

So I ran back and did the reverse of the wrestling that'd opened the gate. Still scared spitless about touching that wire. Yet maybe not quite as scared as when I'd first done it, for I was able to say to myself all the while: what in the hell have I done to deserve this dose of predicament?

Again on the rake, I broke all records of driving that Double W approach road, down from the benchland to where the ranch buildings were clustered on the north side of Noon Creek. Across the plank bridge the rake rumbled, my thunder against the storm's thunder, and I sighted refuge. The Double W barn.

In minutes I had my team unhitched--leaving the scatter rake out by a collection of old machinery, so that lightning at least would have to do some sorting to find it--and was ~~ensconcing~~ ^{ensconcing} them in barn stalls. They were lathered enough that I unharnessed them and rubbed them dry with a gunny sack. In fact, I looked around for the granary, went over there, and brought back a hatful of Double W oats ^{apiece} to blanche and Fisheye as their reward.

Now I could draw a breath and look around for my own benefit.

The Double W had buildings and more buildings. This barn was huge, and the two-story white Williamson house across the yard could have housed the governor of Montana. You would think this was ranch enough for anybody, yet Wendell Williamson actually owned another one at least as big as this. The Deuce W--its cattle brand was 2W-- down in the Highwood Mountains between Great Falls and Lewistown,

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a hundred or more miles from here. More distance than I'd been in my whole life, and Wendell goddamn Williamson possessed both ends of it.

Be that as it may, the Double W was now my port in the storm, and I had better make my presence known.~~H~~ No one was in sight, it would take a little while for the rain to bring in Alec and the other riders and the hay crew from the range and the hayfield. But somebody was bound to be in the house, and I hurried over to there before I had to do it during the storm.

I knocked at the front door.

The door opened and Meredice Williamson was standing there smiling and saying: "Yes?"

"'Lo, Mrs. Williamson. I put Blanche and Fisheye in your barn."

That seemed to be double Dutch to her. But she smiled on and commended: "That was good of you. I'm sure Wendell will be pleased."

I sought to correct her impression that a ~~deliver~~^{delivery} of Blanche and Fisheye was involved here. "Well, no, they'll only be there until it clears up. I mean, what it is, I was driving my scatter rake to town and the storm started coming and I had to head in here on account of lightning, so I unhitched my team and put them in the barn there, I hope that's all right?"

"I'm sure it must be," she acceded, pretty plainly because she had no idea what else to say. Meredice Williamson was a city woman--a lawyer's widow, it was said--whom Wendell met and married in

California a few winters before. The unkind view of her was that she'd had too much sun on the brain down there. But I believe the case honestly was that because Meredice Williamson only came north to spend summers at the Double W, she never got clued in to the Two country; never quite caught up with its rhythms of season and liveliness and lore. At least, standing there within the weathered doorway in her yellow sun frock and with her graying hair in perfect ~~waves~~^{marcelled}, she looked much like a visitor to her own ranch house.

Yet maybe Meredice Williamson was not as vague as the general estimate of her, for she now pondered my face a moment more and then asked: "Are you Beth McCaskill's other boy?"

Which wasn't exactly my most preferred phrasing of it. But she did have genealogical fact on her side. So I bobbed yes and contributed: "Jick. Alec's brother."

"Wendell thinks highly of Alec," she confided, as if I gave a hoot in hell about Mr. Double W's opinion. So far as I could see Wendell Williamson was a main contributor to Alec's mental delinquency, encouraging him in his damn cowboy notions. The summer's sunder of my family followed a faultline which led to this doorstep. Fair is fair, though, and I couldn't really blame Meredice Williamson for Wendell's doings. Innocent as a bluebird on a manure pile, this lady seemed to be. Thus I only said back:

"Yeah. So I savvy."

Just then the leading edge of rain hit, splatting drops the size of quarters on the flagstones of the walk. Meredice Williamson peered

past me in surprise at the blackening sky. "It looks like a shower," she mustered. "Wouldn't you like to step in?"

I was half-tempted. On the other hand, I figured she wouldn't have the foggiest notion of what to do with me once I was in there. Furnish me tea and ladyfingers? Ask me if I would care for a game of Chinese checkers?

"No, that's okay," I declined. "I'll wait in the bunkhouse. Alec likely will show up there pretty quick. I'll shoot the hooey with him until the rain's over and then head on to town." Here Meredice Williamson's expression showed that she was unsure what hooey was or why we would shoot it. In a hurry I concluded: "Anyway, thanks for the borrow of your barn."

"You're quite welcome, Jake," she was saying as I turned and sprinted across the yard. The rain was beginning to pelt in plentiful drops now, pocking the dust. Flashes of light at the south edge of the storm and the immediate rumbles made me thankful again that I was in off the rake, even if the haven was the Double W.

Strange, to be in a bunkhouse when its residents are out on the job. Like one of those sea tales of stepping aboard a ship where everything is intact, sails set and a meal waiting on the galley stove, but the crew has vanished.

Any bunkhouse exists only to shelter a crew. There is no feel of it as a home for anybody, although even as I say that

I realize many ranch hands spent their lives in a bunkhouse. Alec himself was a full-timer here, and would be until he and Leona tied their knot. Even so, a bunkhouse to me seems a place you can put up with for a season but that would be enough.

If you are unaccustomed to a bunkhouse, the roomful of beds is a medley of odors. Of tobacco in three incarnations: hand-rolled cigarettes, snoose, and chewing tobacco. The last two, in fact, had a permanent existence in the spit cans beside about half the bunks. These I took special note of, not wanting to kick one of them over. Of too many bodies and not enough baths; yet I wonder why it is that we now think we have to deodorize the smell of humanness out of existence. Of ashes and creosote; the presence of an elderly stove and stovepipe. All in all, the scent of men and what it takes them to lead the ranch hands' life.

I gandered around to try and figure out which bunk was Alec's. An easy enough mystery. The corner bunk with the snapshot of Leona on the wall above the pillow.

Naturally the picture deserved a closer look.⁴ It showed Leona on a horse in a show ring--that would be Tollie Zane's during one of his horse sales--and wearing a lady Stetson and leather chaps. And a smile that probably fused the camera. But I managed to get past the top of Leona, to where something else was tugging my eyes. Down the length of her chaps, something was spelled out in tooled letters with silver spangles between. I moved in for a closer look yet, my nose almost

onto the snapshot, and I was able to make out:

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Well, that wasn't the message that ordinarily would come to mind from looking along Leona's leg. But it was interesting.

I could hear voices, and men began trooping in. The hay crew,
m and at the tail end of them Alec, who looked flabbergasted to see me sitting on his bunk.

"Jicker, what in blazes--" he started as he strode over to me. I related to him my scatter rake situation and he listened keenly, although he didn't look perceptibly happier with my presence. "As soon as the rain lets up, I'll head on to town," I assured him.

"Yeah, well. Make ~~yourself~~ at home, I guess." Now to my surprise, my brother seemed short of anything more to say. He was saved from having to, by the arrival of the Double W foreman Cal Petrie and the other two riders, older guys named Thurl Everson and Joe Henty. Both had leather gloves and fencing pliers, so I imagined they were glad to be in away from barbwire for a while, too.

Cal Petrie spotted me ~~sitting~~^{perched} on the bunk beside Alec, nodded hello, and steered over to ask: "Looking for a job?" He knew full

well I wasn't, but as foreman it was his responsibility to find out just what brought me here.

Again I explained the scatter rake-lightning situation, and Cal nodded once more. "A stroke of that could light you up like a Christmas tree, all right. Make yourself to home. Alec can introduce you around." Then Cal announced generally: "I got to go to town ~~after~~^{after supper} supper for some sickle heads for the mowers, and I can take two of you jaspers in with me in the pickup. I'll only be in there an hour or so, and you got to be ready to come home when I say. No staying in there to drink the town dry, in other words. So cut cards or Indian rassle or compare dicks or however you want to choose, but only two of you are going." And he went off into the room he had to himself at the far end of the bunkhouse.

In a hay crew such as the Double W's there were ten or a dozen guys, putting up two stacks at once, and what struck me as Alec made me known to them was that three of the crew were named Mike. A gangly one called Long Mike, and a mower man naturally called Mike the Mower, and then one who lacked either of those distinctions and so was called Plain Mike. The riders who had come in with Cal Petrie I already knew, Thurl and Joe. Likewise the choreboy, old Dolph Kuhn, one of those codgers who get to be as much a part of a ranch as its ground and grass. So, I felt acquainted enough even before somebody chimed out:

"What, are you another one of the famous fist-fighting McCaskills?"

Alec's flooring of Earl Zane at the Fourth of July dance was of course the natural father of that remark.

"No, I'm the cut and shoot type," I cracked back. "When the trouble starts, I cut through the alley and shoot for home."

You just never know. That joke had gray whiskers and leaned on a cane, but it drew a big laugh from the Double W ~~yahoos~~ even so.

There followed some more comment, probably for the fortieth time, about how Alec had whopped Earl, and innumerable similar exploits performed in the past by various of this crew. You'd have thought the history of boxing had taken place in that bunkhouse. But I was careful not to contribute anything further. The main rule when you join a crew, even if it's only for the duration of ^a rainstorm, is to listen more than you talk.

Alec still didn't look overjoyed that I was on hand, but I couldn't help that. I didn't order up the damn electrical storm, which still was rumbling and crashing around out there.

"So," I offered as an opener, "what do you know for sure?"

"Enough to get by on," Alec allowed.

"Been doing any calf roping?"

"No."

That seemed to take care of the topic of calf roping. Some silence, then Alec hazarded: "How's the haying going at Pete's?"

"We've pretty close to got it. A few more days left. How're they doing here?"

"More like a couple of weeks left, I guess."

And there went the topic of haying. Alec and I just

sat back and listened for a little to where the discussion had now turned, the pair of slots for town. Some grumping was going on about Cal Petrie's edict that only two of ~~the~~^{crew} were going to get to see the glories of Gros Ventre on a Saturday night. This was standard bunkhouse grouse, though. If Cal had said the whole shebang of them could go to town with him there'd have been grumbling that he hadn't offered to buy them the first round of drinks as well. No, the true issue was just beginning to come out: more than half the hay crew, six or so guys, considered themselves the logical town candidates. The variety of reasoning--the awful need for a haircut, a bet to be collected from a guy who was going to be in the Medicine Lodge only this very night, even a potential toothache that necessitated preventive remedies from the drugstore--was remarkably well-rehearsed. This Double W bunch was the kind of crew, as the saying went, who began on Thursday to get ready on Friday to go to town on Saturday to spend Sunday.

Long Mike and Plain Mike and a sort of a gorilla of a guy who I figured must be one of the two stackmen of this gang were among the yearners for town. Plain Mike surprised me by being the one to propose that a game of cards settle the matter. But then, you just never know who in a crew will turn out to be ~~a~~^{the} tiger rider.

The proposal itself eliminated the big stackman. "Hell with it, I ain't lost nothing in that burg anyway." At the time I thought his sporting blood was awfully anemic. It has since dawned on me that he could not read--could not tell the cards apart.

Inasmuch as Plain Mike had efficiently whittled off one contender, the other four felt more or less obliged to go along with a card game.

"We need an honest banker," Plain Mike solicited.

"You're talking contradictions," somebody called out.

"Damn, I am at that. Honest enough that we can't catch him, will do. Hey there, Alec's brother! How about you being the bank for us?"

"Well, I don't know. What are you going to play?"

"Pitch," said Plain Mike. "What else is there?"

That drew me. Pitch is the most perfect of card games. It excels poker in that there can be more than one winner during each hand, and cribbage in that it doesn't take an eternity to play, and rummy and hearts in that judgment is more important than the cards you are dealt, and stuff like canasta and pinochle can't even be mentioned in the same breath with pitch.

"I guess I could," I assented. "Until the rain lets up." It still was raining like bath time on Noah's ark.

"Pull up a stump," invited Plain Mike, nodding toward a spare chair beside the stove. "We'll show you pitch as she is meant to be played."

Uh huh, at least you will, I thought to myself as I added my presence to the circle of card players. But I will say this for yayhoos, the Double W ~~yahoos~~, they played pitch the classic way--high, low, game, jack, jick, joker. It would just surprise you, how many people go through life under the delusion that pitch ought to be played

without a joker in the deck, which is a skimpy damned way of doing it, and how many others are just as dim in wanting to play with two jokers, which is excessive and confusing.

My job of banker didn't amount to all that much. Just being in charge of the box of Diamond wooden matches and paying out to each player as many matches as he'd made points, or taking matches back if he went set. Truth be told, I could have kept score more efficiently with a pencil and sheet of paper, and Alec simply could have done it in his head. But these Double W highrollers wanted to be able to squint around the table and count for themselves how much score everybody else had.

From the very first hand, when the other players were tuning up with complaints like "Is this the best you can deal, a mess like this?" and Plain Mike simply bid three, "in them things called spades," and led with ~~a~~^{the} queen, it was worth a baccalaureate degree in the game of pitch to watch Plain Mike. He bid only when he had one sure point, ace for high or deuce for low, with some other point probable among his cards, so that when he did bid it was as good as made. But during a hand when anybody else had the bid, he managed to run with some point, jack or jick or joker, for himself, or at least--this, a real art of pitch--he managed to sluff the point to somebody besides the bidder. I banked and admired. While the other cardsters' scores gyrated up and down, with every hand Plain Mike added a wooden match or two to his total.

Around us, the rest of the crew was carrying on conversation. If you can call it that. There is no place like a bunkhouse for

random yatter. One guy will grouch about how the eggs were cooked for breakfast and another will be reminded of a plate of beans he ate in Pocatello in 1922. Harness the gab gas of the average bunk-house and you'd have an inexhaustible fuel.

I was taking it all in, eyes and mind pretty much on the card game and ears shopping around in the crew conversation, when one of the pitch players popped out with:

"Aw hell, there goes Jick."

I blinked and sat up at that. Anybody would, wouldn't they? All right, so my attention was a bit divided: so what the hell business was it of some stranger to announce it to the world? But then I saw that the guy hadn't meant me, he was just bemoaning because he'd tried to run the jick past Plain Mike and Plain Mike had nabbed it with his jack of trump.

The only one to notice my peeved reaction was Plain Mike himself, who I would say did not miss many tricks in life as well as in cards. "A jick and a Jick we got here, huh?" he said now. "Who hung that nickname on you, that battling brother of yours?"

Actually my best guess was that it'd been Dode Withrow who suggested I looked like the jick of the McCaskills, but my parents were vague about the circumstance. I mean, a person wants to know his own history insofar as possible but if you can't, you can't. So instead of trying to go into all that before this Double W crowd I just responded: "Somebody with an imagination, I guess."

"Lucky thing he didn't imagine you resembled the queen of hearts," observed Plain Mike and turned his attention back to the pitch game.

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By now Alec, looking restless and overhearing all this name stuff, had come over and joined me in watching the card game. This was certainly a more silent brother than I'd ever been around before. Maybe it had something to do with his surroundings, this hay crew he and the other riders now had to share the bunkhouse with. Between checking out the window on the progress of the rain and banking the pitch game, I started mulling what it would be like to work in this hay crew instead of Pete's. If, say, ranches were swapped under Alec and me, him up the creek at the Reese place as he'd been at my age and me here at the Gobble Gobble You. Some direct comparison of companions was possible. Wisdom Johnson was an obvious choice over the gorilla of a guy who was one of the Double W stackmen, and a rangy man called Swede who ~~more~~ than likely was the other one. A possible advantage I could see to the gorilla was what he might have inflicted on Good Help Hebner for trying to drown him in hay, but that was wishful thinking. Over on the conversation side of the room, Mike the Mower looked somewhat more interesting than Bud Dolson. He was paying just enough attention to the pair of storiers not to seem standoffish. His bunk was the most neatly made, likely showing he had been in the army. All in all, though, Mike the Mower showed more similarity to Bud than difference. Mower men were their own nationality.

From how they had been razzing one another about quantities of hay moved, three of the five pitch players--Plain Mike and Long Mike and a heavy-shouldered guy--were the horse buckrakers. I was pretty sure how they shaped up on the job. The heavy-shouldered guy, who looked like a horseman, was the best buckraker. Long Mike was the slowest. And Plain Mike did just enough more work than Long Mike to look better.

A couple of younger guys, around Alec's age but who looked about a fraction as bright, likely were the stacker team drivers in this outfit. Then a slouchy elderly guy in a khaki shirt, and a one-eyed one--I suppose it doesn't say much for my own haying status that I was working down through this Double W crew, getting to the bunch rakers and whoever the scatter raker was, when the ^{tele} phone jangled at the far end of the room.

The ring of that phone impressed me more than anything else about the Double W had yet. I mean, there was no stipulated reason why there couldn't be a telephone in a bunkhouse. But at the time it seemed a fairly swanky idea.

Cal Petrie stepped out of his room to answer it. When he had listened a bit and yuffed an answer, he hung up and looked over toward where Alec and I were on the rim of the card game.

"Come on up for supper with us," the foreman directed at me.
"Give the mud a little more chance to dry out, that way."

Cal declaimed this as if it was his own idea, but I would have bet any money as to who was on the other end of that phone line.
Meredice Williamson.

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Not long after, the supper bell sounded the end of the card game. The heavy-shouldered guy had the highest score, and yes, Plain Mike had the next. Now that they were the town-bound pair they received a number of imaginative suggestions of entertainment they might seek in there, as the crowd of us sloshed over to the kitchen door of the house. While everybody scraped mud off their feet and trooped on in I hung back with Alec, to see what the table lineup was going to be.

"Jick," he began, but didn't go on with whatever he had in mind. Instead, "See you after supper," he said and stepped into the house, with me following.

The meal was in the summer room, a kind of windowed porch along the side of the house, long enough to hold a table for a crew this size. I of course did know that even at a place like the Double W, family and crew ate together. If the King of England had owned Noon Creek benchland instead of Scottish moors, probably even he would have had to go along with the ranch custom of everybody sitting down to refuel together. So I wasn't surprised to see Wendell Williamson sitting at the head of the table. Meredice sat at his right, and the old choreboy Dolph Kuhn next to her. At Wendell's left was a vacancy which I knew would be the cook's place, and next to that, Cal Petrie seated himself. All five of them had chairs, then backless benches filled the rest of both sides of the table, which was about twenty feet long.

I felt vaguely let down. It was a set-up about like any other ranch's, only bigger. I suppose I expected the Double W to have something special, like a throne for Wendell Williamson instead of a

straightback kitchen chair.

Alec and Joe and Thurl, as ranch regulars, took their places next to the head-of-the-table elite, and the hay crew began filling in the rest of the table to the far end. In fact, at the far end there was a kitchen stool improvised as a seat, and Meredice Williamson's smile and nod told me it was my place.

This I had not dreamt of. Facing Wendell Williamson down the length of the Double W supper table. He now acknowledged me by saying: "Company. Nuhhuh. Quite a way to come for a free meal, young fellow."

Before thinking I said back: "Everybody says there's no cooking like the Double W's."

That caused a lot of facial expressions along the table, and I saw Alec peer at me rather firmly. But Wendell merely said "Nuhhuh" again--that "nuhhuh" of his was a habit I would think anybody with sufficient money would pay to have broken--and took a taste of his cup of coffee.

To me, Wendell Williamson always looked as if he'd been made by the sackful. Sacks of what, I won't go into. But just everything about him, girth, shoulders, arms, even his fingers, somehow seemed fuller than was natural; as if he always was slightly swollen. Wendell's head particularly stood out in this way, because his hair had retreated about halfway back and left all that face to loom out. And the other odd thing up there was, what remained of Wendell's hair was thick and curly and coal-black--a real stand of hair there at the rear of that big moonhead, like a sailor might wear a watchcap pushed way back.

The cook came in from the kitchen with a bowl of gray gravy and handed it to Wendell. She was a gaunt woman, sharp cheekbones, beak of a nose. Her physiognomy was a matter of interest and apprehension to me. The general theory is that a thin cook is a poor idea; why isn't she more enthusiastic about her own grub?

Plain Mike was sitting at my left, and at my right was a scowling guy who'd been one of the losers in the pitch game. As I have always liked to keep abreast of things culinary, I now asked Plain Mike in an undertone: "Is this the cook from Havre?"

"No, hell, she's long gone. This one's from up at Lethbridge."

What my mother would have commented danced to mind: "So Wendell Williamson has to import them from Canada now, does he? I'm Not Surprised."

I kept that to myself, but the scowler on my right had overheard my question and muttered: "She ain't Canadian though, kid. She's a Hungrarian."

"She is?" To me, the cook didn't look conspicuously foreign.

"You bet. She leaves you hungrier than when you came to the table."

I made a polite "heh-heh-heh" to that, and decided I'd better focus on the meal.

The first bowl to reach me contained a concoction I've never known the actual name of, but in my own mind I always dub Tomato Smush. Canned tomatoes heated up, with little dices of bread dropped in. You sometimes get this as a side dish in cafes when the cook has run out of all other ideas about vegetables. Probably the Lunchery in Gros

Ventre served it four days a week. In any case, Tomato Smush is a remarkable recipe, in that it manages to wreck both the tomatoes and the bread.

Out of chivalry I spooned a dab onto my plate. And next loaded up with mashed potatoes. Hard for any cook to do something drastic to mashed potatoes. The gravy, though, lacked salt and soul.

Then along came a platter of fried liver. This suited me fine, as I can dine on liver even when it is overcooked and tough, as this was.. But I have observed in life that there is no middle ground about liver. When I passed the platter to the guy on my right he mumbled something about "Lethbridge leather again," and his proved to be the majority view at the table.

There was some conversation at the head of the table, mostly between Wendell and the foreman Cal about the unfairness of being rained out at this stage of haying. In light of what followed, I see now that the rainstorm was largely responsible for Wendell's mood. Not that Wendell Williamson ever needed a specific excuse to be grumpy, so far as I could tell, but this suppertime he was smarting around his wallet. If the rain had started before noon and washed out the haying, he'd have had ^{this} to pay all ~~his~~ hay crew for only half a day. But since the rain came in the afternoon he was laying out a full day's wages for not a full day's work. I tell you, there can be no one more morose than a rancher having to pay a hay crew to watch rain come down.

Anyway, the bleak gaze of Wendell Williamson eventually found its way down the length of the table to me. To my surprise, since I didn't

think anybody's welfare mattered to him but his own, Wendell asked me:
"How's your folks?"

"Real good."

"Nuhhuh." Wendell took a mouthful of coffee, casting a look at the cook as he set down his cup. Then his attention was back on me:

"I hear your mother gave quite a talk, the day of the Fourth."

Well, what the hell. If Wendell goddamn Williamson wanted to tap his toe to that tune, I was game to partner him. The McCaskills of this world maybe don't own mills and mines and all the land in sight, as some Williamson back in history had managed to grab, but we were born with tongues.

"She's sure had a lot of good comments on it," I declared with enthusiasm. Alec was stirring in his seat, trying to follow all this, but he'd missed Mom's speech by being busy with his roping horse. No, this field of engagement was mine alone. "People tell her it brought back the old days, when there were all those other ranches around here. The days of Ben English and those."

"Nuhhuh." What Wendell would have responded beyond that I will never know, for Meredice Williamson smiled down the table in my direction and then said to Wendell: "Ben English. What an interesting name, I have always thought." Mr. Double W didn't conspicuously seem to think so. But Meredice sallied right on: "Was he, do you think?"

"Was he what?" retorted Wendell.

"English. Do you suppose Mr. English was of English extraction?"

"Meredice, how in hell--" Wendell stopped himself and swigged

some more sour coffee. "He might've been Swedish, for all I know."

"It would be more fitting if he were English," she persisted.

"Fitting? Fit what?"

"It would be more fitting to the memory of the man and his times."

She smiled toward me again. "To those old days." Now she looked somewhere over my head, and Plain Mike's, and the heads of all of us at our end of the table, and she recited:

"Take of English earth as much

As either hand may rightly clutch.

In the taking of it breathe

Prayer for all who lie beneath."

Then Meredice Williamson dipped her fork and tried a dainty bite of Tomato Smush.

All around the table, though, every other fork had stopped. Even mine. I don't know, maybe Kipling out of the blue would have that effect on any group of diners, not just hay hands. But in any case, there was a mulling silence as Wendell contemplated Meredice and the rest of us contemplated the Double W boss and his wife. Not even a "nuhhuh" out of Wendell.

Finally Cal Petrie turned toward me and asked, "How's that power buckrake of Pete's working out?"

"Real good," I said. "Would somebody pass the liver, please?" And that pretty much was the story of supper at the great Double W.

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Alec walked with me to the barn to help harness Blanche and Fisheye. He still wasn't saying much. Nor for that matter was I. I'd had about enough Double W and brooding brother, and was looking forward to getting to town.

Something, though--something kept at me as we started harnessing. It had been circling in the back of my mind ever since the hay crew clomped into the bunkhouse that afternoon. Alec came in with them. Cal Petrie and the riders who had been fixing fence made their appearance a few minutes after that.

I may be slow, but I usually get there. "Alec?" I asked across the horses' backs. "Alec, what have they got you doing?"

On the far side of Blanche, the sound of harnessing stopped for an instant. Then resumed.

"I said, what have they--"

"I heard you," came my brother's voice. "I'm helping out with the haying."

"I figured that. Which job?"

Silence.

"I said, which--"

"Raking."

You cannot know with what struggle I resisted popping out the next logical question: "Dump or scatter?" Yet I already knew the answer. I did indeed. The old slouchy guy in the khaki shirt and the one-eyed one, they were plodding dump rakers if I had ever seen the species. And that left just one hayfield job unaccounted for. My brother the calf-roping caballero was doing the exact same thing

in life I was--riding a scatter rake.

I did some more buckling and adjusting on Fisheye. Debating with myself. After all, Alec was my brother. If I couldn't talk straight from the shoulder with him, who could I?

"Alec, this maybe isn't any of my business, but--"

"Jick, when did that detail ever stop you? What's on your mind, besides your hat?"

"Are you sure you want to stay on here? More than this summer, I mean? This place doesn't seem to me anything so special."

"So you're lining up with Mom and Dad, are you." Alec didn't sound surprised, as if the rank of opinion against him was like one of the sides in choosing up to play softball. He also didn't sound as if any of us were going to alter his thinking. "What, is there a law that says somewhere that I've got to go to college?"

"No, it's just that you'd be good at it, and--"

"Everybody seems awful damn sure about that. Jick, I'm already doing something I'm good at, if I do say so my own self. I'm as good a hand with cattle as Thurl or Joe or anybody else they ever had here. So why doesn't that count for anything? Huh? Answer me that. Why can't I stay on here in the Two country and do a decent job of what I want to, instead of traipsing off to goddamn college?"

For the first time since he stepped into the bunkhouse and caught sight of me, Alec came alive. He stood now in front of Blanche, holding her haltered head. But looking squarely at me, as I stood in front of Fisheye. The tall and blue-eyed and flame-haired Alec

of our English Creek years, the Alec who faced life as if it was always going to deal him aces.

I tried again, maybe to see if I was understanding my brother's words. "Christamighty, though, Alec--they haven't even got you doing what you want to do here. You hired on as a rider. Why're you going to let goddamn Wendell do whatever he wants with you?"

Alec shook his head. "You do sound like the folks would."

"I'm trying to sound like myself, is all. What is it about the damn life here that you think is so great?"

My brother held his look on me. Not angry, not even stubborn. And none of that abstracted glaze of earlier in the summer, as though only half-seeing me. This was Alec to the full, the one who answered me now:

"That it's my own."

"Well, yeah, I guess it is," was all I could manage to respond. For it finally had struck me. This answer that had popped out of Alec as naturally as a multiplication sum, this was the future. So much did my brother want to be on his own in life, he would put up with a bad choice of his own making--endure whatever the Double W heaped on him, if it came to that--rather than give in to somebody else's better plan for him. Ever since the night of the supper argument our parents thought they were contending with Alec's cowboy phase or with Leona or the combination of the two. I now knew otherwise. What they were up against was the basic Alec.

"Jick," he was saying to me, "do me a favor about all this, okay?"

"What is it?"

"Don't say anything to the folks. About me not riding, just now."

He somewhere found a grin, although a puny one. "About me following in your footsteps as a scatter raker. They have a low enough opinion of me recently." He held the grin so determinedly it began to hurt me. "So will you do that for me?"

"Yeah. I will."

"Okay." Alec let out a lot of breath. "We better get you hooked up and on your way, or you'll have to roll Grady out of bed to do the welding."

One more thing I had to find out, though. As I got up on the seat of the scatter rake, the reins to Blanche and Fisheye ready in my hand, I asked as casually as I could:

"How's Leona?"

The Alec of the Fourth of July would have cracked "fine as frog hair" or "dandy as a field of dandelions" or some such. This Alec just said: "She's okay." Then goodbyed me with: "See you around, Jicker."

"Ray? Does it ever seem like you can just look at a person and know something that's going to happen to them?"

"No. Why?"

"I don't mean look at them and know everything. Just something. Some one thing."

"Like what?"

"Well, like--" I gazed across the lawn at the Heaney house, high and pale white in the dark. Ed and Genevieve and Mary Ellen had gone to bed, but Ray and I won permission to sprawl on the grass under the giant cottonwood until Ray's bedroom cooled down a bit from the sultry day. The thunderstorm had missed Gros Ventre, only left it its wake of heat and charged air. "Promise not to laugh at this?"

"You couldn't pay me to."

"All right. Like when I was talking to Alec out there at the Double W after supper. I don't know, I just felt like I could tell. By the look of him."

"Tell about what?"

"That he and Leona aren't going to get married."

Ray weighed this. "You said you could tell something that's going to happen. That's something that's not going to happen."

"Same thing."

"Going to happen and not going to happen are the same thing?
Jick, sometimes--"

"Never mind." I stretched an arm in back of my head, to rub a knuckle against the cottonwood. So wrinkled and gullied was its trunk that it looked as if rivulets of rain had been running down it ever since the deluge floated Noah. I drifted in thought past the day's storm along Noon Creek, past the Double W and Alec, past the hayfields of the Ramsay place, past to where I had it tucked away to tell Ray:

"Saw Marcella a while back. From a distance."

"Yeah?" Ray responded, with what I believe is called elaborate

indifference.

The next morning I returned with the rake to the Reese place, confirmed with Pete that the hay was too wet for us to try, retrieved Pony, and by noon was home at English Creek in time for Sunday dinner. During which I related to my parents my visit to the Double W.

My father, the fire season always on his mind now, grimaced and said: "Lightning. You'd think the world could operate without the damn stuff." Then he asked: "Did you see your brother?" When I said I had, he only nodded.

Given how much my mother had been on her high horse against the Double W all summer, I was set to tell her of the latest cook and the Tomato Smush and the weakling gravy. But before I could get started she fixed me with a thoughtful look and asked: "Is there anything new with Alec?"

"No," came flying out of me from some nest of brotherly allegiance I hadn't been aware of. Lord, what a wilderness is the thicket of family. "No, he's just riding around."

This is what I meant, earlier, about the chain of events of ~~that last sputte~~ those last week of haying. If Clayton Hebner had not grab-assed himself into a twisted ankle, I would not now have been the sole depository of the news of Alec's Double W situation.

The second Saturday in August, one exact month since we started

haying, we sited the stacker in the last meadow along Noon Creek.

Before climbing on the power buckrake Pete cast a long gaze over the windrows, estimating. Then said what didn't surprise anybody who'd ever been in a haying crew before: "Let's see if we can get it all up in one, instead of moving the stacker another damn time."

"If you can get it up here," vowed Wisdom, "we'll find someplace to put it."

So that final haystack began to climb. Bud Dolson, now that mowing was over, was on top helping Wisdom with the stacking. Perry too was done with his part of haying, no more windrows to be made. He tied his team in some shade by the creek and in his creaky way was dabbing around the stack with a pitchfork, carrying scraps of hay to the stacker fork. Clayton, I am happy to report, had mended enough to drive the stacker team again and I had regained my scatter rake.

Of course, it was too much hay for one stack. But on a last one, that never stops a hay crew. I raked and re-raked behind Pete's swoops with his buckrake. The stack towered. The final loads wouldn't come off the stacker fork by themselves, Wisdom and Bud pulled up the hay pitchforkful by pitchforkful to the round summit of the stack.

At last every stem of hay was in that stack.

"How the hell do we get off this thing?" called down Bud from the island in the air, only half-joking.

"Along about January I'll feed from this stack," Pete sent back up to him. "I'll bring out a ladder and get you then."

In actuality, the descent of Wisdom and Bud was provided by

Clayton running the stacker fork up to them, so they could grab hold of the fork teeth while they climbed down onto the frame.

Marie had driven up from the main ranch to see this topping-off of the summer's haying, and brought with her cold tea and fresh-baked oatmeal cookies. A crew about to scatter, we stood and looked and sipped and chewed, Perry to head back into Gros Ventre and a winter of leather work at the saddle shop. Bud tonight onto a bus to Anaconda and his smelter job. Wisdom proclaimed he was heading straight for the redwood logging country down in California, and Pete and Bud had worked on him until they got Wisdom to agree that he would ride the bus with Bud as far as Great,

Falls, at least getting him and his wages past the Medicine Lodge saloon. Clayton, over the English Creek-Noon Creek divide to the North Fork and Hebner life again. Pete and Marie, to fencing the haystacks and then shipping the lambs and then trailing the Reese sheep home from the Reservation, and all too soon feeding out the hay we had put up. Me, to again become a daytime dweller at English Creek instead of a nightly visitor. And the tall, tall last haystack, standing over us as if it was a holy mound we had come to, to hear where each of us was to go next in life.

—

"Either this weather is Out Of Control," declared my mother,
"or I'm Getting Old."

It can be guessed which of those she thought was the case. This summer did not seem to be aware that, with haying done, it was supposed to be thinking about departure. The wickedest weather yet settled in, a real siege of swelter. The first three days I was home at English Creek after finishing at Pete's the temperature hit the 90s and the rest of the next couple of weeks wasn't a whole lot better. Too hot. Putting up with heat while you drive a scatter rake or work some other job is one thing. But having the temperature try to toast you while you're just hanging around and existing, that somehow seems a personal insult.

Nor, for all her lament about August's runaway warmth, was my mother helping the situation any. The contrary. She was canning. And canning and canning. It started each June with rhubarb, and then would come a spurt of cooking homemade sausage and layering it in crocks with the fat over it, and next would be the first of the garden vegetables, peas, and after them beets to pickle, and then the various pickings of beans, all the while interspersed with making berry jams, and at last in late August the arrival to Helwig's merc in Gros Ventre of the flat boxes of canning peaches and pears. We ate all winter on what my mother put up, but the price of it was that during a lot of the hottest days of summer the kitchen range also was blazing away. So whenever canning was

the agenda I steered clear of the house as much as I could. It was that or melt.

In the ranger station as well, life sometimes got too warm for comfort, although not just because of the temperature reading.

"How's it look?" my father asked his dispatcher Chet Barnouw first thing each morning. This time of year, this sizzling August, *start* Chet's reports were never good. "Extreme danger" was the fire rating on the Two Medicine National Forest now, day after day. There already were fires, big ones, on forests west of the Continental Divide; the Bad Rock Canyon fire in the Flathead National Forest was just across the mountains from us.

Poor Chet. His reward for reporting all this was to have my father say, "Is that the best news you can come up with?" My father put it lightly, or tried to, but both Chet and the assistant ranger Paul Eliason knew it was the start of another touchy day. Chet and Paul were young and in their first summer on the Two, and I know my father suffered inwardly about their lack of local knowledge. Except for being wet behind the ears, they weren't a bad pair. But in a fire summer like this, that was a big except. As dispatcher Chet was in charge of the telephone setup that linked the lookout towers and the ~~fire~~ guard cabins to the ranger station, and he kept in touch with headquarters in Great Falls by the regular phone system. His main site of operation, thus, was the switchboard behind a partition at one side of my father's office. I think my mother was the one who gave that cubbyhole the name of "the belfry,"

from all the phone signals that chimed in there. The belfry took some getting used to, for anybody, but Chet was an unhurryable type best fitted for the job of dispatcher.

Of the two, Paul Eliason gave my father more grief than Chet did. Paul did a lot of moping. You'd have thought he was born looking glum about it. Actually the case was that the previous winter, just before he was transferred to the English Creek district as my father's assistant ranger, Paul and his wife had gotten a divorce and she'd gone home to her mother in Seattle. According to what my father heard from Paul it was one of those things. She tried for a year to put up with being a Forest Service wife, but Paul at the time was bossing CCC crews who were building trail on the Olympic National Forest out in the state of Washington, and the living quarters for the Eliasons was a backcountry one-room cabin which featured pack rats and a cookstove as temperamental as it was ancient. Perfect circumstances to make an assistant ranger-city wife marriage go flooey if it ever ~~was~~ going to.

"He's starting to heal up," my father assessed Paul at this point of the summer. "Lord knows, I've tried to keep him busy enough he doesn't have time to feel sorry for himself."

If I rationed myself and didn't get in the way of business, my father didn't mind that I hung around in the ranger station. But there was a limit on how much I wanted to do that, too. Whenever something was happening--the lookouts up there along the skyline of

the Two calling in their reports to Chet in the belfry; my father tracing his finger over and over the map showing the pocket fires his smokecashers and fire guards already had dealt with--the station was a lively enough place to be. But in between those times, rangering was not much of a spectator sport.

Each day is a room of time, it is said. In that long hot remainder of August I knew nothing to do but go from one span of sun to the next with as little of rubbing against my parents as possible. My summer's work was done, they were at the zenith of theirs.

Consequently a good deal of my leisure or at least time-killing was spent along the creek. I called it fishing, although it didn't really amount to that. Fish are not dumb, they don't exert themselves to swallow a hook during the hot part of the day. So ~~until~~ until the trout showed any signs of biting I would shade up under ~~a~~ cottonwood, pull an old magazine from my hip pocket and read.

A couple of times each week, I would saddle Pony and ride up to Breed Butte to check on Walter Kyle's place, then fish the North Fork beaver dams on my way home. Walter's place was a brief hermitage for me on those visits. The way it worked was this. We and Walter were in the habit of swapping magazines, and after I had chosen several to take from the pile on his shelf, I would sit at his *and think matters over* kitchen table for a while before heading down to the beaver dams.

The low old ranch house of Walter Kyle's was as private a place

as could be asked for. To sit there at the table looking out the window to the south, down the slope of Breed Butte to the willow thickets of the North Fork and beyond to Grizzly Reef's crooked cliffs and the line of peaks into the Teton River country, was to see the earth empty of people. Just out of sight down the North Fork was our ranger station and only over the brow of Breed Butte the other direction was the old McCaskill homestead, now Hebnerized. But all else of this long North Fork coulee was vacancy. Not wilderness, of course. Scotch Heaven left traces of itself, a few homestead houses still standing or at least not quite fallen down, fencelines whose prime use now was for hawks to perch on. But any other breathing soul than me, no. The sense of emptiness all around made me ponder the isolation those early people, my father's parents among them, landed themselves into here. Even when the car arrived into this corner of the Two Medicine country, mud and rutted roads made going anywhere no easy task. To say nothing of what winter could do. Some years the snow here drifted up and up until it covered the fenceposts and left you guessing ^{the} its depth beyond that. It went without saying ^{No} that those homesteaders of Scotch Heaven did not know what they were getting into. But once in, how many cherished this land as their own, whatever its conditions? It is one of those matters hard to balance out. Distance and isolation create a freedom of sorts. The space to move in according to your own whims and bents. Yet it was exactly this freedom, this fact that a person was a speck on the

earth sea, that must have been too much for some of the settlers. From my father's stories and Toussaint Rennie's, I knew of Scotch Heavener who retreated into the dimness of their homestead cabins, and the worse darkness of their own minds. Others who simply got out, walked away from the years of homestead effort. Still others who carried it with them into successful ranching. Then there were the least lucky who took their dilemma, a freedom of space and a toll of mind and muscle, to the grave with them.

It was Alec who had me thinking along these heavy lines. Alec and his insistence on an independent life. Was it worth the toll he was paying? I could not give an absolute affidavit either way. What I did know for sure was that Alec's situation now had me in my own kind of bind. For if my parents could learn what a fizzle Alec's Double W job was, it might give them fresh determination to persuade him out of it. At very least, it might soften the frozen mood, put them and him on speaking terms again. But I had told Alec I'd say nothing to them about his situation. And his asking of that was the one true brother-to-brother moment between us since he left English Creek.

That's next thing to hopless, to spend your time wishing you weren't in the fix you are. And so I fished like an apostle, and read and read, and hung around the ranger station betweentimes, and eventually even came up with something else I wanted to do with myself. The magazines must have seeded the notion in me. In any

case, it was during those hot drifting last of August days that I proposed to my mother that I paper my bedroom.

She still was canning. Pole beans by now, I think. She tucked a wisp of hair back from where it had stuck to her damp forehead and informed me: "Wallpaper costs money." I never did understand why parents seem to think this is such startling news, that something a kid wants costs money. Based on my own experience as a youngster, the real news would have been if the object of desire was for free.

But this once, I was primed for that response from my mother. "I'll use magazine pages," I suggested. "Out of those old Posts and Collier's. There's a ton of pictures in them, Mom."

That I had thought the matter through to this extent told her this meant something to me. She quit canning and faced me. "Even so, it would mean buying the paste. But I suppose--"

I still had my ducks in a row. "No, it won't. The Heaneys have got some left over. I heard Genevieve say." Ray's mother had climaxed her spring cleaning that year by redoing the Heany front hall.

"All right," my mother surrendered. "It's too hot to argue. The next time anybody makes a trip to town, we'll pick up your paste."

I can be fastidious when it's worth being so. The magazine accumulation began to get a real going-over from me for illustrations worthy of gracing my sleep parlor.

I'd much like to have had western scenes, but do you know, I could not find any that were worth a damn. A story called Bitter Creek showed a guy riding with a rifle across the pommel of his saddle and some packhorses behind him. The packhorses were all over the scenery instead of strung together by rope, and there was every chance that the guy would blast his leg off by not carrying that rifle in a scabbard. So much for Bitter Creek. Then there was a story which showed a couple on horseback, which drew me because the pair made me think of Alec and Leona. It turned out, though, that the setting was a dude ranch, and the line under the illustration read: One Dude Ranch is a Good Deal Like Another. You Ride Horseback and You Overeat and You Lie in the Sun and You Fish and You Play Poker and You Have Picnics. All of which may be true enough, but I didn't think it interesting enough to deserve wall space.

No, the first piece of art I really liked was a color illustration in Collier's of a tramp freighter at anchor. And then I found a Post piece showing a guy leaning ^{on} the railing of another merchant vessel and looking across the water to a beautiful sailing ship. As the 'Inchcliffe Castle' Crawled Along the Coast of Spain, Through the Strait of Gibraltar, the Engineer Was Prey to a Profound Pre-occupation. This was more like it. A nautical decor, just what the room could use. I went ahead and snipped out whatever sea story illustrations I could find in the stack of magazines. I could see that there wasn't going to be enough of a fleet to cover the whole wall, but I ~~saw~~ ^{came} across a Mr. Moto detective series that went on

practically forever and so I filled in along the top of the wall with action scenes from that, as a kind of contrasting border.

When I was well launched into my paperhanging, Mr. Moto and various villans up top there and the sea theme beginning to fill in under, I called in my mother to see my progress.

"It does change the look of the place," she granted.

The evening of the 25th of August, a Friday, an electrical storm struck across western Montana and then moved to our side of the Continental Divide. It threw firebolts beyond number. At Great Falls, radio station KFBB was knocked off the air and power lines blew out. I would like to be able to say that I awoke in the big storm, so keen a weather wizard that I sat up in bed sniffing the ozone or harking to the first distant avalanche of thunder. The fact is, I snoozed through that electrical night like Sleeping Beauty.

The next morning, more than 200 new lightning fires were reported in the national forests of Region One.

Six were my father's. One near the head of the South Fork of English Creek. One at the base of Billygoat Peak. Two in the old Phantom Woman burn, probably snags alight. One in northwest behind Jericho Reef. And one up the North Fork at Flume Gulch.

The McCaskill household was in gear ^{before} ~~by~~ daybreak.

"Fire school never told us they come half a dozen at a time," muttered my father and went out to establish himself in the ranger station.

I stoked away the rest of my breakfast and got up to follow him. My mother half-advised and half-instructed, "Don't wear out your welcome." But she knew as well as anything that it would take logchains and padlocks to keep me out of the station with all this going on.

As soon as I stepped in I saw that Chet and Paul looked braced. As if they were sinners and this was the morning after, when they had to stand accountable to a tall red-haired Scotch preacher.

My father on the other hand was less snorty than he'd been in weeks. Waiting for the bad to happen was always harder for him than trying to deal with it once it did.

"All right," was all my father said to the pair of them, "let's get the guys to chasing these smokes." Chet started his switchboard work and the log of who was sent where at what time, Paul began assessing where he ought to pitch ⁱⁿ ~~in~~ person.

The day was not August's hottest, but hot enough. It was vital that all six plumes of smoke be gotten to as quickly as possible, before mid-day heat encouraged these smudges to become genuine fires. The job of smokechaser always seemed to me a hellish one, shuffling along a mountainside with a big pack on your back and then when you finally sighted or sniffed out the pocket of fire, using a shovel or a pulaski to smother it to death. All the while, dry trees

standing around waiting to catch any embers and go off like Roman candles.

No, where fire fighting of any sort was concerned I considered myself strictly a distant witness. Alec had done some, a couple of Augusts ago on the fireline against the Biscuit Creek blaze down on Murray Tomlin's ranger district at the south end of the Two, and as with everything else he showed a knack for it. But I did not take after my brother in that flame-eating regard.

It was mostly good news I was able to repeat to my mother when I visited the house for gingersnaps just past mid-morning. In those years the official Forest Service notion for fighting forest fires was what was called the 10 a.m. policy: gain control of a fire by 10 the morning after it's reported; if it's still out of hand by then, aim ~~and~~ for 10 the next morning and so on. Chet had ~~been able to~~ reported to headquarters in Great Falls, "We've got 10 a.m. control on four of ours"--the South Fork, Billygoat and the two Phantom Woman situations. All four were snag strikes, lightning gashing into a dead tree trunk and leaving it slowly burning, and the nearest fire guard had been able put out the South Fork smolder, the lookout man and the smokechaser stationed on Billygoat Peak combined to whip theirs, while the Phantom Woman pair of smokes were close enough together that the smokechaser who'd been dispatched up there managed to handle both. So those four now were history. Jericho Reef and Flume Gulch were actual blazes; small ones, but still alive and trying. A fire guard named Andy Ames and a smokechaser named Emil Kratka were on the Flume Gulch blaze. Both were new to that area of the Two, but my father thought well of them. "They'll stomp it if anybody can." Jericho Reef, so much farther back in the mountains, seemed more like trouble. Nobody wanted a backcountry fire getting underway in weather like this. Paul had nibbled on

the inside of his lips for a while, then suggested that he collect the CCC crew that was repairing trail on the North Fork and go on up to the Jericho Reef situation. My father told him that sounded right, and Paul charged off up there.

"Fire season in the Forest Service," said my mother. "There is nothing like it, except maybe St. Vitus' dance."

Ours was the only comparatively good news in the Two Medicine National Forest that Saturday. On his Indian Head district south of us Cliff Bowen had a fire away to hell and gone up in the mountains, under the Chinese Wall. A bunch of EFFs--emergency fire fighters, those were; casual labor who were signed on in a real pinch--were being sent from Great Falls, but it would take Cliff most of the day just to hike them up to his fire. "Gives me a nosebleed to think about fighting one up there," my father commiserated. And at Blacktail Gulch down by Sun River, Murray Tomlin was still scooting his smokechasers here and there to tackle a dozen snag strikes. The worst of the electrical storm must have dragged through Murray's district on its way to Great Falls.

"Sunday, the day of rest," was the mutter from my father as he headed to the ranger station the next morning.

Had he known, he would have uttered something stronger. It turned out to be a snake of a day. By the middle of the morning, Chet was telling Great Falls about 10 a.m. control on one of our

two blazes--but not the one he and my father expected. Jericho Reef was whipped, Paul and his CCs found only a quarter-acre ground fire there and promptly managed to mop it up. "Paul should have taken marshmallows," my father was moved to joke to Chet. Flume Gulch, though, had grown into something full-fledged. All day Saturday Kratka and Ames had worked themselves blue against the patch of flame, and by nightfall they thought they had it contained. But during the night a remnant of flame crawled along an area of rock coated with pine needles. Sunday morning it surfaced, touched off a tree opposite from where Kratka and Ames were keeping an eye on matters, and the fire then took off down a slant of the gulch into a thick stand of ~~lodgepole~~^{timber}. In a hurry my father yanked Paul and his CCs back from Jericho Reef to Flume Gulch, and I was killing time in the ranger station, late that morning, when Chet passed along the report Paul was phoning in from the guard cabin nearest Flume Gulch.

Thus I was on hand for those words of Paul's that became fabled in our family.

"Mac," Chet recited them, "Paul says the fire doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all."

"Is that a fact," said my father carefully, too carefully. Then it all came. "Kindly tell Mr. goddamn Eliason from me that it's his goddamn job to see to it that the goddamn fire DOESN'T keep burning, and that I--no, never mind."

My father got back his breath, and most of his temper. "Just tell Paul to keep at it, keep trying to pinch it off against a rock formation. Keep it corraled."

—

Monday made Sunday look good. Paul and his CC crew still could not find the handle on the Flume Gulch fire. They would get a fire-line almost built, then a blazing fir tree would crash over and come sledding down the gulch, igniting the next jungle of brush and windfall and tinder-dry timber. Or sparks would shoot up from the slope, find enough air current to waft to the other steep side of the gulch and set off a spot fire there. Ten a.m. came and went, with Paul's report substantially the same as his ones from the day before: not that much fire, but no sight of control.

My father prowled the ranger station until he about had the floor worn out. When he said something unpolite to Chet for the third time and started casting around for a fresh target, I cleared out of there.

The day was another scorcher. I went to the spring house for some cold milk, then in to the kitchen for a doughnut to accompany the milk down. And here my father was again, being poured a cup of coffee by my mother. As if he needed any more prowl fuel today.

My father mimicked Paul's voice: "'Mac, the fire doesn't look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all.' Jesus. How am I supposed to get through a fire season with help like that, I ask you."

"The same way you do every summer," suggested my mother.

"I don't have a pair of green peas as assistant and dispatcher, every summer."

"No, only about every other summer. As soon as you get them trained, Sipe or the Major moves them on and hands you the next fresh ones."

"Yeah, well. At least these two aren't as green as they were

a month ago. For whatever that's worth." He was drinking that coffee as if it was going to get away from him. It seemed to be priming him to think out loud. "I don't like it that the fire outjumped Kratka and Ames. They're a real pair of smokehounds, those guys. It takes something nasty to be too much for them. And I don't like it that Paul's CCs haven't got matters in hand up there yet either." My father looked at my mother as if she had the answer to what he was saying. "I don't like any of what I'm hearing from Flume Gulch."

"I gathered that," she said. "Do you want me to put you up a lunch?"

"I haven't said yet I'm going up there."

"You're giving a good imitation of it."

"Am I." He carried his empty coffee cup to the sink and put it in the dishpan. "Well, Lisabeth McCaskill, you are famous the world over for your lunches. I'd be crazy to pass one up, wouldn't I."

"All right then." But before starting to make his sandwiches, my mother turned to him one more time. "Mac, are you sure Paul can't handle this?" Which meant: are you sure you shouldn't let Paul handle this fire?

"Bet, there's nothing I'd like more. But I don't get the feeling it's being handled. Paul's been lucky on his other fires this summer, they both turned out to be weenie roasts. But this one isn't giving up." He prowled over to the window where Roman Reef and Phantom Woman

Peak could be seen. "No, I'd better get up there and have a look."

I didn't even bother to ask to go along. A counting trip or something else routine, that was one thing. But the Forest Service didn't want anybody out of the ordinary around a fire. Particularly if their sum of life hadn't yet quite made it to 15 years.

"Mom? I was wondering--" Supper was in the two of us, she had washed the dishes and I had dried, I could just as well have abandoned the heat of the house for an evening of fishing. But I had to rid myself of at least part of what had been on my mind the past weeks.

"I was wondering--well, about Leona."

Here was an attention-getter. My mother lofted a look and held it on me. "And what is it you've been wondering about Leona?"

"Her and Alec, I mean."

"All right. What about them?"

I decided to go for broke. "I don't think they're going to get married. What do you think?"

"I think I have a son in this kitchen who's hard to keep up with. Why are Alec and Leona tonight's topic?"

"It's not just tonight's," I defended. "This whole summer has been different. Ever since the pair of them walked out of here, that suppertime."

"I can't argue with you on that. But where do you get the idea the marriage is off?"

I thought about how to put it. "You remember that story Dode tells about Dad? About the very first time you and Dad started, uh, going together? Dad was riding over to call on you, and Dode met up with him on the road and saw Dad's clean shirt and shined boots and the big grin on him, and instead of 'Hello' Dode just asked him, 'Who is she?'"

"Yes," she said firmly. "I know that story."

"Well, Alec doesn't look that way. He did earlier in the summer. But when I saw him at the Double W that time, he looked like somebody had knocked the blossom off him. Like Leona had."

My mother was unduly slow in responding. I had been so busy deciding how much I could say, without going against my promise to Alec not to tell what a botch his Double W job was, that I hadn't realized she too was doing some deciding. Eventually her thoughts came aloud:

"You may have it right. About Leona. We're waiting to see."

She saw that I damn well wanted a definition of "we."

"Leona's parents and I. I saw Thelma Tracy the last time I was in town. She said Leona's mind still isn't made up, which way to choose."

"Choose?" I took umbrage on Alec's behalf. "What, has she been seeing some other guy, too?"

"No. To choose between marrying Alec and going on with her last year of high school, is what she's deciding. Thelma thinks school is gaining fast." She reminded me, as if I needed any: "It starts in a little over a week."

"Then what--what do you think will happen after that? With Alec, I mean. Alec and you and Dad."

"We'll just have to see in September. Your father still has his mad on about Alec throwing away college. For that matter, I'm not over mine either. To think, a mind like Alec's and all he wants to do Is Prance Around Like--" She caught herself. Then got back to her tone of thinking out loud: "And knowing Alec, I imagine he's still just as huffy as we are."

"Maybe"--I had some more careful deciding than ever, how to say this so as not to bring about something which would rile Alec even more--"maybe if you and Dad sort of stopped by to see Alec. Just dropped by the Double W, sort of."

"I don't see how it would help. Not until Leona and the college question are out of the way. Another family free-for-all won't improve matters. Your father and your brother. They'll have to get their minds off their argument, before anything can be done. So."

The "so" which meant, we have now put a lid on this topic. But she added, as it it would reassure me:

"We wait and see."

Say this for the Forest Service life, it enlarges your days. Not long after my mother and I were done with breakfast the next morning, the telephone rang. Everybody in a ranger's family knows the rings of all the lookout sites and guard cabins on the line. The signal was from the fire guard Ames's cabin, the one nearest

to Flume Gulch.

"Rubber that, will you, Jick," called my mother from whatever chore she was on elsewhere in the house. "Please."

I went to the wall phone and put the receiver to my ear.

Rubbering, which is to say listening in, was our way of keeping track of matters without perpetually traipsing back and forth between the house and the ranger station.

"Mac says to tell Great Falls there's no chance of controlling the fire by 10 today," Paul was reporting to Chet. "If you want his exact words, he says there isn't a diddling deacon's prayer of whipping it today." Even on the phone Paul's voice sounded pouty. My bet was, when my father arrived and took over as fire boss, Paul had reacted like a kicked pup.

"Approximate words will do, given the mood Mac's been in," Chet told Paul. "Anything else new, up there?"

"No" from Paul and his click of hanging up.

I relayed this, in edited form, to my mother. She didn't say anything. but with her, silence often conveyed enough.

When the same phone ring happened in late morning, I called out "I'll rubber."

This voice was my father himself.

~~orner~~
"It is an ~~son~~ sonofabitch," he was informing Chet. "Every time a person looks at it, it looks a little bigger. We better hit it hard. Get hold of Isidor and have him bring in a camp setup. And tell Great Falls we need fifty EFFs" I think I have said, EFFs were emergency fire

and a timekeeper for them.

fighters, guys scraped together and signed up from the bars and
~~and close to Helena~~
flopouses of Galena Street in Butte and Trent Avenue in Spokane
and First Avenue South in Great Falls.

"Say again on that EFF request, Mac," queried Chet. "Fifteen or fifty? One-five or five-oh?"

"Five-oh, Chet."

Pause.

Chet was swallowing on the figure. With crews of EFFs already on the Chinese Wall fire and the fires down in the Lewis and Clark forest, Two headquarters in Great Falls was going to greet this like the miser meeting the tax man.

"Okay, Mac," Chet mustered. "I'll ask for them. What else can I get you?" Chet could not have realized it, but this was his introduction to the Golden Rule of a veteran ranger such as my father when confronted with a chancy fire: always ask for more help than you think you'll need. Or as my father said he'd once heard it from a ranger of the generation before him: "While you're getting, get plenty."

"Grub," my father was going on. "Get double lunches in here for us today." Double lunches were pretty much what they sound like: about twice the quantity of sandwiches and canned fruit and so on that a working man could ordinarily consume. Fire fighters needed legendary amounts of food. "And get us a real cook for the camp by tonight. The CC guy we been using could burn water. I'm going to get some use out of him by putting him on the fireline."

"Okay," said Chet again. "The double lunches I'll get out of Gros Ventre, and I'll start working on Great Falls for the fifty men and a cook. Anything else?"

"Not for now," allowed my father. Then: "Jick. You there?"

I jumped, but managed: "Yeah?"

"I figured you were. How's your fishing career? Owe me a milkshake yet?"

"No, I didn't go ^{yesterday} last night."

"All right. I was just checking." A moment, then: "Is your mother around there?"

"She's out in the root cellar, putting away canning."

"Is she. Okay, then."

"Anything you want me to tell her?"

"Uh huh, for all the good it'll do. Tell her not to worry."

"I will if I want to," she responded to that. "Any time your father asks Great Falls for help, it's worth worrying about." She set off toward the ranger station. "At least I can go into town for the double lunches. That'll keep Chet free here. You can ride in with me."

While she was gone to apprise Chet, the Flume Creek fire and my father filled my mind. Trying to imagine what the scene must be. That campsite where my father and I, and Alec in the other summers, caught our fill of brookies and then lazed around the campfire, flames now multiplied by maybe a million. In the back of all our minds, my father's and my mother's and mine, we had known that unless the weather let up it would be a miracle not to have a fire somewhere on the Two. Montana weather, and a miracle. Neither one is anything to rest your hopes on. But why, out of all the English Creek district

of the Two Medicine National Forest, did the fire have to be there, in that extreme and beautiful country of Flume Gulch.

I heard the pickup door open and my mother call: "Jick! Let's go."

I opened the screen door and stepped from the kitchen. Then called back: "No, I think I'll just stay here."

From behind the steering wheel she sent me a look of surprise. "Do you feel all right?" That I would turn down a trip to town must be a malady of some sort, she figured.

"Yeah. But I just want to stay, and do some more papering on my room."

She hesitated. Dinnertime was not far off, her cookly conscience now was siding with her motherly one. "I thought we'd grab a bite at the Lunchery. If you stay, you'll have to fix your own."

"Yeah, well, I can manage to do that."

As I was counting on, she didn't have time to debate with me. "All right then. I'll be back as soon as I can." And the pickup was gone.

I made myself a headcheese sandwich, then had a couple of cinnamon rolls and cold milk. All the while, my mind on what I had decided, my eyes on the clock atop the sideboard.

Each day a room of time. Now each minute as slow as the finding and pasting of another page onto my bedroom wall in there.

I waited out the clock because I had to. It at last came up on the noon hour. The time to do it.

Out the kitchen door I went, sprinting to the ranger station. Just before coming around to its front, I geared myself down to what I hoped was my usual walking pace.

Chet was tipped back in a chair in the shade of the porch while he ate his lunch, as I'd counted on. Dispatchers are somewhat like gophers, they're holed up indoors so much they pop out into the air at any least chance.

"Hey there, Jick," I was greeted by Chet ~~and~~ ^{as} I sauntered onto the porch. "What's up? It's too blasted hot to move if you don't have to."

"I came to see if it's okay if I use the town line. I forgot to tell Mom something and I want to leave word for her at the Lunchery."

"Sure thing. Nothing's going on right now, you can help yourself. You should've just rung me, Jick. I'd have gone in and switched it for you." Uh-huh, and more than likely have stayed on and listened, as was a dispatcher's habit. Rubbering was something that worked both directions.

"No, that's okay, I didn't want to bother you. I won't need the line long." In I went to the switchboard and moved the toggle switch that connected the ranger station to the community ^{telephone} ~~line~~.

"When you're done," Chet said as I headed off the porch past him, "just ding the dealybob and I'll switch things back to our line."

"Right. Thanks, Chet. Like I say, I won't be long." I moseyed around the corner of the station out of Chet's sight, then

sped like hell back to our house.

Facing the phone, I sucked in all the breath I could, to crowd out my puffing and my nervousness about all that was riding on this idea of mine. Then I lifted the receiver, rang central in Gros Ventre, and asked to be put through to the Double W.

Onto the line came a woman's voice: "Hello?"

Perfect again: Meredice Williamson. I hadn't been sure what I was going to resort to if Wendell answered.

"'Lo, Mrs. Williamson. Can I--may I speak to Alec McCaskill in the bunkhouse, please? That is, would you ask him to go to the phone out at the bunkhouse? This is, uh, personal."

Down the line came the silence of Meredice Williamson pondering her way through the etiquette of yet another Two country situation. Maybe I would have been better off with Wendell's straight forward bluster. At last she queried: "Who is this, please?"

"This is Alec's brother Jick, I put Blanche and Fisheye in your barn that time, remember? And I'm sorry to call but I just really need to talk to--"

"Oh yes. Jack. I remember you well. But you see, Alec and the other men are at lunch--"

"Yeah, I figured that, that's why I'm calling right now."

--could I have him return your call afterward?"

"No, that'd be too late. I need to talk to him now, it's just that it's, like I said, private. Family. A family situation has come up. Arisen."

"I see. I do hope it's nothing serious?"

"It could get that way if I don't talk to Alec. Mrs. Williamson, look, I can't explain all this. But I've got to talk to Alec, while he's alone. Without the whole damn--without everybody listening in."

"I see. Yes. I think I see. Will you hold on, Jack?" As if from a great distance, I heard her say: "Alec, you're wanted on the phone. I wonder if it might be more convenient for you to answer it in the bunkhouse?"

Now a dead stretch of time. But my mind was going like a million. All of the summer to this minute was crowded into me. From that supper-time when Alec stomped out with Leona in tow, through all the days of my brother going his stubborn way and my parents going their stubborn one, through my times of wondering how this had come to be, how we McCaskills had so tangled our family situation; ~~now~~^{to}, when I saw just how to unknot it all. At last it was coming up right, the answer was about to dance within this telephone line--

Finally a voice from across the miles. "Jick? Is that you? What in the holy hell--"

"Alec, listen, I know this is kind of out of the ordinary."

"You're right about that."

"But just let me tell you all this, okay? There's a fire. Dad's gone up to it, at Flume Gulch--"

"The hell. None of that country's ever burned before."

"Well, it is now. And that's why I got hold of you, see. Alec, Dad's only help up there is Paul Eliason, and Paul doesn't know zero

about that part of the Two."

A void at the Double W bunkhouse. The receiver offered only the sounds within my own ear, the way a seashell does. At last Alec's voice, stronger than before, demanding: "Jick, did Dad ask you to call me? If so, why in all hell couldn't he do it him--"

"No, he didn't ask me. He's up on the fire, I just told you."

"Then who--is this Mom's idea?"

"Alec, it's nobody's damn idea. I mean, it's none of theirs, you can call it mine if it's anybody's. All that's involved, Dad needs somebody up there who knows that Flume Gulch country. Somebody to help him line out the fire crew."

"That's all, huh. And you figure it ought to be me."

I wanted to shout, why the hell else would I be on this telephone line with you? But instead carefully stayed to: "Yeah, I do. Dad needs your help." And kept unsaid too: this family needs its logjam of quarrel broken. Needs you and our father on speaking terms again. Needs this summer of separation to be over.

More of the seashell sound, the void. Then:

"Jick, no. I can't."

"Can't? Why not? Even goddamn Wendell Williamson'd let you off to fight a forest fire."

"I'm not going to ask him."

"You mean you won't ask him."

"It comes to the same. Jick, I just--"

"But why? Why won't you do this?"

"Because I can't just drop my life and come trotting home. Dad's got the whole damn Forest Service for help."

"But--then you won't do it for him."

"Jick, listen. No, I can't or won't, however you want to say it. But it's not because of Dad, it's not to get back at him or anything. It's--it's all complicated. But I got to go on with what I'm doing. I can't--" All these years later, I realize that here he very nearly said: "I can't give in." But the way Alec actually finished that sentence was: "I can't go galloping home any time there's a speck of trouble. If somebody was sick or hurt, it'd be different. But--"

"Then don't do it for Dad," I broke in on him, and I may have built up to a shout for this: "Do it because the goddamn country's burning up!"

"Jick, the fire is Dad's job, it's the Forest Service's job, it's the job of the whole crew they'll bring in there to Flume Gulch. It is not mine."

"But Alec, you can't just--" Here I ran out of argument. The dead space on the telephone line was from my direction now.

"Jick," Alec's voice finally came, "I guess we're not getting anywhere with this."

"I guess we're not."

"Things will turn out," said my brother. "See you, Jick." And

the phone connection ended.

It was too much for me. I stood there gulping back tears.

The house was empty, yet they were everywhere around me. The feel of them, I mean; the accumulation, the remembering, of how life had been when the other three of my family were three, instead of two against one. Or one against two, as it looked now. Alec. My mother. My father.

People. A pain you can't do without.

Eventually I remembered to ding the phone, signaling Chet that I was done with the town line. Done in, was more like it.

For the sake of something, anything, to do, I wandered to my bedroom and listlessly thumbed through magazines for any more sea scenes to put on the wall. Prey to a Profound Preoccupation, that was me.

at last

I heard the pickup arrive. Nothing else I did seemed to be any use in the world, maybe I at least had better see if my mother needed any help with the fire lunches she was bringing.

I stepped out the kitchen door to find that help already was on hand, beside her at the tailgate of the pickup. A brown Stetson nodded to me, and under it Stanley Meixell said: "Hullo again, Jick."

Civility was nowhere among all that crowded my brain just then. I simply blurted:

"Are you going up to the fire?"

"Thought I would, yeah. A man's got to do something to ward off frostbite."

My mother was giving Stanley her look that could peel a rock. But in an appraising way. I suppose she was having second thoughts about what she had set in motion here, by fetching Stanley from the Busbys' ranch, and then third thoughts that any possible help for my father was better than no help, then fourth thoughts about Stanley's capacity to be any help, and on and on.

"Do you want some coffee?" she suggested to Stanley.

"I better not take time, Bet. I can get by without it." The fact was, it would take more than coffee to make a difference on him. "Who's this dispatcher we got to deal with?"

My mother told him about Chet, Stanley nodded, and she and he headed for the ranger station. Me right behind them.

"Getting those lunches up there'd be a real help, all right," Chet agreed when my mother presented Stanley. But all the while he had been giving Stanley a going-over with his eyes, and it must be said, Stanley did look the worse for wear; looked as old and bunged-up and afflicted as the night in the cabin when I was rewrapping his massacred hand. In this instance, though, the affliction was not Stanley's hand but what he had been pouring into himself with it.

Not somebody you would put on a fire crew, at least if your name was Chet Barnouw and the responsibility was directly traceable to you. So Chet now went on, "But beyond you taking those up for us, I don't see how we can use--"

"How're you fixed for a hash slinger?" Stanley asked conversationally.

Chet's eyebrows climbed. "You mean it? You can cook?"

"He's A-number-one at it," I chirped in commemoration of Stanley's breakfast the morning of my hangover.

better

Chet needed ~~more~~ vouching than my notorious appetite. He turned to my mother. If ever there was a grand high authority on food, it was her. She informed Chet: "When Stanley says he can do a thing, he can."

"All right then," said Chet. "Great Falls more than likely would just dig out some wino fryhouse guy for me anyway." The dispatcher caught himself and cleared his throat. "Well, let's get you signed up here."

Stanley stepped over to the desk with him and did so. Chet looked down at the signature with interest.

"Stanley Kelley, huh? You spell it the same way the Major does."

My mouth flapped open. The look I received from my mother snapped it shut again.

All politeness, Stanley inquired: "The who?"

"Major Evan Kelley, the Regional Forester. The big sugar, over in Missoula. Kind of unusual, two e's in Kelley. You any relation?"

"None that I know of."

Chet went back in his belfry, and Stanley headed to the barn to rig up a saddle horse and ~~Brownie~~ ^{Homer} the ~~the~~ as a pack horse. Ordinarily

I would have gone along to help him. But I was shadowing my mother, all the way back to the house.

As soon as we were in the kitchen I said it.

"Mom? I've got to go with Stanley."

The same surprise as when I'd stepped up and asked to dance the Dude and Belle with her, that distant night of the Fourth. But this request of mine was a caper in a more serious direction. "I thought you'd had enough of Stanley," she reminded me, "on that camp-tending episode."

"I did. But that was then." I tried, for the second time this day, to put into words more than I ever had before. "If Stanley's going to be any help to Dad, I'm going to have to be the help to ~~know what he told me~~ Stanley. You ~~heard him~~, after the camp-tending. ^{When} He said he couldn't have got along up there without me. ~~There at the fire camp~~ Paul's going to be looking down his neck ~~all the time~~. The first time he catches Stanley with a bottle ^g ~~whole~~ he'll send him down the road." Plead is not a word I am ashamed of, in the circumstances. "Let me go with him, Mom."

She shook her head. "A fire camp is a crazyhouse, Jick. It wouldn't be just you and Stanley this time. They won't let you hang around--"

Here was my ace. "I can be Stanley's flunky. Help him with the cooking. That way, I'd be right there with him all the time."

Serious as all this was, my mother couldn't stop her quick sideways grin at the notion of me around food full-time. But then she

sobered. With everything in me, I yearned that she would see things my way. That she would not automatically tell me I was too young, that she would let me play a part at last, even just as chaperone, in this summer's stream of events.

Rare for Beth McCaskill, not to have an answer ready by now. By now she must have been on tenth and eleventh thoughts about the wisdom of having asked Stanley Meixell to go to Flume Gulch.

My mother faced me, and decided.

"All right. Go. But stay with Stanley or your father at all times. Do you Understand That? At All Times."

"Yes," I answered her. Any term of life as clear as that, even I could understand.

Stanley was my next obstacle.

"She said you can?" C-A-N, can?"

"Yeah, she did. You can go on in and ask her." I kept on with my saddling of Pony.

"No, I'll take your word." He rubbed the back of his right hand with his left, still studying me. "Going to a fire, though--you sure you know what you're getting into?"

Canada Dan and Bubbles and Dr. Al K. Hall in a tin cup had come into my life at the elbow of this man and he could stand there and ask me that?

I shot back, "Does anybody ever?
The squinch around Stanley's eyes let up a little. "There you
got a point. Okey-doke, Jick. Let's get to getting."

Up the North Fork road the summer's second Meixell-McCaskill
expedition set out, Stanley on a buckskin Forest Service gelding
~~the packhorse Homer with the load~~
named Buck, leading ~~Brownie with the packs~~ of lunches, and me behind
on Pony.

I still don't know how Stanley managed the maneuver, but by
the time we were past the Hebner place and topping the English Creek-
Noon Creek divide, the smoke rising out of the canyon of the North
Fork ahead of us, I was riding in the lead just as on our camp-tending
expedition. That the reason was the same, I had no doubt. I didn't
bother to look back and try to catch Stanley bugling a bottle, as
that was a sight I did not want to have to think about. No, I
concentrated on keeping us moving at a fast walk, at least as fast
as I could urge Pony's short legs to go.

Something was different, though. This time, Stanley wasn't
singing. To my surprise I missed it quite a lot.

Smoke in a straight column. Then an oblong haze of it drifting
south along the top of Roman Reef. The day's lone cloud, like a
roll of sooty canvas on a high shelf.

A quantity of smoke is an unsettling commodity. The human being does not like to think its environs are ~~in~~ flammable. My mother had the memory that when she was a girl at Noon Creek the smoke from the 1910 fires brought a Bible-toting neighbor, a homesteader, to the Reese doorstep to announce: "This is the wrath of God. The end of the world is come." Daylight dimming out to a sickly green color and no distinct difference between night and day, I suppose it would make you wonder.

That same 1910 smoke never really left my father. He must have been about twelve or thirteen then, and his memory of that summer when the millions of acres burned in the Bitterroot while the Two had its own long stubborn fire was the behavior of the chickens there at the family homestead on the North Fork. "Christamighty, Jick, by about noon they'd go in to roost for the night, it got so dark." The 1910 smoke darkness, and then the scarred mountainside of ^{later} Phantom Woman as a reminder; they stayed and stayed in my father, smears of dread.

Stanley too had undergone the 1910 smoke. In the cabin, he had told me of being on that fire crew on the Two fire west of Swift Dam. "Such as we were, for a crew. Everybody and his cousin was already fighting some other sonuvabitch of a fire, Bitterroot or somewhere else. We dabbed at it here as best we could, a couple of weeks. Yeah, and we managed to lose our fire camp. The wind come up and turned a flank of that fire around and brought it right into our camp. A thing I never will forget, Jick, all the canned goods blew up. That

was about all that was left when the fire got done with that camp,
a bunch of exploded goddamn tin cans."

All three of them, each with a piece of memory of that awful
fire summer. Of how smoke could multiply itself until it seemed
to claim the world.

Now that my father had stepped in as fire boss at Flume Gulch,
Paul Eliason was the camp boss. I will say, Paul was marshaling things
into good order. We rode in past a couple of CCs digging a toilet trench.
A couple of others were setting up the ~~council~~^{fire boss} tent, each of them
pounding in ~~the~~ tent pegs with the flat of an axe. The feed ground--
the kitchen area--already was built, and there we encountered Paul.

Paul still had an expression as if somebody big was standing on
his foot and he was trying to figure out what to say about it, but
he lost no time in sending one of the CCs off with ~~some~~^{Homer} and the
lunches to the fire crew. "Late is better than never," he rattled
off, as if he invented that. "Thanks for delivering, Jick," he next
recited, awarded Stanley a nod too, and started back to his ~~tent~~^{next}
~~target of inspection.~~^{construction.} ~~supervision,~~

"Paul," I managed to slow and turn him, "somebody here you got
to meet. This is Stanley, uh--"

--Kelley. Pleased to know you, ranger."

--and, and he's here to--" I finally found the inspiration I
needed: "Chet signed him on as your cook." Well, as far as it went,
that was true, wasn't it?

Paul studied this news. "I thought Chet told me he was going to have to get one out of Great Falls, and the chances didn't look real good even there."

"He must have had his mind changed," I speculated.

"Must have," Paul conceded. He looked Stanley over. "Have you ever cooked for a fire camp before?"

"No," responded Stanley. "But I been in a fire camp before, and I cooked before. So it adds up to the same."

"For crike's sake,
Paul stared. ~~Jesus~~, mister. Have you got any idea what it takes to cook for a bunch of fire fighters? They eat like--"

"Oh yeah," Stanley inserted, "and I almost forgot to tell you, I also've ate fire camp grub. So I been through the whole job, a little at a time."

"Uh huh," emitted from Paul, more as a sigh than an acknowledgment.

Stanley swung his gaze around the camp in interest. "Have you got some other candidate in mind for cook?"

as the devil
"No, no, I sure to Christ don't. I guess you're it. So the feed ground is yours, mister." Paul waved to the area where the cookstove and a work table and the big T table to serve from had been set up. "You better get at it. You're going to have CCs coming at you from down that mountain and EFFs coming up from Great Falls.

Figure supper for about 75." Paul turned to me. "Jick, I appreciate you getting those lunches up here. If you start back now, you'll be home well before dark."

"Well, actually, I'm staying," I informed Paul. "I can be Stanley's flunky. My mom said it's okay."

Possibly this was the first time a member of a fire crew ever arrived with an excuse from his mother, and it sure as hell was nothing Paul Eliason had ever dealt with before. Particularly from a mother such as mine. You could all but see the thought squatting there on his mind: what next from these damn McCaskills?

But Paul only said: "You sort that out with your father. He's the fire boss." And sailed off to finish worrying the camp into being.

Stanley and I began to tour our feed ground. The mule-loads of groceries and cooking gear Isidor Pronovost had brought in by packstring.

An open fire pit

and not far from it the stove. Both were lit and waiting, as if hinting that they ought to be in use. A long work table built of stakes and poles. And about twenty feet beyond it, the much bigger T-shaped serving table. I could see the principle: tin plates and utensils and bread and butter and so forth were to be stacked along the stem of the T, so the fire crew could file through in a double line--one along each side of the stem--to the waiting food at both arms of the T. The food, though. That I could not envision: how Stanley and I were going to manage, in the next few hours, to prepare a meal for 75 guys.

"So," Stanley announced. "I guess--"

This I could have completed in my sleep--"we got it to do."

The Forest Service being the Forest Service and Paul being Paul, there hung a FIRE CAMP COOK BOOK on a nail at the serving table. Stanley peered over my shoulder as I thumbed to the page titled

FIRST SUPPER, then ran my finger down that page to where it was

decreed: Menu--beef stew.

"Slumgullion," Stanley interpreted. "At least it ain't mutton."

Below the menu selection, instructing began in earnest: Place
large wash boiler, half full of water, on fire.

"Christamighty, Stanley, we better get to--" I began, before noticing the absence at my shoulder.

Over beside the packs of groceries, Stanley was leaning down to his saddlebags. Oh, Jesus. I could forecast the rest of that movement before it happened, his arm going in and bringing forth the whiskey bottle.

I don't know which got control of my voice, dismay or anger. But the message was coming out clear: "Goddamn it all to hell, Stanley, if you start in on that stuff--"

"Jick, you are going to worry yourself down to the bone if you keep on. Here, take yourself a swig of this."

"No, damn it. We got seventy-five men to feed. One of us has got to have enough damn brains to stay sober."

"I know how many we got to feed. Take a little of this in your mouth, just enough to wet your whistle."

When things start to skid they really do go, don't they. It wasn't enough that Stanley was about to begin a bender, he was insisting on me as company. My father would skin us both. My mother would skin whatever was left of me after my father's skinning.

"Just taste it, Jick." Stanley was holding the bottle out to

me, patient as paint.

All right, all goddamn right; I had run out of thinking space, all the foreboding in the world was in me instead; I would buy time by faking a little swig of Stanley's joy juice, maybe after putting the bottle to my lips like this I could accidentally on purpose drop the--

Water.

Yet not quite only water. I swigged a second time to be sure of the taste. Just enough whiskey to flavor it faintly. If I'd had to estimate, perhaps a finger's worth of whiskey had been left in the bottle before Stanley filled it with water.

"It'll get me by," Stanley asserted. He looked bleak about the prospect, and said as much. "It's worse than being weaned a second time. But I done it before, a time or two when I really had to. Now we better get down to cooking, don't you figure?"

"The Forest Service must of decided everything tastes better with tin around it," observed Stanley as he dumped into the boiler eight cans each of tomatoes and peas.

"Sounds good to me right now," I said from where I was slicing up several dozen carrots.

"You got time to slice some bread?" Stanley inquired from where he was stirring stew.

"Yeah." I was tending a round boiler in which twelve pounds

of prunes were being simmered for dessert, but figured I could dive back and forth between tasks. "How much?"

"This is the Yew Ess Forest Service, remember. How ever much it says in the book."

I went and looked again at the FIRST SUPPER page.

Twenty loaves.

BB

"Jick, see what it says about how much of this sand and snoose to put in the stew," Stanley requested from beside the wash boiler, a big box of salt in one hand and a fairly sizable one of pepper in the other.

"It doesn't."

"It which?"

"All the cook book says is: Season to taste."

"Aw, goddamn."

My right arm and hand felt as if they'd been slicing for years. I remembered I was supposed to set out five pounds of butter to go with the bread. Stanley now was the one at the cook book, swearing steadily as he tried for ~~the~~^a third time to divine the proportions of salt and pepper for a wash boiler of stew.

"What's it say to put this butter on?"

His finger explored along the page. "Pudding dishes. You got time to start the coffee after that?"

"I guess. What do I do?"

"Fill two of ~~these~~^{them} halfbreed boilers in the creek--"

All afternoon Paul had been going through the camp at such a pace that drinks could have been served on his shirtpail. But he gave Stanley and me wide berth until he at last had to pop over to tell us the fire crew was on its way in for supper.

He couldn't help eyeing us dubiously. I was sweaty and bedraggled, Stanley was parched and bedraggled.

"Mind if I try your stew?" Paul proposed. I say proposed, because even though Paul was camp boss it was notorious that a cook coming up on mealtime had to be handled with kid gloves.

This advantage must have occurred to Stanley, because he gave Paul a flat gaze, stated "If you're starving to death, go ahead--I got things to do" and royally strode over to the work table where I was.

We both watched over our shoulders like owls, though. Paul grabbed a spoon, advanced on the stew tub, dipped out a dab, blew on it, tasted. Then repeated. Then swung around toward us. "Mister, you weren't just woofing. You can cook."

Shortly the CCs streamed into camp, and Stanley and I were dishing food onto their plates at a furious rate. A day on a fire line is ash and sweat, so these CCs were not exactly fit for a beauty contest. But they were at that brink of manhood--~~and~~^{most} of them about Alec's age--where energy recovers in a hurry. In fact, their appetites recuperated instantly. Some CCs were back on line for seconds before we'd finished serving everybody a first helping.

Paul saw how swamped Stanley and I were with the serving, and sent two of his CC camp flunkies to take over from us while we

fussed with reheating and replenishment. The fifty emergency fire fighters from Great Falls were yet to come.

So was my father. I had seen him appear into the far end of camp, conferring with Kratka and Ames, now his fireline foremen, and head with them to the ~~council~~ ^{*}~~office~~ tent. He wore his businesslike look. Not a good sign.

I was lugging a resupply of prunes to the T table when I glanced into the grub line and met the recognition of my father, his hand in mid-reach for a tin plate.

For a moment he simply tried to register that it was me standing before him in a flour sack apron.

"Jick! What in the name of hell are you doing here?"

"'Lo, Dad. Uh, I'm being the flunkey."

"You're--" That stopped not only my father's tongue but all other parts of him. He stood rooted. And when I sunk in, so to speak, he of course had to get his mind to decide who to skin alive for this, Paul or Chet.

"Mom said I could," I put in helpfully.

This announcement plainly was beyond mortal belief, so now my father had definite words to express to me. "You're going to stand there with your face hanging out and tell me your mother--" Then the figure at the stove turned around to him and ^{he} saw that behind this second flour sack apron was Stanley.

"Hullo, Mac," Stanley called out. "I hope you like slumgullion. 'Cause that's what it is."

"Jesus H.--" My father became aware of the audience of CCs piling up behind him in the grub line. "I'm coming around there, you two. You better have a story ready when I arrive."

Stanley and I retreated to the far end of the kitchen area while my father marched around the T table to join us. He arrived aiming huffy looks first to one of us and then the other, back and forth as if trying to choose between targets.

"Now," he stated. "Let's hear it."

"You're kind of on the prod, Mac," observed Stanley. "You don't care that much for ~~slumgullion~~, huh?"

"Stanley, goddamn you and your slumgullion. What in the hell are the pair of you doing in this fire camp?"

Stanley was opening his mouth, and I knew that out of it was going to drop the reply, "Cooking." To head that off, I piped: "Mom figured you could use our help."

"She figured what?"

"She wouldn't have sent us"--adjusting the history of my inception into the trip with Stanley and the lunches--"if she hadn't figured that, would she? And what's the matter with our cooking?" Some CCs were back in line for third helpings, they didn't seem to lack appreciation of our cuisine.

I noticed something else. My father no longer was dividing huffy looks between Stanley and me. He was locked onto Stanley. My presence in this fire camp was not getting my father's main attention.

As steadily as he could, after his afternoon of drought and wholesale cookery, Stanley returned the scrutiny. "Mac," he said, in that rasped-over voice from when my father and I first met him on the trail that day of June, "you're the fire boss. You can put the run on us anytime you want. But until you do, we can handle this cooking for you."

My father at last said: "I'm not putting the run on anybody. Dish me up some of your goddamn slumgullion."

It was getting dusk when the EFFs arrived into camp like a ragtaggle army. These men were drift, straight from the saloons and flophouses of First Avenue South in Great Falls, and they more than looked it. One guy even had a beard. Supposedly a person couldn't be hired for emergency fire fighting unless he owned a stout pair of shoes, but of course the same passable shoes showed up on guy after guy in the signup line. Most of these EFFs now were shod in weary leather, and hard-worn blue jeans if they were ranch hands, and bib pants if they were gandy dancers or out-of-work smeltermen from Black Eagle. Motley as they looked from the neck down, I paid keener attention to their headgear. There was a legend in the Forest Service that a fire boss once told his signup man in Spokane: "Send me thirty men if they're wearing Stetsons, or fifty if they're wearing caps." Most of these EFFs at least were hatted--they were used to outdoor work, were not city guys except for recreational purposes.

I remember that this time, Stanley and I were lugging another boiler of coffee to the T table. For I damn near dropped my end when a big guy leaned out of the back of the grub line, peered woozily toward me, then yelled in greeting:

"Hey, Jick!"

Wisdom Johnson had not advanced conspicuously far on his plan to head for the redwood country for the winter. As soon as Stanley and I got the boiler situated on the table, I hustled to the back of the grub line to shake hands with Wisdom.

"That First Avenue South," he marveled. "That's just quite a place."

Uh huh, I thought. And Bouncing Betty is quite a guide to it.

What my first night in a fire camp was like, I can't really tell you. For when Stanley and I at last were done washing dishes, I entered my sleeping bag and that is the last I know.

Breakfast, though. If you have not seen what six dozen fire fighters will consume for breakfast, the devastation may shock you. It did me, after I awoke to the light of a gas lantern and Stanley above it half-croaking, "Picnic time again, Jick."

Whack off 150 slices of ham for frying. Mush, two 16-quart round boilers of water and 4 pounds of oatmeal into each. Milk for the mush, 15 tall cans of Sego mixed with the same of water. Potatoes to make fried spuds--thank the Lord, we had just enough of the canned variety so that I didn't



have to start peeling. Fill two more halfbreed boilers for coffee, slice another codle of bread, open 7 cans of jam.

Enough grub to feed China, it looked to me like. But Stanley viewed matters and shook his head.

"Better dig out a half dozen of those fruitcakes, Jick, and slice them up."

I still blink to think about it, but only crumbs of those fruitcakes were left when that crew was done.

— That morning, my father put his fire fighters to doing everything that the Forest Service said should be done in such a battle. Fire-line was being dug, snags were being felled, wherever possible the flames were being pinched against Flume Gulch's rocky outcroppings. One saving grace about a fire burning its way down a north slope is that it usually comes slowly, and my father's crews were able to work close, right up against the face of the fire. On the other hand, Flume Gulch truly was a bastardly site to have to tackle. The fire had started at the uppermost end of the gulch, amid a dry tangle of windfall, and was licking its way down through jungly stands of Douglas fir and alpine fir and an understory of brush and juniper and more windfall-- "heavy fuel," as it's called. Burning back and forth on the gulch's steep sides as a falling flaming tree or a shower of sparks would ignite the opposite wall of forest. So in a sense, in a kind of slow sloshing pattern the fire was advancing right down the trough of nature's

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version of a flume, aiming itself into the creekside trees along the North Fork and the high grassy slope opposite the gulch. And all the forested country waiting beyond that slope.

To even get to the fire my father's men had to climb up the face of the creek gorge into the gulch, and once there they had to labor on ground which sometimes tilted sharply ahead of them



and sometimes tilted sideways but always tilted. At breakfast I had heard one of the CCs telling the EFFs that Flume Gulch was a spraddledy-ass damn place.^H Besides being high and topsy-turvy the fire battle^C ground was hot and dry, and my father designated Wisdom Johnson to be the Flume Gulch water cow. What this involved was making trips along the fire^C line with a 5-gallon water pack on his back, so that the thirsty men could imbibe a drink from the pack's nozzle--the tit. "I thought I had done every job there was," claimed Wisdom, "but I never hit this one."

About mid-morning when he came down from the gulch to refill, Wisdom brought into camp my father's message for Paul. Paul read it, shook his head, and hustled down the trail to phone it on to Chet at the ranger station.

"What'd it say?" I pumped Wisdom before he could start back up with his sloshing water pack.

"'No chance 10 a.m. control today,'" Wisdom quoted. Then added his own view of the situation in Flume Gulch: "Suffering Jesus, they're a thirsty bunch up there."

"A lot of Great Fall nights coming out through the pores," Stanley put in piously from the work table where he and I next were going to have make double lunches for the 75 fire fighters. Which, the cook book enlightened us, amounted to 150 ham sandwiches, 150 jam sandwiches, and 75 cheese sandwiches.

" Slice the meat about four slices to the inch," I read in

a prissy voice. " Slice the bread about two slices to the inch.

Christamighty, they want us to do everything by the measurement
and then don't provide us any damn thing to measure with."

"Your thumb," said Stanley.

"My thumb what?"

"Your thumb's a inch wide. Close enough to it, anyhow. Go by
that. The forest Service has got a regulation for everything up to
and including how to swat a mosquito with your hat. Sometimes,
though, it don't hurt to swat first and read up on it later."

My thumb and I set to slicing.

At noon, Paul and his pair of camp flunkies and Stanley and
Wisdom and I lugged the sandwiches and canned fruit and pork and
beans up to the fireline.

I had grown up hearing of forest fires. The storied fire
summers, Bitterroot, Phantom Woman, Selway, this one, they amounted
to a Forest Service catechism. Yet here, now, was my first close
view.

Except for the smoke boiling in ugly fashion into the sky, the
scene was not as awful as you might expect. Orange flames were
a dancing tribe amid the trees, and the fire fighters were a rippling
line of shovelers and axmen and sawyers as they tried to clear any-
thing ~~flammable~~^{combustible} from in front of the fire. But then when you got
over being transfixed by the motions of flame and men, the sense of
char hit you. A smell like charcoal, the black smudge of the burned

forest behind the flames. And amid the commotion of the fireline
too--
work, the sounds of char,~~burning~~ the flames crackling, and ~~the~~
continual snap of branches breaking as they burned, and every so
often a big roar of flame as a tree crowned out.

What told me most about the nature of a forest fire was one
~~single tree, a low scrawny sapling at that.~~ young Douglas fir
It had managed
to root high up within a crack in one of the gulch's rock formations,
and as I was gawking around trying to register everything, I saw
that tree explode. Spontaneously burst into flames, there on its
stone perch so far from any other foliage or the orange feather-
edge of the fire itself.

I found my father and read his face. Serious but not grim. He
came over to my pack of sandwiches and plowed into one. I glanced
around to be sure Paul wasn't within hearing, then said: "It doesn't
look that bad. It just keeps burning, is all."

He had to grin at that. "That's about the case. But I think
there's a chance we can kick it in the pants this afternoon. Those
First Avenuers are starting to get their legs under them. They'll
get better at fireline work as the day goes on." He studied the sky
above Roman Reef as if it would answer what he said next. "What we
don't need is any wind."

To shift himself from that topic, my father turned to me.

"How about you? How you getting along?"

"Okay. I never knew people could eat so much, though."

"Uh huh. Speaking of which, pass me another sandwich, would
you." Even my father, conscientiously stoking food into himself.
It was as if the fire's hunger for the forest had spread an epidemic
of appetite among us as well.

My father watched Stanley divvy sandwiches out to a nearby bunch of EFFs. "How about your sidekick there?"

"Stanley's doing real good." Then the further answer I knew my father was inviting: "He's staying dry."

~~Uh-huh.~~ "Uh-huh. Well, that's news. When he does get his nose in the bottle, you let me know. Or let Paul know if I'm not around. We got to have a cook. One'll have to be fetched in here from somewhere when Stanley starts a bender."

"If he does," I agreed because of all that was involved, "I'll say so."

Through the afternoon I flunkied for Stanley. Hot in that base camp, I hope never to suffer a more stifling day. It was all I could do not to wish for a breath of breeze.

Stanley too was sweating, his shirt dark with it. ~~This would~~
~~teach him to joke about other drinkers' pores.~~

And he looked in semi-awful shape. Agonized around the eyes, the way he had been when Bubbles butchered his hand. What bothered me more than his appearance, though, he was swigging oftener and oftener at the bottle.

As soon as Stanley went off to visit nature I got over there to his saddle pack, yanked the bottle out, and sipped.⁹ It still was water with a whiskey trace. Stanley's craving thirst was for the trace rather than the water, but so far he hadn't given in.

This lifted my mood. As did the continuing absence of wind. I was predicting to Stanley, "I'll bet they get the fire whipped."

"Maybe so, maybe no," he responded. "Where a forest fire is concerned, I'm no betting man. How about peeling me a tub of spuds when you get the chance."

"Stanley, I guess this isn't exactly any of my business, but-- have you seen Velma? Since the Fourth?"

"Now and then."

"Yeah, well. She's quite--quite a lady, isn't she?"

"Quite a one."

"Uh huh. Well. So, how are you two getting along?"

Stanley flexed his hand a time or two, then went back to cutting bacon. Tonight's main course was a casserole--if you can do that by the tubful--of macaroni and canned corn and bacon slices. "We've had some times," he allowed.

Times with Velma Simms. Plural. The gray eyes, the pearl-buttoned ears, those famous rodeo slacks, in multiple. Sweat was already rolling off me ~~that morning~~, but this really opened the spigots. I went over to the water bucket and splashed a handful on my face and another on the back of my neck.

Even so, I couldn't help resuming the topic. "Think anything will come of it?"

"If you mean permanent, nope. Velma's gave up marrying and I never got started. We both know there's a season on our kind of

entertainment." Stanley slabbed off another half dozen slices of bacon, I peeled away at a spud. "But a season's better than no calendar at all, is what I've come to think." He squinted at the stacked results of his bacon slicing. "How many more hogs does that recipe call for?"

I was still peeling when the casualty came down from the gulch.

He was one of the CCs, half-carried and half-supported by two others. Paul hurried across the camp toward them, calling: "How bad did he get it?"

"His cawlehbone and awm," one of the helping CCs answered. New York? Philadelphia? Lord only knew what accent any of the CC guys spoke, or at least I sure didn't.

"Get him on down to the trailhead," Paul instructed the bearers. Then summoned ~~his best flunkie~~ ^{the timekeeper}: "Tony, you'll have to drive the guy in to the doc in Gros Ventre."

A ^{limb of a} falling snag had sideswiped the injured CC. This was sobering. I knew enough fire lore to realize that if the snag had found the CC's head instead of his collarbone and arm, he might have been on his way to the undertaker rather than ~~the doctor~~ ^{to Doc Spence.}

As yet, no wind. Calm as the inside of an oven, and as hot. I wiped my brow and resumed peeling.

"What would you think about going for a stroll?"

This proposal from Stanley startled me. By now, late afternoon, he looked as if it took 99% of his effort to stay on his feet, let alone put them into motion.

"Huh? To where?"

His head and Stetson indicated the grassy slope of Rooster Mountain above us, opposite the fire. "Just up there. Give us a peek at how things are going."

I hesitated. We did have our supper fixings pretty well in hand. But to simply wander off up the mountainside--

"Aw, we got time," Stanley told me as if he'd invented the commodity. "Our stepdaddy"--he meant Paul, who was down phoning Chet the report of the injured CC--"won't be back for a while."

"Okay, then," I assented a little nervously. "As long as we're back here in plenty of time to serve supper."

I swear he said it seriously: "Jick, you know I'd never be the one to make you miss a meal."

I thought it was hot in camp. The slope was twice so. Facing south as it did, the grassy incline had been drinking in sun all day, not to mention the heat the forest fire was putting into the air of this whole area.

"Yeah, it's a warm one," Stanley agreed. I was watching him with ~~concern~~. The climb in the heat had tuckered me considerably. How Stanley could navigate this mountainside in his bent-knee fashion--more than ever he looked like a born horseman, grudging the fact of

ground--was beyond me.

Except for a few scrubby ~~jackpine~~^s peppered here and there, the slope was shadeless until just below its summit where the ~~ledgepole~~⁵ forest overflowed from this mountain's north side. Really there weren't many trees even up there because of the rocky crest, the rooster comb. And Stanley and I sure as hell weren't going that high anyway, given the heat and steepness. So it was a matter of grit and bear it.

Stanley did lean down and put a hand flat against the soil of the slope as if he intended to sit. I was not surprised when he didn't plop himself down, for this sidehill's surface was so tropical I could feel its warmth through the soles of my boots.

"Looks to me like they're holding it," I evaluated the fire scene opposite us. Inasmuch as we were about halfway up our slope, we were gazing slightly downward on Flume Gulch and the fire crew. Startling ~~near~~^{near} how close that scene seemed; these two sides of the North Fork vee truly were sharp. Across there in the gulch we could see the smoke pouring up, a strange rapid creation to come from anything as deliberate as this downhill fire; and close under the smoke column, the men strung out along the fireline. Even the strip of turned earth and cleared-away debris, like a long wavy stripe of garden dirt, that they were trying to pen the fire with--even that we could see. In a provident moment I had snagged a pair of binoculars from the office tent before Stanley and I set off on our climb, and with them I could pick out individuals. I found my father and Kratka in conference near the center of the fireline. Both of them stood in that peering way men do up a sidehill, one foot advanced and the opposite arm crooking onto a hip. →

They looked like they could outwait any fire.

The dry grass creaked and crackled under my feet as I stepped to hand the binoculars to Stanley. He had been gandering here, there and elsewhere around our slope, so I figured he was waiting to use the glasses on the actual fire.

"Naw, that's okay, Jick. I seen enough. Kind of looks like a forest fire, don't it?" And he was turning away, starting to shuffle back down to the fire camp.

When the first fire fighters slogged in for supper, my father was with them. My immediate thought was that the fire was whipped: my father's job as fire boss was done.

As soon as I could see ~~their~~ faces, I knew otherwise. The fire fighters looked done in. My father looked pained.

I told Stanley I'd be right back, and went over to my father.

"It jumped our fireline," he told me. "Three places."

"But how? There wasn't any wind."

"Like hell. What do you call that whiff about 4 o'clock?"

"Not down here," I maintained. "We haven't had a breath all afternoon. Ask Stanley. Ask Paul."

My father studied me. "All right. Maybe down here, there wasn't any. But up there, some sure as hell came from somewhere. Not much. Just enough." He told me the story. Not long after Stanley and I took our look at things from the slope, with the afternoon starting to cool away from its hottest, most dangerous time, a quick south wind came along Roman Reef and caught the fire. "The whole east flank made a run like gasoline had been poured on it. Jumped our fireline like

nothing and set off a bunch of brush. We got there and corralled it. But while we were doing that, it jumped in another place. So we got to that one, got that one held. And in the meanwhile, goddamned if it didn't jump one more time." That one flared and took off, a stand of fir crowning into orange flame. "I had to pull the crew away from that flank. Too damn dangerous. So now we've got ourselves a whole new fire, marching right down the mountain. Tomorrow we're going to have to hold the sonofabitch here at the creek. Damn it all to hell anyway."

#

My father did fast damage to his plateful of supper and went back up to the fire. He was keeping Kratka's crew on ~~watch~~ patrol at what was left of fire^{line} until the cool of the evening would damper the flames.

Ames's gang of CCs and EFFs meanwhile were ready to dine. Ready and then some. "Hey, Cookie!" one among them yelled out to Stanley. "What're you going to founder us on tonight?"

"Soupa de bool-yon," Stanley enlightened him in a chefly accent of some nature. "Three buckets of water and one on-yon." Actually the lead course was vegetable soup, followed by the baconized macaroni and corn, and mashed potatoes with canned milk gravy, and rice pudding, and all of it tasted just heavenly if I do say so myself.

Dark was coming on by the time Stanley and I went to the creek to fill a boiler with water as a headstart toward breakfast.

From there at creekside, the fire lay above us to the west.

A few times in my life I had seen Great Falls at night from one of its hills. The forest fire reminded me of that. A city alight in the dark. A main avenue of flame, where the live edge of the fire was advancing. Neighborhoods where rock formations had isolated stubbornly burning patches. ~~Hundreds of~~ Single spots of glow where snags and logs still blazed.

"Pretty, ain't it," Stanley remarked.

"Well, yeah, I guess. If you can call it that."

"Tomorrow it'll be just an ugly sonuvabitch of a forest fire. But tonight, it's pretty."

My father had come back into camp and was waiting for Paul to arrive with the phone report from Chet. As soon as Paul showed up, my father was asking him, "How's Ferragamo?" Joseph Ferragamo was the CC the falling snag had sideswiped.

"The doc splinted him up, then took him to the hospital in Conrad. Says he'll be okay." Paul looked wan. "A lot better off than some, anyway."

"How do you mean?" my father wanted to know.

Paul glanced around to make sure none of the fire crew were within earshot. "Mac, there've been two CCs killed, over on the west-side fires. One on the Kootenai, and one on the Kaniksu fire. Snags got both of them."

My father said nothing for a little. Then: "I appreciate the report, Paul. Round up Ames and Kratka, will you. We've got to

figure out how we're going to handle this fire tomorrow."

My father and Paul and the pair of crew foremen took lanterns and headed up the creek to look over the situation of tomorrow morning's fireline. My father of course knew the site backwards and forwards but the hell of it was, to try to educate the others in a hurry and in the dark. I could not help but think it: if Alec--

At their bed ground some of the fire crew already were oblivious in their sleeping bags, but a surprising many were around campfires, sprawled and gabbing. The climate of the Two. Roast you all day in front of a forest inferno, then at dark chill you enough to make you seek out fire.

While waiting for my father, I did some wandering and exercising of my ears. I would like to say here and now that these fire fighters, elderly from 18-year-old CCs to the most ~~elderly~~ denizen among the First Avenue South EFFs, were earnestly discussing how to handle the Flume Gulch fire. I would like to say that, but nothing would be farther from the truth. Back at the English Creek ranger station, on the wall behind my father's desk was tacked one of those carbon copy gags that circulate among rangers:



Subjects under discussion during one summer (timed by stopwatch)
 by U.S. Forest Service crews, trail, fire, maintenance and
 otherwise.

	<u>Percent of Time</u>
Sexual stories, experiences and theories.....	37%
Personal adventures in which narrator is hero.....	23%
Memorable drinking jags.....	8%
Outrages of capitalism.....	8%
Acrimonious remarks about bosses, foremen and cooks..	5%
Personal adventures in which someone not present is the goat.....	5%
Automobiles, particularly Fords.....	3%
Sarcastic evaluations of Wilson's war to end war.....	2%
Sarcastic evaluations of ex-President Coolidge.....	2%
Sarcastic evaluations of ex-President Hoover.....	2%
Sears Roebuck catalogue versus Montgomery Ward catalogue.....	2%
The meteorological outlook.....	2%
The job at hand.....	1%

From what I could hear, that list was just about right.

—

Stanley I had not seen for a while, and it crossed my mind that he may have had enough of the thirsty life. That he'd gone off someplace to jug up from an undiluted bottle.

But no, when I at last spied my father and his fire foremen and Paul returning to camp and then heading for the tent to continue their war council, I found Stanley in that same vicinity. Looking neither worse nor better than he had during our day of cooking.

Just to be sure, I asked him: "How you doing?"

"Feeling dusty," he admitted. "Awful dusty."

My father spotted the pair of us and called over: "Jick, you hang on out here. We got to go over the map, but it won't take too long." Into the tent he ducked with Paul, Kratka and Ames following.

"You want me to go get your sipping bottle?" I offered to Stanley, referring to the one of whiskey-tinged water in his saddlebag.

"Mighty kind," replied Stanley. "But it better wait." And before I could blink, he was gone from beside me and was approaching the tent where my father's war council was going on.

Stanley stuck his head in past the flap door of the tent. I heard:

"Can I see you for part of a minute, Mac?"

"Stanley, it's going to have to wait. We're still trying to dope out our fire~~line~~ line for the morning."

"That fire~~line~~ line is what it's about."

There was a moment of silence in the tent. Then Paul's voice:

"For crying out loud! Who ever heard of a fire camp where the cook gets to put in his two bits' worth? Mister, I don't know who the devil you think you are, but--"

"All right, Paul," my father umpired. "Hold on." There was a moment of silence, which could only have been a scrutinizing one. My father began to say: "Stanley, once we get this--"

"Mac, you know how much it takes for me to ask."

A moment again. Then my father: "All right. There's plenty of night ahead. We can stand a couple of minutes for me to hear what Stanley has to say. Paul, you guys go ahead and map out how we can space the crews along the creek bottom. I won't be long." And bringing one of the gas lanterns out he came, giving Stanley a solid looking-over in the white light.

Side by side the two of them headed out of earshot of the tent. Not out of mine, though, for this I was never going to miss. They had gone maybe a dozen strides when I caught up with them.

The three of us stopped at the west end of the camp. Above us the fire had on its night face yet, bright, pretty. No hint whatsoever of the grim smoke and char it showed by day.

"Mac, I'm sorry as all hell to butt into your war council, there. I hate to say anything about procedure. Particularly to you. But--"

"But you're determined to Stanley, what's on your mind?"

"The idea of tackling the fire down here on the creek, first thing in the morning." Stanley paused. Then: "Mac, my belief is that's not the way to go about it."

"So where would you tackle it?"

Stanley's Stetson jerked upward, indicating the slope of grass across the North Fork from us. "Up there."

Now in the lantern light it was my father's eyes that showed ~~squint~~
the hurtful ~~quint~~ Stanley's so often did.

The thought repelled him. The fire doubling its area of burn:
~~blackened~~
both sides of the North Fork gorge ~~black~~ instead of one. More than that--

~~over~~
"Stanley, if this fire gets loose ~~on~~ the slope and up into that next timber, it can take the whole goddamn country. It can burn for miles." My father stared up at the dim angle of slope, but what was in his mind was 1910, Bitterroot, Selway, Phantom Woman, all the smoke ghosts that haunt a fire boss. "Christamighty;" he said softly, "it could burn until snowfall."

Jerking his head around from that thought, my father said: "Stanley, don't get radical on me here. What in the hell makes you say the fireline ought to be put up there on the mountain?"

"Mac, I know you hate like poison to see any inch of the Two go up in smoke. I hated it, too. But if you can't hold the fire at the base of the gulch, it's gonna break out onto the slope anyway."

"The answer there is, I'm supposed to hold it."

"Supposed to is one thing. Doing it's another."

"Stanley, these days we've got what's called the 10 a.m. policy. ~~The Forest Service~~
~~Mazoola~~ got religion about all this a few years ago. The Major told us, 'This approach to fire suppression will be a dividend-payer.'

So the rule is, try to control any fire by 10 the next morning."

"Yeah, rules are rules," agreed Stanley. Or seemed to agree, for I had heard my father any number of times invoke the second part of this ranger station catechism: "And fools are fools."

My father pulled out a much-employed handkerchief, wiped his eyes, and blew his nose. Among the aggravations of his day was smoke irritation.

"All right, Stanley," he said at last. "Run this by me again.
damn
You're saying, give the fire the whole ~~dem~~ slope of Rooster Mountain?"

"Yeah, more or less. Use the morning to backfire in front of that rocky top." Backfiring is when you deliberately burn an area ahead of a fire, to rob its fuel. It has to be done just right, though, or you've either wasted your time or given the fire some more flame to work with. "Burn in a fireline up there that Hell itself couldn't jump." Stanley saw my father was still unconverted. "Mac, it's not as nasty a place as this gorge."

"Christamighty, I can't pick places to fight a fire by whether they're nasty or not."

"Mac, you know what I mean." Stanley spelled it out for my father anyway. "That slope is dry as a torch. If you put men down in this gorge and the fire sets off that slope behind them too, you're going to be sifting piles of ashes to find their buttons."

I could see my father thinking it: nothing in the behavior of the Flume Gulch fire to date supported Stanley's picture. If anything, this slow downhill fire was almost too slow, staying up there in wicked

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terrain and burning when and where it pleased. He and his crews had been able to work right up beside the fire, it was the geography they couldn't do anything about. True, the fire's behavior could all change when it reached the gorge, but--"I can't see how the fire could set off the slope across this much distance," my father answered slowly.

"I can," Stanley said back.

Still stubborn as a government mule against the notion of voluntarily doubling the size of the Flume Gulch burn, my father eyed back up at the slope of Rooster Mountain. "Hell, what if we're up there merrily backfiring and the fire doesn't come? Goes down this gorge instead and around that slope? Then's when we'll have a bigger mess on our hands."

"That's a risk," admitted Stanley. "But my belief is it's a worse risk to tackle that fire down in here,^{Mac.} Up there you'd have a bigger fireline. And rocks instead of men to help stop it."

My father considered some more. Then said: "Stanley, I'd rather take a beating than ask you this. But I got to. Are you entirely sober?"



"Sorry to say," responded Stanley, "I sure as hell am."

"He is," I chimed in.

My father continued to confront Stanley. I could see that he had more to say, more to ask.

But there I was wrong. My father only uttered, "The slope is something I'll think about," and set off back to the tent.

Stanley told me he was going to turn in--"This cooking is kind of a strenuous pastime"--and ordinarily I would have embraced bed myself. But none of this was ordinary. I trailed my father to the war council once more, and heard him say as soon as he was inside the tent:

"Ideas don't care who their daddies are. What would you guys say about this?" And he outlined the notion of the fireline atop the slope.

They didn't say much at all about it. Kratka and Ames already had been foxed once by the Flume Gulch fire, no need for them to stick their necks out again. After a bit my father said: "Well, I'll use it all as a pillow tonight. Let's meet here before breakfast. Meantime, everybody take a look at that slope on the map."



Paul's voice finally came. "Mac, can I see you outside?"

"Excuse us again, gents."

Out came my father and Paul, again I made sure to catch up before the walking could turn into talking.

At the west edge of the camp Paul confronted my father. "Mac, whichever way you decide on tackling this fire, I'll never say a word against you. But the fire record will. You can't get around that. If you don't have the crew down here to take the fire by its face in the morning, Sipe is going to want to know why. And the Major--if this fire gets away ~~over~~^{down the gorge and around} that slope, they'll sic a board of review on you. Mac, they'll have your hide."

My father weighed all this. And at last said: "Paul, there's another if. If we can kill this fire, Sipe and the Major aren't going to give one good goddamn how we did it."

Paul peered unhappily from the flickering cracks in the night on the Flume Gulch side of us, to the dark bulk of the slope on our other. "You're the fire boss," he said.

I am not sure I slept at all that night. Waiting, breath held, any time I imagined I heard a rustle of wind. Waiting for the morning, for my father's fireline decision. Waiting.

"Christamighty, Stanley. Twenty loaves again?"

"Milk toast instead of mush to start with this morning, Jick," confirmed Stanley from the circle of lantern light where he was peering down into the cook book. "Then after the bread, it's Place

20-quart half-oval

20 cans of milk and the same of water in a 13-quart boiler--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Let me get the damn slicing done first."

My father and Ames were the first ones through the breakfast line. Ames's men had come off the fireline earliest last night, so they were to be the early ones onto it this morning. Wherever that fireline was going to be.

I was so busy flunkying that it wasn't until a little break after Ames's men and before Krataka's came that I could zero in on my father. He and Ames brought their empty plates and dropped them in the dishwash tub. My father scrutinized Stanley, who was lugging a fresh heap of fried ham to the T table. Stanley set down the ham and met my father's regard with a straight gaze of his own. "Morning, Mac. Great day for the race, ain't it?"

My father nodded to Stanley, although whether in hello or agreement it couldn't be told. Then he turned to Ames. "Okay, Andy. Take your gang up there to the top and get them started digging the control line for backfiring." And next my father was coming around the serving table to where Stanley and I were, saying: "Step over here, you two. I've got something special in mind for the pair of you."

Shortly, Wisdom Johnson came yawning into the grub line. He woke up considerably when my father instructed him that the tall, tall slope of Rooster Mountain, just now looming up in the approach of dawn, was where his water duty would be today.

"But Mac, the fire's over here, it ain't up there!"

"It's a new theory of fire fighting," my father told him.

"We're going to do it by mail order."

Kratka's men were soon fed. It transpired that my father himself was going to lead this group onto the slope and ~~supervise~~ ^{in lighting the} show them where he ~~wanted backfires lit~~.

First, though, he called Paul Eliason over. I heard him instruct: "Have Chet tell Great Falls the same thing as yesterday--'No chance 10 a.m. control today.'"

"Mac," Paul began. "Mac, how about if I at least wait until toward that time of morning to call it in? I don't see any sense in advertising what--what's going on up here."

My father leveled him a stare that made Paul sway back a little. "Assistant ranger Eliason, do you mean to say you'd delay information to headquarters?"

Paul gulped but stood his ground. "Yeah. In this case, I would." "Now you're talking," congratulated my father. "Send it in at 5 minutes to 10." My father turned and called to the crew waiting to go up the mountain with him. "Let's go see a fire."

"Stanley, this makes me feel like a coward."

"You heard the man."

~~well past~~
It was almost mid-afternoon, the sweltering heart of so hot a day. The rock formation we were perched on might as well have been a stoked stove. Pony and the buckskin saddlehorse were tethered

in the shade of the trees below and behind us, but they stood there drooping even so.

Stanley and I were chefs in exile. This rock observation point of ours was the crown-shaped formation ~~on~~ above the line cabin where the two of us sheltered during our camptending shenanigan. How long ago it seemed since I was within those log walls, bandaging Stanley's hand and wishing I was anywhere else.

I had heard the man. My father, when he herded the pair of us aside there at breakfast and decreed: "I want you two out of here this afternoon. You understand?" If we did, Stanley and I weren't about to admit it. My father the fire boss spelled matters out for us: "If the wind makes up its mind to blow or that fire takes a turn for some other reason, it could come all the way down the gorge into this camp. So when you get the lunches made, clear out of here."

"Naw, Mac," Stanley dissented. "It's a good enough idea for Jick to clear out, but I--"

"Both of you," stated my father.

"Yeah, well," I started to put in, "Stanley's done his part, but I could just as well--"

"Both of you," my father reiterated. "Out of here, by noon."

The long faces on us told him he still didn't have Stanley and me convinced. "Listen, damn it. Stanley, you know what happened the last argument you and I had. This time, let's just don't argue." Then, more mild: "I need you to be with Jick, Stanley."

Stanley shifted the way he was standing. Did so again. And finally came out with a quiet "Okey-doke, Mac," and headed back to his cookstove.

My father did not have to labor the point to me. I knew, and nodded it to him, that the other half of what he had just said was that I was needed to be with Stanley. But he stopped me from turning away to my flunky tasks.

"Jick," he said as if this had been stored up in him for some time. "Jick, I can't risk you." His left eyelid came down as he forced a grin to accompany ~~the last of~~ his words: "You've earned a grandstand seat this afternoon. Lean back and watch the event."

Thus here we were. Simmering in safety on this rock outlook, barbecued toes our only peril. At our angle, the fire camp at the mouth of the gorge was in sight but Flume Gulch and the fire itself were just hidden, in behind the end of Roman Reef that towered over us. The cloud of smoke, though, told us the fire was having itself a big time.

The grass slope of Rooster Mountain lay within clear view. A tan broad ramp of grass. If Pat Hoy had had Dode Withrow's sheep in a scattered graze there they would have been plain to the unaided

eye. In fact, at first it puzzled me that although even my father agreed this rock site was a healthy enough distance behind the fire for Stanley and me, the slope seemed so close. Eventually I figured out that the huge dark dimension of the smoke made the distance seem foreshortened.

I had snagged the binoculars again from the ~~council~~ ^{spice} tent, and every few minutes I would squat--as with the slope yesterday at this time, our island of stone was too damn hot to sit on--and prop my elbows on my knees to steady the glasses onto the fireline work.

The brow of the slope, between its rocky top and the grass expanse stretching down to the North Fork, by now resembled a reflection of the devastation in Flume Gulch opposite it. All morning until about 10 o'clock, when the day began to get too hot for safe backfiring, my father's men little by little had blackened that area. First they trenched the control line along the ridgetop, then the careful, careful burning began. Four or five feet wide at a time, a strip of grass was ignited and let to burn ^{back} uphill into the bare control line. When it had burned itself out, the next strip below it was lit. Down and down, the barrier of scorch was built that way, the dark burn scar at last inflicted across the entire upper part of the slope. And even yet at the edge of the forest atop the skyline, crews were cutting down any trees which stood too close behind the backfired fireline, other teams were hauling the combustible foliage a safe distance into the rocks and timber. My father's men were doing their utmost up there to deny the Flume Gulch fire anything to catch hold of and burn when it came. If it came.

Even Stanley now and again peered through the binoculars to the fireline preparation. He wasn't saying anything, though, except his

appraisal when we climbed onto the sun-cooked rock: "Hotter than dollar chili, ain't it?"

The event, as my father called it. Can you believe--it took me by total surprise. After all that waiting. All that watching, anticipating. The human being is the world's most forecasting damn creature. Yes, my imagination had the scene ready as if it were a dream I'd had twenty nights in a row, how the fire at last would cross from Flume Gulch and pull itself up out of the gorge of the North Fork onto the slope, vagrant ribbons of flame at first and then bigger fringes and at last a great ragged orange length climbing toward the fireline where my father's men waited to battle it in any way they could.

Instead, just this. Nothing seemed imminent yet, the smoke still disclosed the fire as only approaching the creek gorge. Maybe just brinking down onto the height between the gulch and the gorge, would have been my guess. I deemed that the next little while would start to show whether the fire preferred the gorge or Stanley's slope. So I did not even have the binoculars to my eyes, instead was sleeving the sweat off my forehead. When Stanley simply said: "There."

From both the gorge and the bottom of the slope the fire was throwing up smoke like the chimneys of hell. So much smudge and smear, whirling, thickening, that the slope vanished behind the billowing cloud. It scared me half to death, this smoke eclipse.

The suck of fear that went through me, the sweat popping out on the backs of my hands as I tried to see through smoke with binoculars. I can never--I want never--to forget what went through

me then, as I realized what would be happening to my father and his fire crew if they had been in the gorge as the avalanche of fire swooped into it. The air itself must be cooked, down in there.

Then this. The smoke, all of it, rose as if a windowblind was being lifted. Sixty, eighty feet, I don't know. But the whole mass of smoke lifted that much. Stanley and I could look right into the flames, abruptly they were as bright and outlined as the blaze in a fireplace. The fire already had swarmed across the gorge and was stoking itself with the grass of the lower slope. Just as clear as anything, that aggregation of flame with the smoke curtained so ~~well~~ obligingly above it, as much fire as a person could imagine seeing at once. And then, it awes me to even remember it, the fire crazily began to double, triple--multiply impossibly. I was told later by Wisdom Johnson: "Jick, this is the God's truth, a cool wind blew over us right then, down into that fire." A wedge of air, it must have been, hurling itself under that furiously hot smoke and flame. And that air and those flames meeting--the fire spewed up across the slope in an exploding wave, a tide. The crisp tan grass of the slope, going to orange and black. In but a minute or two, gone.

The smoke closed down again, boiled some more in a gray heavy way. But then there began to be clefts in the swirl, thinnings, actual gaps. The binoculars now brought me glimpses of men spaced along the backfired fireline and the rock summit of the slope, stomping and swatting and shoveling dirt onto flame wherever it tried to find fuel enough to catch.

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But more and more, sentrylike watching instead of fire combat. Watching the flamestorm flash into collision with the backfired barrier or the rock comb of Rooster Mountain, and then dwindle.

These years later, I wish I could have those next minutes back to makings. Could see again that slope battle, and our fire camp that the sacrifice of the slope had saved. Could know again the



rise of realization, the brimming news of my eyes, that the Flume Gulch fire steadily was quenching itself against my father's fireline, Stanley Meixell's fireline.

I couldn't speak. For some time after, even. My mouth and throat were as dry as if parched by the fire. But finally I managed:

"You knew the slope would go like that."

"I had the idea it might," was as much as Stanley would admit. "Superheated the way it was, from both the fire and the sun."

He looked drained but satisfied. I may have, too.

"So," Stanley said next. "We better go get to work on goddamn supper."

—

Dusk. Supper now behind us, only the dishes to finish. My father came and propped himself against the worktable where Stanley and I were dishwashing. "It went the way you said it would," he said to Stanley, with a nod. Which passed for thanks in the complicated system of behavior between these two men. Then my father cleared his throat, and after a bit asked Stanley if he could stand one more day of cooking while the fire crew policed smoking snags and smolder spots tomorrow, and Stanley replied Yeah, cooking wasn't all that much worse anyway than dealing with sheepherders.

I broke in:

"Tell me the argument."

Nothing, from either of these two.

I cited to my father from when he directed Stanley and me to clear out of the fire camp: "The last argument you and Stanley had, whenever the hell it was." I had searched all summer for this. "What was that about?"

My father tried to head me off. "Old history now, Jick."

"If it's that old, then why can't I hear it? You two--I need to know. I've been in the dark all damn summer, not knowing who did what to who, when, where, any of it. One time you send me off with Stanley, but then we show up here and you look at him like he's got you spooked. Damn it all to hell anyway"--I tell you, when I do get worked up there is not much limit. "What's it all about?"

Stanley over his dishwater asked my father: "You never told him, huh?" My father shrugged and didn't answer. Stanley gazed toward me. "You ^{folks} never enlightened you on the topic of me?"

"I just told--No. No, they sure as hell haven't."

"McCaskills," Stanley said with a shake of his head, as if the name was a medical diagnosis. "I might of known you and Bet'd have padlocks on your tongues, Mac."

"Stanley," my father tried, "there's no need for you to go into all that."

"Yeah, I think there is." I was in Stanley's gaze again. "Phantom Woman," he began. "I let that fire get away from me. Or at least it got away. Comes to the same--a fire is the fire boss's responsibility, and I was him." Stanley turned his head to my father. Then to me again. "Your dad had come up from his Indian Head district to be a fireline foreman for me. So he was on hand when it happened. When Phantom Woman blew up across that mountain-side." Stanley saw my question. "Naw, I can't really say it was the

same as happened on that slope today. Timber instead of grass, different this and that--every goddamn fire I ever been around is different from every other goddamn fire. But anyhow, up it blew, Phantom Woman. Flames everywhere, all the crew at my flank of the fireline had to run out of there like singed cats. Run for their lives. It was just a mess. And then that fire went and went and went." Stanley's throat made a dry swallow. "Burned for three weeks. So that's the history of it, Jick. The blowup happened at my flank of the fireline. It was over that that your dad and I had our"--Stanley faced my father--"disagreement."

My father looked back at Stanley until it began to be a stare. Then asked: "That's it? That's what you call the history of it?"

Stanley's turn to shrug.

My father shook his head. Then uttered:

"Jick, I turned Stanley in. For the Phantom Woman fire."

"Turned him in? How? To who?"

"To headquarters in Great Falls. Missoula. The Major. Anybody I could think of, wouldn't you say, Stanley?"

Stanley considered. "Just about. But Mac, you don't--"

"What," I persisted, "just for the fire getting away from him?"

"For that and--" My father stopped.

"The booze," Stanley completed. "As long as we're telling, tell him the whole of it, Mac."

"Jick," my father set out, "this goes back a long way. Longer than you know about. I've been around Stanley since I was what,

sixteen, seventeen?

"Somewhere there," Stanley confirmed.

"There were a couple of years in there," my father was going on, "when I--well, when I wasn't around home much. I just up and pulled out for a while, and Stanley--"

"Why was that?" This seemed to be my main chance to see into the McCaskill past, and I wanted all the view I could get. "How come you pulled out?"

My father paused. "It's a hell of a thing to have to say, after all this with Alec. But my father and I, your grandfather--we were on the outs. Not for anything like the same reason. He did something I couldn't agree with, and it was just easier all around, for me to stay clear of the homestead and Scotch Heaven for a while. Eventually he got over it and I got over it, and that's all that needs to said about that episode." A pause. This one, I knew, sealed whatever that distant McCaskill father-son ruckus had been. "Anyway, Stanley took me on. Started me here on the Two, giving me any seasonal job he could come up with. I spent a couple of years that way, until we went into the war. And then after, when I was the association rider and your mother and I had Alec, and then you came along--Stanley suggested I take the ranger test."

I wanted to hear history, did I. A headful was now available. Stanley had been the forest arranger, the one who set up the Two Medicine National Forest. Stanley had stood in when my father was on the outs with his father. Stanley it had been who urged this

father of mine into the Forest Service. And it was Stanley whom my father had--

"It never was any secret Stanley liked to take a drink," I was hearing the elaboration now. "But when I started as ranger at Indian Head and he still was the ranger at English Creek, I started to realize the situation was getting beyond that. There were more and more days when Stanley couldn't operate without a bottle at his side. He still knew more about the Two than anybody, and in the normal course of events I could kind of keep a watch on things up here and catch any problem that got past Stanley. We went along that way for a few years. Nobody higher up noticed, or at least minded. But it's one thing to function day by day, and another to have to do it during a big fire."

"And Phantom Woman was big enough," Stanley quietly dropped into telling my father's ~~tell~~ of it all.

Something was adding up in a way I didn't want it to. "After Phantom Woman. What happened after Phantom Woman?"

Stanley took his turn first. "Major Kelley tied a can to me. 'Your employment with the U.S. Forest Service is severed,' I believe is how it was put. And I been rattling around ever since, I guess." He glanced at my father as if he had just thought of something further to tell him. "You remember the couple times I tried the cure, Mac. I tried it a couple more, since. It never took."

"But you got by okay here," I protested. "You haven't had a real drink all the time we've been cooking."

"But I'll have one the first minute I get back to the Busbys'," Stanley forecast. "And then a couple to wash that one down. Naw, Jick. I know myself. I ought to, I been around myself long enough." As if to be sure I accepted the sum of him, Stanley gave it flatly: "In a pinch, I can go dry for as long as I did here. But ordinarily, no. I got a built-in thirst."

Now my father. "I never expected they'd come down on Stanley that hard. A transfer, some rocking chair job where the drinking wouldn't matter that much--something to get him off the English Creek district. I couldn't just stand by and see both him and the Two country go to hell." The expression on my father: I suppose here was my first inkling that a person could do what he thought was right and yet be never comfortable about it. He shook his head over what had to be said next, erasing the inquiry that had been building in me. "You know how the Major is. Put up or shut up. When he bounced Stanley, he handed me English Creek. I wanted it run right, did I? Up to me to do it." My father cast a look around the fire camp, into the night where no brightness marked either Flume Gulch or the slope. "And here I still am, trying to."

Again that night, I was too stirred up for sleep. Turning and turning in the sleeping bag; the question beyond reach of questioner; the two similar figures crowding my mind, they and my new knowledge of them as awake as the night.

Up against a decision, my father had chosen the Two country over his friend, his mentor, Stanley.

~~against~~
Up ~~again~~ a decision, my brother had chosen independence over my father.

Rewrite my life into one of those other McCaskill versions and what would I have done in my father's place, or my brother's? Even yet I don't know. I do not know. It may be that there is no knowing until a person is in so hard a place.

All that next morning my father had Kratka's crew felling suspicious snags in the burnt-over gulch and creek bottom, and Ames's men on the slope to patrol for any sign of spark or smudge amid that char that had been grass. Mop-up work was all this amounted to--a couple of days of it needed to be done after a fire this size, just to be on the safe side-- and at lunch my father said he was thinking about letting ~~most~~ ^{half} of the EFFs go back to Great Falls tonight. He predicted, "The thanks I'll get is that headquarters will want to know why in holy hell I didn't get them off the payroll last night."

Stanley and I recuperated from the lunch preparation and gradually started on supper, neither of us saying anything worthwhile.

When the hot part of the afternoon had passed without trouble, even my father was satisfied that the Flume Gulch fire was not going ~~to rise~~ ^{leap} from its black grave.

He came into camp ^{early} with the ~~rest of the EFFs~~ "Paul, the show is all yours," he delegated. "After supper you can have the CCS with one load break the camp." "I'm going to head into Gros Ventre now with the of these guys, and Tony"--the timekeeper--"can haul the rest. Have Chet tell Great Falls to send a truck up and get them from there, would you."

~~Rest of these EFFs. Chet can tell Great Falls to get them from there.~~

"And Paul," my father checked his assistant as Paul started off phone the Chet.
~~to pass orders to the~~ "Paul, it was a good camp."

I was next on my father's mental list. "Jick, you might as well come in with me. Stanley can leave Pony off on his ride home."

Plainly my father wanted my company, or at least my presence.

"Okay," I said. "Let me tell Stanley."

My father nodded. "I'll go round up Wisdom. He's somewhere over ~~pickups~~ there bragging up Bouncing Betty to the CCs. Meet us down at the ~~truck~~."
1

The ride to town, my father driving and Wisdom and I beside him one pickup and the other pickup load of EFFs behind us, in the cab of ~~the truck~~, was mostly nickel and dime gab. Our route was the Noon Creek one, a handier drive from the fire camp than backtracking over to English Creek. Reminiscent exclamations from Wisdom when we passed the haystacks of the Reese place. Already the stacks were turning from green to tan. Then my father eyeing around the horizon and thinking out loud that August sure as hell ought to be done with heat and lightning by now. More than that, I have no memory of. The fact may even be that I lulled off a little, in the pickup motion of that ~~truck~~ cab.

When we had goodbyed Wisdom and the other EFFs, my father and I grabbed a quick supper in the Lunchery. Oyster stew never tasted better, which is saying a lot. Before we could head home, though, my father said he had to ~~stop~~ by the Gleaner office. "Bill is going to want all the dope about the fire. It may take a little while. You want me to pick you up at Ray's after I'm done?" I did.

—

St. Ignatius St. was quiet, in the calm of suppertime and just after, except for one series of periodic whirrs. Which proved to be Ray pushing the lawn mower around and around the Heaney front yard. Behind him, Mary Ellen was collecting the cut grass with a lawn rake bigger than she was.

I stepped into the yard and propped myself against the giant cottonwood, in its shadowed side. Busy as Ray and Mary Ellen were, neither saw me. Myself, I was as tired as I have ever been, yet my mind was going like a million.

After a minute I called across the lawⁿ to Ray: "A little faster if you can stand it."

His grin broke out, and from the far corner of the yard he came pushing the lawn mower diagonally across to me, somehow making in the back of his throat the clackaclackaclacka sound of a horse-drawn hay mower.

"Ray-ay!" protested Mary Ellen at his untidy shortcut across the lawn. But then here she came, raking up after him.

"What do you think?" Ray asked when he reached the tree and me. "Had I better bring this out to Pete's next summer and make hay with you?"

"Sounds good to me," I said. "But that's next summer. I want to know where this one went to." The light in the Heaney kitchen dimmed out, another one came on in the living room, then the murmur of Ed's radio. 7 p.m., you could bank on it. I thought back to my last visit to this household you could set your clock by, when I

pulled in from the Double W and the session with Alec, that first Saturday night of the month. "It's been a real quick August."

"Quicker than you know," advised Ray. "Today is September. School's almost here."

"The hell. I guess I lost some days somewhere." Three more days and I would be 15 years old. Four more days and Ray and Mary Ellen and I would be back in school. It didn't seem possible. Time is the trickiest damn commodity. The sound of Ed Heaney's radio in there should have been what I was hearing the night of the Fourth of July, not almost to Labor Day. Haying and supper at the Double W and the phone call to Alec and the forest fire and the revelations from Stanley and my father, all seemed as if they should be yet to happen. But they were the past now, in my mind like all that history in Toussaint's and Stanley's.

"Can we feed you something, Jick?" Ray asked in concern. "You look kind of hard used."

"Dad and I ate uptown," I said. "And he'll be here any minute. But I suppose I could manage to--"

Just then the front porch screen door opened and Ed Heaney was standing there. We all three looked at him in curiosity because with the screen door open that way he was letting in moths, which was major disorderly conduct for him. I will always see Ed Heaney in that doorway of light, motionless there as if he had been pushed out in front of a crowd and was trying to think of what to say. At last he did manage to bring out words, and they were these:

"Ray, Mary Ellen, you better come in the house now. They've started another war in Europe."

"We'll be in it inside of six months," was one school of thought when Europe went to war in September of 1939, and the other refrain ran, "It's their own scrap over there, we can just keep our nose out this time." But as ever, history has had its own say and in a way not foretold--at Pearl Harbor last Sunday, in the flaming message of the Jap bombs.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner

Dec. 11, 1941

All the people of that English Creek summer of 1939 — they stay on in me even though so many of them are gone from life. You know how when you open a new book for the first time, its pages linger against each other, pull apart with a reluctant little separating sound. They never quite do that again, the linger or the tiny sound. Maybe it can be said that for me, that fourteenth summer of my existence was the new book and its fresh pages. My memories of those people and times and what became of them, those are the lasting lines within

the book, there to be looked on again and again, whenever the mood of wonder asks to.

My mother was the earliest of us to get word of Pearl Harbor on that first Sunday of December, 1941. The ^{tele} phone rang, she answered it, and upon learning that the call was from Two Medicine National Forest headquarters in Great Falls she began to set them straight on the day of the week. When told the news from Hawaii she went silent and held the receiver out for my father to take.

In a sense Alec already had gone to the war by then. At least he was gone, with the war as a kind of excuse. For when the fighting started in Europe and the prospect for cattle prices skyrocketed, Wendell Williamson loaded up on cattle. Wendell asked Alec to switch to the Deuce W, his ranch down in the Highwood Mountains, as a top hand there during this build-up of the herd. Just after shipping time, mid-September of 1939, Alec went. It may come as no vast surprise that he and Leona had unraveled by then. She had chosen to start her last year of high school, Alec was smarting over her decision to go that way instead of to the altar, and my belief is that he grabbed the Deuce W job as a way to put distance between him and that disappointment.

I saw Leona the day of the Gros Ventre centennial, several years ago now. She is married to a man named Wright and they run a purebred Hereford ranch down in the Crazy Mountains country. The beauty still

shines out of Leona. Ranch work and the riding she does have kept her in shape, I couldn't help noticing. But one thing did startle me. Leona's hair now is silvery as frost.

She smiled at my surprise and said: "Gold to silver, Jick. You've seen time cut my value."

Left to my own devices, I would not tell any further about Alec. Yet my brother, his decisions, the consequences life dealt him, always are under that summer and its aftermath like the paper on which a calendar is printed.

Before he enlisted in the Army the week after Pearl Harbor, Alec did come back to Gros Ventre to see our parents. Whether reconciliation is the right amount of word for that visit I don't really know, for I was on a basketball trip to Browning and a ground blizzard kept those of us of the Gros Ventre team there overnight. So by the time I got back, Alec had been and gone. And that last departure of his from English Creek led to a desert in Tunisia. How stark it sounds; yet it is as much as we ever knew. A Stuka finding that bivouac at dusk, swooping in and splattering 20-millimeter shells. Of the cluster of soldiers who were around a jerry can drawing their water rations, only one man lived through the strafing. He was not Alec.

So. My last words with my brother were those on the telephone when I tried to talk him into going to the Flume Gulch fire. I do

have a hard time forgiving life for that.

Ray Heaney and I went together to the induction station ~~in~~^{at} Missoula in September of 1942, about a week after my eighteenth birthday. And we saw each other during basic training at Fort Lewis out in Washington. In the war itself, though, we went separate ways. Ray spent a couple of years of fighting as a rifleman in Italy and somehow came through it all. These days Ray has an insurance agency over in Idaho, at Coeur d'Alene, and we keep in touch by Christmas card.

I wound up in a theater of World War Two that most people don't even know existed, the Aleutians campaign away to hell and gone out in the northern Pacific Ocean off Alaska. Those Aleutian islands made me downgrade the wind of the Two country. There is not a lot else worth telling in my warrior career, for early in our attack on Cold Mountain I was one of those ~~we~~^{who} got an Attu tattoo--a Jap bullet in my left leg, breaking the big bone not far above the ankle. Even yet on chilly days, I am reminded down there.

When the Army eventually turned me loose into civilian life I used my G.I. bill to study forestry at the university in Missoula. Each of those college summers I worked as a smokejumper for the Forest Service, parachuting out of more airplanes onto more damn forest fires than now seems sane to me. And in the last of those smokejumping summers I began going with a classmate of mine at the university, a young woman from there in the Bitterroot country. The

day after graduation in 1949, we were married. That marriage lasted just a year and a half, and it is not something I care to dwell on.

That same graduation summer I took and passed the Forest Service exam and was assigned onto the Custer National Forest over in eastern Montana. I suppose one of the Mazoola desk jockeys thought it scrupulous, or found it in some regulation, that most of the state of Montana should be put between me and my father on the Two. But all that eastern Montana stint accomplished--hell, even the name got me down, that dodo Custer--was to cock me into readiness to shoot out of the Forest Service when the chance came.

Pete Reese provided the click. As soon as his lambs were shipped in the fall of 1952 Pete offered me a first crack at the Noon Creek ranch. Marie's health was giving out--she lived only a few more years, dark lovely doe she was--and Pete wanted to seize an opportunity to buy a sheep outfit down in the Gallatin Valley near Bozeman, where the winters might not be quite so ungodly. I remember every exact word from Pete in that telephone call: "You're only an accidental ^{jack,} nephew, but I suppose maybe I can give you honorary son-in-law terms to buy the place."

I took Pete up on his offer and came back to the Two Medicine country so fast I left a tunnel in the air.

On the 21st of March of 1953--we kidded that going through a lambing time together would tell us in a hurry whether we could stand each other the rest of our lives--Marcella Withrow and I were married.

Her first marriage, to a young dentist at Conrad, had not panned out either, and she had come back over to Gros Ventre when the job of librarian opened up. That first winter of mine on the Reese place I resorted to the library a lot, and it began to dawn on me that books were not the only attraction. I like to think Marce and I are both tuned to an echo of Dode: "Life is wide, there's room to take a new run at it."

In any event, Marce and I seem to have gotten divorce out of our systems with those early wrong guesses, and we have produced two daughters, one married to a fish-and-game man up at Sitka in Alaska, the other living at Missoula where she and her husband both work for the newspaper. We also seem to be here on Noon Creek to stay, for as every generation ends up doing on this ranch we have lately built a new house. Four such domiciles by now, if you count the Ramsay homestead where I was born. It cost a junior fortune in double-glazing and insulation, but we have windows to the mountains all along the west wall of this place. These September mornings when I sit here early at the kitchen table and watch dawn come to the skyline of the Two, coffee forgotten and cold in my cup, the view is worth any price.

The thirty-plus years of ranching that Marce and I have put in here on Noon Creek have not been easy. Tell me what is. But so far the pair of us have withstood coyotes and synthetic fabrics and Two country winters and the decline of sheepherders to persevere in the sheep business--although we have lately diversified into some

Charolais cattle and several fields of that new sanfoin alfalfa.

I am never going to be red-hot about being a landlord to cows. And the problem of finding decent hay hands these days makes me positively pine for Wisdom Johnson and Bud Dolson and Perry Fox. But Marce and I are agreed that we will try whatever we have to, in order to hang on to this land. I suppose even dude ranching, though I hope to Christ it never quite comes to that.

Along English Creek, the main change to me whenever I go over there is that sheep are damn few now. Cattle, a lot of new farming; those are what came up on the ^{latest} ~~next~~ spin of the agricultural roulette wheel. About half the families--Hahns, Frews, Roziers, another generation of Busby brothers--still retain the ranches their parents brought through the Depression. The Van Bebber ranch is owned by a North Dakotan named Florin, and he rams around the place in the same slambang fashion Ed did. Maybe there is something in the water there.

And Dode Withrow's place is run by one of Dode's other son-in-laws, Bea's husband Merle Torrance. Dode though is still going strong, the old boy. Weathered as a stump, but whenever I see that father-in-law of mine he is the original Dode: "What do you know for sure, Jick? ^{people} Have they found a cure yet for ~~those of us~~ in the sonofabitching sheep business?"

Anyway, except for big aluminum sheds and irrigation sprinklers slinging water over the fields, you would not find the ranches of

English Creek so different from the way they were.

The Double W now is owned by a company called TriGram Resources, which bought it from the California heirs after Wendell Williamson's death. As a goddamn tax write-off, need I say.

How can it be twenty years since my father retired from the Forest Service? Yet it is.

After this summer I have told about, the next year was awful on him, what with Alec gone from us to the Deuce W and the decision from Mazoola in the winter of 1939 to move my father's district office from English Creek into Gros Ventre. Access realignment, they called it, and showed him on paper how having the ranger station in town would put him closer by paved road to the remote north portion of the Two. He kicked against it in every way he could think of; even wrote to the Regional Forester himself, the Major: "Since when is running a forest a matter of highway miles?" Before long, though, the war and its matters were on my father's mind and the mail was bringing Forest Service posters urging: LET'S DELIVER THE WOODS Sharpen your ax to down the Axis. # ISF

The way the water of a stream ripples around a rock, the Forest Service's flow of change went past my father. Major Kelley departed Missoula during the war, to California to head up the government project of growing guayule for artificial rubber. "I'd rather take a beating than admit it," my father confessed, "but I was kind of

getting used to those goddamn kelleygrams." The Two supervisor Ken Sipe was tapped for a wartime job at Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C., and stayed on back there. Their successors in Region One and the Two Medicine forest headquarters simply left my father in place, rangering the English Creek district. I have heard of a ranger out in the state of Washington who spent a longer career on a district, but my father's record wasn't far behind.

His first winter of retirement in Gros Ventre was a gloomy and restless time for him, although my mother and I could never tell for sure how much of that was retirement and how much just his usual winter. It was a relief to us all when spring perked him up. I had a call from him the morning of the first day of fishing season:

"Bet you a beer you've forgotten how to string ten fish on a willow."

"I can't get away," I had to tell him. "I've got ewes and lambs all over creation out here. You sure you wouldn't like to take up a career as a bunch herder?"

"Brook trout," he informed me, "are the only kind of herd that interests me. You're missing a free chance at a fishing lesson."

"I'll cash that offer on Sunday, okay? You can scout the holes for me today. I want Mom to witness your count when you get home, though. It's past time ^{was} I owed a beer, and it's beginning to dawn on me that your arithmetic could be the reason."

"That'll be the day," he rose to my joshing. "When I don't bring

home ten fish on a willow. As will be shown to you personally on Sunday."

When he hadn't returned by dusk of that day, my mother called me at the ranch and I then called Tom Helwig, the deputy sheriff. I drove across the divide to English Creek and just before full dark found my father's pickup parked beside the North Fork, on Walter Kyle's old place. Tom Helwig and I and the men from the English Creek ranches searched and searched, hollering in the dark, until giving up about midnight.

With first light of the next morning I was the one who came onto my father. His body, rather, stricken by a heart attack, away back in the brush atop a beaver dam he'd been fishing. Nine trout on the willow stringer at his side, the tenth still on the hook where my father had dropped his pole.

"Jick, the summer when Alec left. Could it have come out different? If your father and I hadn't kept at him, hadn't had
should our notions of what he ~~should~~ do--would it all have been different?"

My mother brought this up in the first week after my father passed away. In a time like that, the past meets you wherever you turn. The days do not use their own hours and minutes, they find ones you have lived through with the person you are missing.

Only that once, though, in all the years from then to now, did she wonder that question aloud. The other incidents of the summer of 1939 we often talk over, when I stop by to see how she

is doing. She has stayed on in her own house in Gros Ventre. "I'm sufficient company for myself," this mother of mine maintains. She still grows the biggest vegetable garden in town and is perpetual president of the library board. What irks her is when people regard her, as she puts it, "as if I was Some Kind Of A Monument." I had to talk hard when her ^{84th} birthday came this ^{April} ~~February~~ and the new young editor of the Gleaner wanted to interview her. Gros Ventre Woman Has 'Fooled' the Leaped In' with 20th Century was the headline. You know how those stories are, though. It is hard to fit such a life into mere inches of words.

father

I had never told her or my ~~late~~ father of Alec's refusal, that noon when I phoned him about the Flume Gulch fire. And I did not when she asked could it, would it all have come out different?

But what I did say to her was the one truth I could see in that distant English Creek summer.

"If you two hadn't had the notions you did, you wouldn't have been yourselves. And if Alec hadn't gone his way, he wouldn't have been Alec."

She shook her head. "Maybe if it had been other times--"

"Maybe," I said.

And Stanley Meixell.

Stanley stayed on with the Busby brothers until their lambs were shipped that fall of 1939, then said he thought he'd go have a look at Oregon--"always did like that name." Early in the war the Busbys received word that he was working in a shipyard out there

(BF)

at Portland. After that, nothing.

So I am left with the last scene of Stanley after the Flume Gulch fire, before my father and I headed in to Gros Ventre. I went over to where Stanley was stirring a pot of gravy.

"Yes sir, Jick. Looks like this feedlot of ours is about to close down."

"Stanley," I heard myself saying, "all that about the Phantom Woman fire--I don't know who was right or wrong, or if anybody was, or what. But I'm sorry, about the way things turned out back then."

"A McCaskill who'll outright say the word sorry," replied Stanley. He tasted the gravy, then turned to me, his dark eyes steady within the weave of squint lines. "I was more right than I even knew, that time."

"What time was that?"

"When I told your folks you looked to me like the jick of the family."



dedication for ENGLISH CREEK

Again for Carol.

"You got to make your way
in this old pig iron world."

--Miss Rose Gordon (1885-1968)

for ENGLISH CREEK
insert at back of
the book.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is a work of fiction, and so English Creek, the Two Medicine National Forest, and the town of Gros Ventre exist only in these pages. Some of their geography is actual--the area of Dupuyer Creek and the Rocky Mountain Front, west of the town of Dupuyer, Montana. I'm afraid, though, that anyone who attempts to sort the real from the imagined in this book is in for confusion. In general I've retained nearby existing places such as Valier, Conrad, Choteau, Heart Butte and so on, but anything within what I've stretched geography to call the "Two Medicine country" I have felt free to change or invent. Thus my town of Gros Ventre, on Dupuyer's actual site, shares with Dupuyer only its origin as a stopover for freight wagons. That, and my love for the place.

Two persons I allude to were actual: Regional Forester Evan W. Kelley and pioneer Ben English. Insofar as possible I've sketched them from contemporary accounts or historical records. Where their lives coincide with those of my own characters, I've simply tried to do what seems to me the fiction writer's job--make the stuff up as

realistically as I can. My particular thanks to Mary English Lindsay^e for sharing with me her memories of her father, and to Jack Hayne for contributing from his lode of knowledge about the Dupuyer area's pioneers.

I could not have created my version of the Two country in the period of this novel without the newspaper files and other local historical material of several northern Montana public libraries. I'm much indebted to: Choteau Public Library and librarians Maureen Strazdas and Marian Nett; Conrad Public Library and librarians Corleen Norman and Steve Gratzer; Great Falls Public Library, librarians Sister Marita Bartholome, Howard Morris and Susan Storey, and library director Richard Gerken; Havre Public Library and librarian Bill Lisonby; Hill County Library and Dorothy Armstrong; Valier Public Library and librarian Sue Walley. And my appreciation as well to Harriet Hayne of Dupuyer, for sharing the taped interviews done for Dupuyer's remarkable centennial volume, By Gone Days and Modern Ways.

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the Flume Gulch fire is my own concoction.

I benefited greatly from listening to two career Forest Service men as they "pawed over old ground" --the late Nevan McCullough of Enumclaw, Washington, and ~~Pat~~ ^{Dahl} Kirkpatrick of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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Special thanks to my first and best friend in the Dupuyer country, Tom Chadwick; his driving skills delivered Carol and me to much of the landscape of this book.

My wife Carol has been ~~my~~^{the} first reader and editor of all my books,

this time, camera ever in hand, she also became geographer of the

Two country and architect of the town of Gros Ventre. My debt to her
in all my work is beyond saying.

To my agent, Liz Darhansoff, and my editor, Tom Stewart--thanks
for making English Creek possible.

One of my first memories, a few months before my sixth birthday,
is of hearing my parents and their neighbors discuss the radio news
of the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in April, 1945.

Thus it is very nearly forty years now that I have been listening to

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(BF)

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My inspiration for "The Lord of the Field" in Beth McCaskill's
 4th of July speech was Montgomery M. Atwater's article, "Man-Made
 Rain," written for the Montana Writers' Project during the WPA era.
 Similarly, the "Subjects under discussion...by U.S. Forest Service
 was inspired by
 crews" ~~is adapted from a piece by~~ the remarkable Bob Marshall, "A
 Contribution to the Life History of the Lumberjack," Pulp and Paper
Magazine of Canada, May 21, 1931.

The observation that a forest fire at night resembles a lighted city
 is from Ellers Koch, in Early Days in the Forest Service, Region One.
 The theological survey joke is told by Hartley A. Calkins in that
 same volume. The analogy of a wedge of cool air thrusting between
 a fire and its smoke, and other rare eyewitness description of a

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