stanley considered some more. You would have thought he was doing it in Latin, the time it took him. But finally: I guess

on my mind was the saying that you'll never hear the lightning bolt that hits you. The rain rattled constantly loud now. At last there came a big crackling sound quite a way off, and while I knew nature is not that regular I told myself the lightning portion of the storm had moved beyond us--or if it hadn't, I might as well be dead in bed as anywhere else--and I announced to Stanley, I'm turning in.

What, already?

Yeah, already--a word which for some reason annoyed me as much as anything had all day. I unlaced my boots and took them and my socks off, pulled out my shirt tail, and swung myself into the upper bunk.

Guess I'm more foresighted than I knew, I heard Stanley go on, to bring Doctor Hall along for company.

Who? I asked, my eyes open again at this. Gros Ventre's physician was Doc Spence, and I knew he was nowhere near our vicinity.

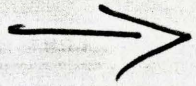
Stanley lanked himself up and casually went over to the packs. Doctor Hall, he repeated as he brought out his good hand from a pack, a brown bottle of whiskey in it. Doctor Al K. Hall.

The weather of the night I suppose continued in commotion. But at that age I could have slept through a piano tuners' convention. Came morning, I was up and around--the nearest reef and the peak south beyond it both stood in sun, as if the little square of window had been made into a picture of the Alps--while Stanley still lay flopped in the lower bunk. I lit a fire and went out to check on the horses and brought in a pail of fresh water, and even then he hadn't budged, just was breathing like he'd decided on hibernation. The bottle which had nursed him into that condition, I noticed, was down by

I believe my hair was swept straight on end, from that blast of of noise and light. I know I had trouble getting air into my body, past the blockade where my heart was trying to ~~kkx~~ climb out my throat. Stanley, though, didn't show any particular ruffle at all. The quick hand of God, my ma~~e~~ used to say.

Yeah, well, I informed him when I got the breath for it, I'd just as soon it grabbed around someplace else.

I stood waiting for the next cataclysm, although what really was



arriving to us now like beer barrels tumbling down stairs.

Now, an electrical storm is not something I am fond of. And here along the east face of the Rockies, any of these big rock thrusts--such as that outcropping up the slope from the cabin--notoriously can draw down lightning bolts. In fact, the more I pondered that outcropping, the [redacted] less comfortable I became with the fact that it neighbored us.

In my head I always counted the miles to how far away the lightning had hit--something I still find myself doing--so when the next bolt winked, somewhere out the south window, I began the formula:

One, a-thousand.

Two, a-thousand.

Three...The boom reached us then, the bolt had struck just more than two miles off. That could be worse, and likely would be. Meanwhile rain was raking the cabin. We could hear it drum against the west wall as well as on the roof.

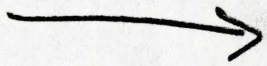
Sounds like we got a dewy night ahead of us, Stanley offered. He looked a little perkier now. Myself, I was beginning to droop, the day catching up with me. I did some more thunder-counting whenever I happened to glimpse a crackle of light out the window, but came up with pretty much the same mileage each time and so began to lose attention toward that. Putting this day out of its misery seemed a better and better idea. The cabin didn't have any beds as such, just a cobbled-together double bunk arrangement with planks where you'd like a mattress to be. But any place to be prone looked welcome, and I got up from the table to untie my bedroll from behind my saddle and spread it onto the upper planks.

The sky split white outside the cabin. That crack of thunder I honestly felt as much as heard. A jolt through the air; as if a quake had leapt upward out of the earth.

70A follows

them with some slices of bread smeared with mayonnaise because I knew butter would be down deeper in the pack with other unbreakables. Canada Dan's cooking must have stuck with me more than I was aware, though, as I didn't even think to open any canned fruit for dessert.

Meanwhile the weather grew steadily more rambunctious. Along those mountainsides thunder can roll and roll, and claps were



The tail off my clean shirt.

Your ma's gonna like to hear that.

I shrugged. Trouble ~~seemed~~ was lined up deep enough here in company with Stanley that my mother's turn at it ~~was~~ seemed a long way off.

Feels like new, Stanley said, moving his bandaged hand with a flinch he didn't want to show and I didn't really want to see. What if he passed out on me? What if--I tried to think ~~of~~ of anything I had ever heard about blood poisoning and gangrene. ~~I seemed to know that they~~ Supposedly those took a while to develop. But then, this stint of mine with Stanley was beginning to seem like a while.

It also seemed to me time to try get Stanley's mind, not to say my own, off his wound, and to bring up what I figured was a natural topic. So I queried:

What are we going to do about supper?

Stanley peered at me a considerable time. Then said: I seem to distinctly remember Canada Dan feeding us.

That was a while back, I defended. Sort of a second lunch.

Stanley shook his head a bit and voted himself out. I don't just feel like anything, right now. You go ahead.

So now things had reached the point where I had lost out even on my father's scattershot version of cooking, and was going to have to invent my own. I held ~~a~~ another considerable mental conversation with my father about that, meanwhile fighting the stove to get any real heat from it. At last I managed to warm a can of pork and beans and ate

at the corners of Stanley's eyes were showing deep and sharp, as if he was squinched up to study closely at something, and he seemed washed-out, whitish, across that part of his face, too. Like any Montana kid I had seen my share of swacked-up people, yet Stanley didn't really look liquored. No, he looked more like--

How's that hand of yours? I inquired, putting my suspicion as lightly as I knew how.

Stanley roused. Feels like it's been places. He moved his gaze past me and around the cabin interior. Not so bad quarters. Not much worse than I remember this pack rat palace, anyway.

Maybe we ought to have a look, I persisted. That wrapping's seen better times. Before he could waltz off onto some other topic I stepped over to him and began to untie ~~untied~~ the rust-colored wrapping.

When I unwound that fabric, the story was gore. The back of Stanley's hand between the first and last knuckles was skinned raw where the sharp edge of Bubbles' hoof had shoved off skin: raw and seepy and butchered-looking.

Jesus H. Christ, I breathed.

Aw, could be worse. Even as he said so, though, Stanley seemed ~~looked~~ even more pale and eroded around the eyes. I'll get it looked at when I get to town.

There's some bag balm in my saddlebag there. Get the lid off that for me, will you, and I'll dab some on.

Stanley slathered the balm thick across the back of his hand and I stepped over again and began to rewrap it for him. He noticed that the wrapping was not the blood-stained handkerchief. Where'd you come up with that?

Aw, I don't imagine it will. Lightning like this, it's probably just a thunderstorm. Stanley contemplated the rain spatting onto the cabin window and evidently was reminded that his pronouncement came close to being good news. Still, you never know, he amended,

The cabin wasn't much, just a roofed-over bin of jackpine logs, maybe fifteen feet long and ten wide and with a single window beside the door at the south end; but at least was drier than outside. Outside in fact was showing every sign of anticipating a night-long bath. The face of the Rocky Mountains gets more weather than any other place I know of and ~~you~~ a person just ~~have~~ has to abide by that fact. I considered the small stash of wood behind the stove, mostly kindling, and headed back out for enough armfuls for the night and morning. Off along the tree line I found plenty of squaw wood, which already looked damp but snapped okay when I tromped it in half over a log.

With that provisioning done and a bucket of water lugged from a seep of spring about seventy yards out along the slope, I declared myself in for the evening and shed my wet slicker. Stanley through all this stayed half-propped, half-sitting on an end of the little plank table. Casual as a man waiting for a bus. His stillness set me to wondering just how much whiskey was in him--after all, he'd been like a mummy on the ride from Canada Dan's camp, too--and so before long I angled across the room, as if exercising the saddle hours out of my legs, for a closer peek at him.

At first I wasn't enlightened by what I saw. The crowfoot lines

started in on it right away, the unpacking of the mare and Bubbles. Already I had size, my father's long bones the example to mine, and could do the respected packer's trick of reaching all the way across the horse's back to lift those off-side packs from where I was standing, instead of going back and forth around the horse all the time. I did the mare and then carefully began uncargoing Bubbles, Stanley hanging onto the bridle and matter-of-factly promising Bubbles he would yank his goddamn head off if he gave any trouble. Then as I swung the last pack over and off, a hefty lift I managed to do without bumping the pack saddle and giving Bubbles an excuse for excitement, Stanley pronounced: Oh, to be young and fucking twice a day again.

He took notice of the considerable impact of this on me. 'Scuse my French, Jick. It's just a saying us old coots have.

Nonetheless it echoed around in me as I lugged the packs through the cabin door and stood them in a corner. By now thunder was applauding lightning higher up the mountain and the rain was arriving in earnest, my last couple of trips outside considerably damp. Stanley meanwhile was trying to inspire a fire in the rickety stove.

The accumulated chill in the cabin had us both shivering as we waited for the stove to produce some result.

Feel in here like it's gonna frost, I muttered.

Yeah, Stanley agreed. About a foot.

That delivered me a thought I didn't particularly want. What, ah, what if this turns to snow? I could see myself blizzarded in here for a week with this reprobate.

nor even glanced ahead any farther than his horse's ears; didn't even stir when we reached the boundary fence. In a hurry to get us into the cabin before the weather cut loose I hopped off Pony to open the gate.

My hand was just almost to the top wire hoop when there was a terrific yell:

GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!

I jumped back as if flung, looking around to see what had roused Stanley like that.

Go find a club and knock it open with that, he instructed. You happen to be touching that wire and lightning hits that fence, I'll have fried Jick for supper.

So I humored him, went off and found a sizable dead limb of jackpine and tapped the hoop up off the top of the gate stick with it and then used it to fling the gate ~~off~~ to one side the way you might flip a big snake. The hell of it was, I knew Stanley was out-and-out right. A time, lightning hit Ed Van Bebber's fence up the South Fork road from the English Creek station and the whole top wire melted for about fifty yards in either direction, dropping off in little chunks as if it'd been minced up by fencing pliers. I knew as well as anything not to touch a wire fence in a storm; why then had I damn near done it? All I can say in my own defense is that you just try going around with Stanley Meixell on your mind as much as he had been on mine since mid-morning, and see if you don't do one or another thing dumb.

I was resigned by now to what was in store for me at the cabin, so

the herder said more as observation than question. You can set up the tepee, regular goddamn canvas hotel. It only leaks a little where it's ripped in that one corner. Been meaning to sew the sonofabitch up.

Well, actually, no, said Stanley. This perked me up more than anything had in hours. Maybe there existed some fingernail of hope for Stanley after all. We got all that pack gear to keep dry, so we'll just go on over to that line cabin down on Spencer's school section. Fact is--Stanley here took the chance to shove away his still mutton-laden plate and get to his feet as if night was stampeding toward him--we better be getting ourselves over there if we're gonna beat dark. You ready, Jick?

Was I.

Spencer's line cabin stood just outside the eastern boundary of the forest, through a barbwire fence. We had ridden more than an hour to get there, the weather steadily heavier and grimmer all around us, and Stanley fairly grim himself, I guess from the mix of alcohol and mutton sludging around beneath his belt. Once when I glanced back to be sure I still had him I happened to see him make an awkward lob into the trees, that exaggerated high-armed way when you throw with your wrong hand. So he had finally run out of bottle, and at least I could look forward to an unpickled companion from here on. I hoped he wasn't the kind who came down with the DTs as he dried out.

The whole way from Canada Dan's sheepwagon he never said a word

Yeah, Stanley said slower than ever, and swallowed experimentally.

The report crossed my mind that I had just spent a couple of hours elbow-deep in dead sheep and now I was being expected to eat some of one, but I tried to keep it traveling. Time, as it's said, was the essence here. The only resource a person has against mutton is to eat it fast, before it has a chance for the tallow in it to congeal. So I poked mine into me pretty rapidly, and even so the last several bites were greasy going. Stanley by then wasn't much more than getting started.

While Canada Dan forked steadily through his meal and Stanley mussed around with his I finished off the hominy on the theory that anything you mixed into the digestive process with mutton was probably all to the good. Then I gazed out the dutch door of the sheepwagon while waiting on Stanley. The afternoon was going darker, a look of coming rain. My father more than likely was done by now with the counting of Dode Spencer's band. He would be on his way up to the Billy Peak lookout, and the big warm dry camp tent there, and the company of somebody other than Canada Dan or Stanley Meixell, and probably another supper of brookies. I hoped devoutly the rain already had started directly onto whatever piece of trail he might be riding just now.

Canada Dan meanwhile had rolled himself a cigarette and was filling the wagon with blue smoke while Stanley worked himself to the halfway point of his slab of mutton. Staying the night, ain't you?

side of it. Canada Dan as cook and host I knew would need to be nearest the stove and sit on a stool at the outside end of the table, so I slid into the seat opposite Stanley, going real careful because three people in a sheepwagon is about twice too many.

KEEYIPE! erupted from under my inmost foot, about the same instant my nose caught the distinctive smell of wet dog warming up.

Here now, what the hell kind of manners is that, walking on my dog? He does that again, Rags, you want to bite the notion right out of him. This must have been Canada Dan's idea of hilarity, for he laughed a little now in what I considered an egg-sucking way.

Or it may simply have been his pleasure over the meal he had concocted. Onto the table the herder plunked a metal plate with a boiled chunk of meat on it, then followed that with a stained pan of what looked like small moth balls.

Like I say, I figured you might finally show up today, so I fixed you a duke's choice of grub, he crowed. Get yourselves started with that hominy. Then, picking up a hefty butcher knife, Canada Dan slabbed off a thickness of the grayish greasy meat and toppled it aside. You even got your wide choice of meat. Here's mutton.

He sliced off another slab. Or then again here's growed-up lamb.

The butcher knife produced a third plank-thick piece. Or you can always have sheep meat.

Canada Dan divvied the slices onto our plates and concluded: A menu you don't get just everywhere, ain't it?

spoke out: Stanley!

Yeah, Jick? The brown Stetson turned most of the way in my direction. All the ways to say what I intended to competed in my mind. Stanley, this just isn't going to work out...Stanley, this deal was my father's brainstorm and not mine, I'm heading down that trail for home... Stanley, I'm not up to--to riding herd on you and doing the work of this wampus cat of a sheepherder and maybe getting wool poisoning and-- but when my mouth did move, I heard it mutter:

Nothing, I guess.

After wrestling the second consignment of pelts into shelter under Canada Dan's sheepwagon, I went up by the door to wash. Beside the basin on the chopping block lay a sliver of gray soap, which proved to be so coarse my skin nearly grated off along with the sheep blood and other mess. But I at least felt scoured fairly clean.

Is there a towel? I called into the sheepwagon with what I considered a fine tone of indignation in my voice.

The upper part of Canada Dan appeared at the dutch door. Right there in front of you, he pointed to a gunny sack hanging from a corner of the wagon. Your eyes bad?

I dried off as best I could on the ~~gunny~~ burlap sack, feeling now as if I'd been rasped from elbow to fingertip, and swung on into the sheepwagon. The table of this wagon was a square of wood about the size of a big checkerboard, which pulled out from under the bunk at the far end of the wagon and then was supported by a gate leg which folded down, and Stanley had tucked himself onto the seat on one

Canada Dan's estimate of fifteen dead ewes proved to be eighteen. Also I noticed that six of the pelts were branded with a bar above the number, signifying that the ewe was a mother of twins. Which summed out to the fact that besides the eighteen casualties, there were two dozen newly motherless lambs who would weigh light at shipping time.

This came to Stanley's attention too when he arrived back leading the pack mare and we--or rather I, because Stanley of course didn't have the hand for it and Canada Dan made no move toward the task whatsoever--slung the first load of pelts onto the pack saddle. Guess we know what all that lamb blatting's about, now, observed Stanley. Canada Dan didn't seem to hear this, either.

Instead he turned and was trudging rapidly across the slope toward his sheepwagon. He whistled the dog from his coat and sent him policing after a few ewes who had dared to stray out onto open grass, then yelled back over his shoulder to us: It's about belly time. C'mon to the wagon when you get those goddamn pelts under control, I got us a meal fixed.

I looked down at my hands and forearms, so filthy with blood and other sheep stuff I didn't even want to think about that I hated to touch the reins and saddlehorn to climb onto Pony. But I did climb on, for it was inevitable as if Bible-written that now I had to ride in with Stanley to the sheepwagon, unload these wet slimy pelts because he wasn't able, ride back out with him for the second batch, load them, ride back in and unload--seeing it all unfold I abruptly

pelts at least would bring a dollar apiece for the Busby brothers and a dollar then was still worth holding in your hand. But that it was necessary did not make it any less snotty a job. I don't know whether you have ever skinned a sheep which has lain dead in the rain for a few days, but the clammy wet wool adds into the situation the possibility of wool poisoning, so that the thought of puffed painful hands accompanies all your handling of the pelt. That and a whole lot else on my mind, I slit and slit and slit, tugging pelt off bloated belly and stiffened legs. I started off careful not to work fast, in the hope that Canada Dan would slice right along and thereby skin the majority of the carcasses. It of course turned out that his strategy was identical and that he had had countless more years of practice at being slow than I did. In other circumstances I might even have admired the drama in the way he would stop often, straighten up to ease what he told me several times was the world's worst crick in his back, and contemplate my scalpel technique skeptically before finally bending back to his own. Out of his experience my father always testified that he'd rather work any day with sheepherders rather than cowboys. You might come across a herder that's loony now and then, but at least they aren't so apt to be such self-inflated sonsabitches. Right about now I wondered about that choice. If Canada Dan was representative, sheepherders didn't seem to be any bargains of companionability either.

Finally I gave up on trying to outslow Canada Dan and went at the skinning quick as I could, to get it over with.

can stand all the help I can get.

Stanley did take the chance to get a shot in on him. You been too occupied the past three days to get to them, I guess? But it bounced off Canada Dan like a berry off a buffalo.

We all three looked at the sheep for awhile. There's not all that much conversation to be made about bloated sheep carcasses. After a bit, though, Canada Dan offered in a grim satisfied way: That'll teach the goddamn buggers to eat deathcamas.

Well, Stanley expounded next. There's no such thing as one-handed skinning. Which doubled the sense of dread in me. I thought to myself, But there is one-handed tipping of a bottle, and one-handed dragging me into this campjack expedition, and one-handed weaseling out of what was impending here next and...All this while, Stanley was looking off in some direction carefully away from me. I can be unloading the grub into Dan's wagon while this goes on, then come back with the mare so we can lug these pelts in. Guess I ought to get at it.

Stanley reined away, leading the pack horses toward the sheepwagon, and Canada Dan beaded on me. Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid. Plenty of these goddamn pelters for both of us.

So for the next long while I was delving in ewe carcasses, slicing the hides loose around the hooves and then down the legs and around the milk bag and at last the big incision along the belly which, if your jackknife slipped just a little bit, would bring the guts pouring out all over your project. It had to be done, because the

gonna regret charity when he sees the goddamn chore we got for ourselves up here.

What would that be, Dan?

About fifteen head of goddamn dead ones, that's what. They got onto some deathcamas, maybe three days back. Poisoned themselves before you could say sic 'em. Canada Dan reported all this as if he was an accidental passerby instead of being responsible for these animals. Former animals, they were now.

That's a bunch of casualties, Stanley agreed. I didn't happen to notice the pelts anywhere there at the wag--

Happened right up over here, Canada Dan went on as if he hadn't heard, gesturing to the ridge close behind him. Just glommed onto that deathcamas like it was goddamn candy. C'mon here, I'll show you. The herder shrugged out of his coat, tossed it down on the grass, pointed to it and instructed his dog: Stay, Rags. The dog came and lay on the coat, facing the sheep, and Canada Dan trudged up the ridge without ever glancing back at the dog or us.

I began to dread the way this was trending.

The place Canada Dan led us to was a pocket meadow of bunch grass interspersed with pretty white blossoms and with gray mounds here and there on it. The blossoms were deathcamas, and the mounds were the dead ewes. Even as cool as the weather had been they were bloated almost to bursting.

That's them, the herder identified for our benefit. It's sure convenient of you fellows to show up. All that goddamn skinning, I

Canada Dan's sheep were bunched in a long thick line against a stand of jackpine. A lot of blatting was going on, as if there was an uneasiness among them. A sheepherder who knows what he is doing in timber probably is good in open country too, but vice versa is not necessarily the case, and I remembered my father mentioning that Canada Dan had been herding over by Cut Bank, plains country. A herder new to timber terrain and skittish about it will dog the bejesus out of his sheep, keep the band tight together for fear of losing some. As we rode up, Canada Dan's patch-marked sheepdog looked weary, panting, and I saw Stanley study considerably the way these sheep were crammed along the slope.

Been looking for you since day before yesterday, Canada Dan greeted us. I'm goddamn near out of canned milk.

That so? said Stanley. Lucky thing near isn't the same as out.

Canada Dan was looking me up and down now. You that ranger's kid?

I didn't care for the way that was put, and just said back: Jick McCaskill. Too, I was wondering how many more times that day I was going to need to identify myself to people I'd had no farthest intention of getting involved with.

Canada Dan targeted on Stanley again. Got to bring a kid along to play nursemaid for you now, Stanley? Must be getting on in years.

I bunged up my hand, Stanley responded shortly. Jick's been generous enough to pitch in with me.

Canada Dan shook his head as if my sanity was at issue. He's

on that mountain those years ago, all I could think was that I had on my hands the two worst of such representations, a behind-the-bush bottle-tipper and a knotheaded packhorse.

But she tell him no luck,
the price is another buck,
a banjo don't woo a screw.

I spent a strong hour being furious with my father before it occurred to me to wonder just how he ought to have alerted me to Stanley's condition. Cleared his throat and announced, Stanley, excuse us but Jick and I got something to discuss over here in the jackpines, we'll be right back? Worked his way behind Stanley and pantomimed to me a swig from a bottle? Neither of those seemed what could be called etiquette, and that left me with the perturbing suggestion that maybe it'd been up to me to see the situation for myself. Which gave me another hour or so of heavy chewing, trying to figure out how I was supposed to follow events that sprung themselves on me from nowhere. How do you brace for that, whatever age you are?

I go to see Lucy,

to play with her poosy.

Lucy take my dollar away.

When Stanley drew even with me I still couldn't see much of his eyes under the brim of the pulled-down hat, although I was studying pretty hard this time.

Yessir, Stanley announced as the sorrel stopped, great day for the race, ain't it?

The race? I gaped.

The human race. Stanley pivoted in his saddle--a little unsteadily, I thought--enough to scan at the black pack mare and then the gray one. He got a white-eyed glower in return from the gray. Bubbles there is still in kind of an owly mood. Mad because he managed to only kick my hand instead of my head, probably ~~maybe~~. You're doing fine up ahead, Jick, I'll wander along behind while Bubbles works on his sulking.

There was nothing for it but head up the trail again. At least now I knew for sure what my situation was. If there lingered any last least iota of doubt, Stanley's continued disappearances and his ongoing croon dispatched it.

My brother is Sancho,

he try with a banjo

to coax Lucy to woo.

I have long thought that the two commonest afflictions in Montana--it may be true everywhere, but then I haven't been everywhere--are drink and orneriness. True, my attitude has thawed somewhat since I have become old enough to indulge in the pair myself now and again. But back there

on this grand tour of sheepherders. Which camp do we head for first? I called ahead to him.

Canada Dan's, he's the furthest south. If we sift right along for the next couple hours or so we'll be there.

It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes after we left my father, though, when Stanley reined his horse off the trail into a little clearing and the packhorses followed. When I rode up alongside, he said: I got to go visit a tree. You keep on ahead, Jick. I'll catch right up.

I had the trail to myself for the next some minutes. Just when I was about to rein around and see what had become of Stanley, the white of the sorrel's blaze flashed into sight. Be right there, Stanley called, motioning me to ride on.

But he caught up awfully gradually, and in fact must have made a second stop when I went out of sight around a switchback. I began to wonder a bit. Not only had I been volunteered into this expedition by somebody other than myself, I sure as the devil had not signed on to lead it. So this time, I was determined to wait until Stanley was up with me. And as I sat there on Pony, firmly paused, I began to hear him long before I could see him.

My name, she is Pancho,
I work on a rancho.
I make a dollar a day.

Stanley's singing voice surprised me, a clearer, younger tone than his raspy talk.

So did his song.

Even I was able to translate that. What was my father going to face from my mother for sending me off camptending into the mountains with Stanley for a number of days?

Sure, my father said, as if doubt wasn't worth wrinkling the brain for. Bring him back when he's dried out behind the ears.

Well, then. The brown Stetson tipped up maybe two inches, and Stanley swung a slow look around at the pines and the trail and the mountainslope as if this was a site he might want to remember. I guess we ought to be getting. Got everything you need, Jick?

I had no idea in hell what I needed for going off into the Rocky Mountains with a one-handed campjack, but I managed to blurt: I guess so.

Stanley delivered my father the longest gaze he had yet. See you in church, Mac, he said, then nudged the sorrel into motion.

The black packhorse and the light gray ugly one had passed us by the time I swung onto Pony, and my father was standing with his thumbs in his pockets, looking at the series of three horse rumps and the back of Stanley Meixell, as I reined around onto the trail. I stopped beside him long enough to see if he was going offer any explanation, or instructions, or edification of ~~any~~ damn sort at all. His face said he wasn't.

Don't forget the day book, I muttered as I rode past him.

Thanks for reminding me, my father said poker-faced. I'll give it my utmost.

The Busby brothers, I knew, ran three bands of sheep on their forest allotment, which stretched north of us from the north fork of English Creek. Stanley had slowed beyond the first bend of the trail for me to catch up, or maybe to make sure I actually was coming along

something he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set to remind him of our appointment with Dode Spencer's sheep when he added on: Jick here could maybe ride along with you.

I hope I didn't show the total of surprise I felt. Some must have lopped over, though, because Stanley promptly enough was saying: Aw, no, Mac. Jick's got better things to do than haze me along.

Think about morning, my father came back at him. Those packs and knots are gonna be several kinds of hell, unless you're more left-handed than you've ever shown.

Aw, no. I'll be out a couple or three days, you know. Longer if any of those herders have got trouble.

Jick's been out that long with me any number of times. And your cooking's bound to be better for him than mine.

Well, Stanley began, and stopped. He seemed to be considering. Matters were passing me by before I could even see them coming.

I will always credit Stanley Meixell for putting the next two questions in the order he did.

It ought to be up to Jick. Stanley looked directly down at me. How do you feel about playing nursemaid to somebody so goddamn dumb as to get himself kicked?

The corner of my eye told me my father suggested a pretty enthusiastic response to any of this.

Oh, I feel fine about--I mean, sure, Stanley. I could, uh, ride along. If you really want. Yeah.

Stanley looked down at my father now. Mac, you double sure it'd be okay?

It took me a blink or two to realize that although he said it in my direction, the query was intended for Stanley. I saw then that a handkerchief was wrapped around the back of Stanley's right hand, and that he was resting that hand on the saddle horn with his left hand atop it, the reverse of usual procedure there. Also, as much of the handkerchief as I could see had started off white but now showed stains like dark rust.

You know how it is, that Bubbles cayuse--Stanley tossed a look over his shoulder to the gray packhorse--was kind of snakey this morning. Tried to kick me into next week. Took some skin off, is all.

We all contemplated Bubbles. As horses go, he looked capable not just of assault, but maybe pillage and plunder and probably arson too. He was ewe-necked, and accented that feature by stretching stubbornly against the lead rope even now that he was standing still. The constellation of dark nose-spots which must have given him his name--at least I couldn't see anything else nameable about him--drew a person's look, but if you happened to glance beyond them, you saw that Bubbles was peering back at you as if he'd like to be standing on your spine. How such creatures get into pack strings, I just don't know. I suppose the same way Good Help Hebners get into the human race.

I don't remember you as having much hide to spare, my father said then to Stanley. Then, as if the idea had just strolled up to him out of the trees: How'd you like some company? I imagine it's no special fun running a packstring one-handed.

Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about

almost in two parts: yeh-uh. And his voice sounded huskier than it ought to, as if a rasp had been used across the top of it. Yeah, these times, I guess being campjack is better than no jack at all. Protocol was back to him now. He asked my father, Counting them onto the range, are you?

Withrow's band yesterday, and ~~Dede~~ Les Spencer's today.

Quite a year for feed up here. This's been a million dollar rain, ain't it? Brought the grass up ass-high to a tall Indian. Though I'm getting to where I could stand a little sunshine to thaw out with, myself.

Probably have enough to melt you, my father predicted, soon enough.

Could be. Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just noticing that it continued on from where we stood. Could be, he repeated. Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father, and it began to come through to me that this conversation was seriously kinked in some way. These two men had not seen each other for the larger part of ten years, so why didn't they have anything to say to one another besides this small-change talk about weather and grass? And already were running out of that?

Finally my father offered: Want some peaches? A few in here we haven't stabbed dead yet.

Naw, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have sheepherders after my hide. Yet Stanley did not quite go into motion; seemed, somehow, to be storing up one last look at the pair of us.

My father fished out another peach slice and handed me the can to finish. Along with it came his casual question, What was it you did to your hand?

or nine years since we had last seen him I couldn't have told you anything whatsoever. So it was odd how much immediately arrived back to mind about this unexpected man.

Jick, I clarified. 'Lo, Stanley.

It was my father's turn to pick up the conversation. Heard you were gonna be campjack for the Busby boys.

Yeah. Stanley's yeah was that Missourian slowed-down kind,

Brownie/Homer

horses sharp in interest at us and Pony and Homer, and Mouse. The rider showed no attention until he was right up to us. Then, though I didn't see him do anything with the reins, the sorrel stopped and the Stetson veered half out over the slickered shoulder nearest us.

Hullo, Mac.

Thought it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?

Still able to sit up and take nourishment. Hullo, Alec or Jick, as the case may be.

I hadn't seen him since I was five or six years old, yet right then I could ~~have told~~ counted off to you a number of matters about Stanley Meixell. That he was taller than he looked on that sorrel, built in the riderly way of length mostly from his hips down. That he had once been an occasional presence at our meals, stooping first over the wash basin for a cleanse that included the back of his neck, and then slicking back his hair--I could have said too that it was crow-black and started from a widow's peak--before coming to the table. That unlike a lot of people he did not talk down to children, never delivered them that phony guff such as Think you'll ever amount to anything? That, instead, he once set Alec and me to giggling to the point where my mother threatened to send us from the table, when he solemnly told us that where he came from they called milk moo juice and eggs cackleberries and molasses long-tailed sugar. Yet of his eight

reason to venture down off the back of a horse. Not much of his face showed between the buttoned-up slicker and the pulled-down brown Stetson, but thinking back on it now, I am fairly sure that my father at once recognized both the horseman and the situation.

The brief packstring climbed steadily to us, the ears of the

Out like this, my father tended to suryive on whatever jumped out of the food pack first. He did have the principle that supper needed to be a cooked meal, especially if it could be trout. But as for the rest of the day, he was likely to offer up as breakfast a couple of slices of headcheese and a can of tomatoes or green beans, and if you didn't watch him he might do the exact same again for lunch. My mother consequently always made us up enough slab sandwiches for three days' worth of lunches. Of course, by the ~~third~~ second noon in that high air the bread was about dry enough to strike a match on, but still a better bet than whatever my father was apt to concoct.

We had eaten an applebutter sandwich and a half apiece and were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when Mouse suddenly snorted. My father stepped backward the three or four paces until he was beside the scabbard on Mouse, with the 30.06 in it. That time of year in the Two, the thought was automatic in anybody who at all knew what he was doing: look around for bears, for they are coming out of hibernation cantankerous.

What Mouse was signaling, however, proved to be a rider appearing at the bend of the trail downhill from us. He was on a blaze-face sorrel, who in turn snorted at the sight of us. A black pack mare followed into sight, then a light gray with spots on his nose and his neck stretched out and his lead rope taut.

Somebody's new camptender, must be, my father said.

The rider sat in his saddle that permanent way a lot of those old-timers did, as if he lived up there and couldn't imagine sufficient

That breakfast incident rankled a little even after we saddled up and resumed the ride toward the counting vee where we were to meet Dode Spencer's sheep at around noon. Nor did the weather help any. Clouds closed off the peaks of the mountains, and while it wasn't raining yet, the air ~~dimply~~ promised that it intended to. One of those days too clammy to go without a slicker coat and too muggy to wear one in comfort.

We were about two-thirds of our way, up where the trail crosses the side of Feather Woman Mountain and the north fork of English Creek hides itself in a timber canyon below, when evidently my father figured both the day and I could stand some brightening. He turned atop Mouse and called to me: How's an early lunch sound to you?

Suits me, I of course assured him.

I believe I was about three, maybe four, when my father was assigned to English Creek and we came back up here. Alec said he remembered a little about the couple of Copperopolis years and the intervening year when my father was at Region One headquarters in Missoula, but I don't at all. The Two is the footing of my memory. Literally, for the earliest recall I have is of the Meriwether Peak fire. The commotion that swept through the English Creek station then is in my mind as a kind of album of scenes, trucks and cars bringing loads of men, and then the line of them through ~~our~~ the kitchen, stoking up on and next, my mother's food, ~~in the~~ and next, the sight of them all hiking off in long file up the north fork trail. Right after them, packstrings on their way past, which must have been my first sight of Isidor and Gabe Pronovost although I ~~didn't know~~ of course didn't realize that at the time. The smoke clouded the west for I don't know how many days.

more

pondering that I find myself doing now: whether some other name would have shifted my life any. Yet, of what I might change, I keep deciding that that would not be among the first.

Nobody ever openly said so, but the circumstances plainly declare that it was my coming that sent my father into the Forest Service. He and my mother and Alec maybe could have gotten by as they were, but a family of four was too much to balance on an association rider's pay. As I say, I was born here in the Two country, on the old Ramsay [redacted] homestead which had become part of my grandfather Isaac Reese's ranch--which has always allowed me to brag that I came into the world in a homestead shack, though the Ramsay place actually had a fairly substantial house. Anyway, within three months after my advent, my father took and passed the ranger's exam and was assigned down in the Big Belt mountains more than a hundred miles to the south, to the station on Copperopolis Creek. Or as my mother dubbed that first Forest Service abode of ours, Awfulopolis. When Mac opened the door of the station a mouse nest fell down onto the brim of his Stetson. The place was a sty. Ceiling paper hung down in shreds, the greenblinds on the windows were spotted with flies that'd got mashed when the blinds rolled up. Everywhere the floor was thick with dirt and mouse droppings. They say every Forest Service wife gives her first cabin its first floor-washing with soapy water and tears. I never was much for tears, but I used soapy water on that Copperopolis station until it nearly floated.

About my name. John Angus McCaskill, I was christened. As soon as I began at the South Fork school, though, and gained a comprehension of what had been done to me, I put away that Angus for good. I have thought ever since that using a middle name is like having a third nostril.

I hadn't considered this before, but by then the John must already have been amended out of all recognition, too. At least I can find no memory of ever being called that, so the change must have happened pretty early in life. According to my mother it next became plain that "Johnnie" didn't fit the boy I was, either. Somehow it just seemed like calling rhubarb vanilla, and she may or may not have been making a joke. With her you couldn't always tell. Anyhow, the family story goes on that she and my father were trying me out as "Jack" when some visitor, noticing that I was fair-complected but didn't have the freckles they and Alec all did, said something like: He looks to me more like the jick of this family.

So I got dubbed for the off-card. For the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps. That is to say, in a game such as pitch, if spades are led the jack of clubs becomes the jick, and in the taking of tricks the abiding rule is that jack takes jick but jick takes joker. I explain this a bit because I am constantly astonished by how many people, even here in Montana, no longer can play a decent hand of cards. I believe television has got just a hell of a lot to answer for.

Anyway, Jick I became, and have ever been. That is part of the

If I was a believer in omens, the start of that next morning ought to have told me something.

The rigamarole of untangling out of our bedrolls and getting the campfire going and making sure the horses hadn't quit the country during the night, all that went usual enough. Then, though, my father glanced around at me from where he had the coffee pot heating over a corner of the fire and asked: Ready for a cup, Alec?

Well, that will happen in a family. ~~A moment~~ an instant of absent-mindedness, or the tongue just slipping a cog from what was intended. Ordinarily ~~it~~ being miscalled wouldn't have riled me at all. But all this recent business about Alec, and my own wondering about where anybody in this family stood any more, and I don't know what ~~all~~ the hell else--it now brought a response which scraped out of me like flint: I'm the other one.

Surprise passed over my father; then I guess what is called contrition.

You sure as hell are, he ~~said~~ agreed in a low voice. Unmistakably Jick.

own almanac, you might say. That being true, our specific chunk of the Rockies, the Two country, seemed to us a special gold-leaf edition: positioned as it was along the east slope of the divide of the continent, its water and welfare touching out to the plains. In spring, with the Two opening itself in newness and promise wherever you happened to glance, I believe that my father could not imagine any better neighborhood of the planet.

And finally summer. Well, we were embarking on summer now, and how it would turn out I truly could not imagine. Nor did it come any clearer to me in that span of time from supper until my father said <u>See you in sunshine</u> and we both turned in.

possible add?

Spring can be an awful flop in this country. Other seasons let you down by behaving differently from what you expect of them. Summer too rainy or too dry for good haying. Autumn too brief or too cold. Winter one blizzard after another... But spring can exasperate you just by being itself. Weeks of mud, every step outdoors taken in overshoes weighted with the stuff. Weather warm enough to make you shed a winter coat and cool enough to chill you into a cold.

situation, but some.

Spring is the uneven season on the Two. You can't ever be sure when it's going to arrive, then if it happens to, whether it's going to stay beyond the next twenty minutes. More than a few times I have known mid-May snowfalls, the damp heavy ones, to blanket this country, and I see in my father's day book that this particular year, the record wetness of May included one of those bread dough snows, on the weekend of the 20th and 21st. That these spring snowstorms are perilous to the lambs and calves but also are ~~magnificent~~ wonderful grass-bringers is your usual Montana situation of on the one hand this, on the other hand that. (I sometimes think if a person had third and fourth hands, there'd damn soon be some other hard Montana proposition on those, too.) Anyway, my father seemed to green up with the country each spring. Paperwork he had put off all winter would get tackled and disposed of. All of the gear of the English Creek station got a going-over, saddles, bridles, pack saddles, fire equipment. And from the first moment that charitably might be classified as spring, he read the mountains. Watched the snow hem along the peaks, judging how fast the drifts were melting. Cast a glance to English Creek various times of each day, to see how high it was running. Kept mental tally of the wildlife, when the deer started back up into the mountains, when the fur of the weasel turned from white to ~~gray~~ brown, how soon the first fresh pile of coal-black crap in the middle of a trail showed that bears were out of hibernation. To my father, and through him to the rest of us in the family, the mountains were their

of year when he could assess his job, see right there on the hoof the results of his rangering. In a man who sometimes seemed doubtful whether his life totted up to what it should, that must have been a necessary inventory season, autumn.

He never wintered well. Came down with colds, sieges of hacking and sniffling, strange fissures in a man of his size and strength. Had it not been for the trapping he tutored Alec and me in, he might have gone through all those winter months--which in Montana could amount to five or six--like someone you would think was a permanent pneumonia candidate. The trapping, though, was an excuse to defy the season and put in hours outdoors (as well as being a way to add to the family income, which never was too much). At that time there were still plenty of beaver in English Creek. Too many, in the view of the ranchers who would find their meadows flooded. And weasels were a considerable creek population, too, and occasional mink. My father never said so--again, not what you'd expect, because otherwise he seldom minded talking--but the way a trapped animal dies must have bothered him. However many gnawed-off feet it had taken to persuade him, by the time he was teaching Alec and me he insisted that we set spring poles on at least the weasel traps; beaver of course ~~were~~ are trapped at their hutches, in such a way that they drown promptly. With a spring pole, the weasel or mink would be snapped off the ground and hung into the air to freeze to death within an hour or so, rather than fighting the trap for days or gnawing its own foot off. I suppose that my father's view was that a spring pole was not much mercy in a cruel

So the day was summed and we had dined on trout and the campfire was warmth and light against the night, and we had nothing that needed doing except to contemplate until sleep overcame us. My thoughts circled among Alec and my mother and my father--somewhat onto Leona, too--and what had happened last night. But mostly, I suppose because he was there next to me in the firelight, it was my father at the center of my mulling.

I am hard put to know how to describe him as he seemed to me then. How to lay him onto paper, for a map is never the country itself, only some ink suggesting the way to get there. Season somehow seems to bring out more about him than sketchwork does, and so I believe that to come close to any understanding of Varick McCaskill you would have to spend a full year at his side--

Despite what the calendar indicates, autumn was the onset, or threshhold you could say, of a McCaskill year. The Two Medicine National Forest got reworked by my father each autumn almost as if making sure to himself that he still had all of that zone of geography. Of course every ranger is supposed to inspect the conditions of his forest at the end of the grazing season. My father all but X-rayed the Two. South Fork and North Fork, up under the reefs, in beyond Heart Butte, day after day he delved the Two. And somehow too when the bands of sheep trailed down and streamed toward the railroad chutes at Blackfoot or Pendroy, he was on hand there to look them over, talk with the herders, the ranchers, the lamb buyers, join in the jackpot bets about how much the lambs would weigh. I suppose it was the time

When I became big enough to go into the mountains with him for some days at a time, my father perceived relief for his day book situation. I think we had not gone a mile along the trail above the North Fork that first morning when he reined up, said Whyn't you kind of keep track of today for me? and presented me a fresh-sharpened stub pencil and a pocket notebook.

It did take a little doing to catch onto my father's style. But after those first days of my reporting into my notebook in the manner of We met up with Dill Egan on the south side of Noon Creek and talked with him about whether he can get a bigger allotment to run ten more steers on and my father squashing it down in his day book to Saw D. Egan about steer proposition, I adjusted.

By now I was veteran enough that the day came readily to the tip of my pencil. Patroled--another principle some early ranger had taught my father was that if you so much as left the station to go to the outhouse, you had patroled--Patroled the n. fork of English Creek. Counted L. Withrow's sheep onto allotment. Commenced packing bolts, and flanges and cable to Billy Peak lookout site.

My father read it over and nodded. Change that "bolts and flanges and cable" just to "gear." You don't want to be any more definite than necessary where regional headquarters is concerned. But otherwise it reads like the very Bible.

The day book constituted my father's worst bother about being a ranger. Early on, someone told him the story of a rider-turned-ranger down on the Shoshone forest. Cut short my horses tail and the wind blew all day, read the fellow's first day book entry. Then with further thought, he concluded: From the northeast. My father could swallow advice if he had to, and so he did what he could with the perpetual nag of having to jot his activities into the day book. When he did it was entirely another matter. Two or three weeks he would stay dutiful, then came a Saturday morning when he had seven little yellow blank pages to show for his week, and the filling in would start.

Beth, what'd I do on Tuesday? That the day it rained and I worked over the horse stalls?

That was Wednesday. Tuesday you rode up to look over the Noon Creek range.

I thought that was Thursday.

You can think so if you like, but you'd be wrong. My mother was careful to seem half-exasperated about these scriving sessions, but I think she looked forward to the chance to set my father straight on history, even if it was only the past week's. Thursday I baked, and you took a rhubarb pie for the Bowens when you went to the Ear Mountain station. Not that Louise Bowen is capable of recognizing a pie.

Well, then, when I rode to the Billy Peak lookout, that was--only yesterday? Friday?

Today is Saturday, yesterday most likely was Friday, my mother was glad to confirm for him.

The fish in fact began to prove that, right then. I do make the concession to sportsmanship that I'll fish a riffle once in a while, even though it demands some attention to casting instead of just plunking into the stream, and so it pleased me a little that in the next half hour or so I pulled my ten fish out of bumpy water, while at the pool he'd chosen to work over my father took some minutes longer to complete his catch.

Those little brookies, Eastern brook trout about eight inches long, are among the best eating there can be. You begin to taste them as quick as they hit the frying pan and go into their curl. Brown them up and take them in your fingers and eat them like corn on the cob, and you wish you had capacity for a hundred of them.

When we'd devoured five or so brookies apiece, we slowed down enough to share out a can of pork and beans, then resumed on the last half of our fish fry.

That hold you? my father asked when we were out of trout. I bobbed that I guessed it would, and while he went to the creek to scour the frying pan and rinse off our plates, I set to work composing the day book entry.

Carol read to here in Feb. X

Supper's in the creek, my father advised. Hide behind a tree to bait your hook or they'll swarm right out of the water after you.

Up here on its north fork English Creek didn't amount to much. Most places you could cross it in a running jump. But the stream was headed down out of the mountains in a hurry and so had some pretty riffles and every now and again a pool like a big wide stairstep of glass. If fish weren't in one of those waters, they were in the other.

Each of us took our hat off and unwound the fishline and hook wrapped around the hatband. On our way up, before the willows gave out we'd cut a pair of decent length, and now notched them about an inch from the small end, tied each fishline snug into each notch so it couldn't pull off, and were ready to talk business with those fish.

My father still had a reputation in the Forest Service from the time some Forest Service muckymuck who was quite a dry-fly fisherman asked him what these English Creek trout took best. Those guys of course have a whole catechism of hackles and muddlers and goofus bugs and stone flies and nymphs and midges. Chicken guts, my father informed him.

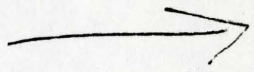
We didn't happen to have any of those along with us, but just before leaving home we'd gone to the old haystack bottom near the barn and dug ourselves each a tobacco can of angleworms. Why in holy hell anyone thinks a fish would prefer a dab of hair to something as plump as a stack-bottom worm, I never have understood the reasoning of.

By the time Dode declared he had to head down the mountain toward home, I actually was looking forward to the rest of the counting trip again. For I knew that tomorrow's sheep were Les Spencer's, farther up in the mountains, and after that would come the interesting prospect of the new Billy Peak lookout tower. It was on my mind, too, that on our way to that pair of attractions, we would spend tonight at a camping spot along the North Fork which my father and I--and yes, Alec in years past--always referred to as the Fulton Fish Market.

named by Bob Marshall

By just before dusk the two of us were there, and Mouse and Pony and Homer were unsaddled and tethered on good grass, and camp was established. It seemed to me time to get down to the important matter, so I suggested:

Suppose we ought to give some thought to the menu?



more weather lit 7. on ftn

— I hear nature calling, Dode now was excusing himself. He headed off not toward the timber, though, but to a rock outcropping about forty roughly as big and high as a one-story house. When Dode yards away that angled up out of the ground like climbed up onto that I figured I had misunderstood his mission, he evidently was clambering up there to look along the mountain and check on Sam's progress with the sheep. But no, he proceeded to do that and the other too, gazing off up the mountain slope as he unbuttoned and peed. Do you know, even as I say this I again see him in every particular. His left hand resting on his hip and the arm and elbow kinked out like the handle on a coffee cup. His hat tilted back at an inquiring angle. He looked composed as a statue up there, if you can imagine heroic stone spraddled out in commemoration of that particular human function.

flanged

My father and I grinned until our faces almost split. There is only one Dode, he said. Then he cupped his hands and called out in a concerned tone: Dode, I hope you've got a good foothold up there. Because you sure don't have all that much of a handhold.

#—

it now could have been Dode standing there wearing the pine tree badge and my father in possession of a sheep ranch. Their friendship actually went back to before either of them had what could be called a career, to when they both were bronc punks, youngsters riding in Dill Egan's father's big round corral at Noon Creek every summer Sunday. My father loved to tell that Dode earned a lasting reputation the Sunday he showed up wearing a new pair of corduroy pants with leather trim--Dode could be a dressy guy whenever there was an occasion--and found everybody gathered around a stranger from Fort Benton. The stranger, it turned out, possessed a bucking steer, and the standing wager that nobody could stay aboard him for a total of five minutes within a half-hour span. Dode snapped up the offer and then, getting a closer look at the animal, began to realize what he was in for. He strapped and tied on his saddle in every direction he could think of, got into the stirrups, and had the handlers turn the two of them loose. Before the half hour was up, the steer had scraped and split Dode's fancy corduroy pants to tatters, and he would need to borrow something to go home in. But he also had totaled, between spills and remounts, five minutes on the steer's back. Anybody can be a bareback rider, my father always concluded in telling the corduroy pants story, but it took Dode to ride barebutt.

pound, highest in years, encouragement that could ~~almost~~ goddamn near make a man ~~consider~~ think about staying in the sheep business, and that Dode himself didn't intend to shear until around the end of the month unless ~~it~~ the weather turned christly hot, and that--

I put myself against a tree and enjoyed the ~~look~~ sight and sound of the two of them. All the English Creek sheepmen and my father generally got along like hand and glove, but Dode was special beyond that. I suppose it could be said ~~they~~ that he and my father were out of the same ~~mould~~ brin at least it doesn't stretch my imagination much to think that if circumstances had ~~been a bi~~ changed sides when they were young,

while to swap talk. What's new with Uncle Sam? he inquired.

Roosevelt doesn't tell me quite everything, understand, my father responded. We are going modern, though. It has only taken about half of my goddamn life, but maybe by the Fourth of July the Billy Peak lookout will be done. This forest will finally have a fire tower everywhere it ought to have one. Naturally it's happening during a summer when the forest is more apt to float away than burn down, but anyway... Dode was a compact rugged-face guy, whose listening grin featured a gap where the sharp tooth just to the left of his front teeth was missing, knocked out in some accident or another. A Dode tale was that when he and Midge were about to be married he told her that he intended to really dude up for the wedding, even planned to stick a navy bean in the tooth gap. But if Dode looked and acted as if he always was ready to take on life headfirst, he also was one of those rare ones who could listen as earnestly as he could talk. Then it was Dode's turn to report, and my father just as keenly welcomed in his information that down on the Musselshell a wool consignment of thirty thousand fleeces had gone for 22 cents a

Bouncing Betty got up and came over to me and said, "Withrow, I think you need some fun. On the house. We'll make it up out of ~~Pete's~~ Sam's next wages." I thought about how I'd been leaning there two-thirds of the night watching all this disgusting stuff, and I thought to myself, "By God, she is about a hundred percent right. I think Withrow DOES need some fun." Right then, wouldn't you just know, in the door comes goddamn ~~Pete~~ Sammy. "You looking for me?" he says. "I'm ready, let's head on home."

#

You can see how being around Dode and Sam lifted our dispositions. When the count was done and we had helped Sam start the sheep on up toward the range he would summer them on--the ewes and lambs already browsing, taking their first of however many million nibbles of grass would ensue on the Two between then and September--Dode stayed on with us a little

another one just before lambing time, go down to Great Falls and get all bent out of shape. He's got his pattern down real pat. The Star Cigar Store, Lena's place, he makes his headquarters, and for the first week he drinks whiskey and his women are pretty good lookers. The next week or so he's mostly on beer and his women are getting a little shabby. Then for about two weeks after that he's on straight wine and squaws. Generally it took ~~Lee~~ Dode three or four trips to Great Falls to fish ~~Pete~~ Sam out of a spree. I'll get there to Lena's and track him down and sober him up a little and have him all lined out to bring home, and he'll say, "Oh hell, I about forgot, I gotta have ten dollars to go pay a fellow." Then he takes off with that ten and that's the last I see of him. I wish to hell I had a nickel for every hour I've spent leaning up against the cigar counter in that joint, trying to wait that bugger out. Jesus, one time I never will forget, I drove down there just bound and determined to get him back on the job, and I went into the Star, and no ~~Pete.~~ Sam Lena told me, "He's around here somewhere, Withrow, you just wait, he'll blow in here." So I waited. And waited. Leaning a hole into that goddamn counter. The bar was full of guys, it'd been railroad payday, and Lena's whores were working the crowd, Big Tit Lou and Bouncing Betty and Nora Buffalo and some others. Bouncing Betty had the first table, right in front of me, and she'd smile like a million dollars at everybody who came in. And all the time those gandy dancers were getting more and more boozed up. The place sounded like Hell changing shifts.

(no 41) So I stood there and stood there and stood there. Taking it all in, passing the time by thinking to myself what a sap I was. Finally

instructions, when I first began going into the mountains with him on counting trips, not to get too affectionate with any herder's dog, simply stroke them a time or two if they nuzzled me and let it go at that. Taffy came over now to see if I had any stray praise to offer, and I just said You're a dog and a half, Taffy.

Grass gets much higher up here, Jick, I'm liable to lose Taffy in it, Sam called over to me. You ever see such a jungle of a year?

No, I confessed, and we made conversation for a bit about the summer's prospects. Sam Hoy was a true grassaroo--knew how to graze sheep as if the grass was his own sustenance as well as theirs. No herder in all of the Two country was more highly prized than Sam the ten months of the year when he stayed sober and behind the sheep, and because this was so, Dode ~~Jos~~ put up with what was necessary to hang onto him. That is, put up with the fact that some random ~~given~~ number of times a year Sam would proclaim to him: I quit, goshdammit, I quit. Dode ~~Jos~~ knew that only two of those proclamations ever meant anything. The sonofagun has to have a binge after the lambs are shipped and then

after the cottoncake. As they snooped forward on the trail of more, they led other sheep out the gate and started the count. You could put sheep ~~up Mount Everest~~ through the eye of a needle if you once got the first ones going so that the others could turn off their brains and follow.

My job was at the rear of the sheep with the herder, to keep them pushing through the counting hole and to see that none circled around after they'd been through the vee and got tallied twice--or, had this been Ed Van Bebber's band, I would have been back there to see that his herder, on instructions from Ed, didn't spill some sheep around the wing of the corral while the count was going on, so that they missed being tallied into the allotment. But since these were Dode's sheep with Sam Hoy on hand at the back of them, I had little to add to the enterprise of the moment. I always watched ~~Pete~~ Sam all I could without seeming to stare to try learn how he mastered those woolies as he did. Someway, he was able just to look ewes into behaving better than they had in mind. One old independent biddy or another would step out, size up her chance of breaking past ~~Pete~~ Sam, figure out who she was facing and then shy off back into the rest of the bunch. This of course didn't work with lambs--who have no more predictability to them than ~~chickens~~ hens in a hurricane--but in their case, all ~~Pete~~ Sam had to do was say Round 'em, Taffy, and his carmel-colored shepherd dog would be sluicing them back to where they belonged.

A sheepdog as good as Taffy was worth his weight in shoe leather. And a herder as savvy as Sam knew how to be a diplomat toward his dog, rewarding him every now and then with praise and ear rubbing but not babying him so much that the dog hung around waiting to be complimented rather than performing his work. That was one of my father's basic

My father was waiting for us at the counting vee, and after greetings had been said all around among him and Dode ~~Les~~ and Sam ~~Pete~~ Hoy, Dode ~~Les~~ handed my father a gunny sack with a couple of handfuls of cottoncake in it, said Start 'em, Mac, and stepped around to his side of the counting gate. Up at Palookaville, where the dozen bands that summered on the north end of the Two entered the mountains all at the same place, there was an actual counting corral. But here on the spread-out English Creek range the count was done on each allotment through a vee made of poles spiked onto trees, the sheep funneling through while my father and the rancher stood beside the opening at the narrow end and counted.

Now ~~My~~ father went through the narrow gate into the vee, to the front of the sheep. He shook the sack in front of him, where the sheep could see it, and let a few cottonseed pellets trickle to the ground. Then it came, that sound not even close to any other in this world, my father's coax to the sheep: the tongue-made prrrrr prrrrr prrrrr, approximately a cross between an enormous cat's purr and the cooing of a dove. Maybe it was all the rs built into a Scotch tongue, but for whatever reason my father could croon that luring call better than any sheepman on the Two. Dode ~~Les~~ and Sam ~~Pete~~ and I watched now as a first cluster of ewes, attentive to the source of the prrrrs, caught the smell of the cottoncake. They scuffled, did some ewely butting of each other, as usual to no conclusion, then forgot rivalry and swarmed

(no4) Myself, I liked sheep. Or rather, I didn't mind sheep as such, which is the best a person can do towards creatures whose wool begins in their brain, and I liked the idea of sheep. True, sheep had to be troubled with more than cattle did, but the troubling was on a smaller scale. Pulling a lamb from a ewe's womb is nothing to untangling a leggy calf from the inside of a heifer. And a sheep you can brand by dabbing a splot of paint on her back, not needing to invite half the county in to maul your livestock around in the dust of a branding corral. More and more in life I find myself favoring proportion, and sheep somehow simply looked proper to me on those slopes of the Two. To my notion, cattle on the same pasture stick out like pepper on meringue, but sheep blend with the country as sage or heather or some other normal coloration would. A kind of instant natural crop, sheep somehow are; under a strong-eyed herder who has them in graze across a half-mile of wildflower slope, sheep seem as if generations of them always have been right there, cloudlike yet perpetual, and the grass and the flowers just now have been put in under them fresh for the year.

Nor do I hold with the argument that sheep destroyed such pasture. Put enough white mice or ostriches or anything else on a piece of land and you can overgraze it. No, if sense was used, if the sheep were moved around adequately on the range and there weren't more of them than the grass could stand, there was nothing in this world wrong with pasturing sheep on a portion of a forest. Anybody who slanders them as "hoofed locusts" or "bleaters and eaters" can also explain to me a better way to transform wild grass into food and fiber.

up the groceries. So I had this gonna-be herder, with a pair of shoes I'd had to buy him out of my own pocket as an advance on his wages, if he ever stuck with the job long enough to earn that much wages, and still no sheep. So I sent him off around the mountainside the other way from yesterday, and I started working the timber on horseback, and of course here comes the rain again, harder and colder than ever. I kept saying to myself, "This is the end of the sheep business for me. If I ever find those damn sheep this time, this is it." About four hours of that and I finally came onto the sheep. So I got the big guy over there and told him, "All right, now you got something to herd, push the sonsabitches back down toward camp," and I rode down to the wagon to try dry out. I remember standing in there over the stove, all my clothes draped around trying to get some of the water out of them, standing there with goosebumps all over me and saying, "This is it. This does it. I am going to get out of the sonofabitching sheep business." That was about fifteen years ago and yet here I am, still in the sonofabitching sheep business. God, what a man puts himself through.

On up the mountainslope Dode and ~~Lee~~ and ~~Pete~~ Sam Hoy and I shoved the sheep. It took a while, because up is not a direction sheep particularly care to go, at least at someone else's suggestion. Sheep seem perpetually leery of what's over a hill, which I suppose makes them either ~~terrifically~~ truly dumb or ~~terrifically~~ truly smart.

gonna get him, so I fired him and then was so hard up for a new herder that I hired a guy right off the street there in Gros Ventre. Never'd herded sheep before, but said he was game to. Well, he must have stood six-six or so, about big enough to eat hay, and I guess I figured that if nothing else he might be good bear-wrestling material. So we got up there onto the range and I happened to look down and see he was wearing oxfords. "Where's your other shoes?" I say. "Got none," he says. I told him to go off along the mountainside and look for the sheep while I rode up to try on top of the reef. Of course it started raining, and fog and cold and miserable. No sheep, anygoddamnwhere. I'd been up there most of the afternoon when all at once my horse stopped dead. Couldn't get him to move. So I climbed off and walked ahead about fifteen or twenty feet to take a look, and here there was a cliff that dropped off about eight hundred feet, right down the north end of the reef onto Billy Creek. If the horse hadn't had good sense we'd've dove right off that. So that was enough hunting sheep for that day, and when I got back to the wagon the big guy was in there feeding his face and he says, "I'm gonna have to have new shoes." Walking in those rocks up there had just tore those oxfords all to hell. So, okay, I told him I'd go to town in the morning and bring him out some damn ~~shoes~~ workshoes. "What size do you take?" "Thirteens," he says. Drove into Gros Ventre first thing the next morning, and do you think there was a shoe in the whole damn town that big? I ended up going all the way to Conrad to ~~get~~ find a pair. Got back up onto the range about noon, the guy was sitting in the wagon waiting and eating

we get up to the vee.

At the rate these sonsabitches want to move along this morning, he's got time to patrol the whole Rocky Mountains.

This was ~~said~~ remarked loud enough by ~~Les~~ Dode that I figured it was not for my benefit alone. Sure enough, an answer shot out of the timber to our left.

You might just remember the sonsabitches ARE sheep instead of racehorses. Into view over there between some trees came ~~Les's~~ Dode's herder, ~~Pete~~ Sam Hoy. For as long as I had been accompanying my father on counting trips and I imagine for years before, ~~Les~~ Dode and ~~Pete~~ Sam Hoy had been wrangling with each other as much as they wrangled their sheep. Hello there, Jick. Don't get too close to ~~Les~~ Dode, he's on the prod this morning. Wants the job done before it gets started.

I'm told you can tell the liveliness of a herder by how his sheep move, ~~Les~~ Dode suggested. Maybe you better lay down, ~~Pete~~ Sam, while we send for the undertaker.

If I'm slow it's because I'm starved down, trying to live on the grub you bring. Jick, ~~Les~~ Dode is finally gonna get out of the sheep business. He's gonna set up a stinginess school for you Scotchmen.

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for Dode Withrow's particular anthem of the Two was a lament about staying on and on in the sheep business. According to ~~Les~~ Dode, ~~both~~ the sheep and the humans who had anything to do with them would have ~~shown~~ taught Job true affliction. This one time, the herder ~~He~~ had lost the band and was sitting in the wagon quivering that ~~the~~ a bear ~~were~~ was

a herder would start piling stones, but because he hated to admit he was out there hefting rocks for no real reason, he'd stack up a shape that he could tell himself would serve as a landmark. Fighting back against the loneliness--that was a major part of being a sheep herder. In the wagons of some of them you would find a stack of old magazines, creased and crumpled from being carried in a hip pocket. An occasional herder would have a battery radio to keep him company in the evenings. Once in a while you came across a carver or a braider. Some, though, couldn't be bothered with pasttimes; they just lived in their heads, and that can be cramped quarters. Those religions which feature years of solitude and silence, I have grave doubts about. I believe you are better off doing anything rather than nothing, even if it is only piling stones or fashioning initials.

In any event, that jackknife work absorbed me,

to the point where I was startled by the first blats of the Withrow sheep.

I headed on down through the timber on foot to help bring them to the counting vee. A sheepman could have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his band along and he'd still seem glad of further help.

Dode ~~Les~~ Withrow spotted me and called, Morning, Jick. That father of yours come to his senses and turn his job over to you?

He's patrolling to a winter kill. Said he'd be back by the time

Dode Withrow's sheep, though, proved to be theoretical, for the moment, when we arrived at the counting vee. A slow start by his herder might account for it, or maybe it just was one of those mornings when sheep are pokey. In either case, I had learned from my father to expect lateness, because if you try to follow some exact time when you work with sheep you will rapidly drive yourself loony.

I might as well go up over here and have a look at that winter-kill, my father decided. A stand of pine about a mile to the north was showing the rusty color of death. How about you hanging on here in case the sheep show up. I won't be more than an hour. He forced a grin. Think about how to grow up saner than that brother of yours.

This whole family is sanity could stand some thinking about, I thought in reply but didn't say. My father climbed on Mouse and went to worry over winter-kill on his forest.

I took out my jackknife and started putting my initials into the bare fallen log I was sitting on. This I did whenever I got the chance, and I suppose even yet up there a few logs and stumps announce J McC to the silent universe. The J always wasn't too bad to make and the M easy, but the c's needed to be carefully cut. Thanks to Les Withrow's tardy sheep, I had ample leisure to do so. I suppose sheep have caused more time to be whiled away than any other creatures in the world. Even yet on a lot of Montana ridges there can be seen stone cairns about the height of a man. Sheepherders' monuments they are called, and what they are monuments to is monotony. Just to be doing something

Don Frew: a college man and thus guilty until he could ever manage to prove himself innocent of a ranching community's automatic indictment-- lank and pale and palsied, but still a man of high "educated fool." J.L. Hill; ~~wheezy and ancient, a man of strange~~ insistences, ~~precisions~~ such as always providing his herders, even the ones who it was pretty clear couldn't read, with the previous week's ~~plenty of old~~ issues of Saturday Evening Post or ~~and~~ Collier's. Charlie Farrell: a close manager, as was said in both admiration and not, who never left a herder ~~many~~ more than three cans of vegetables a week, for fear somebody would rob the wagon. Different as clouds, these English Creek ranchers in a lot of their ways. ~~might be~~, yet they were all sheepmen, and from the sides of the Rockies out onto the plains where the farming at last began, they and other men like them had made the Two country a land of sheep.

The Busby brothers, Bob and Ken: they grew up in Helena, and when they were big enough to be of any help their uncle, Guy Busby, imported them out here as summer hands.

We were misfortunate enough to come out here to work for old Unk about the time he bought his first car. A Model T. He figured it was a wonderful advance, you know. Any time he wanted now he could scoot in to Gros Ventre and get liquored up. The only thing was, going home there were two bobwire gates between the county road and the ranch, and the old bugger'd be so lit up he couldn't be bothered to stop and open them. Just hit the sonsofguns with that Model T and break them down and drive on through. And it'd be our chore the next morning to have to go out and fix those damn gates up. We finally said to each other, by the Christ, I'm getting a little bit fed up with all this. We went and got us a couple great big old railroad tie cornerposts, set them way down in the ground, you know, and then strung just a hell of a stout gate--put on six strands of bob and then hog wire over that, and nailed in a bunch of stays besides. We thought, old boy, that'll fix you. Then a week or so, and off Unk goes on another spree, and next morning at the breakfast table he says, "You know, Bobby and Kenny, you boys sure built some good gates down there. I had to back up and take a run at them three times before I could get them broke down." Old Guy gave out before the world's whiskey did--some say the notion of Prohibition sent his blood pressure soaring beyond what the human body can stand--and ever since, Bob and Ken had been trying to rebuild the Busby ranch. Thank the Lord that Unk was into sheep instead of anything else. Not even he could entirely drink up the wool money before the lamb money came.

Ed Van Bebber: Ed had a harum-scarum way of going about things, but nobody ever questioned his knack with sheep. During lambing, for example, he never even hired a night man, just got up from the supper table and went out to take the shift himself; [redacted] he'd nap in his sheepskin coat there in the shed until the cold woke him up, then go around and collect the fresh drop of lambs. Being his own night man gave him a lower payroll than anyone else on the creek--although nobody else figured the self-punishment was worth it--but I believe Ed did his double-duty [redacted] for more than love of dollars. It's just got to be done, is all. In lambing it's the ewes and me against [redacted] all the odds. Coyotes and scours and spring blizzards, they're a pack against us. Why give in to the sonofabitch side of nature, I ask you?

Sheep and their owners were the chorus in our lives, the theme of every season and almost all conversation. Blindfold and tickle me, and through it all I still could have identified each English Creek sheepman by voice and tale. Preston Rozier: his parents had homesteaded not far south Pendroy,

next to the Sheble place, and as in a lot of cases, growing up on a homestead sharpened his eyes for any other way of life. ~~the summer of 1917~~ when a four-man

surveyor crew arrived to run the route for the railroad to push north from Bynum to Pendroy, two of them boarded with the Shebles and the other pair with the ~~Van Bebbers~~ Roziers; probably the best crop either family ever did get off those homesteads was those surveyors. When the railroad arrived in a few years it brought with it ~~Ed's~~ Fras's vision of his future. I'd see those cowmen come into Pendroy when they shipped their stock, they'd be pretty sorry lookers, cook over a campfire and sleep under their wagons and kind of slink off home the next day. But sheepmen, hell, they'd arrive and ship their wool and then hang around and drink and whoop and raise general hell, maybe party for three or four days before they'd drive off in a fancy car of some kind. And five months later they'd be back to ship their lambs and do it all again. Right then, I figured the money was in sheep.

As in so much of the west, in the Two country hay is as necessary as air. The earliest stockmen out here didn't think so, believed they could graze their herds of cattle through a Montana winter. 1886 showed them that they hadn't yet ~~seen~~ tasted a genuine Montana winter. By that next spring carcasses littered this land, I suppose as the buffalo earlier had lain after one of the slaughtering hunts for hides. Some foreign traveler crossing the prairie down there every decade or so then might have thought ~~it~~ northern Montana an experimental site for killing four-hooved animals.

But those of course were cattle times, and now, with the encouragement of what the Depression had done to cattle prices, the Two Medicine country was home mostly to sheep.

~~And so sheep in those Depression years were the sustenance, the bread and butter, manna of the Two country.~~ For a month solid at the start of summer, a band of sheep a day ~~would~~ pass through Gros Ventre on the way north to the Blackfeet Reservation, Tom Larson and Guy Miller each trailing several bands from all the way down by Choteau, and the Bartley brothers and Broadhurst Smith and Ira Perkins and the others bringing theirs from around Bynum and Pendroy, and even Charlie Farrell from here on English Creek took his three bands north to the Reservation instead of up here onto the national forest. ~~That~~ This was a time on the Reservation when you could see a herder's wagon on top of practically every rise: a fleet of white wagons anchored across the land. And off to the east, just out of view beyond the bench ridges, the big sheep outfits from ~~Yakima~~ over in Washington were running their tens of thousands, too. And of course in here to the west where we were sitting demolishing sandwiches at the moment, my father's forest pastured the many English Creek bands.

down onto both drainages and their various ranches. Three only, there on Noon Creek--Dill Egan's, and the Reese family place now run by my mother's brother Pete, and of course, the Double W home ranch to the east of them. But the valley of English Creek, there we could see ranches one after another like green velvet pouches on a long thong. That is to say, we could pick out the hay meadows of each place, for hayfields were splotched all along English Creek to the town of Gros Ventre, some of them narrow nests of brome grass which a mowing machine could scarcely maneuver in, others fat sweeping parcels which took a day or so apiece to cut flat.

Isidor on one of the highest trails farthest back in this part of the mountains of the Two, where a misstep by one pack horse might pull all the rest into a tumble a few thousand feet down the slope, when Isidor turned in his saddle and called: Mac, if we was to roll this packstring right about here, the bastards'd bounce until they stunk.

Since the lookout gear and our food only amounted to a load for one horse it hadn't been necessary to call on Isidor for this counting trip of ours. But even absent he had his influence as we arranged the the packs on Brownie/Homer that morning under my father's scrutiny, both of us total converts to Isidor's perpetual preachment that in packing a horse, balance is everything. It took some contriving, say to make a roll of eighth-inch guywire on one side of the pack saddle equivalent to some canned goods on the other side of it, but finally my father had proclaimed: There, looks to me like you got it Isidored. Evidently I had indeed, for I didn't find that the packs or ropes had shifted appreciably on our ride thus far.

My father had been looking back out over the country behind us while I was cross-examining the pack ropes. Since we're this far along, maybe we might as well eat our lunch, he decided.

The view rather than his stomach guided him in that choice, I believe. By now, late morning, we were above the North Fork-Noon Creek divide, and so could see

Back there on the subject of our horses, I should have ~~said~~ told too that we were leading one pack horse with us. After the counting of Dode Withrow's sheep today and Les Spencer's tomorrow, we were going on up to deliver a packload of guywire and bolts and flanges to the crew building the fire lookout on Billy Peak. That third horse, bearer of that load whose ropes and hitch knots I now was testing for tautness, was an elderly solemn sorrel whom my father addressed as Brownie but the rest of us called by the name he'd been given before the Forest Service deposited him at the English Creek station: Homer. Having Brownie née Homer along was a cause for mixed emotions. One more horse is always a nuisance to contend with, yet the presence of a pack horse also made the journey seem more substantial; testified that you weren't just jaunting off to somewhere, you were transporting. Packstrings had been the lifeblood of the Forest Service ever since its birth, the hoofed carriers of supply into the ~~countless~~ mountains of all the west. I know for a fact that my father considered that the person most important to his job as English Creek ranger was not anyone up the hierarchy from him, the forest superintendent or the regional forester or any of those, but his packer, Isidor Pronovost. ~~Probably the story~~ One of the stories my father told oftenest was of being with

--gander. My father had halted Mouse, and was swiveled around looking at me in curiosity. Anybody home there, under your hat? I was saying, it's about time you checked on your packslinging, better hop off and have a gander.

seemed to elude my father, but he could be nimble enough at short-range. The McCaskill-Reese marriage ensued, and a year or so after that, Alec ensued. Which then meant that my father and mother were supporting themselves and a youngster by a job which my father had been given because he was single and didn't need much wage. This is the brand of situation you can find yourself in without much effort in Montana, but that it is common does not make it any more comfortable.

I am as sure as anything that the memory of that predicament at the start of my parents' married life lay large behind their qualms about what Alec now was intending.

Partly my father

My father especially wanted no repeat, in any son of his, of that season-by-season scrabble for livelihood. I know our family ruckus was more complicated than just that. Anything ever is. But if amid the previous evening's contention my father and Alec could have been put under oath, each Bibled to the deepest of the truths in him, my father would have had to say something like: I don't want you making my mistakes over again. And Alec to him: Your mistakes were yours, they've got nothing to do with me.

the Montana philosophy of make-do, as practiced by our sizable ranching proportion of Scotchmen, Germans, Norwegians, and Missourians, meant that ranch people simply tried to figure out which species did best at the moment, sheep or cows, and chose accordingly. It all came down, so far as I could see, to my father's habitual comment whenever someone asked him how he was doing: Trying to stay level in an uneven world.

In that time when he became their association rider there still would have been six or eight Noon Creek cattle ranchers. Now there was only Dill Egan, with the rest of those places either bought up by the Double W or under lease to it. What I am aiming at, though, is that among those Noon Creek ranchers at the time my father was hired on was Isaac Reese, mostly a horse raiser but also running 75 or so head of cattle at the time. It was when my father came to pick up those Reese cattle for the drive into the mountains that he first saw my mother. Saw her as a woman, that is. Oh, I had known she had some promise. Lisabeth Reese. The name alone made you keep her somewhere in mind. Long-range opportunities

That association job of course was only a summer one, the combined Noon Creek cattle--except the Double W's--trailing up into the mountain range in June and down out again in September, and so in winters my father fed hay at one cow ranch or another and then when spring came and brought lambing time with it, he would hire on with one of the English Creek sheepmen. I guess that squarely runs against the popular notion of the West, but anybody who grew up around stock in our part of Montana had no qualm about working with both cattle and sheep. Range wars never were much the Montana style, and most particularly not the Two Medicine fashion. Oh, somewhere in history there had been an early ruckus south on the Sun River, some cowman kiyiing over to try kill off a neighboring band of sheep, and probably in any town along these mountains, Browning or Gros Ventre or Choteau or Augusta, you could go into a bar and still find an occasional old hammerhead who proclaimed himself nothing but a cowboy and never capable of drawing breath as anything else, especially not as a mutton puncher. (Which isn't to say that most sheepherders weren't equally irreversibly sheepherders, but somehow that point never seemed to need constant general announcement as it did with cowboys.) By and large, though,

OK

Yeah, I went off to Wilson's war. Fought in blood up to my knees. As I have told, the one crack in how solemn my father could be in announcing something like this was that lowered left eyelid of his, and I liked to watch for it to dip down and introduce this next part. Fact is, you could get yourself a fight just about any time of day or night in those saloons outside Fort Leonard Wood.

(no 41) That my father's combat had been limited to fists against Missouri chins seemed not to bother him a whit, although I myself wished he had some tales of the actual war. Rather, I wished his knack with a story could be applied to the war, as an alternative to so many guys' refrain that I served my time over in Frogland and you by God can have the whole bedamned place, without ever really providing any notion of what the experience was like. But you settle for what family lore you can. My father's history resumes that when he came back from conducting the war against the Missourian saloonhounds, he was hired on by the Noon Creek cattle ranchers as their association rider. Generally some older hand got the job, but I was single and broke, just the kind ranchers love to whittle their wages down to fit--by then too, the wartime livestock prices were on their toboggan ride down--and they took me on.

of our ancestors helped fight the sea with stone meant more to my father than he liked to let on. As far as I know, the only halfway sizable body of water my father himself had ever seen was Flathead Lake right here in Montana, let alone an ocean and its beacons, yet when the fire lookout towers he had fought for were finally being built on the Two during these years it was noticeable that he called them Franklin Delano's lighthouses.

Looking back from now at that matter of my McCaskill grandparents, I question, frankly, whether my mother and father would have kept close with that side of the family even if it had still been extant. No marriage is strong enough to bear two loads of in-laws. Early on the choice might as well be made, that one family will be seen as much as can be stood and the other, probably the husband's, shunted off to rare visits. That's theory, of course. But theory and my mother together--in any case, all I grew up knowing of the McCaskills of Scotch Heaven was that thirty years of homestead effort proved to be their lifetime and that my father emerged from the homestead, for good, in the war year of 1917.

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Of course then the place was the McCaskill homestead. And the North Fork was nicknamed Scotch Heaven, for the several burr-on-the-tongue-and-thistle-up-the-kilt families who had come over and settled. Moirs, Adamsons, Frews, McHarolds, Lewises, and my ~~my grandparents Ian and Sarah~~ grandparents, McCaskill; they all lit in here sometime in the 1880s and all were dead or defeated or departed by the time the ~~[illegible]~~ flu epidemic of 1918 and the winter of 1919 got through with them. I had no first-hand information on my father's parents, both of them ~~were~~ long since under the ~~[illegible]~~ North Fork soil by the time I was born. And for all of my father's ear to the past, there did not seem to be anything known about what the McCaskills came from in Scotland except for a single scrap of lore: the story that a McCaskill had been one of the stone masons of Arbroath who worked for the Stevensons--as I savvy it, they must have been a family of engineers before Robert Louis cropped into the lineage and picked up a pen--when the Stevensons were putting up the lighthouses all around the coast of Scotland. The thought that one