final ms draft that went to typists; some checking done on this draft, the rest on final typescript.

ENGLISH CREEK

by Ivan Doig

Marilyn--the adjustments I need on this page are:
--a 3-line space between the newspaper item and the rest of the text.
--no underlining of Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner
--the two insertions as shown
--and I need it all to fit on this one page; you can move the text a line or two toward the bottom if necessary.

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

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 1

Acantha 25 May '39 - 1.68"

That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my life until then I had never seen the sidehills come so green, the coulees stay so spongy with run-off. A ~~wet May~~ right amount of wet evidently could sweeten the universe. Already my father on his first high patrols ~~was~~ had encountering ~~ed~~ cow elk drifting up and across the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side. They, and the grass and the wild-hay meadows and the benchland alfalfa, all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which of course accounted for the fresh mood everywhere across the Two. As is always said, spring rain in range country is as if halves of $10 bills are being handed around, with the other halves promised at shipping time. And so in the English Creek sheepmen, what few cowmen were left along Noon Creek and elsewhere, the out-east farmers, ~~mers~~, the storekeepers of Gros Ventre, our Forest Service people, in just everyone that start of June, hope was up and would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Talk could even be heard that Montana maybe at last had seen the bottom of the Depression. After all, the practitioners of this

3 lines

Gary clean letter

similar to '82 summer

Acantha 10 Aug '39: retail sales up over '38
Acantha 20 June '39: assessments up

Talk could even be heard that Montana maybe at last had seen the bottom of the Depression. After all, the practitioners of this bottomed-out notion went around pointing out, last year was a bit more prosperous, or anyway a bit less desperate, than the year before. A nice near point of measurement which managed to overlook that for the several years before last, the situation of people on the land out here had been godawful. I suppose I ought not to dwell on dollar matters when actually our family was scraping along better than a good many. Even though during the worst years the Forest Service did lay off some ~~rangers~~ people--Hoovered them, the saying went--my father, ranger Varick McCaskill, was ~~was~~ never among them. True, his salary was jacked down ~~three~~ a couple of times, and Christ only knew if the same wasn't going to start happening again. But we were getting by. Nothing extra, just getting by.

It gravels me every time I read a version of those times that makes it sound as if the Depression set in on the day Wall Street tripped over itself in 1929. Talk about nearsighted. By 1929 ~~By then~~ Montana already had been on rocky sledding for ten years. The winter of 1919--men my father's age and older still just called it that sonofabitch of a winter--was the one that delivered hard times. Wholesale. As Dode Withrow, who had the ranch farthest up the south fork of English Creek, used to tell: I went into that '19 winter with four thousand head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to five hundred. Trouble never travels lonesome, so about that same time live-stock and crop prices nosedived because of the end of the war in Europe. And right along with that, drought and grasshoppers showed up to take over the dry-land farming. It began to be just a hell of a situation, my

father always summed up those years when he and my mother were trying to get a start in life. "Anyplace you looked you saw people who had put twenty years into this country and all they had to show for it was a pile of old calendars." Then when drought circled back again at the start of the Thirties and joined forces with Herbert Hoover, bad progressed to worse. That is within my own remembering, those dry bitter years. Autumn upon autumn the exodus stories kept coming out of the High Line grain country to the north and east of us, and right down here on the highway which runs through the town of Gros Ventre anybody who looked could see for himself the truth of those tales, the furniture-loaded jitney trucks with farewells to Montana painted across their boxboards in big crooked letters: GOODBY OLD DRY and AS FOR HAVRE YOU CAN HAVE 'ER. The Two country did have the saving grace that the price for lambs and wool recovered somewhat while other livestock and crops stayed sunk. But anybody on Two land who didn't scrape through the early Thirties with sheep likely didn't scrape through at all. Cattle rancher after cattle rancher and farmer after farmer got in deep with the banks. Gang plow and ditcher, work horses and harness, haymow and cream separator: everything on those places was mortgaged except the air. And then foreclosure, and the auctioneer's hammer. At those hammer sales we saw men weep, women as stricken as if they were looking on death, and their children bewildered.

So it was time hope showed up.

Jick! Set your mouth for it!

Supper, and my mother. It is indelible in me that all this began there right at the very outset of June, because I was out working over my saddle and lengthening the stirrups to account for how much I had grown in the past year, for the ride up with my father on the counting trip

the next morning. I can even safely say what the weather was, one of those brockle late afternoons under the Rockies when tag-ends of storm cling in the mountains and sun is reaching through wherever it can between the cloud piles. Tell me why it is that details like that, saddle stirrups a notch longer than last year or sunshine dabbed around on the foothills some certain way, seem to be the allowance of memory while the bigger points of life hang back. At least I have found it so, particularly now that I am at the time where I try to think what my life might have been like had I not been born in the Two Medicine country and into the McCaskill family. Oh, I know what's said. How home ground and kin together lay their touch along us as unalterably as the banks of a stream direct its water. But that doesn't mean you can't wonder. Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. Or whether some other place of growing up might have turned you wiser or dumber, more contented or less. Here in my own instance, some mornings I will catch myself with a full cup of coffee yet in my hand, gone cold while I have sat here stewing about whether my threescore years would be pretty much as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say, China or California instead of northern Montana.

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not Going Around with our Heads

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

as anybody else. Just because your father and your brother--

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do. In the time after, it was her more than anyone who would return and return her thoughts here to where all four of our lives made their bend. The summer when--she would start in, and as if the three-note signal of a chickadee had been sung, it told me she was turning to some happening of that last English Creek summer. She and I were alike at least in that, the understanding that such a season of life provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

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

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

I crossed the yard to our house behind the ranger station. I knew better than to have my mother call me time number three.

I went on in to wash up and I suppose was a little more deliberately offhand than I had to be by waiting until I'd dippered water into the basin and added hot from the kettle before announcing, Company.

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

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

You seem to know a remarkable lot about it, my mother said.

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

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

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

Fried, he said. Done to a cinder would suit me, paricularly Van Bebber's allotment. It'd save me arguing the Section Twenty grass with him one goddamn more time.

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

By the time I came back into the kitchen with the spare chair which had been serving as my nightstand, Alec and Leona were arriving through the doorway, him inquiring Is this the McCaskill short-order house? and her beaming up at him as if he'd just recited ~~all of~~ Shakespeare. ¶ They were a pair to look on, Alec and Leona. By now Alec was even taller than my father, and had the same rich red head of hair; a blood-sorrel flame which several hundred years of kilts and skirts being flung off must have fanned into creation. Same lively blue eyes. Same straight keen McCaskill nose, and same tendency to freckle across it but nowhere else. Same deep upper lip, with the bottom of the face coming out to meet it in stubborn support; with mouth closed, both Alec and my father had that jaw-forward look which meets life like a plow. Resemblance isn't necessarily duplication, though, and I see in my mind's eye that there also was the message of that as promptly as my brother and my father were in the same room that evening. Where my father never seemed to take up as much space as his size might warrant, Alec somehow took up his share and then some. I noticed this now, how Alec had begun to stand in that shambly wishbone way a cowboy adopts, legs and knees spraddled farther apart than they need to be, as if hinting to the world that he's sure longing for a horse to trot in there between

them. Alec was riding for the Double W ranch, his second summer as a hand there, and it had caused some family ~~reduction~~ruction--his going back to cowboying instead of taking a better-paying job, such as driving a truck for Adam Kerz as my mother particularly suggested. But the past year or so ~~he~~ Alec had had to shut off his ears to a lot of opinions my parents had about ~~his~~ this cowboy phase of his. Last Fourth of July when Alec showed up in rodeo clothes which included a red bandanna, ~~around his neck,~~ my father asked him: What, is your Adam's apple cold?

Not that you could ever dent Alec for long. I have told that he had a head-up, nothing-in-life-has-ever-slowed-me-up-yet way of riding. I maybe should amend that to say that on horseback Alec looked as if he was riding the world itself, and even afoot as he was here in the kitchen he seemed as if he was being carried to exactly where he wanted to go. Which, just then, I guess you would have to say he was. Everything was coming up aces for Alec that year. Beating Earl Zane's time with Leona. Riding for the Double W this green high-grass summer. And in the fall he would be headed for Bozeman, the first McCaskill to manage to go to college. Launching Alec to college from the canyon of the Depression was taking great exerting by ~~the~~ our whole family, but his knack for numbers plainly justified it; we none of us held a doubt that four years from now he would step out of Bozeman with a degree in mechanical engineering. Yes, Alec was a doer, as people said of him. My own earliest memory of this brother of mine was the time--I must have been four and him eight--when he took me into the pasture where the ranger station's saddle horses were grazing and said Here's how you mooch them, Jick. He eased over to the nearest horse, waited until it put its head down to eat grass, then straddled its neck.

When the horse raised its head Alec was lifted, and slid down the neck into place on its back and simultaneously gripped the mane to hang on and steer by. Now you mooch that mare Alec called to me, and I went beside the big chomping animal and flung my right leg over as he had, and was elevated into being a bareback rider the same as my brother.

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

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

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

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

Working hard?

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

Just times I've seen you hardly working.

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

--and an old-as-womankind kitchen ritual between Leona and my mother--

Can I help with anything, Mrs. McCaskill?

No, probably it's beyond help.

--until shortly my mother was satisfied that she had multiplied the food on the stove sufficiently and said: I expect you brought your appetites with you? Let's sit up.

I suppose every household needs some habited way to begin a meal. I have heard the Lord thanked in some of the unlikeliest of homes, and for some of the unholiest of food. And seen whole families not lift a fork until the patriarch at the head of the table had his plate full and his bread buttered. Ours, though, said grace only once every three hundred sixty-five days, and that one a joke--my father's New Year's Day invocation in that Scotch-preacher burr he could put on: Hogmanay that's born today, gi' us a year o' white bread and nane o' your gray--and other than that, a McCaskill meal started at random, the only tradition to help yourself to what was closest and pass the food on clockwise.

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

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

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

I had the bright idea this conversation could benefit from my help, so I chimed in: Counting starts tomorrow, Alec. Dode's sheep, and then Walter Kyle's, and then Fritz Hahn's. Dad and I'll be up there a couple three days. Remember that time you and I were along with him and Fritz's herder's dog Moxie got after a skunk and we both--

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

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

Speaking of counting, Alec came up with next, you got your beavers counted yet? Here he was giving my father a little static. Every so often the Forest Service regional headquarters in Missoula--Mazoola,

all of us pronounced it my father's way, emphasis on the zoo--invented some new project for rangers to cope with, and the latest one we had been hearing about from my father was the inventory he was supposed to take of the beaver population of English Creek. Christamighty, he had grumped, this creek is the beaver version of New York City.

Now, though, with Leona on hand--this was the first time Alec had brought her out for a meal; the rest of us in the family recognized it as an early phase, a sort of curtain-raiser, in ~~his~~ the Alec style of courting--my father just passed off the beaver census with: No, I'm waiting for policy ~~direction~~ guidance from the Mazoola inmates. They might want me to count only the tails and then multiply by one, you never know.

Alec didn't let it go, though. Maybe if they like your beaver arithmetic, next summer they'll have you do fish.

Maybe. My father was giving Alec more prancing room than he deserved, but I guess Leona justified it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just fine, Leona responded along with her flash of smile. She seemed to be on the brink of saying a lot more, but then just passed that smile around to the rest of us, a full share to my father and another to my mother and then one to me that made my throat tighten a little, then letting it rest last and coziest on Alec. She had a natural ability at that, producing some pleasantry then lighting up the room so you thought the remark amounted to a whole hell of a lot more than it did. I do envy that knack in a person, though likely wouldn't have the patience to use it myself even if I had it.

We still were getting used to the idea of Leona, the three of us in the family besides Alec. His girls before her were from the ranch families in here under the mountains or from the farm folks east of

Gros Ventre. Nor was Leona in circulation at all for the past few years, going with Tollie Zane's son Earl as she had been. But this past spring, Alec's last in high school and Leona's next-to-last, he somehow cut Earl Zane out of the picture. Swap one cowboy for another, she might as well have stayed put, my mother said at the time, a bit perturbed with Alec anyway about his intention for the Double W summer job again.

--All right, I guess, Alec was answering profoundly to some question of my father's about how successful the Double W's calving season had turned out.

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

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

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

How come?

Even yet I don't know why I said that. I mean, I was plenty old enough to know why people got married. There were times recently, seeing

Alec and Leona mooning around together, when I seemed to savvy more than I actually had facts about, if that's possible.

Focused as he was on how our parents were going to respond, the philosophy question from my side of the table jangled Alec. Because, because we're--we love each other, why the hell do you think?

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

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

When's all this taking place? my father got out next.

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

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

Yeah, Alec said as if taking a vow. It's what I want to do. The unsaid part of this was huge, huger than anything I had ever felt come into our kitchen before. The financing to send Alec to Bozeman, my parents had been gathering like quilt pieces: whatever savings the household managed to pinch aside, plus a loan from my mother's brother Pete Reese, plus a part-time job which my father had set up for Alec with a range management professor at the college who knew us from having spent time up here studying the Two, plus of course Alec's own wages from this

summer, which was another reason why his choice of the Double W riding job at $30 a month again was less than popular--Christamighty, since my own haying wages later this summer would go into the general household kitty, even I felt I had a ~~major~~ stake in the Bozeman ~~enterprise~~ plan. And now here was Alec choosing against college. Against all the expectation riding on him. Against--

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

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

You two did, at first.

We starved out at it, too.

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

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

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

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

Mom, now damn it, listen--

We all better listen, my father tried again. Leona, we got nothing against you. You know that. Which was a bit short of true in both its parts, but Leona responded only with a lower beam of smile. It's just that, Godamighty, Alec, cattle have gone bust time after time these last years. That way of life just has changed. Even the Double W would be on hard times if Wendell Williamson's daddy hadn't left him such deep pockets. Whether anybody'll ever be able to start off from scratch in the cow business and make a go of it, I don't see how--

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

My father seemed to consider. No, most probably not, in your case. It takes a trace of common sense to herd sheep. He said it lightly enough that Alec would have to take it as a joke, but there was a poking edge to the lightness. Alec, I just think that whatever the hell you do, you need to bring an education to it these days. That old stuff of banging a living out of this country by sheer force of behavior doesn't work. Hasn't for almost twenty years. This country can outbang any man. Look at them along this creek, even these sheepmen, Hahn, Ed Finletter, Van Bebber, Pres Rozier, the Busbys, Dode Withrow, ~~Farrell~~, Hill. They've

all just managed to hang on, and they're as good a set of stockmen as you'll find in this whole goddamn state. You think any of them could have got underway, in years like there've been?

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

I saw my father glance at my mother, to see if she wanted to swat down this part of Alec's argument or whether he should go ahead. Even I could tell from the held-in look of her that once she got started there'd be no stopping, so he soldiered on. And if about five more come good back-to-back, everybody'll be almost to where they were fifteen or twenty years ago. Alec, trying to build a living on a few head of stock is a dead end these days.

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

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

I say warned. What rang through to me was an alarm different from the one in my father's words--an iron tone of anger such as I had never heard out of him before.

That's as maybe. Alec's timbre was an echo of the anger, the iron. But we got to start. Now Alec was looking at Leona as if he was storing up for the next thousand years. And we're going to do it married. Not going to wait our life away.

#

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

All those years ago, the topic rode with me into the next morning as my father and I set off from the ranger station toward the mountains. Cool but cloudless, the day was a decent enough one, except for wind. I ought to have been in a topnotch mood, elevated by the anticipation that always began with my father's annual words, "Put on your mountain clothes in the morning." Going along on one of these start-of-June rides with my father as he took a count on the sheep summering on the various ranchers' range allotments in the national forest was one of the awaited episodes of life. Better country to look ahead to could not be asked for. Kootenai, Lolo, Flathead, Absaroka, Bitterroot, Beaverhead, Deerlodge, Gallatin, Helena, Cabinet, Lewis and Clark, Custer, Two Medicine--those were the national forests of Montana, totaling dozens of ranger districts, but to our estimation the Two Medicine was head and shoulders above the others, and my father's English Creek district the topknot of the Two. Anybody with eyes could see this at once, for our ride that morning led up the north fork of English Creek, which actually angles mostly west and northwest to thread between Roman Reef and Phantom Woman Mountain to its source, and where the coulee of the North Fork opened ahead of us, there the first summits of the Rockies sat on the horizon like stupendous sharp boulders. Only when our first hour or so of riding carried us above that west edge of the coulee would we see the mountains in total, their broad bases of timber and rockfall gripping into the foothills.

10-Day fire reports, found in 39 data folder

p. 20A follows →

And the reefs. Roman Reef ahead of us, a ~~wall of stone~~ rimrock half a mile high and more than three long. Grizzly Reef even bigger to the south of it, smaller Jericho Reef to the north. I don't know, are mountain reefs general knowledge in the world? I suppose they get their name because they stand as outcroppings do at the edge of an ocean--steady level ridges of ~~rock~~ stone, as if to give a calm example to the waves beyond them. Except that in this case the blue-gray billow up there is not waves but the Continental Divide against the sky. The name aside, though, sections of a ~~wall~~ fortress were what the three reefs reminded me of, spaced as they were with canyons between them and the higher jagged crags penned up behind. As if the whole horizon of the west had once been barricaded with slabs of rock and ~~these~~ these were the mighty traces still standing. I must not have been the only onlooker this occurred to, as an even longer barrier of cliff farther south in the national forest was named the Chinese Wall.

The skyline of the Two. Even here at the outset the hover of it all always caused my father to turn and appreciatively call over his shoulder to Alec and me something like: "Nothing the matter with that." And always Alec and I would chorus, "Not one thing," both because we were expected to and because we too savored those waiting mountains.

Always was not in operation this year, however. My father did not pause to pronounce on the scenery, I had no chance to echo him, and Alec--Alec this year was on our minds instead of riding between us.

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

Whether I was sorting through my horse hopes or the outset of this counting trip without Alec weighed more heavily on me than I realized, I don't know. But in either case I was so deep into myself that I was surprised to glance ahead and learn that Mouse and my father were halted, and my father was gandering back to see what had become of me. # I rode on up and found that we had arrived to where a set of rutted tracks--in flattery, it could have been called almost a road--left the North Fork roadbed and crossed the coulee and creek and traced on up the side of Breed Butte to where a few log buildings could be seen.

Normally I would have been met with some joke from my father about sunburning my eyeballs if I went around ~~sleeping~~ asleep with my eyes open like that. But this day he was looking businesslike, which was the way he looked only when he couldn't find any better mood. How about you taking a ~~look~~ squint at Walter's place? he proposed. You can cut around the butte and meet me at the road into the Hebner tribe.

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

I suppose one school of thought is that I have an overdrawn imagination. Yet answer me this: how can the farthest reaches of life be gotten to except by way of the mind? I stop to say this because otherwise what I did next might sound odd. For as soon as my father had gone his way and I was starting up Breed Butte, I turned myself west in my saddle to face Roman Reef, tapped the brim of my hat in greeting, and spoke in the slow and distinct way you talk to a deaf person, 'Lo, Walter. How's everything up on the Reef?

What was involved here was that from Walter Kyle's summer range up there in the mountains, on top of Roman Reef a good five miles from where I was, his actual house and outbuildings here on Breed Butte could be seen through ~~fieldglasses~~ his spyglass. Tiny, but seen. Walter had shown Alec and me this stunt of vision when we took some mail up to him during last year's counting trip. "There ye go," he congratulated as each of us in turn managed to extend the telescope tube just so and sight the building specks. "Ye can see for as long as your eye holds out in this country." Walter's enthusiasm for the Two was that of a person newly smitten, for although he was the most

elderly of all the English Creek ranchers--at the time he seemed to me downright ancient, I suppose partly because he was one of those dried-up little guys who look eternal--he also was much the most recent to the area. Only three or four years ago Walter had moved here from down in the Ingomar country in the southeastern part of the state, where he had run several bands of sheep. I have never heard of a setup like it before or since, but Walter and a number of other Scotch sheepmen, dedicated bachelors all, lived there in the hotel in Ingomar and operated their sheep outfits out of their back pocket and hat, you might say. Not a one of them possessed a real ranch, just grazing land they'd finagled one way or another, plus wagons for their herders, and of course sheep and more sheep. Away each of those old Scotchies would go once a week, out from that hotel with boxes of groceries in the back of a Model T to tend camp. For whatever reason, Walter pulled out of hotel sheep tycooning--my father speculated that one morning he turned to the Scotchman beside him at the table and burred, Jock, for thirrrty yearrrs ye've been eating yourrr oatmeal aye too loud, got up and left for good--and bought the old Barclay place here on Breed Butte for next to nothing.

Pony was trudging up the butte in her steady uninspired way, and I had nothing to do but continue my long-distance coversation with Walter. Not that I figured there was any real chance that Walter would be studying down here exactly then, and even if he was I would be only a gnat in the spyglass lenses and certainly not a conversationalist on whom he could perform any lip-reading. But for whatever reason, I

went ahead and queried in the direction of the distant reef: Walter, how the hell do people get so crosswise with one another?

For last night's rumpus continued to bedevil me from whatever angle I could find to view it. The slant at which Alec and my parents suddenly were diverging from each other, first of all. In hindsight it may not seem such an earthquake of an issue, whether Alec was going to choose college or the wedding band/riding job combination. But hindsight is always through bifocals, it peers specifically instead of seeing whole. And the entirety here was that my father and my mother rested great hopes on my brother, especially given all that they and others of their generation had endured in the years past, years they had gotten through by constantly saying within themselves Our children will know better times. They've got to. Hopes of the sort only parents can know. That Alec seemed not to want to step up in life, now that the chance at last was here, went against my parents' thinking as much as if he'd declared he was going to go out on the prairie and dig a hole and live a gopher's existence.

Walter Kyle had seen a lot of life, his mustache which must have been sandy in his youth now was as yellow-white as if he'd been drinking cream from a jar. What about that, Walter? From your experience, has Alec gone as goofy as my folks think? And got back instead of Walter's long Scotch view of life my father's briefer Scotch one, his last night's reasoning to Alec: Why not give college a year and then see? You got the ability, it's a crime not to use it. And Bozeman isn't the moon. You'll be back and forth some times during the year. The two of you can see how the marriage notion holds up after that. But Alec wasn't about to have

time bought from him. We're not waiting our life away, ran his constant response. And there, our life: that convergence of Alec and Leona and the headlong enthusiasm which none of the rest of us had quite realized they were bringing to their romance. Well, it will happen: two people who have been around each other for years and all of a sudden finding that nobody else in history has ever been in love before, they're inventing it all themselves. Yet apply my mind to it in all the ways I could, my actual grasp of their mood wasn't at all firm, for to me then marriage seemed about as distant as death. Nor did I understand much more about the angle of Leona and--I was going to say, of Leona and my parents, but actually of Leona and the other three of us, for I somehow did feel included into the bask she aimed around our kitchen. I will admit, it was an interesting sensation, collecting an occasional gleam off Leona as if I'd abruptly been promoted beyond fourteen-year-oldhood. A battlefield commission, so to speak. Leona, Leona. Now there is a topic I could really stand to talk to you about, Walter. Yet maybe a bachelor was not the soundest source either. Perhaps old Walter Kyle knew only enough about women, as the saying goes, to stay immune. Well, anyhow; with all care and good will I was trying to think through our family situation in a straight line, but Leona brought me to a blind curve. Not nearly the least of last evening's marvels was how much ground Leona had been able to hold with only a couple of honest-to-goodness sentences. When my father and mother were trying to argue delay into Alec and turned

to her to test the result, she said just We think we're ready enough. And then at the end of the fracas, going out the door Leona turned to bestow my mother one of her ~~million-watt~~ sunburst smiles and say, Thank you for supper, Beth. And my mother saying back, just as literally, Don't mention it.

The final line of thought from last night was the most disturbing of all. The breakage between my father and Alec. This one bothered me so much I couldn't even pretend to be confiding it to Walter up there on Roman Reef. stony silence from that source was more than I could stand on this one. For if I'd had to forecast, say at about the point Alec was announcing marriage intentions, my mother was the natural choice to bring the house down on him. That would have been expected, it was her way. And she of course did make herself more than amply known on the college/marriage score. But the finale of that suppertime was all-male McCaskill: You're done running my life, flung by Alec as he stomped out with Leona in tow, and Nobody's running it, including you, from my father to Alec's departing back.

Done running my life. Nobody's running it, including you. Put that way, the words without the emotion, it may sound like something concluding itself; the moment of an argument breaking off into silence, a point at which contention has been expended. But I know now, and I somehow knew even then, that the fracture of a family is not a thing that happens clean and sharp, so that you at least can calculate that from here on it will begin to be over with. No, it is like one of those

worst bone breaks, a shatter. You can mend the place, peg it and splint it and work to strengthen it, and while the surface maybe can be brought to look much as it did before, the deeper vicinity of shatter always remains a spot that has to be favored. So if I didn't grasp much of what abruptly was happening within our family, I at least held the realization that last night's rift was nowhere near over.

Thinking heavily that way somehow speeds up time, and before I quite knew it Pony was stopping at the barb-wire gate into Walter Kyle's yard. I tied her to the fence on a long rein so she could graze a little and slid myself between the top and second strands.

Walter's place looked hunky-dory. But I did a circle of the tool shed and low log barn and the three-quarter shed sheltering Walter's old Flying Cloud coupe, Reo just to be sure, and then went to the front of the house and took out the key from behind the loose piece of chinking which hid it.

The house too was undisturbed. Not that there was all that much in it to invite disturbance. The sparse habits of hotel living apparently still were in Walter. Besides the furniture--damn little of that beyond the kitchen table and its chairs of several stiff-back varieties--and the open shelves of provisions and cookery, the only touches of habitation were a drugstore calendar, and a series of coats hung on nails, and one framed studio photograph of a young, young Walter in a tunic and a fur cap: after Scotland and before Montana, he had been a Mountie for a few years up in Alberta.

All in all, except for that stale feel that unlived-in rooms give off, Walter might just have stepped out to go down there on the North Fork and fish a beaver dam. A good glance around was all the place required. Yet I stood and inventoried for some minutes. I don't know why, but an empty house holds me. As if it was an opened book about the person living there. Peruse this log-and-chinking room and Walter Kyle could be read as thrifty, tidy to the verge of fussy, and alone.

At last, just to stir the air in the place with some words, I said aloud the conclusion of my one-way conversation with the mustached little sheepman up on the Reef: Walter, you'd have made somebody a good wife.

Pony and I now cut west along the flank of Breed Butte, which would angle us through Walter's field to where we would rejoin the North Fork road and my father. Up here above the North Fork coulee the outlook roughened, the mountains now in full rumpled view and the foothills bumping up below them and Roman Reef making its wide cordon of bare stone between the two. On this part of our route the land steadily grew more beautiful, which in Montana also means more hostile to settlement. From where I rode along this high ground, Walter Kyle's was the lone surviving ranch to be looked back on between here and the English Creek ranger station.

Thw wind seemed to think that was one too many, for it had come up and was pummeling everything on Walter's property, including me. I rode now holding onto my hat with one hand lest it skitter down to the North Fork and set sail for St. Louis. Of all

Out loomed a figure in [illegible]

Wennberg grunted a curse and grabbed for the knife inside his rainshirt.

In Karlsson's voice the figure midly chided: "I thought I had better look the part. You don't find Bilibin's cap becoming on me, Wennberg?"

"Speaking of caps," Melander said as if announcing tea, "it's time to fling our hat over the nunnery wall."

Karlsson eased the gate open just enough for them to slip through with the guns. Minutes stretched, then the three were back from the canoe and the blackness of the Kolosh village.

"We're off to the cache," whispered Melander. "Stand ready with the gate."

of the number of matters about the Two country that I never have nor will be able to savvy--one life is not nearly enough to do so--a main one is why in a landscape with hills and buttes and benchlands everywhere a person is so seldom sheltered from the everlasting damn wind. I mean, having the wind **forever** trying to blow harmonica tunes through your rib cage just naturally wears on the nerves. Someone like Ed Van Bebber, whose ranch lay ~~next~~ up the south fork of English Creek ~~from~~ next to the ranger station, couldn't even be said hello to until he positioned himself with a building between him and the wind, and then ~~he~~ Ed would cuss about how much of it was following him around the corner. Of course not everybody ~~was that highstrung.~~ is that strung out by the wind. I like to think that I'm not, ~~quite.~~ But I do believe it is incontestable that if that wind off the Rockies could be done away with, the Two would be a hundred percent more comfortable place of the world.

The Two, I have been saying. I ought to clarify that to us the term meant both the landscape to all the horizons around ~~us~~--that is pretty much what a Montanan means by a "country"--and the national forest that my father's district was part of. (In those days, the six hundred square miles of the Two Medicine National Forest were divvied into only three ranger districts--English Creek; Indian Head, ~~which I have told about,~~ west of Choteau; and Blacktail Gulch, down by Sun River at the south end of the forest. Actually, only my father's northmost →

portion of the Two Medicine National Forest had anything at all to do with the Two Medicine River or Two Medicine Lake: the vicinity where the forest joins onto the south boundary of Glacier National Park and fits in there, ~~again~~ as a map shows it, like a long straight-sided peninsula between the park and the Continental Divide and the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. So the Two Medicine itself, the river that is, honestly is in sight to hardly any of the Two country. Like all the major flows of this region the river has its source up in the Rockies, but then promptly cuts a sizable canyon east through the plains as it pushes to meet the Marias River and eventually the Missouri. Burrows its way through the prairie, you might almost say. It is just the ring of the words, Two Medicine, that has carried the name all the way south along the mountains some thirty miles to our English Creek area. The derivation as I've heard it is that in distant times the Blackfeet made their medicine lodge, their place for sacred ceremony, two years in a row near the high lake that is one of the river's sources, and the name lasted from that. By whatever way Two Medicine came to be, it is an interesting piece of language, I have always thought.

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

Uh huh, I affirmed.

All right. ~~My father's~~ His businesslike expression had declined into what I think is called dolor. Let's go do it. And we set off into the weave of tracks toward the Hebner place.

#

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

p. 33 follows →

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

I take that back. Even seeing them on a constant basis wouldn't necessarily have been a foolproof guide to who was who, because all the faces in that Hebner family rhymed. I don't know how else to put it. Every Hebner forehead was a copy of Good Help's wide crimped-in-the-middle version, a pale bony expanse centered with a kind of tiny gully which widened as it went down, as if the nose had avalanched out of there. Across most of the left side of this divided forehead a ~~cowlick~~ forelock ~~swatch~~ of hair flopped at a crooked angle. The effect was as if every male Hebner wore one of those eyepatches shown in pictures of pirates, only pushed up higher. Then from all that forehead any Hebner face simply sort of dwindled down, a quick skid of nose and a tight mouth and a small ball of chin.

The tandem horsebackers stared us the length of the yard. It was another Hebner quality to gawp at you as if you were some new species on earth. My father had a not entirely ironic theory to explain that: <u>They've all eaten so goddamn much venison their eyes have grown big as deers</u>'. For it was a fact of life that somewhere up there in the jackpines beyond the Hebner buildings would be a woolsack hanging

from a top limb. The bottom of the sack would rest in a washtub of water, and within the sack, being cooled nicely by the moisture as it went wicking up through the burlap, would be a hind quarter or two of venison. Good Help Hebner liked his deer the same way he preferred his eggs--poached.

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

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

Morning, Ranger! Hello there, Jick!

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

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

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

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

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

With the profundity of that, Good Help materialized from behind the screening and out onto the decaying railroad tie which served as the front step to the Hebner house. Like his place, Good Help Hebner himself was more than a little ramshackle. A tall yet potbellied man with one bib of his overalls usually frayed loose and dangling, his sloping face made even more pale by a gray-white chevron of grizzle which mysteriously never matured into a real mustache. Garland Hebner: nicknamed Good Help ever since the time, years back, when he volunteered to join the Noon Creek cattlemen when they branded their calves and thereby get in on a free supper afterward. In Dill Egan's corral, the branding crew at one

point looked up to see Hebner, for no reason that ever became clear, hoisting himself onto Dill's skittish iron-gray stud. Almost before Hebner was truly aboard, the gray slung him off and then tried to pound him apart while everybody else bailed out of the corral. Hebner proved to be a moving target; time and again the hooves of the outraged horse missed the rolling ball of man, until finally Dill managed to reach in, grab hold of a Hebner ankle, and snake him out under the corral poles. Hebner wobbled up, blinked around at the crowd, then sent his gaze on to the sky and declared as if piety was natural to him: Well, I had some Good Help getting out of that, didn't I?

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

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

His That allergy to work, however, was the one characteristic in which the rest of the family did not emulate Good Help. They didn't dare. Survival depended on whatever wages the squadron of Hebner kids could earn

by hiring out at lambing time or through haying season. Up and down English Creek at those times of year, on almost any ranch you would find a Hebner boy bucketing water in the lambing shed or driving a stacker team in the hayfield, a Hebner girl kitchen-choring for the ranch wife. Then at some point in their late teens each Hebner youngster somehow would come up with a more serious job and use it as an escape ladder out of that family. The oldest boys, Harvey and Sanford, and the daughter just younger than them, Norena, already were out in the world one place or another.

I have told that among my thinking routes now is that question of whether I'd be much the same person if my lineage and birthsite had been altered a bit. Whenever I was around the Hebners a variation of that always shot to mind, as it did now while Good Help nattered to my father about his intentions of repair: Christamighty, what if I had tumbled into life as a member of this family instead of my own? For Alec and I had accidentally been on hand for one of the Hebner chapters of life, the launching of Sanford, and if I wished to mull matters of chance and circumstance, that instance stood as a considerable education. It occurred a couple of springs before when Ed Van Bebber came by the ranger station one Friday night and asked if Alec and I could help out with the lambing chores that weekend. Neither of us much wanted to do it, because Ed Van Bebber is nobody's favorite person except Ed Van Bebber's. But you can't turn down a person who's in a pinch, either. When the pair

of us rode into Ed's place early the next morning we saw that Sanford Hebner was driving the gutwagon, even though he was only seventeen or so, not all that much older than Alec at the time. And that particular ~~rugged~~ lambing season at Van Bebber's had been a rugged one, the hay was used up getting through the winter and the ewes now thin as shadows and not particularly ready to become mothers. Ed had thrown the drop band clear up onto the south side of Wolf Butte to provide any grass for them at all, which meant a mile and a half drive for Sanford to the lambing shed with each gutwagonload of ewes and their fresh lambs. With the ewes dropping eighty and ninety lambs a day out there Sanford was working every horse on the ranch, saddle horses and everything, to pull that heavy wagon on that slope and make those long shed trips—walking in to the ranch as many as three times a day to trade a played-out team for ~~different~~ fresher horses. All in all, Sanford was performing about two men's work and doing it damn well. The day this happened, dark had almost fallen, Alec and I were up on the hillside above the lambing shed helping Ed Van Bebber corral a bunch of mother ewes and their week-old lambs, and we meanwhile could see Sanford driving in with his last load of lambs of the day. We actually had our bunch under control just fine, the three of us and a dog or two. But Ed always had to have a tendency toward hurry. So he cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled down the hill to Sanford:

HEY-THERE-YOU-HEBNER! COME-UP-HERE-AND-HELP-US-CORRAL-THESE-EWES-AND-LAMBS!

I still think if Ed had asked properly, Sanford probably would have been fool enough to have climbed up and joined us, even though he already

had put in his workday and then some. But after the season of man's labor he had done, to be yelled at to come up and help a couple of milk-tooth kids like us chase lambs; worse than that, to not be awarded even his first name, just be shouted to the world as a Hebner--I still can see Sanford perched on the seat of that gutwagon, looking up the slope to us, and then cupping his hands to his mouth the same way Ed had, and hear yet his words carry up the hill:

YOU-GO-PLUMB-TO-HELL-YOU-OLD-SON-OF-A-BITCH!

And he slapped his reins on the rumps of the gutwagon team and drove on to the lambing shed. At the supper table that night, Sanford's check was in his plate.

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

a family, a father, that he would even clean chicken houses to be free of; to me, the news that life could deal such a hell of a situation to someone about the age of Alec and me came as a sobering gospel.

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

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

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

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

The route we rode out of the Hebner place was a sort of upside-down L, the long climbing stem of ruts and then the brief northwestward leg of the North Fork trail where it tops onto the English Creek-Noon Creek divide. Coming onto that crest, we now would be in view of the landmarks that are the familiar sentries of the Two country. Chief Mountain--even though it is a full seventy miles to the north and almost into Canada, standing distinct as a mooring peg at the end of the long chain of mountains. Also north but nearer, Heart Butte--no great piece of geography, yet it too poses separate enough from the mountain horizon that its dark pyramid form can be constantly seen and identified. And just to our east the full timber-topped profile of Breed Butte, a junior landmark but plainly enough the summit of our English Creek area.

With all this offered into sight, I nonetheless kept my eyes on my father, watching for what I knew would happen, what always happened after he paid a visit to the Hebner place. There at the top of the rise he halted his horse, and instead of giving his regard to the distant wonders of Chief Mountain and Heart Butte, he turned for a last slow look at the Hebner hodgepodge. Then shook his head, said Jesus H. Christ, and reined away. For in that woebegone log house down there, and amid those buildings before neglect had done its handiwork on them, my father was born and brought up.

Of course then the place was the McCaskill homestead. And the North Fork known by the nickname of Scotch Heaven on account of the several burr-on-the-tongue-and-thistle-up-the-kilt families who had come over and settled. Duffs, Barclays, ~~Moirs, Adamsons,~~ Frews, Findlaters, Erskines, ~~McHarolds, Lewises,~~ and my

McCaskill grandparents, they lit in here sometime in the 1880s and all were dead or defeated or departed by the time the flu epidemic of 1918 and the winter of '19 got done with them. I possessed no first-hand information on my father's parents. Both of them were long since under the North Fork soil by the time I was born. And despite my father's ear to the past, there did not seem to be anything known or at least fit to report about what the McCaskills came from in Scotland. Except for a single scrap of lore: the story that a McCaskill had been one of the stone masons of Arbroath who worked for the Stevensons--as I savvy it, the Stevensons must have been a family of engineers before Robert Louis cropped into the lineage and picked up a pen--when they were putting up the lighthouses all around the coast of Scotland. The thought that an ancestor of ours helped fight the sea with stone meant more to my father than he liked to let on. As far as I know, the only halfway sizable body of water my father himself had ever seen was Flathead Lake right here in Montana, let alone an ocean and its beacons. Yet when the fire lookout towers he had fought for were finally being built on the Two Medicine forest during these years it was noticeable that he called them Franklin Delano's lighthouses.

Looking back from now at that matter of my McCaskill grandparents, I question, frankly, whether my mother and father would or could have kept close with that side of the family even if it had still been extant. No marriage is strong enough to bear two loads of in-laws. Early on the choice might as well be made, that one family will be seen as much as can be stood and the other, probably the husband's, shunted off to rare

visits. That's theory, of course. But theory and my mother together--in any case, all I grew up knowing of the McCaskills of Scotch Heaven was that thirty years of homestead effort proved to be the extent of their lifetimes and that my father emerged from the homestead, for good, in the war year of 1917.

Yeah, I went off to Wilson's war. Fought in blood up to my knees. As I have told, the one crack in how solemn my father could be in announcing ~~announcing~~ something like this was that lowered left eyelid of his, and I liked to watch for it to dip down and introduce this next part. Fact is, you could get yourself a fight just about any time of day or night in those saloons outside ~~Fort Leonard Wood~~ Camp Lewis. That my father's combat had been limited to fists against ~~Missouri~~ in the state of Washington chins seemed not to bother him a whit, although I myself wished he had some tales of the actual war. Rather, I wished his knack with a story could have illuminated that war experience of his generation, as an alternative to so many guys' plain refrain that I-served-my-time-over-in-Frogland-and-you-by-God-can-have-the-whole-bedamned-place. But you settle for what family lore you can.

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My father's history resumes that when he came back from conducting the war against the ~~Missourian~~ Camp Lewis saloonhounds, he was hired on by the Noon Creek cattle ranchers as their association rider. Generally some older hand got the job, but I was single and broke, just the kind ranchers love to whittle their wages down to fit--by then too, the wartime livestock prices were on their toboggan ride down--and they took me on.

That association job of course was only a summer one, the combined Noon Creek cattle--except those of the big Double W ranch--trailing up onto the national forest grass in June and down out again in September, and so in winters my father fed hay at one cow ranch or another and then when spring came and brought lambing time with it he would hire on with one of the English Creek sheepmen. I suppose that runs against the usual notion of the West, of cow chousers and mutton conductors forever at odds with each other. But anybody who grew up around stock in our part of Montana knew no qualm about working with either cattle and sheep. Range wars simply never were much the Montana style, and most particularly not the Two Medicine fashion. Oh, somewhere in history there had been an early ruckus south toward the Sun River, some cowman kiyiing over to try kill off a neighboring band of sheep. And probably in any town along these mountains, Browning or Gros Ventre or Choteau or Augusta, you could go into a bar and still find an occasional old hammerhead who proclaimed himself nothing but a cowboy and never capable of drawing breath as anything else, especially not as a mutton puncher. (Which isn't to say that most sheepherders weren't equally irreversibly sheepherders, but somehow that point never seemed to need constant general announcement as it did with cowboys.) By and large, though, the Montana philosophy of make-do, as practiced by our sizable ranching proportion of Scotchmen, Germans, Norwegians, and Missourians, meant that ranch people simply tried to figure out which species did best at the moment, sheep or cows, and chose accordingly. It all came down, so far as I could see, to the philosophy my father expressed whenever someone

asked him how he was doing: Just trying to stay level.

In that time when young Varick McCaskill became their association rider there still would have been several Noon Creek ranchers, guys getting along nicely on a hundred or so head of cattle apiece. Now nearly all of those places either were bought up by Wendell Williamson's Double W or under lease to it. The Williamsons of life always do try to latch onto all the land that touches theirs, was my father's view on that. What I am aiming at, though, is that among those Noon Creek stockmen when my father was hired on was Isaac Reese, mostly a horse raiser but under the inspiration of wartime prices also running cattle just then. It was when my father rode in to pick up those Reese cattle for the drive into the mountains that he first saw my mother. Saw her as a woman, that is. Oh, I had known she had some promise. Lisabeth Reese. The name alone made you keep her somewhere in mind.

Long-range opportunities seemed to elude my father, but he could be nimble enough in the short run. I wasn't without some practice at girling. And Beth was worth extra effort.

The McCaskill-Reese matrimony ensued, and a year or so after that, Alec ensued. Which then meant that my father and mother were supporting themselves and a youngster by a job that my father had been given because he was single and didn't need much wage. This is the brand of situation you can find yourself in without much effort in Montana, but that it is common does not make it one damn bit more acceptable. I am sure as anything that the memory of that predicament at the start of my parents'

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

#

My brother and my father. I am hard put to know how to describe them as they seemed to me then, in that time when I was looking up at them from fourteen years of age. How to lay each of them onto paper, for a map is never the country itself, only some ink suggesting the way to get there.

Which may be why the calendar of their lives, the seasons of the Two Medicine country, somehow seems to bring out more about this pair than sketchwork does. Yes, I believe that to come close to any understanding of Alec McCaskill or Varick McCaskill you would have had to gone through a year at the side of each.

Of course, until Alec graduated that May, the year as he and I knew it always had that long 9-month compartment in it, the school year. The first three grades, Alec went to a country school out west of Choteau; the Indian Head ranger station down there at the middle of the Two Medicine National Forest was where my father started in the Forest Service. Myself, I had only a few beginning recollections of the four or so years we spent at Indian Head. A windstorm one night that we thought was going to take the roof off the ranger station. A time

p. 47A follows →

Alec and I rode double into the mountains with our father, for he took us along on little chore trips as soon as we were big enough to perch on a horse. Funny, what memory does. That a day of straddling behind the saddle where my brother sat--my nose inches from the collar of Alec's jacket, and I can tell you as well as anything that the jacket was green corduroy, Alec a greener green than the forest around us--is so alive, even yet. Anyway, After Indian Head came our move to English Creek and my father's rangering of the north end of the Two ever since. Now that I think on all this, that onset of our English Creek life was at the start of Alec's fourth school year, for I recall how damn irked I was that, new home or not, here Alec was again riding off to school every morning while I still had a whole year to wait.

Next year did come, and there we both were, going to school to Miss Thorkelson at the South Fork schoolhouse, along with the children of the ranch families on ~~this~~ the upper end of English Creek--the Hahn boys, a number of Busbys and Roziers, the Finletter twins, the Withrow girls, and then of course the Hebner kids who made up about

p. 47B follows

half the school by themselves. Alec ~~of course~~ always stood well in his studies, yet I can't help but believe the South Fork school did me more good than it did him. You know how those one-room schools are, all eight grades there in one clump for the teacher to have to handle. By a fluke of Hebner reproductive history Marcella Withrow and I were the only ones our age at South Fork, so as a class totaling two we didn't take up much of Miss Thorkelson's lesson time and she always let us read extra or just sit and partake of what she was doing with the older grades. By the time Marcella and I reached the 6th grade, we already had listened through the older kids' geography and reading and history and grammar five times. I still know what the capital of Bulgaria is, and not too many people I meet do. And since ~~Because~~ Miss Thorkelson was a bearcat on poetry, parts of poems lodged in the mind then, too. "The holiest of all holidays are those kept/by ourselves in silence and apart./ The secret anniversaries of the heart."

Sofia; 183 Alexander Battenberg in Bulgaria independent in 1908

Longfellow, Sonnets: Holidays

As did the books she would read to us from, at the last of each school day. "Squire Trelawney, Doctor Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island, and that only because there is still treasure not yet lifted, I take up my pen"--I'll tell you right now, that Treasure Island is still one topnotch book.

checked with our copy of TI

(p. 47C follows) →

Anyway, words I always could remember like nobody's business. Numbers, less so. But there Alec shined. Shined in spite of himself, if such is possible.

It surprised the hell out of all of us in the family. I can tell you the exact night we got this new view of Alec.

It had been "paper day" for my father, the one he set aside each month to wrestle paperwork asked for by the Two Medicine National Forest headquarters down in Great Falls, and more than likely another batch wanted by the Region One office over in Missoula as well. The author of his sorrow this particular time was Missoula, which had directed him to prepare and forward--that was the way Forest Service offices talked--a report on the average acreage of all present and potential grazing allotments in his English Creek ranger district. "Potential" was the nettle in this, for it meant that my father had to dope out from his maps every bit of terrain which fit the grazing regulations of the time and translate those map splotches into acreage. So, acres had been in the air all that day in our household, and it was at supper that Alec asked how many acres there were in the

p. 47D follows

entire Two Medicine National Forest altogether.

Alec must have been in about the sixth grade then. Which would put me in the second, since there were four years between us. Three years and 51 weeks, since I preferred to count it; my birthday being on September 4th and Alec's the 11th of that same month. But the point here is that we were both down there in the grade years and my father didn't particularly care to be carrying on a conversation about any more acreage, so he just answered: "Quite a bunch. I don't know the figure, exactly."

Alec was never easy to swerve. "Well, how many sections does it have?" You likely know that a section is a square mile, in the survey system used in this country.

"Pretty close to 600," my father knew offhand.

"Then that's 384,000 acres," imparted Alec.

"That sounds high, to me," my father responded, going on with his meal. "Better get a pencil and paper and work it out."

Alec shook his head against the pencil and paper notion. "384,000," he said again. "Bet you a milkshake."

p. 47E follows →

At this juncture my mother was heard from. "There'll be no betting at the supper table, young man." But she then got up and went to the sideboard where the mail was lying and returned with an envelope. On the back of it she did the pencil work--600 times 640, the number of acres in a section--and in a moment reported:

"384,000."

"Are you sure?" my father asked her.

My mother in her younger days had done a little schoolteaching, so here my father simply was getting deeper into the arithmetic bog. "Do you want to owe both Alec and me milkshakes?" she challenged him back.

"No, I can do without that," my father said. He turned to Alec again and studied him a bit. Then: "All right, Mister Smart Guy. How much is 365 times 12?"

This too took Alec only an instant. "4,380," he declared. "Why, what's that?"

"It's about how many days a twelve-year-old like you has been on this earth," my father said. "Which is to say it's about how long it's taken us to discover what it is you've got in that head of yours."

That, then, was what might be called the school year portion of Alec. An ability he couldn't really account for--"I don't know, Jicker, I just can," was all the answer I could ever get when I pestered him about how he could handle figures in his head like that--and maybe didn't

p. 47F follows →

absolutely want or at least welcome. The Alec of summer was another matter entirely. What he didn't display the happy knack of, in terms of ranch or forest work that went on in the Two country at that season of year, evidently hadn't yet been invented. Fixing fence, figuring how to splice in barbwire and set new posts, Alec was a genius at; anytime an English Creek rancher got money enough ahead for fence work, here he came to ask Alec to ride his lines and fix where needed. When Alec, at age thirteen, came to his first haying season and was to drive the scatter rake for our uncle Pete Reese, after the first few days Pete put him onto regular windrow raking instead. As a scatter raker Alec simply worked the job for more than it was worth, trotting his team of horses anywhere in the hayfield a stray scrap of hay might be found; the regularity of making windrows, Pete said, slowed him down to within reason. That same headlong skill popped out whenever Alec set foot into the mountains. On our counting trips before this year, he perpetually was the first to see deer or elk or a hawk or whatever, before I did and often before our father did.

The combination of all this in Alec, I am sure as anything, was what inspired my father and mother to champion college and engineering. They never put it in so bald a way, but Alec's mathematical side and his knacky nature and his general go-to-it approach seemed to them fitted for an engineer. A builder, a doer. Maybe even for the Forest Service, for in those New Deal times there were roads and bridges and trails under way everywhere a place could be found for them, it seemed like. The idea even rang right with Alec, at first. All through that winter of his last year in high school Alec kept saying he wished he could go right now, go to the college at Bozeman and get started.

p. 47G follows →

But then Leona happened, and the Double W summer job again, and the supper ruckus about marriage over college.

Well, that was a year's worth of Alec, so to speak. His partner in ruckus, my father up there on the horse in front of me, can't be calendared in the strictly regular fashion either. Despite the order of months printed and hung on our wall at the English Creek ranger station, a Varick McCaskill year began with autumn. With Indian summer, actually, which in our part of Montana arrives after a customary stormy turn of weather around Labor Day. Of course every ranger is supposed to inspect the conditions of his forest there at the end of the grazing season. My father all but X-rayed his portion of the Two Medicine National Forest. South Fork and North Fork, up under the reefs, in beyond Heart Butte, day after day he delved the Two almost as if making sure to himself that he still had all of that zone of geography. And somehow when the bands of sheep trailed down and streamed toward the railroad chutes at Blackfoot or Pendroy, he was on hand there too to look them over, gossip with the herders, the ranchers, the lamb buyers, join in the jackpot bets about how much the lambs would weigh. It was the time of year when he could assess his job, see right there on the land and on the hoof the results of his rangering and give thought to how to adjust it. A necessary inventory season, autumn.

He never wintered well. Came down with colds, sieges of hacking and sniffling, like someone you would think was a permanent pneumonia candidate. Strange, for a man of his lengthy strength and otherwise so in tune with the Two country. "Are you sure you were born and raised up there on the North Fork?" my mother would ask, along with about the

p. 47H follows →

third mustard plaster she applied onto him every winter. "Maybe a traveling circus left you."

More than likely, ~~I have since come to think that~~ all of my father's winter ailments really were symptoms of just one, indoorness. For stepping out a door somehow seemed to extend him, actually tip his head higher and brace his shoulders straighter, and the farther he went from a house the more he looked like he knew what he was doing.

Does that sound harsh? It's not meant to. All I am trying to work into words here is that my father was a man born to the land, in a job that sometimes harnessed him to a desk, a typewriter, a book of regulations. A man caught between, in a number of ways. I have since come to see that he was of a generation that this particularly happens to. The ones who are first-born in a new land. My belief is that it will be the same when there are births out on the moon or ~~/~~ the other planets; those first-born always, always will live in a straddle between the ancestral path of life and the route of the new land. In my father's case the old country, ~~/~~ of the McCaskills, Scotland, was as distant and blank as the North Pole, and the fresh one, America, still was making itself. Especially a rough-edged part of America such as the Montana he was born into and grew up in. All ~~his~~ my father's sessions with old Toussaint Rennie, hearing whatever he could about the past days of the Two Medicine country, I think were due to this; to a need for some footing, some groundwork of the time and place he found himself in.

p. 47 I follows →

Then too, the Forest Service itself was an in-between thing, for that matter. Keeper of the national forests, their timber, grass, water, yet merchant of those resources, too. Anybody local like my father who "turned green" by joining the USFS now sided against the thinking of a lot of people he had known all his life, people who considered that the country should be wide-open, or at least wider open than it was, for using.

And even within all this, ranger Varick McCaskill was of a betwixt variety. A good many of the guys more veteran than my father dated back to the early time of the Forest Service, maybe even to when it was established in 1905; they tended to be reformed cowboys or loggers or some such, old hands who had been wrestling the West since before my father was born. Meanwhile, the men younger than my father were showing up with college degrees in forestry and the New Deal alphabet on their tongues.

So there my father was, between and between and between. My notion in all this is that winter, that season of house time and waiting, simply was one more between than he could stand.

So when spring let him out and around, my father seemed to green up with the country. In the Two, even spring travels in on the wind--chinooks which can cause you to lean into them like a drunk against a lamppost while they melt away the snowbanks of winter. The first roar of a chinook beginning to sweep down off the top of the Rockies signaled newness, promise, to my father. "The wind from Eden," he called the chinook, for he must have read that somewhere. Paperwork chores he had put off and off, now got tackled and disposed of. All of the gear of the English Creek station received a going-over from him,

p. 47 J follows

Then too, this Forest Service of his

He and his assistant ranger gave the gear of the English Creek ranger district a going-over; saddles, bridles, pack saddles, fire equipment, phone lines, all of it. With his dispatcher he planned the work of trail crews, and the projects the Civilian Conservation Corps boys would be put to, and the deployment of fire guards and smokechasers when the fire season heated up.

And from the first moment that charitably might be classified as spring, my father read the mountains. Watched the snow hem along the peaks, judging how fast the drifts were melting. Cast a glance to English Creek various times of each day, to see how high it was running. Kept mental tally of the wildlife, when the deer started back up into the mountains, when the fur of the weasel turned from white to ~~gray~~ brown, how soon the first fresh pile of coal-black ~~crap~~ droppings in the middle of a trail showed that bears were out of hibernation. To my father, and through him to the rest of us in the family, the mountains now were their

(p. 47K follows) →

Wennberg had a temper [illegible] and fast as the fire of his forge.

"Your tongue is bigger than your brain, Melander. It's not for you to tell me who stands where. Don't forget that I can always show the Russians the hidey-hole where you've had Braaf stashing things these months."

"But Wennberg, heart's friend, there's nothing there," Melander said patiently. "Unless you're interested in mouse turds, and even the Russians might find it hard to believe that we've been busy storing away mouse turds. Aye? No, Wennberg, since you've invited yourself along with us we thought we'd get ourselves a new hidey-hole.

own calendar, you might say.

Finally, spring's offspring. Summer. The high season, the one the rest of my father's ranger year led up to. Summer was going to tell itself, for my father and I were embarking into it now with this counting trip.

"--a gander. Don't you think?"

My father had halted Mouse and was swiveled around looking at me in curiosity. Sometimes I think if I endure in life long enough to get senile nobody will be able to tell the difference, given how my mind has always drifted anyway.

Uh, come again? I mustered. I didn't quite catch that.

Anybody home there, under your hat? I was saying, it's about time you checked on your packslinging. Better hop off and take a gander.

Back there on the subject of our horses, I should have told too that we were leading one pack horse with us. Tomorrow, after we finished the counting of the Kyle and Hahn bands of sheep, we were going on up to Billygoat Peak, where Paul Eliason, the junior forester who was my father's assistant ranger, and a couple of fireguards were building a fire lookout. They had gone in the previous week with the pre-cut framework and by now likely had the lookout erected and shingled, but the guywire had been late in coming from Missoula. That was our

packload now, the roll of ½-inch galvanized cable and some bolts and flanges to tie down the new lookout cabin, you may think the wind blows in the lower areas of the Two, but up there on top it really huffs.

This third horse, bearer of the load whose ropes and hitch knots I now was testing for tautness, was an elderly solemn sorrel whom my father addressed as Brownie but the rest of us called by the name he'd been given before the Forest Service deposited him at the English Creek station: Homer. Having Brownie nee Homer along was cause for mixed emotions. One more horse is always a nuisance to contend with, yet the presence of a pack animal also made a journey seem more substantial; testified that you weren't just jaunting off to somewhere, you were transporting. Packstrings of horses and mules had been the lifeblood of the Forest Service ever since its birth, the hoofed carriers of supply into the mountains of all the west. I know for a fact that my father considered that the person most important to his job as English Creek district ranger was not Paul Eliason, although Paul was a good enough assistant, nor anyone up the hierarchy, the superintendent of the Two Medicine National Forest or the regional forester of Region One or any of those, but his packer, Isidor Pronovost.

Since the lookout gear and our food only amounted to a load for one horse it hadn't been necessary to call on Isidor for this counting trip of ours. But even absent he had his influence that morning as I arranged the packs on Brownie/Homer under my father's scrutiny, both of us total converts to Isidor's perpetual preachment that in

packing a horse or a mule, balance is everything. One of the best things that was ever said to me was Isidor's opinion that I was getting to be "a pretty daggone good cargodier" in learning how to fit cargo onto a pack animal. These particular Billy Peak packs took me some extra contriving,

to make a roll of heavy guywire on one side of the pack saddle equivalent to some canned goods on the other side of it, but finally my father had proclaimed: There, looks to me like you got it Isidored.

Evidently I had indeed, for I didn't find that the packs or ropes had shifted appreciably on our ride thus far. But I went ahead and reefed down on a rope or two anyway, snugging them even further to justify the report to my father: "All tight as fiddlestrings."

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

The view rather than his stomach guided him in that choice, I believe.

By now, late morning, we were well started into the mountains above the English Creek-Noon Creek divide, and so could see down onto both drainages and their various ranches, and on out to where the farm patterns began, east of the town of Gros Ventre. To be precise, on a map our lunch spot was about where the east-pointing panhandle of the Two Medicine National Forest joins onto the pan--the pan being the seventy-five mile extent of the forest along the front of the Rockies, from East Glacier at the north to Sun River at the south. Somehow when the forest boundary

was drawn the English Creek corridor, the panhandle route we had just ridden, got included and that is why our English Creek ranger station was situated out there with ranches on three sides of it. That location, like a nest at the end of a limb, bothered some of the map gazers at Regional Headquarters. They'd have denied it, but they seemed to hold the theory that the deeper a ranger station was buried into preposterous terrain, the better. Another strike was that English Creek sat almost at the southern end of my father's district, nothing central or tidy about the location either. But the Mazoola inmates had never figured out anything to do about English Creek, and while the valley-bottom site added some riding miles to my father's job, the convenience of being amid the English Creek ranch families--his constituents, so to speak--was more than worth it.

My mother had put up sandwiches for us; slices of fried ham between slabs of homemade bread daubed with fresh yellow butter. You can't beat that combination. Eating those sandwiches and gaying out over the Two country mended our dispositions a lot.

If a person can take time to reflect on such a reach of land, other matters will dim out. An area the size of the Two is like a small nation. Big enough to have several geographies and a gamut of climates and a considerable population, yet compact enough that people know each other from one end of the Two to the other.

A hawk went by below us, sailing on an air current. A mark of progress into the mountains I always watched for, hawks and even eagles now on routes lower than our own.

p. 52 follows →

Mostly, however, as my father and I worked our way through sandwiches and a shared can of plums, I simply tried to store away the look of the land this lush June. Who knew if it would ever be this green again? The experience of recent years sure as hell didn't suggest so. For right out there in that green of farmland and prairie where my father and I were gazing, a part of the history of the Depression began to brew on a day of early May in 1934. Nobody here in the Two could have identified it as more than an ordinary wind. Stiff, but that is never news in the Two country. As that wind continued east, however, it met a weather front angling down out of Canada, and the combined velocity set to work on the plowed fields along the High Line. An open winter and a spring of almost no rain had left those fields dry; brown talcum waiting to be puffed. And so a cloud of wind and topsoil was born and grew. By the time the dirt storm reached Plentywood in the northeastern corner of the state, the grit of it was scouring paint off farmhouses. All across the Dakotas, further dry fields were waiting to become dust. The brown storm rolled into the Twin Cities, and on to Chicago, where it shut down plane flights and caused streetlights to be turned on in the middle of the day. I don't understand the science of it, but that storm continued to grow and widen and darken the more it traveled, Montana dirt and Dakota dirt and Minnesota dirt in the skies and eyes of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio. And on and on the storm swept, into New York City and Washington, D.C., the dust of the west fogging out the pinnacle of the Empire State building and powdering the shiny table tops within the White House. At last the dirt cloud expended itself into the Atlantic.

Elmer Gwyn topic, 725– dust storms come from west

Of course thereafter came years of dust, particularly in the Great Plains and the Southwest. But that Montana-born blow was the Depression's ~~first~~ great nightmare storm, the one that told the nation that matters were worse than anyone knew, the soil itself was fraying loose and flying away.

In a way, wherever I scrutinized from the lunch perch of that day I was peering down into some local neighborhood of the Depression. As if, say, ~~binoculars~~ a spyglass such as Walter Kyle's could be adapted to pick out items through time instead of distance. The farmers of all those fields hemming the eastern horizon--they were veterans of years of scrabbling. Prices and crops both had been so weak for so long, many a farm family got by only on egg money or cream checks. Or any damn thing they could come up with. Time upon time we were called upon at the ranger station by one overalled farmer or another from near Gros Ventre or Valier or even Conrad, traveling from house to house offering a dressed hog he had in the trunk of his jalopy for three cents a pound. ~~Incredibly~~ Believe it or not, though, ~~the farmers that neighbored the Two country were better off than those that neighbored them on the east.~~ those of the ones who That great dust storm followed a path across northern Montana already blazed by drought, grasshoppers, army worms, you name it. Around the time the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corps, was being set up, my father and other rangers and county agents and maybe government men of other kinds were called to a session over at Plentywood. It was the idea of some government thinker--the hunch was that it came down all the way from Tugwell or one of those--that everybody working

along any lines of conservation ought to see Montana's worst-hit area of drought. My father grumbled about it costing him three or four days of work from the Two, but he had no choice but to go. I especially remember this because when he got back he said scarcely anything for about a day and a half, and that was not at all like him. Then at supper the second night he suddenly looked across at my mother and burst out, Bet, there're people over there who're trying to live on just potatoes. They feed Russian thistles to their stock. Call it Hoover hay. It--I just never saw such things. Never even dreamed of them. Fencelines pulled loose by the wind piling tumbleweeds against them. When a guy goes to drive a fencepost, he first has to punch holes in the ground with a spudbar and pour in water to soften the soil. And out in the fields, what the dust doesn't cover, the goddamn grasshoppers get. I tell you, Bet, it's a crime against life, what's happening.

So that was the past that came to mind from the horizon of green farms, and closer below us, along the willowed path of Noon Creek, the Depression history of the cattlemen was no happier memory. Noon Creek is the next drainage north of English Creek, swale country without as much cottonwood and aspen along its stream banks. Original cattle country, the best cow-grazing land anywhere in the Two. But what had been a series of about ten good ranches spaced along Noon Creek was dwindled to three. Fathest west, nearest our lunch perch, the Reese family place now run by my mother's brother Pete, who long ago converted to sheep; just east from there Dill Egan's cow outfit, with its historic round corral; and everywhere east of Dill the miles of Double W swales and benchland and the eventual cluster of buildings that was the Double W home ranch. Dill Egan was one of those

leery types who steered clear of banks, and so had managed to hold his land. The Williamsons of the Double W owned a bank and property in San Francisco or Los Angeles, one of those places, and as my father put it, "When the end of the world comes, the last sound will be a nickel falling from someplace a Williamson had it hid." Every Noon Creek cowman between the extremes of Dill Egan and Wendell Williamson, though, got wiped out when the nation's plunge flattened the cattle market. Places were foreclosed on, families shattered. The worst happened at a piece of Noon Creek I could not help but look down onto from our lunch site: the double bend of the stream, an S of water and willows like a giant brand onto the Noon Creek valley. The place there had belonged to a rancher who, on the day before foreclosure, told his wife he had some things to do, he'd be a while in the barn. Where he tacked up in plain sight on one of the stalls an envelope on which he had written: "I cant take any more. I wont have my ears knocked down any more." And then hung himself with a halter rope.

The name of the rancher was Carl Nansen, and that Nansen land was bought up by the Double W. "Wendell Williamson'll let us have the house on the Nansen place to live in," had been Alec's words about the domestic plan after he and Leona became Mr. and Mrs. this fall.

The thought of this and the sight of that creek S were as if wires had connected in me, for suddenly I wanted to turn to my father and ask him everything about Alec. What my brother was getting himself into, sashaying off into the Depression with a saddle and a bridle and a bride.

p. 55A follows →

Whether there was any least chance Alec could be headed off from cowboying, or maybe from Leona, since the two somehow seemed to go together. How my father and my mother were going to be able to reason in any way



with him, given last night's family explosion. Where we stood as a family. Divided for all time, or yet the unit of four we had always been? Ask and ask and ask; the impulse rose in me as if coming to percolation.

My father was onto his feet, had pulled out his pocket watch and was kidding me that my stomach was about half an hour fast as usual, it was only now noon, and I got up too and went with him to our horses. But still felt the asking everywhere in me.

No, I put that wrong. About the ask, ask, ask. I did not want to put to my father those infinite questions about my brother. What I wanted, in the way that a person sometimes feels hungry, half-starved, but doesn't know exactly what it is that he'd like to eat, was for my father to be answering them. Volunteering, saying I see how to bring Alec out of it, or It'll pass, give him a couple of weeks and he'll cool off about Leona and then

But Varick McCaskill wasn't being voluntary, he was climbing onto his horse and readying to go be a ranger. And to my own considerable surprise, I let him.

Why I kept my silence, did not blurt out my accumulated asking as I would have done any other time before that moment, is a puzzle I have thought about a lot. In a sense, I have thought about it all the years since that June lunchtime above the Noon Creek-English Creek divide. My conclusion, such as it is, is

p. 56A follows

that right then and there I became old enough to be aware of two necessities at once. And the one that I was choosing, with silence, was that my father and I needed this trail day, the rhythm or ritual or whatever it was, of beginning a counting trip, of again fitting ourselves to the groove of the task and the travel and the mountains. Of entering another



Two summer together, I might as well say. All of this the other necessity, the questions about the one involving Alec, would unbalance.

We tell ourselves whatever is needed to go from one scene of life to the next. Tonight in camp, I told myself now; there, that would be early enough to muster the asking. Without ~~really~~ fully knowing it, telling myself too that life was offering new considerations ~~all the time~~ fairly often now.

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Dode Withrow's sheep were nowhere in evidence when we arrived at the counting vee an hour or so after our lunch stop. A late start by the herder might account for their absence, or maybe it just was one of those mornings when sheep are pokey. In either case, I had learned from my father to expect delay, because if you try to follow some exact time when you work with sheep you will rapidly drive yourself loony.

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

This whole family's sanity could stand some thinking about, crossed my mind in reply but didn't come out. My father climbed on Mouse and went to worry over winter-kill on his forest.

I took out my jackknife and started putting my initials into the bare fallen log I was sitting on. This I did whenever I had time to

pass in the forest of the Two, and I suppose even yet up there some logs and stumps announce J McC to the silent universe.

The wind finally had gone down, I had no tug at my attention except for the jackknife in my hand. Carving initials as elaborate as mine does take some concentration. The J never was too bad to make and the M big and easy, but the curves of the c's needed to be carefully cut. Thanks to the tardy Withrow sheep, I had ample leisure to do so. I suppose sheep have caused more time to be whiled away than any other creatures in the world. Even yet on any number of Montana ridgelines there can be seen stone cairns about the height of a man. "Sheepherders' monuments" they are called, and what they are monuments to is monotony. Just to be doing something a herder would start piling stones, but because he hated to admit he was out there hefting rocks for no real reason, he'd stack up a shape that he could tell himself would serve as a landmark. Fighting back somehow against loneliness--that was a perpetual part of being a sheepherder. In the wagons of a lot of them you would find a stack of old magazines, creased and crumpled from being carried in a hip pocket. An occasional prosperous herder would have a battery radio to keep him company in the evenings.

Once in a while you came across a carver or a braider. Quite a few though, the ones who give the herding profession a reputation for skewed behavior, figured they couldn't be bothered with pasttimes. They just lived in their heads, and that can get to be cramped quarters. Those religions which feature years of solitude and silence, I have grave doubts about. I believe you are better off doing anything rather than nothing. Even if it is only piling stones or fashioning initials.

In any event, that jackknife work absorbed me for I don't know how long, but to the point where I was startled by the first blats of the Withrow sheep.

I headed on down through the timber on foot to help bring them to the counting vee. A sheepman could have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his band along and he'd still seem glad of further help. Dode Withrow spotted me and called, Afternoon, Jick. That father of yours come to his senses and turn his job over to you?

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

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

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

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

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

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

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for an anthem of the Two was Dode Withrow's lament of staying on and on in the sheep business. In that '19 winter, I remember coming in to the house and standing over the stove, I'd been out all day skinning froze-to-death sheep. Standing there trying to thaw the goosebumps off myself and saying, "This is it. This does it. I am going to get out of the sonofabitching sheep business." Then in '32 when the price of lambs went down to ~~four cents~~ 4¢ a pound and might just as well have gone all the way to nothing, I told myself, "This is really it. No more of the sonofabitching sheep business for me. I've had it." And yet here I am, still in the sonofabitching sheep business. God, what a man puts himself through.

That was Dode for you. Poet laureate of the woes of sheep, and a sheepman to the pith of his soul. On up the mountainslope he and Pat Hoy and I now shoved the band. It took a while, because up is not a direction sheep particularly care to go, at least at someone else's suggestion. Sheep seem perpetually leery of what's over a hill, which I suppose makes them either notably dumb or notably smart.

Myself, I liked sheep. Or rather, I didn't mind sheep as such, which is the best a person can do towards creatures whose wool begins in their brain, and I liked the idea of sheep. True, sheep had to be troubled with more than cattle did, but the troubling was on a smaller

scale. Pulling a lamb from a ewe's womb is nothing to untangling a leggy calf from the inside of a heifer. And a sheep you can brand by dabbing a splot of paint on her back, not needing to invite half the county in to maul your livestock around in the dust of a branding corral. Twleve times out of a dozen, in the debate of cow and ewe I will choose sheep as a matter of proportion. There on those slopes of the Two, for instance, to me sheep somehow simply looked proper, blending with the country as sage or heather or some other normal coloration would, while to my notion cattle on the same pasture stuck out like pepper on meringue. A kind of instant crop, sheep were. Under a strong-eyed herder who had them in easy graze across a half-mile of wildflower slope, sheep seemed as if generations of them always had been right there, cloudlike yet perpetual, and the grass and the flowers just now had been put in under them fresh for the year.

Nor do I hold with the argument that sheep inevitably destroyed such pasture. Put enough white mice or ostriches or anything else on a piece of land and you can overgraze it. No, if sense was used, if the sheep were moved around adequately on the range and there weren't more of them than the grass could stand--both of those conditions were enforced like the law of gravity in my father's bailiwick--pasturing sheep on a portion of a forest was a reasonable enough proposition. Anybody who slanders them as "hoofed locusts" or "bleaters and eaters" can also explain to me a better way to transform grass into food and fiber.

Anyway, for a person partial to the idea of sheep I was in the right time and place. With the encouragement of what the Depression had done

pp. 62-65, English Creek sheepmen's "chorus" of voices and experiences, taken out of ms for possible use in Mariah Montana.

Now my father went through the narrow gate into the vee, to the front of the sheep. He shook the sack in front of him where the sheep could see it, and let a few cottonseed pellets trickle to the ground.

Then it came, that sound not even close to any other in this world, my father's coax to the sheep: the tongue-made prrrrr prrrrr prrrrr, remotely a cross between an enormous cat's purr and the cooing of a dove. Maybe it was all the rs built into a Scotch tongue, but for whatever reason my father could croon that luring call better than any sheepman on the two.

Dode and Pat and I watched now as a first cluster of ewes, attentive to the source of the prrrrs, caught the smell of the cottoncake. They scuffled, did some ewely butting of each other, as usual to no conclusion, then forgot rivalry and swarmed after the cottoncake. As they snooped forward on the trail of more, they led other sheep out the gate and started the count. You could put sheep through the eye of a needle if you once got the first ones going so that the others could turn off their brains and follow.

My job was at the rear of the sheep with the herder, to keep the band pushing through the counting hole and to see that none circled around after they'd been through the vee and got tallied twice--or, had this been Ed Van Bebber's band, I would have been back there to see that his herder, on instructions from Ed, didn't spill some sheep around the wing of the corral while the count was going on, so that they missed being tallied into the allotment.

But since these were Dode's sheep with Pat Hoy on hand at the back of them, I had little to add to the enterprise of the moment and was there mostly for show. I always watched Pat all I could without seeming to stare, to try learn how he mastered these woolies as he did. Someway, he was able just to look ewes into behaving better than they had in mind. One old independent biddy or another would step out, size up her chance of breaking past Pat, figure out who she was facing and then shy off back into the rest of the bunch. This of course didn't work with lambs--who have no more predictability to them than hens in a hurricane--but in their case, all Pat had to do was say "Round 'em, Taffy," and his carmel-colored shepherd dog would be sluicing them back to where they belonged. A sheepdog as good as Taffy was was worth his weight in shoe leather. And a herder as savvy as Pat knew how to be a diplomat toward his dog, rewarding him every now and then with praise and ear rubbing but not babying him so much that the dog hung around waiting to be complimented rather than performing his work. That was one of my father's basic instructions when I first began going into the mountains with him on counting trips, not to get too affectionate with any herder's dog; simply stroke them a time or two if they nuzzled me and let it go at that.

Taffy came over now to see if I had any stray praise to offer, and I just said "You're a dog and half, Taffy."

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

No, I confessed, and we made conversation for a bit about the summer's prospects. Pat Hoy looked like any of a thousand geezers you could find in the hiring bars of First Avenue South in Great Falls, but he was a true grassaroo--knew how to graze sheep as if the grass was his own sustenance as well as theirs. No herder in all of the Two country was more highly prized than Pat the ten months of the year when he stayed sober and behind the sheep, and because this was so, Dode put up with what was necessary to hang onto him. That is, put up with the fact that some random number of times a year Pat proclaimed to him: "I quit, by damn, you can herd these old nellies your own self. Take me to town." Dode knew that only two of those quitting proclamations ever meant anything: "The sonofagun has to have a binge after the lambs are shipped and then another one just before lambing time, go down to Great Falls and get all bent out of shape. He's got his pattern down like linoleum, Pat has. For the first week he drinks whiskey and his women are pretty good lookers. The next week or so he's mostly on beer and his women are getting a little shabby. Then for about two weeks after that he's on straight wine and First Avenue squaws. That gets it out of his system, and I go collect him and we start all over."

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You can see how being around Dode and Pat lifted our dispositions. When the count was done and we had helped Pat start the sheep on up toward the range he would summer them on--the ewes and lambs already

P. 70 follows →

browsing, taking their first of however many million nibbles of grass would ensue on the Two between then and September--Dode stayed on with us a while to swap talk. What's new with Uncle Sam? he inquired.

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

alice Kratte tape, -3

Alec still keeping a saddle warm at the Double W? Dode was asking next.

Still is, my father had to confirm. Dode caught the gist behind the ~~words~~ tight pair of words, for he went on to relate: That goddamn Williamson. He can be an overbearing sonofabitch without half-trying, I'll say that for him. A while back I ran into him in the Medicine Lodge and we sopped up a few drinks together, then he got to razzing me about cattle being a higher class of animal than sheep. Finally I told him,

"Wendell, answer me this. Whenever you see a picture of Jesus Christ, which is it that he's holding in his arms? Always a LAMB, never a goddamn calf."

We hooted over that. For the first time all day, my father didn't look as if he'd eaten nails for breakfast.

Anyway, Dode assured us, Alec'll pretty soon figure out there are other people to work for in the world than Wendell Williamson. Life is wide, there's room to take a new run at it.

My father wagged his head as if he hoped so but was dubious. How about you, you see a nickel in sight anywhere this year? So now it was Dode's turn to report, and my father just as keenly welcomed in his information that down on the Musselshell a wool consignment of thirty thousand fleeces had gone for 22 cents a pound, highest in years, encouragement that could goddamn near make a man think about staying in the sheep business, and that Dode himself didn't intend to shear until around the end of the month unless the weather turns christly hot, and that--

I put myself against a tree and enjoyed the sight and sound of the two of them. All the English Creek sheepmen and my father generally got along like hand and glove, but Dode was special beyond that. I suppose it could be said that he and my father were out of the same bin. At least it doesn't stretch my imagination much to think that if circumstances had changed sides when the pair of them were young, it now could have been Dode standing there in the employ of the U.S. Forest Service and my father in possession of a sheep ranch. Their friendship actually went back

to before either of them had what could be called a career, to when they both were bronc punks, youngsters riding in ~~Dill~~ Egan's ~~father's~~ big round corral at Noon Creek every summer Sunday. My father loved to tell that Dode earned a lasting reputation the Sunday he showed up wearing a new pair of corduroy pants with leather trim--Dode could be

a ~~dressy guy~~ snazzy dresser whenever there was any occasion--and found everybody gathered around a stranger from Fort Benton. The stranger possessed a bucking steer, and the standing wager that nobody could stay aboard him for a total of ~~five~~ 5 minutes within a half-hour span. Dode snapped up the offer. ~~and then, getting~~ Then got a closer look at the animal, and began to realize what he was in for. He strapped and tied on his saddle in every direction he could think of, ~~got into~~ jammed his boots into the stirrups, and had the handlers turn the ~~pair of them~~ steer and him loose. When the half hour was up the steer had scraped and split Dode's fancy corduroy pants to tatters, and he ~~would~~ needed to borrow something to go home in. But Dode also had totaled, between spills and remounts, five minutes and twenty seconds on the steer's back. Anybody can be a bareback rider, my father always concluded in telling the corduroy pants story, but it took Dode to ride barebutt.

By this time of afternoon a few clouds had concocted themselves above the crest of the mountains and were drifting one after another out over the foothills below us. Small fleecy puffs, the kind which during the dry years made people disgustedly joke that Those are empties from Seattle going over. This year it did not matter that they weren't rainbringers, and with the backdrop of my father and Dode's conversation I lost myself in watching each cloud shadow cover a hill or a portion of a ridgeline and then flow down across the coulee toward the next, as if the shadow was a slow mock flood sent by the cloud.

—I hear nature calling, Dode now was excusing himself. He headed off not toward the timber, though, but to a rock outcropping about ~~forty~~ 40

yards away roughly as big and high as a one-story house. When Dode climbed up onto that I figured I had misunderstood his mission, he evidently was clambering up there to look along the mountain and check on Pat's progress with the sheep. But no, he proceeded to do that and the other too, gazing off up the mountain slope as he unbuttoned and peed.

Do you know, even as I say this I again see Dode in every particular. His left hand resting on his hip and the arm and elbow kinked out like the handle on a coffee cup. His hat tilted back at an inquiring angle. He looked composed as a statue up there, if you can imagine stone spraddled out in commemoration of that particular human function.

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

By the time Dode declared he had to head down the mountain toward home, pronto, or face consequences from his wife Midge, I actually was almost in the mood that a counting trip deserved. For I knew that traveling to tomorrow's sheep, those of Walter Kyle and Fritz Hahn, would take us up onto Roman Reef, always topnotch country, and after that would come the interesting prospect of the new Billy Peak lookout tower. It had not escaped me, either, that on our way to that pair of attractions we would spend tonight at a camping spot along the North Fork which my father and I--and yes, Alec in years past--considered

our favorite in the entire Two. Flume Gulch, the locale was called, because an odd high gully with steep sides veered in from the south and poured a trickle of water into the North Fork. If you had to walk any of that Flume Gulch area you would declare the terrain had tried to stand itself on end, and the timber on the slopes was thick and crisscrossed with windfalls; wild and tumbled country, but as pretty as you could ask for.

By just before dusk my father and I were there, and Mouse and Pony and Homer were unsaddled and tethered on good grass, and camp was established.

You know where supper is, my father advised. By which he meant that it was in the creek, waiting to be caught.

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

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

Hide behind a tree to bait your hook, my father warned with an almost straight face, or they'll swarm right out of the water after you.

p. 74A follows →

our favorite in the entire Two.

By just before dusk the two of us were there, and Mouse and Pony

cedar tree had decided to transform into a sharp swimming petrel, this craft of alert grace would have been the result. The canoe lay amid the beached fleet of a dozen nearest the stockade gate, convenient,

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

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

The fish in fact began to prove that, right then. I do make the concession to sportsmanship that I'll fish a riffle once in a while, even though it demands some attention to casting instead of just plunking into the stream, and so it pleased me a little that in the next half hour or so I pulled my ~~ten~~ 15 fish out of bumpy water, while at the pool he'd chosen to work over my father still was short of his limit.

"I can about taste that milkshake," I warned him as I headed downstream a little to clean my catch. Theoretically there was a standing bet in our family, that anybody who fished and didn't catch his limit owed the others a milkshake. My father had thought this up some summers ago to interest Alec, who didn't care anything for fishing but always was keen to compete. But after the tally mounted through the years to where Alec owed my father and me eight milkshakes each, during last year's counting trip ~~he~~ Alec declared himself out and left the fishing to us. And the two of us were currently even-stephen, each having failed to limit just once ~~in~~ all of last summer's ~~fishing~~.

"I'm just corraling them first," my ~~explained~~ father as he dabbed ~~hook~~

p. 754 follows →

a fresh worm to the pool. "What I intend is to get fish so thick in here they'll run into each other and ~~him~~ knock theirselves out."

The fish must have heard and ~~took~~ taken pity, because by the time I'd gutted mine here he came with his.

"What," I inquired as innocently as I could manage, "did you decide to forfeit?"

"Like hell, mister. ~~Ten~~ Fifteen brookies, right before your very eyes. Since you're so advanced in all this, go dig out the frying pan."

Even yet I could live and thrive on that Flume Gulch meal procedure: fry up both catches of fish, eat as many for supper as we could hold, resume on the rest at breakfast.

Those little brookies, Eastern brook trout about ~~eight~~ 8 inches long, are among the best eating there can be. You begin to taste them as quick as they hit the frying pan and go into their curl. Brown them up and take them in your fingers and eat them like corn on the cob, and you wish you had capacity for a hundred of them.

When we'd devoured ~~five~~ 5 or so brookies apiece, we slowed down enough to share out a can of pork and beans, then resumed on the last ~~half~~ stint of our fish ~~fry.~~ supper.

"That hold you?" my father asked when we were out of trout. each had made 8 or 10 trout vanish.

I bobbed that I guessed it would, and while he went to the creek to rinse off our tin plates and scour the frying pan with gravel, I set to work composing his day's diary entry.

and high at the front where Good Help was easing the loads up just barely

over the backfront. frame.

That the U.S. Forest Service wanted to know, in writing, what he'd done with his day constituted my father's single most chronic bother about being a ranger. Early on, someone told him the story of another rider-turned-ranger down on the Shoshone national forest in Wyoming. "Trimmed my horses tail and the wind blew all day," read the fellow's first diary try. Then with further thought, he managed to conclude: "From the northeast." My father could swallow advice if he had to, and so he did what he could with the perpetual nag of having to jot his activities into the diary. When he did it was entirely another matter. Two or three weeks he would stay dutiful, then came a Saturday morning when he had seven little yellow blank pages to show for his week, and the filling in had to start:

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

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

I thought that was Thursday.

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

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

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

Kolosh daggers, a couple of hatchets, and a fire flint apiece.

September's gleanings comprised a second compass--Melander wanted to be double certain about navigation--a small iron kettle, a spyglass, another box of tea and a water cask.

Early in October, New Archangel's month of curtaining rain, the plotters convened about the matter of a canoe.

Karlsson had eyed out a candidate, a twenty-foot shell with a prow which angled up into a high sharp needle of nose. If a sizable

When I became old enough to go into the mountains with him on counting trips, my father perceived relief for his diary situation. (Previously he had tried Alec, but Alec had the same catch-up-on-it-later proclivity as his.) I think we had not gone a mile along the trail above the South Fork that very first morning when he reined up, said as if it had just occurred to him out of nowhere, Jick, whyn't you kind of keep track of today for me? and presented me a fresh-sharpened stub pencil and a pocket notebook.

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

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

My father read it over and nodded. Change that "bolts and flanges and cable" just to "gear." You don't want to be any more definite than necessary in any love note to Uncle Sam. But otherwise it reads like the very Bible.

So the day was summed and we had dined on trout and the campfire was putting warmth and light between us and the night, and we had nothing that needed doing except to contemplate until sleep overcame us. My father was laying back against his saddle, hands behind his head and his hat tipped ~~tipped~~ forward over his forehead. Ever since a porcupine attracted by the salt of horse sweat had chewed hell out of Alec's saddle on the counting trip a couple or three years ago, we made it policy to keep our saddles by us.

He could make himself more comfortable ~~by~~ beside a campfire than anybody else I ever knew, my father could. Right now he looked like he could spend till dawn, talking over the Two country and everything in it, if Toussaint Rennie ~~or Isidor Pronovost~~ or Dode Withrow had been on hand to do it with.

My thoughts, though, still circled around Alec--well, sure, somewhat onto Leona too--and what had erupted at supper last night. But again the reluctance lodged itself in me, against outright asking my father what he thought the prospect was where Alec was concerned. I suppose there are times a person ~~a person sometimes~~ doesn't want to hear pure ~~hard~~ truth.

Instead, I brought out something else that had been dogging my mind.

"Dad? Do you ever wonder about being somebody ~~awke~~ else?"

"Such as who? John D. Rockefeller?"

"What I mean, I got to thinking from watching ~~seeing~~ you and Dode together there at the counting vee

p 78A follows →

Just, you know, whether you'd ever thought about how he could be in your place and you in his."

"Which would give me three daughters instead of you and Alec, do you mean? Maybe I'll saddle up Mouse and go trade him right now."

"No, not that. I mean life generally. Him being the ranger and



you being the sheepman, is what I had in mind. If ~~[illegible]~~ things had gone a little different back when you guys were, uh, young." Were my age, was of course what was hiding behind that.

"Dode jaw to jaw with the Major? Now I know I'm going to head down the mountain and swap straight across, for the sake of seeing that." In that time the regional forester, the boss of everybody in the national forests of Montana and northern Idaho, was Evan Kelley. Major Kelley, for he was like a lot of guys who got a big army rank during the war, hung on to the title ever afterward as if it was sainthood. The Major's style of leadership was basic: when he said frog, everybody better jump. I wish I had a nickel for every time my father opened the mail from Missoula and muttered: "Oh Jesus, another kelleygram. When does the man ever sleep?"

northern Idaho? Find Moore phone call, 1-16-84

Everybody did admit, the Major at least made clear the gospel in his messages to his Forest Service men. What he prescribed from his rangers were no big forest fires and no guff. So far, my father's slate was clean of both. In those years I didn't give the matter any particular thought, but I recognize now that my father's long stint in charge of the English Creek district of the Two Medicine National Forest could only have happened with the blessing of the Major himself. The Pope in Missoula, so to speak.

Nobody lower could have shielded ranger Varick McCaskill from the transfers that ordinarily happened every few years or so in the Forest Service. No, the Major wanted that tricky northmost portion of the Two, surrounded as so much of it was by other government domains, rangered in a way that wouldn't draw any bow-wow from the Glacier Park staff or the Blackfeet Reservation people; and that was how that would keep the sheepmen happy content and the revenue they paid for summer allotments flowing in; and in a way that would not repeat the awful fires of 1910 or the later Phantom Woman Mountain burn, right in here above the North Fork. And that was how my father was rangering it. So far.

"I guess I know what you're driving at, though." My father sat up enough to put his boot against a pine piece of squaw wood and shove it farther into the fire, then lay back against his saddle again.

hesitant entrance into the governor's presence gathered ~~under~~ beneath a single ~~one~~ ceiling two of the three unhappiest men in New Archangel. The third was named Bilibin.

"Excellency."

"Pastor. As you may have heard, our citizenry is fewer by four this morning."

"I did happen to hear the, ah, rumor."

"Yes. Oblige me, if you will. Were these men parishioners of yours?" Rosenberg intoned through the list of four names his secretary had initiated this blighted day with. Melander: [illegible], that gabby stork of a sailor; Karlsson and Wennberg: the Governor could put vague faces to them; average slag among the seven-year

"How come we do what we do in life, instead of something else. But I don't know. I ~~dunno~~ do not know. All I've ever been able to figure out, Jick, is that no job fits as well as a person would like it to, but some of us fit the job better than others do. That sorts matters out, a little."

"Yeah, well, I guess. But how do you get in the job in the first place to find out whether you're going to fit it?"

"You watch for a chance to try it, is all. Sometimes the chance comes looking for you, sometimes you got to look for it. Myself, I had my taste of the army because of the war. And it took goddamn little of army life to tell me huh-uh, not for me. Then when I landed back here, I got to be association rider for Noon Creek by setting out to get it, I guess you'd say. What I did, I went around to Dill Egan and old Thad Wainwright and your granddad Isaac and the other Noon Creekers and asked if they'd keep me in mind when it came time to summer the cows up here. Of course, it ~~might have helped~~ maybe didn't particularly hurt that I mentioned how happy I'd be to keep Double W cows from slopping over onto the Noon Creek guys' allotments, as had been going on. Anyway, the job got to be mine."

"What, you mean the Double W was running cattle up here then?"

"Were they ever. They had an allotment, in the early days. A hellish big one. Back then the Williamsons didn't have hold of all that Noon Creek country to graze. So yeah, they had forest range, and sneaked cows onto anybody else's whenever they could. The number one belief of old Warren Williamson, you know, was that other people's grass might just as well be his." I didn't know. Warren Williamson, father of the present Double W honcho, was before my time; or at least died in California before I was old enough for it to mean anything to me.

"I'll say this one thing for Wendell," my father went on, "he at least buys or rents the country. Old Warren figured he could just take it." He gave the pine piece another shove with his boot. "The everlasting damn Double W. The Gobble Gobble You, as the gent who was ranger when I was association rider used to call it."

"Is that--" I had it in mind to ask if that was why he and my mother were so dead set against Alec staying on at the Double W, those old contentions between the Williamsons' ranch and the rest

of the Two country. But no, the McCaskill next to me here in the fireshine was a readier topic than my absent brother. "Is that how you got to be the ranger here? Setting out to get the job?"

He went still for a moment, laying there in that slope position against the saddle, feet toward the fire. Then shook his head. "The Forest Service generally doesn't work that way, and the Major sure as hell doesn't. Point yourself at the Two and they're liable to plunk you down on the Beaverhead or over onto the Bitterroot. Or doghouse you in the Selway, back when there still was a Selway. No, I didn't aim myself at English Creek. It happened."

I was readying to point out to him that "it happened" wasn't a real full explanation of job history, when he sat up and moved his hat back so as to send his attention toward me. "What about you, on all this if-I-was-him-and-he-was-me stuff? Somebody you think you'd rather be, is there?"

There he had me. My turn to be less than complete. I answered: "Not rather, really. Just might have been, is all."

An answer that didn't even start toward truth, that one was. And not the one I would have resorted to any time up until supper of the night before. For until then if I was to imagine myself happening to be anybody else, who could the first candidate have been but Alec? Wasn't all the basic outline already there? Same bloodline, same place of growing up, same schooling, maybe even the same bodyframe if I kept growing at my recent pace. Both of us September arrivals into the world, even--only the years needed swapping. The remarkable thing to me was that our interests in life were as different as they were, and I suppose I had more or less assumed that time was going to bring mine ~~up~~ around to about where Alec's were. But now, precisely ~~that~~ this possibility was what was unsettling me. I can only describe it something like this: that previous night at the supper table when Alec made his announcement about him and Leona and I asked "How come?", what I intended maybe was something similar to what my parents were asking of Alec. Something like "Already?" What was the rush? How could marriage and all be happening this soon, to my own brother? Yes, maybe put it this way: What I felt, or at least sensed and

was trying to draw into focus, was the suggestion that Alec's recent course of behavior in some way was foreshadowing my own. That "might have been," after all, has within it "might be." It was like looking through the Toggery window in Gros Ventre at a fancy suit of clothes and saying, by the Christ, they'll never catch me dead in those. But at the same time noticing that they seem to be your exact fit.

"Like who?" my father asked, in a tone which signaled me that he was asking it for the second time.

"Who?" I echoed, trying to think of anything more.

"Country seems to be full of owls tonight," he joked. Yet he was still attentive enough that I knew I had to come up with something that ~~seemed like~~ resembled an answer.

"Oh. Yeah. Who." I looked at the fire for some chunk that needed kicking further in, and although none really did, I kicked one anyway. "Well, like Ray. That's all I had in mind, was Ray and me." Ray Heaney was my best friend at high school in Gros Ventre. "Us being the same age and all, like you and Dode."

This brought curiosity into my father's regard of me. "Now that takes some imagination," he said. "Dode and me are Siamese twins compared to you and Ray."

Then he rose, dusting twigs and pine needles off the back of him from where he had lain. "But I guess imagination isn't a shortage with you. You maybe could supply the rest of us as well, huh? Anyway, let's give some thought to turning in. We got a day ahead of us tomorrow."

#

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

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

Well, that will happen in a family. A passing shadow of absent-mindedness, or the tongue just slipping a cog from what was intended. Ordinarily, being miscalled wouldn't have riled me at all. But all this recent commotion about Alec, and my own wondering about where anybody in this family stood any more, and that fireside spell of brooding I'd done on my brother and myself, and I don't know what the hell all else--it now brought a response which scraped out of me like flint:

"I'm the other one."

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

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

#

p. 91 follows

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

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

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

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

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

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

To top it all off, we now were on the one stretch of the trail I never liked, with the Phantom Woman Mountain burn on the slope opposite us. Everywhere over there, acre upon acre upon acre, a gray cemetery of snags and stumps. Of death by fire, for the Phantom Woman forest fire had been the one big one in the Two's history except for the blazing summer of 1910.

Ahead of me, my father was studying across at the burn in the gloomy way he always did here. Both of us now moping along, like ~~a pair of poisoned pups~~ sorrow's orphans. If I didn't like the Phantom Woman neighborhood, my father ~~despised~~ downright it. Plainly he considered this gray dead mountainside the blot on his forest. In those times, when firefighting was done mainly by hand, a runaway blaze was the bane of the Forest Service. My father's slate was as clean as could be; except for unavoidable smudges before lightning strikes could be snuffed out, timber and grass ~~were~~ everywhere else on the English Creek ranger district were intact, even much of the 1910-burnt

p. 92A follows →

"So long as I have lived, so long have I carved," the dagger-man responded. "If the spirit people will let me, I will carve even after I am dead."

Even Melander could not have said why, but that response echoed

~~intact on the English Creek ranger district, even much of the 1910-burnt~~ country restoring itself by now. But the awful scar here was unhealed yet. Not that the Phantom Woman fire was in any way my father's own responsibility, for it happened before this district was his, while he still was the ranger at Indian Head rather than here. He was called in as part of the fire crew--this was a blaze that did ~~yuk~~ run wild for a while, a whole hell of a bunch of men ended up fighting Phantom Woman before they controlled it--but that was all. You ~~dumbbell~~ couldn't tell my father that, though, and this morning I wasn't in a humor to even try.

When time has the weight of a mood such as ours on it, it slows to a creep. Evidently my father figured both the day and I could stand some brightening. Anyway it was considerably short of noon--we were about two-thirds of our way up Roman Reef, where the North Fork hides itself in a timber canyon below and the trail bends away from the face of Phantom Woman to the other mountains beyond--when he turned atop Mouse and called to me:

"How's an early lunch sound to you?"

"Suits me," I of course assured him.

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

We had eaten an applebutter sandwich and a half apiece and were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when ~~a~~ Mouse suddenly snorted.

"Stand still a minute," my father instructed, which I already was ~~doing.~~ embarked on. Meanwhile he stepped carefully backward the ~~three~~ three or four paces until he was beside the scabbard on Mouse, with the 30.06 rifle in it.

That time of year in the Two, the thought was automatic in anybody who at all knew what he was doing: look around for bears, for they are coming out of hibernation cantankerous.

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

"Somebody's new camptender, must be," my father said, and resumed on our peaches.

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

P. 93A follows →

as to bury it clear up to his eyes. He was hard and fast. I took him with the stick to the house and called Jones and Phillips to see the curiosity. It was with difficulty that his bill was pulled out again.

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

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

"Hullo, Mac."

"I had half a hunch it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?"

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

I had not seen him since I was, what--four years old, five? Yet right then I could have told off to you a number of matters about Stanley Meixell. That he was taller than he looked on that sorrel, built in the riderly way of length mostly from his hips down. That he had once been an occasional presence at our meals, stooping first over the wash basin for a cleanse that included the back of his neck, and then slicking back his hair--I could have said too that it was crow-black and started from a widow's peak--before coming to the table. That unlike a lot of people he did not talk down to children, never delivered them that phony guff such as "Think you'll ever amount

written 3-6-81

K monolog - Hal

Braaf was the scale-weight of the three of us. With him here ~~among us~~, Wennberg dared do nothing. Turn on me, he had Braaf to worry about; contend with Braaf, there'd ~~still~~ be me. But now. It has to be the two of us against this coast because neither of us can last alone. Wennberg is no ox, he can see that, if his rage doesn't get in the way. But how to keep him tamped down...

to anything?" That, instead, he once set Alec and me to giggling to the point where my mother threatened to send us from the table, when he told us with a straight face that where he came from they called milk moo juice and eggs cackleberries and molasses long-tailed sugar. Yet of his ~~exact~~ ten or so years since we had last seen him I couldn't have told you anything whatsoever. So it was odd how much immediately arrived back to mind about this unexpected man.

"Jick," I clarified. "'Lo, Stanley."

It was my father's turn to pick up the conversation. "Thought I recognized that black pack mare. Back up in this country to be campjack for the Busby boys, are you?"

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

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

"Withrow's band yesterday, and Kyle's and Hahn's ~~Dode Spencer's~~ today."

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

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

"Could be." Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just noticing that it continued on from where we stood. "Could be," he repeated.

Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father, and it began to come through to me that this conversation was seriously kinked in some way. These two men had not seen each other for the larger part of ten years, so why didn't they have anything to say to one another besides this small-change talk about weather and grass? And already were running low on that? And both were wearing a careful look, as if the trail suddenly was a slippery place?

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

"Naw, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have sheepherders after my hide." Yet Stanley did not quite go into motion; seemed, somehow, to be storing up an impression of the pair of us to take with him.

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

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

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

We ~~all~~ contemplated Bubbles. As horses go, he looked capable not just of assault, but maybe pillage and plunder and probably arson too. He was ewe-necked, and accented ~~it~~ that feature by stretching back stubbornly against the lead rope even now that he was standing still. "A dragger," the Forest Service packer Isidor Pronovost called such a creature: "You sometimes wonder if the sunnabitch mightn't tow easier if you was to tip him over onto his back." The constellation of dark nose spots which must have given Bubbles his name--at least I couldn't see anything else nameable about him--drew a person's ~~look~~ attention, but if you happened to glance beyond ~~them~~ those markings, you saw that Bubbles was ~~looking~~ peering back at you as if he'd like to be standing on your spine. How such creatures get into pack strings, I just don't know. I suppose the same way ~~Good Help Hebners~~ mortgage bankers Good Help Hebners and Ed Van Bebbers get into the human race.

I don't remember you as having much hide to spare, my father said

p. 96A follows →

then to Stanley. During the viewing of Bubbles, the expression on my father's face had shifted from careful. He now looked as if he'd made up his mind about something. "Suppose you could stand some company?" Awful casual, as if the idea had just strolled up to him out of the trees. "Probably it's no special fun running a packstring one-handed."



Now this was a prince of an offer, but of course just wasn't possible. Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about the counting obligation he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set to remind him of our appointments with Walter's and Fritz's sheep when he added on: "Jick here could maybe ride along with you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Well, then. The brown Stetson tipped up maybe two inches, and Stanley swung a slow look around at the pines and the trail and the mountainslope as if this was a site he might want to remember. More of his face showed. Dark eyes, ~~brown~~ blue-black. Into the corners of them, a lot of routes of squint wrinkles. Thin thrifty nose. Thrift of line at the mouth and chin, too. A face with no waste to it. In fact, a little worn down by use, was the impression it gave. "I guess we ought to be getting," Stanley proposed. "Got everything you need, Jick?"

I had no idea in hell what I needed for going off into the Rocky Mountains with a one-handed campjack. I mean, I was wearing my slicker coat, my bedroll was behind my saddle, my head was more or less on my shoulders despite the jolt of surprise that all this had sent through me, but were those nearly enough? Anyway, I managed to blurt: "I guess so."

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

The black packhorse and the light gray ugly one had passed us by the time I swung onto Pony, and my father was standing with his thumbs in his pockets, looking at the series of three horse rumps and the back of Stanley Meixell, as I reined around onto the trail. I stopped beside him long enough to see if he was going offer any explanation, or instructions,

or edification of any damn sort at all. His face, still full of that decision, said he wasn't. All I got from him was: "Jick, he's worth knowing."

"But I already know him."

No response to that. None in prospect. The hell with it. I rode past my father and muttered as I did: "Don't forget to do the diary."

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

p. 98A follows

98A

The Busby brothers, I knew, ran three bands of sheep on their forest allotment, which stretched beneath the cliff face of Roman Reef from the north fork of English Creek. Stanley had slowed beyond the first bend of the trail for me to catch up, or maybe to make sure I actually was coming along on this grand tour of sheepherders. Which camp do we head for first? I called ahead to him.

"Canada Dan's, he's the closest. About under that promontory in the reef is where his wagon is. If we sift right along for the next couple hours or so we'll be there." Stanley and the sorrel were on the move again, in that easy style longtime riders and their accustomed horses have. One instant you see the pair of them standing and the next you see them in motion together, and there's been no rigamarole in between. Stopped and now going, that's all. But Stanley did leave behind for me the observation: "Quite a day to be going places, ain't it."

"Yeah, I guess."

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

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

But he caught up awfully gradually, and in fact must have made a second stop when I went out of sight around a switchback. And before long, he was absent again. This time when he didn't show up and didn't show up, I halted Pony and waited. Just as I was about to go back and start a search, here Stanley came, calling out as before: "Be right there."

I began to wonder a bit. Not only had I been volunteered into this expedition by somebody other than myself, I sure as the devil had not signed on to lead it. So this time, I was determined to wait until Stanley was up with me. And as I sat there on Pony, firmly paused, I began to hear him long before I could see him.

indent 15 spaces

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

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

So did his song.

"I go to see Suzy,
She's got a doozy.
Suzy take my dollar away."

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

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

The race? I gaped.

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

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

"My brother is Sancho,
he try with a banjo
to coax Suzy to woo."

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

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

indent 15 spaces

"But she tell him no luck,
the price is ~~another~~ an extra buck,
him and the banjo make two."

I spent a strong hour or so in contemplation of my father and just what he had saddled me with, here. All the while mad enough to bite sticks in two. Innocent as a ~~daisy~~ goddamn, I had let my father detour me up the trail with Stanley Meixell. ~~Samaritan of the week, that was me.~~ And now to find that my trail compadre showed every sign of being a warbling boozehound. ~~Why was I not informed of this?~~ Couldn't I, for Christ's sake, be told the full extent of the situation before I was shoved into it? What was in the head of that father of mine? Anything?

After this siege of ~~black~~ dull mulling, a new angle of thought did break through. It occurred to me to wonder just how my father ought to have alerted me to Stanley's condition beforehand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What would that be, Dan?

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

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

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

I began to dread the way this was trending.

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

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

can stand all the help I can get.

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

We all three looked at the sheep for awhile. There is not too much you can say about bloated sheep carcasses. After a bit, though, Canada Dan offered in a grim satisfied way: That'll teach the goddamn buggers to eat deathcamas.

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

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

p. 104A follows

So for the next long while I was delving in ewe carcasses. Manhandling ~~the~~ each rain-soaked corpse onto its back, steadying it there, then starting in with that big incision along the belly which, if your jackknife ~~slipped~~ slipped just a little bit, ~~would~~ bring the guts pouring out all over your project. Slice along the insides of the legs, then trim the ~~the~~ pelt off the pale dead flesh. It grudges me even now to say it, but Stanley was accurate, it did have to be done, because the



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

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

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

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

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

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

spoke out: Stanley!

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

Nothing, I guess.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was I.

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

Our route angled us down in such a back and forth way that Roman Reef steadily stood above us now on one side, now on our other. A half-mile-high stockade of graybrown stone, claiming all the sky to the west. Even with Stanley and thunderclouds on my mind I made room in there to appreciate the ~~power~~ might ~~and glory~~ of Roman Reef. Of the peaks and buttresses of the Two generally, for as far as I'm concerned, Montana without its mountain ranges ~~and foothills~~ would just be Nebraska stretched north.

more?

At last, ahead of us showed up an orphan outcropping, a ~~freak~~ formation ~~sort of~~ like a crown of rock but about as big as a railroad roundhouse. Below it ~~would be~~ ran the boundary fence, and just outside the fence the line cabin. About time, too, because we were getting some first spits of rain, and thunder was telling of lightning not all that far off.

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

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

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

GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!

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

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

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

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

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

Geo. Engler letter, 5 Jan '84

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

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

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

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

Yeah, Stanley agreed. "About ~~a foot~~ six inches deep."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jesus H. Christ, I breathed.

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

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

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

The tail off my ~~clean~~ shirt.

Your ma's gonna like to ~~hear~~ find that.

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

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

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

What are we going to do about supper?

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

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

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

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

p. 116A follows

sack.

If and perhaps; coax at them as he would, Wennberg could make them do no more than somersault into perhaps and if. This, this damned skitter of a matter...Wennberg did not at all have well-bottom faith in the prospects of Melander's plan, but neither did he see, now, any clear path out of it. What Wennberg imagined was going to be his power over Melander and the other two somehow, by some coil of the escape plan, was turning out to be their power over him.

Karlsson bided the time with less edginess than the others. Since he went through life anyway in the manner of a man in wait, the space of weeks until the escape was to him simply one more duration, and not ~~as~~ so long as most. Time passed, or you put it past.

Archangel day sound carried like light, and from the blacksmith shop within the stockade began to ~~come~~ ring, chorus the measured clamor of hammer against anvil. # As if roused by the clangor, Karlsson turned ~~back to Melander.~~ to the taller man.

"Two of us are not enough strength for that much paddling."

"No," Melander agreed. "Our other man is Braaf."

"Braaf? That puppy?"

Melander tendered his new co-conspirator a serious smile which might have been a replica of Karlsson's own aboard the schooner in Stockholm harbor.

provisions I ~~found in~~ dug out of one of the packs of groceries for the herders, and exploring further I came up ~~some~~ with bread and ~~other~~ some promising sandwich material.

An imminent meal is my notion of a snug fortune. I was even humming the Pancho and Sancho and Suzy tune when, ready to dine, I sat myself down across the table from Stanley.

He ~~through~~ looked a little quizzical, then drew in a deep sniff. Then queried:

"Is that menu of yours what I think it is?"

"Huh? Just pork and beans, and an onion sandwich. Why?"

"Never mind."

Canada Dan's cooking must have stuck with me more than I was aware, though, as I didn't even think to open any canned fruit for dessert.

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



"Then you don't know fuck-all about where we are! You're running us blind down this coast!"

"I know Astoria is ahead. That ~~is~~ enough."

"Hell take you, it's enough! You think you're too keen to be among us, Karlsson. You've had that about you since we touched away from that Russian dungpile. Afraid maybe I'll smudge off on you, or long-fingers Braaf here'll pick your pocket, you act like. But play us the fool like this. . . We're hopeless as Methusaleh's cock, without maps to go by! This coast'll . . .

headed type carved by a tribe far south along the coast and occasionally bartered north as prized items of trade.

~~70A~~

117A

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

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

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

209

Theirs was a shoreside life which ~~Their coastal life~~ asks to be called nothing less than sumptuous. In spawning time the coastal rivers were stippled thick with salmon, veins of protein bulging there in the water to be wrested, fileted, dried for the winter larder. Abovestream the wealth was wood, particularly the cedar whose cunning these people knew how to ~~release~~ set free; under their hands it transformed to capacious lodges, canoes the length of a decent trawler, and art, ~~alarming~~ the most startling of art. Tree-sized columns of carvings simply offered the most evident form of how these tribes told stories of the creatures of timber and sea, sang and recited them, danced and acted them behind masks, in ~~cold~~ chill times wore pelts as if taking the saga-animals into themselves. (And thereby drew the attention of white newcomers to the coast, who bartered for those furs to cargo them beyond the bend of the world and barter in turn to yellow people: linkage queer in its way as any carved concatenation.) Out of this vivid swirl wafted, inevitably, the reputation of these coastal people as canoe warriors and slave-takers--and ~~xxxxxxx~~ illustrative tales such as that matter of the pillow of skulls. These four interloping Swedes knew no specifics of the downcoast tribes, but reason told them this much; if they had luck, they would not encounter the populated coves where the rain season was being whiled away in performance and potlatch.

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

What, already?

Yeah, already--a word which for some reason annoyed me as much as anything had all day.

Leaning over to unlace my forester boots, a high-topped old pair of my father's I had grown into, fully I felt how much the day had fagged me ~~out. Once~~ The laces were a downright chore. But once my boots and socks were off I indulged ~~myself~~ in a promising yawn, pulled what was left of out my shirt tail, and swung myself into the upper bunk.

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

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

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

weather of the The night I suppose continued in commotion. But at that age I could have slept through a piano tuners' convention. Came morning, I was up and around while Stanley still lay flopped in the lower bunk.

First thing, I made a beeline to the window. No snow. Not only was I saved from being wintered in with Stanley, but ~~the~~ Roman Reef ~~and Phantom~~

(p. 118A follows) →

was as gray as it had been an instant before, the murk was agreed to be thinning a bit.

They pushed off from the beach sand, paddled carefully out and

and all the peaks
~~Woman Peak~~ south beyond it ~~both~~ stood in sun, as if the little square of window had been made into a summer picture of the Alps. It still floors ~~awes~~ me, how the ~~the~~ mountains are not the same any two days in a row. As if hundreds of copies of those mountains exist and each dawn brings in a fresh one, of new color, new prominence of some ~~one~~ feature over the others, a ~~some~~ different wrapping of cloud or rinse of sun for this day's version.

~~lower bunk.~~ # I lit a fire and went out to check on the horses and brought in a pail of fresh water, and even then Stanley ~~he~~ hadn't budged, just was breathing like he'd decided on hibernation. The bottle which had nursed him into that condition, I noticed, was down by

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stanley considered some more. You would have thought he was doing it in Latin, the time it took him. But finally: "I guess don't see offhand why that wouldn't work. You know this piece of country

pretty good. Take along the windchester," meaning his rifle. "If any bear starts eating on me he'll pretty soon give up on account of gristle." Stanley pondered some more to see whether anything further was going to visit his mind, but nothing did. "So, yeah. We got it to do, might as well get at it. Which yahoo do you want, Gufferson or Sanford Hebner?"

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

"I'll take Andy."

"Okey-doke. I guess you know where he is, in west of here, about under the middle of Roman Reef. Let's go see sheepherders."

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

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

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

before long I could look back out onto the plains and see the blue dab of Lake Frances, and the water tower of Valier on its east shore--what would that be, thirty miles away, thirty-five? About half as far off was the bulge of trees which marked where the town of Gros Ventre sat in the long procession of English Creek's bankside cottonwoods and willows.

Gros Ventre: pronounced GROVE on, in that front-end way that town names of French origin get handled in Montana, making Choteau SHOW toh and Havre HAV er and Wibaux WEE boh. Nothing entertained residents of Gros Ventre more than hearing some tourist or other outlander pop out with gross ventree. My

father, though, figured that the joke was also on the town: "Not a whole hell of a lot of them know that Gros Ventre's the French for Big Belly." Energe in EV file

Of course, where all this started is that Gros Ventre is the name of an Indian tribe, although not what might be called a local one; the Gros Ventres originally before Reservation days were up in the Milk River country, near the Canadian line. Why a place down here picked up that tribe's name I didn't really know. Toussaint Rennie was the one who knew A to Why about the Two country; sometime I would have to ask him this name question. Energie a in EV File

write description here

Distant yet familiar sites offering themselves above and below me, and a morning when I was on my own. Atop my own horse and leading a beast of burden, even if the one was short-legged and pudgy and the other too amply justified the term of beast. Entrusted with a Winchester 30.06, not that I ever was one to look forward to shooting it out with a bear. A day to stand the others up against, this one. The twin feelings of aloneness and freedom seemed to lift and lift me, send me up over the landscape, like a balloon. Of course I know it was the steady climb of the land itself that created that impression. But whatever was responsible, I was glad enough to accept such soaring.

Quite possibly I ought to think about this as a way of life, I by now was telling myself. By which I didn't mean ~~shepherding~~ chaperoning Stanley Meixell. One round of that likely was enough for a lifetime. But packing like this, running a packstring as Isidor Pronovost did for my father--that was worth spending some daydreams on. Yes, definitely a packer's career ~~looked interesting~~ held appeal. Be your own boss out on the trail. Fresh air, exercise, scenery. Adventure. One of the stories my father told oftenest was of being with Isidor on one of the really high trails farthest back in the se mountains of the Two, where a misstep by one ~~pack~~ horse or mule might pull all the rest into a tumble a few thousand feet down the slope, when Isidor turned in his saddle and conversationally said: "Mac, if we was to roll this packstring right about here, the buggers'd bounce till they stunk."

Maybe a quieter mountain job than packing. Forest fire lookout, up there in one of Franklin Delano's lighthouses. Serene as a hermit, a person could spend summers in a lookout cabin atop the Two. Peer around like a human hawk for smoke. Heroic work. Fresh air, scenery, Some ~~jasper~~ cadger like Stanley to fetching your groceries up the mountainside to you. The new Billy Peak lookout might be the prime ~~one~~ job. I'd be finding that out right now if my father hadn't detoured me into companioning damn old Stanley. Well, next year, next counting trip--

Up and up I and my horses and my dreams went, toward the angle of slope beneath →

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

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

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

A forest's look of being everlasting is an illusion. Trees too are mortal and they come down. I was about to face one such. In the middle of ~~one of the~~ a straight tilt of trail between switchbacks, there lay a fresh downed ~~ponderosa~~ lodgepole pine poking out over my route, just above the height of a horse. ¶ On one of my father's doctrines of mountain travel I had a light little cruising ax along with me. But the steep hillside made an awkward place to try any chopping and ~~I did not have~~ what I didn't have was a saw of any sort. Besides, I was in no real mood to do trail maintenance for my father and the United States Forest Service. ¶ I studied the toppled

p. 124A follows

lodgepole ~~ponderosa~~. It barriered the trail to me in the saddle, but there was just room enough for a riderless horse to pass beneath. All I needed to do was get off and lead Pony and Bubbles through. But given the disposition of Bubbles, I knew I'd damn well better do it a horse at a time.

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



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

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

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

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

I suppose it can be said that I flubbed the dub on all this. That the whole works came about as the result of my reluctance to clamber up that sidehill and ~~perform~~ do axwork. Yet answer me this, was I the first person not to do what I ~~was supposed~~ didn't want to? Nor was goddamn Bubbles blameless, now was he? After all, I had him most of the way past the windfall before he somehow managed to swing his hindquarters too close in against the hillside, where he inevitably brushed against a broken branch dangling down from the tree trunk. Even that wouldn't have set things off, except for the branch whisking in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch.

Bubbles went straight sideways off the mountain.

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

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

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

I landed more or less upright, though. Upright and being towed down the slope of the mountainside in giant galloping strides, sinking about shin-deep every time, the dirt so softened by all the rain.

After maybe a dozen of those plowing footfalls, my journey ended.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~~That~~ This second notion held appeal of ~~several~~ numerous kinds. I would be rid of Stanley and responsibility for him. I'd done all I could, ~~it was~~ was it in no way my fault that Bubbles had schottisched off a mountaintop. Most of all, delivering my predicament home to English Creek would serve my my father right. He was the instigator of all this; who better to haul himself up here and contend with the mess?

Yet when I came right down to it, I was bothered by the principle of anyone venturing to my rescue. I could offer all the alibis this side of Halifax, but the truth of it still stood: somebody besides myself would be fishing me out of trouble. Here was yet another consequence of my damned in-between age, ~~too.~~ I totally did not want to be in the hell of a fix I was. Yet somehow I just as ~~totally~~ much did not relish resorting to anybody else to pluck me out of it. Have you ever been dead-centered that way? Hung between two schools of thought, neither one of which you wanted to give in to? Why a human ~~being~~ mind doesn't positively split in half in such a situation, I don't know.

As I was pondering back and forth that way, I happened to rub my forehead with the back of my free hand. It left moisture above my brow. Damn. One more sign of my predicament: real trouble always makes the backs of my hands sweat. I suppose nerves cause it. Whatever does, it spooks a person to have his hands sweating their own worry like that.

P-128A follows →

"That's just about enough of all this," I said out loud, apparently to Pony and Bubbles and maybe to my sweating hands and the mountainside and I suppose out across the air ~~to~~ toward Stanley Meixell and Varick McCaskill as well. And to myself, too. For some part of my mind had spurned the back-and-forth debate of whether to go fetch Stanley or dump the situation in my father's lap, and instead got to wondering. There ought to be some way in this world to contrive that damn cinch back together. "If you're going to get by in the Forest Service you better be able to fix anything but the break of day," my father said every spring when he set in to refurbish all the English Creek equipment. Not that I was keen on taking him as an example just then, but--

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

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

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

By taking a wrap of Bubbles' lead rope around the palm of my left hand I was more or less able to use the thumb and fingers to grasp the lash cinch while I punched holes in it with my jackknife. **All the while, of course, talking sweetly to Bubbles. When I had a set of holes accomplished on either side of the break, I** threaded the bootlace back and forth, back and forth, and at last tied it to make a splice. Then, Bubbles' recent standard of behavior uppermost in my mind, I made one more set of holes farther along each part of the cinch and wove in the remainder of the bootlace as a **second splice for insurance. In a situation like this, you had better do things the way you're supposed to do them.**

I now had a boot gaping open like an unbuckled overshoe, but the lash cinch looked as if it ought to lift a boxcar.

Now there remained only the matter of negotiating Bubbles back up to where he had launched from. Talk about an uphill job. But as goddamn Stanley would've observed to me, I had it to do.

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

It took the young thief an instant to realize he was being polled. He blinked and said: "You've to do it. I can't read the maps and he did not let himself sit but stayed propped there, looking across the tideflat to the forest; to the wide bay; to a lone dark stretched

slope. Balk again, and let himself slide back down the slope a little. Sneeze, then fart another series. Shake the packs in hope the splice would let go. ~~Try some more~~ Start over on the balking.

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

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

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

p. 130A follows

for whoever invented bootlaces.

Andy's band was spread in nice fashion along both sides of a timbered draw right under the cliff of Roman Reef. If you have the courage to let them--more of it, say, that was possessed by a certain bozo named Canada Dan--sheep will scatter themselves into a slow comfortable graze even in up-and-down country. But it takes a herder who is sure of himself and has a sort of sixth sense against coyotes and bear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This I didn't follow. In all the range ritual I knew, and even in the perpetual wrestle between Dode Withrow and Pat Hoy, the herder always was angling to provoke a reason for quitting, not to be fired. Being fired from any job was a taint; a never-sought smudge. True, Canada Dan was a prime example that even God gets careless, but--

The puzzle pursued me on into the cabin. As Stanley stepped to the stove to try rev the fire a little, I asked: "What, are you saying Canada Dan wants to get himself canned?"

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

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

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

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

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

That'd help, I answered shortly.

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

I waited while Stanley paused to speculate out the cabin window to where dusk was beginning to deepen the gray of the cliff of Roman Reef, ~~the silver of the [illegible] snags of the Phantom Woman fire scar.~~ But I wasn't in any mood ~~to wait~~ for very damn ~~long~~ much waiting.

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

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

Worth a try. Anything was. I went ahead and I did the halving, and the boots then laced firm as far as my insteps. The high tops pooched out like funnels, but at least now I could get around without one boot always threatening to ~~slop off~~ leave me.

One chore remained. I reached around and pulled my shirt up out of the back of my pants. The remainder of the tail of it, I jackknifed off. Stanley's hand didn't look quite so hideous this time when he rewrapped it, but still was no prize winner.

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

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

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

I at least knew by now I could be my own chef if I had to, and I stepped over to the packs to get started. There a harsh new light dawned on me. Now that we had tended the camps the packs were empty of groceries, which meant that we--or at least I, because so far I had no evidence that Stanley ever required food--were at the mercy of whatever was on hand in Stanley's own small supply pack. Apprehensively I dug around in there, but ~~about~~ all that I came up with that showed any promise was an aging loaf of bread and some Velveeta cheese. So I made myself a bunch of sandwiches out of those and mentally chalked up one more charge against my father.

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

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

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

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

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

One of those--doctor visits. A swig.

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

Fifteen, I maintained, borrowing the next few months.

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

Copying his style of pouring, I tilted the cup somewhat at the same time I was tipping the bottle. Just before I thought Stanley might open his mouth to say something, I ended the flow.

Then went over to the water bucket and dippered in a splash or so the way he had.

It is just remarkable how something you weren't aware of knowing can pop to your aid at the right moment. From times I had been in the Medicine Lodge saloon with my father, I was able to offer now in natural salute to Stanley:

"Here's how!"

"How," Stanley recited back automatically.

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

Tin mugs in hand, the two of them strolled past the sentry at the stockade gate and went a short way into the native

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

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

I didn't know about that, but the elixir of Doctor Hall did draw a person's attention.

Stanley reseated himself and was gandering around the room again.

"Who's our landlord, do you know?"

"Huh?"

"This cabin. Who's got this school section now?"

"Oh. The Double W."

"Jesus H. Christ." Accompanying this from Stanley was the strongest look he had yet given me. When scrutiny told him I was offering an innocent's truth, he let out: "Is there a blade of grass anywhere those sonuvabitches won't try to get their hands on?"

"I dunno. Did you have some run-in with the Double W too?"

"A run-in." Stanley considered the weight of the words. "You might call it that, I guess. I had the particular pleasure once of telling old Warren Williamson, Wendell's daddy, that that big belly of his was a tombstone for his dead ass. 'Scuse my French again. And some other stuff got said." Stanley sipped and reflected. "What did you mean, 'too'?"

"My brother Alec, he's riding for the Double W."

"The hell you say." Stanley waited for me to go on, and when he provided: I didn't, "I wouldn't wish that onto ~~anybody.~~ nobody. But just how does it constitute a run-in?"

"My folks," I elaborated. "They're plenty pis--, uh, P~~i~~eed off over it."

"Family feathers in a fluff. The old, old story." Stanley tipped a sip again, and I followed. Inspiration-in-a-~~[illegible]~~ cup must have been the encouragement my tongue was seeking, for before long I heard myself asking: "You haven't been

in the Two country the last while, have you?

Naw.

Where you been?

Oh, just a lot of places. Stanley seemed to review them on the cabin wall. Down in Colorado for awhile. Talk about dry. Half that state was blowing around chasing after the other half. ~~And Wyoming.~~ A little time in both Dakotas. Worked in the wheat harvest there, insofar as there was any wheat after the drouth and the grasshoppers. And Wyoming. I was an association rider in that Cody country a summer or two. Then Montana here again for a while, over in the Big Hole Basin. A couple

p. 138A follows →

~~138~~
138A

of haying seasons there. He considered, summed: Around. Which moved him to another drag from his cup.

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

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

He elid ~~seemed~~ a trifle ~~mite~~ sensitive on this topic. Well, there was always some other, such as the matter of who he had been before he became a wandering ~~planet~~ comet. "Are you from around here originally?"

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



Stanley Meixell originated in Missouri, on a farm east of St. Joe in Daviess County. As he told it, the summer he turned thirteen he encountered the down-row of corn--that tumbled line of cornstalks knocked over by the harvest wagon as it straddled its way through the field. Custom was that the youngest of the crew always had to be the picker of the down-row, and Stanley was the last of five Meixell boys. Ahead of him stretched a green gauntlet of down-row summers. Except that by the end of the first sweltering day of stooping and ferreting into the tangle of downed stalks for ears of corn,

Stanley came to his decision about further Missouri life. Within the week I was headed out to the Kansas high plains. If you're like me you think of Kansas as one eternal wheatfield, but actually western Kansas then was cattle country; Dodge City was out there, after all.

Four or five years of ranch jobs out there in jayhawk country ensued for Stanley. "I can tell you a little story ~~about~~ one that, Jick. This once we were dehorning a bunch of Texas steers. There was this one ornery sonuvabitch of a buckskin steer we never could get corraled with the others. After enough of trying, the foreman said he'd pay five dollars to anybody who'd bring that sonuvabitching steer in. Well, don't you know, another snotnose kid and me decided we'd just be the ones. Off we rode, and we come onto him about three miles away from the corral, all by hisself, and he was really on the prod. Tried to drive him, but no, hell no, he wasn't about to be driven. Well, then we figured we'd just rope him and drag him in. We got to thinking, though--three miles is quite a drag, ain't it? So instead we each loosed

"You crow-mouthed bastard," Wennberg husked. Minutes later, he clutched the side of the canoe, leaned over, retched. Then grasped his paddle again, cast a glare around at Braaf, and ploughed water in rhythm with the other two.

Their crossing was hours of stupefying slosh, under the most weather of the entire journey.

out our lariat, about ten feet of it, and took turns to get out in front of him and pop him across the nose with that rope. When we done that he'd make a hell of a big run at us and we'd dodge ahead out of his way, and he choused us back toward the corral that way. We finally got him up within about a quarter of a mile of the dehorning. Then each of us roped an end and tied him down and went on into the ranch and hitched up a stoneboat and loaded him on and boated him in in high old style. The foreman was waiting for us with five silver dollars in his hand.

Cowboying in the high old style. Alec, I thought to myself, you're the one who ought to be hearing this.

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

All this I found amazingly interesting. I suppose that part of my father was duplicated in me, the fascination about pawing over old times.

While Stanley was storying, my cup had drained itself without my really noticing. Thus when he, ~~Stanley~~ stopped to tip another round into his cup, I followed suit. The whiskey was weaving a little bit of wooze around me, so I was ~~especially~~ particularly pleased that I was able to dredge back ~~from something I'd overheard~~ Medicine Lodge yet another toast. I offered it heartily:

Here's lead in your pencil!

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

"Well, that's Missouri and Kansas accounted for," I chirped in encouragement. "How was it you got up here to Montana?"

On the 17th of March of 1898, to be real exact, Stanley boarded the first train of his life. From someone he had heard about Montana and a go-ahead new town called Kalispell, which is over on the west side of the Rockies, about straight across from there in the cabin where Stanley was telling me all this. Two days and two nights on that train. The shoebox full of fried chicken one of those Kansas girls fixed for me didn't quite last the trip through.

In Kalispell then, "you could hear hammers going all over town."

For the next few years Stanley grew up with the community. He worked sawmill jobs, driving a sawdust cart, sawfiling, foremanning a lumber piling crew. "Went out on some jobs with the U.S. Geological Survey, for a while there."

A winter, he worked as a teamster hauling lumber from Lake Blaine into Kalispell. Another spell, he even was a river pig, during one of the log drives on the north fork of the Flathead River.

"It was a world of timber over there then. I tell you something, though, Dick. People kind of got spoiled by it. Take those fires--December of my first year in Kalispell. They burned along the whole damn mountains from Big Fork to Bad Rock Canyon and even farther north than that. Everybody went out on the hills east of town at night to see the fire. Running wild on the mountains, that way. Green kid I was I asked why somebody didn't do something about it. 'That's public domain,' I got told. 'Belongs to the government, not nobody around here.' Damn it to hell, though, when I saw that forest being burned up it just never seemed right to me." Stanley here took stiff encouragement from his cup, as if quenching the distaste for forest fire.

"Damn fire anyhow," I seconded with a slurp of my own. "But what got you across the mountains, here to the Two?"

Stanley gave me quite a glance, I guess to estimate the state of my health under Dr. Hall's ministration. I felt first-rate, and blinked Stanley an earnest response that was meant to say so.

"Better go a little slow on how often you visit that cup," he advised. Then: "The Two Medicine country. Why did I ever kiss her hello. Good question. One of the best."

I may as well say, What ensued is somewhat difficult to reconstruct. The bald truth, is that as Stanley waxed forth, my sobriety waned. But even if I had stayed sharp-eared as a deacon, the headful of the past which Stanley now provided me simply was too much to keep straight. Tale upon tale of the Two country; memories of how the range looked some certain year; people who had passed away before I was born; English Creek, Noon Creek, Gros Ventre, the Reservation; names of horses, habits of sheepherders and cowboys, appreciations of certain saloons and bartenders. I was accustomed to a broth of history from my father and Toussaint Rennie, some single topic at a time, but Stanley's version was a brimming mulligan stew. "I can tell you a time, Jick, I was riding along in here under the Reef and met an old Scotch sheepherder on his horse. White-bearded geezer, hadn't had a haircut since Christmas. 'Lad!' he calls out to me. 'Can ye tell me the elevation here where we are?' Not offhand, I say to him, why does he want to know? 'Ye see, I was right here when those surveyors of that Theological Survey came through years ago, and they told me the elevation, but I've forgot. I'm pretty sure the number had a 7 in it, though.'"

The forest fires of 1910, which darkened daytime for weeks on end: Stanley helped combat the stubborn one in the Two mountains west of where Swift Dam now stood. The flu epidemic during the world war: he remembered death outrunning the hearse capacity, two and three coffins at a time in the back of a truck headed for the Gros Ventre town cemetery.

The legendary winter of '19: "We really caught it hell, that time. Particularly those 'steaders in Scotch Heaven. Poor snowed-in bastards." The banks going under in the early Twenties, the tide of homesteaders reversing itself. "Another time I can tell. In honor of Canada Dan, you might say. Must've been the summer of '16, I was up in Browning when one of those big sheep outfits out in Washington shipped in 5000 ewes and lambs. Gonna graze them there on the north end of the Two. Those sheep came hungry from 18 hours in the stock cars, and they hit the flats out there and got onto deathcamas and lupine. Started dying by the hundreds. We got hold of all the pinanginated potash and sulfate of aluminum there was in the drugstore at Browning, and sent guys to fetch all of it there was in Cut Bank and Valier and Gros Ventre too, and we started in mixing the stuff in wash tubs and dosing those sheep. Most of the ones we dosed pulled through okay, but it was too late for about a thousand of them others. All there was to do was drag in the carcasses and set them afire with brush. We burned dead sheep all night on that prairie."

Glen Smith ms

Those sheep pyres I believe were the story that made me check out of Stanley's companionship for the evening. At least, I seem to remember counseling myself not to think about deceased sheep in combination with the social juice I'd been imbibing, by now three cups' worth. Stanley on the other hand had hardly even sipped during his tale-telling spell.

"I've about had a day," I announced. The bunk bed was noticeably more distant than it'd been the night before, but I managed to trek to it.

"Adios till the rooster crows," Stanley's voice followed me.

That's the last I heard from Stanley.

"Or till the crow roosts," I imparted to myself, or maybe to a more general audience, for at the time it seemed to me an exceptionally clever

comment. While my tongue was wandering around that way, though, and my fingers were trying to solve the bootlace situation, which for some reason began halfway down my boots instead of at the top where I was sure they ought to be, my mind was not idle. Cowboying, teamstering, river pigging: all this history of Stanley's was unexpected to me. I'd supposed, from my distant memory of him having been in our lives when I was so small, that he was just another camp tender or maybe even an association rider back when this range was occupied by mostly cattle instead of sheep. But riding along up here and being greeted by the elevation-minded sheepherder as an expert on the Two: that sounded like, what, he'd been one of the early ranchers of this country? Homesteader, maybe? Fighting that forest fire of '10: must have volunteered himself onto the fire crew, association rider would fit that. But dosing all those sheep: that sounded like camptender again.

Then something else peeped in a corner of my mind. One boot finally in hand, I could spare the concentration for the question. "Stanley, didn' you say you been to this cabin before? When we got here, didn' you say that?"

"Yessir. Been here just a lot of times. I go back farther than this cabin does. I seen it being built. We was sighting out that fenceline over there when old Bob Barclay started dragging in the logs for this."

Being built? Sighting the boundary fenceline? The history was skipping to the most ancient times of the Two forest now, and this turn and the whiskey together were compounding my confusion. Also, somebody had put another boot in my hand. Yet I persisted.

"What, were you up here with the Theologic--the Geologic--the survey crew?"

Stanley's eyes were sharp, as if a new set had been put in amid the webs of eyelines. And the look he fastened on me now was the levelest thing in that cabin.

"Jick, I was the ranger that set up the boundaries of the Two Medicine National Forest."

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

In any Forest Service family such as ours, lore of setting up the national forests, of the boundary examiners who established them onto the maps of America as public preserves, was almost holy writ. I could remember time upon time of hearing my father and the other Forest Service men of his age mention those original rangers and supervisors, ~~rangers~~, the ones who were sent out in the first years of the century with not much more than the legal description of a million or so acres and orders to transform them into a national forest. "The forest arrangers," the men of my father's generation nicknamed them. ~~Glen~~ Elers Koch on the ~~Bitterroot~~ Gallatin National Forest, Coert DuBois on the Lolo, others who sired the Beaverhead and the Custer and the ~~Flathead~~ Helena and so on; the tales of them still circulated, refreshed by the comments of the younger rangers wondering how they'd managed to do all they had. Famous, famous guys. Sort of combinations of Old Testament prophets and mountain men, rolled into one. Everybody in the Forest Service told forest arranger stories at any chance. But that Stanley Meixell, wronghanded campjack and frequenter of Doctor Al K. Hall, had been the original ranger of the Two Medicine National Forest, I had never heard a breath of; and this was strange.

p. 146A follows →

1464

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"My sister is Mandy,

she's got a dandy.

At least so the boys say."

I woke with ~~those words~~ that in my ears and a dark brown taste in my mouth.

The serious symptoms ~~occurred~~ set in when I sat up in my bunk. My eyes and temples and ears all seemed to have grown sharp points inward and were steadily stabbing each other. Life, the very air, seemed gritty, gray. Isn't there one hangover description that your tongue feels like you spent the night licking ashtrays? ~~Exactly.~~ That's it.

"Morning there, Jick!" Stanley sang out. He was at the stove. "Here, better wash down your insides with this." Stepping over to the bunk, he handed me a tin cup of coffee turned tan with canned milk. Evidently he had heated the milk along with the coffee, because the contents of the cup were all but aflame. The heat went up my nose in search of my brain as I held the cup in front of my lips.

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

"Uh," I sought around in myself for the information. "Flipped, I guess."

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

I am my mother's son entirely in this respect: I believe good food never made any situation worse. I dug in, and by the time I'd eaten about half the plateful, things were tasting like they were supposed to. I even managed to sip some of the coffee, which I discovered was stout enough to float a kingbolt.

Indeed, I swarmed on to the last bite or so of the feast before it occurred to me to ask. "Where'd you get these eggs?"

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

Breakfast made me feel restored. "Speaking of riding," I began, "how soon--"

"--can we head down the mountain." Stanley inventoried me. And I took the chance to get in my first clear-eyed look of the day at him. Stanley seemed less in pain than he had when we arrived to this cabin, but less in grasp of himself than he had during last night's recounting of lore of the Two. A man in wait, seeing which way he might turn; but unfortunately, I knew, the bottle habit soon would sway his decision. Of course, right then, who was I to talk?

Now Stanley was saying: "Just any time now, Jick. We can head out as soon as you say ready."

p. 148A follows

of course
On our ride down Stanley was into his musical repertoire again, one minute warbling about somebody who was wild and wooly and full of fleas and never'd been curried above her knees, and the next crooning hymnlike
a ~~sweet~~ tune that went, "Oh sweet daughters of the Lord, grant me more than I can afford."

My mind, though, was on a thing Stanley said as we were saddling the horses. In no way was it what I intended to think about, for I knew fully that I was heading back into the McCaskill family situation, that blowup between my parents and Alec. Godamighty, the supper that produced all that wasn't much more than a half a week ago. ~~Then there~~ And in the meantime my father had introduced Stanley and Canada Dan and Bubbles, not to mention Dr. Al K. Hall, into my existence. There were words I intended to say to him about all this. If, that is, I could survive the matter of explaining to my mother why the tops of my boots gaped

out like funnels and how come my pants legs looked like I'd wiped up a mountainside with them and where the tail of my shirt had gone. Thank the Lord, not even she could quite see into a person enough to count three tin cups of booze in him the night before. On that drinking score, I felt reasonably safe. Stanley didn't seem to me likely to trouble himself enough to advertise my behavior. On the other hand, Stanley himself was a logical topic for my mother. More than likely my father had heard, and I was due to hear, her full opinion of my having sashayed off on this campjacking expedition.

A sufficiency to dwell on, and none of it easy thinking. Against my intentions and better interests, though, I still found myself going back and forth over that last scene at the cabin. I had just handed the lead rope for the black pack mare and everloving Bubbles up to Stanley, and was turning away to go tighten the cinch on Pony's saddle. It was then that Stanley said he hoped I didn't mind too much about missing the rest of the counting trip with my father, to the Billy Peak lookout and all. "I couldn't of got along up here without you, Jicks," he concluded, "and I hope you don't feel hard used."

Which of course was exactly how I did feel. You damn bet I did. Had been feeling that way ever since the instant my father volunteered me into Stanley's company, and for all I knew was going to go on feeling that way until I was old and wise. Skinning wet sheep corpses, contending with a pack horse who decides he's a mountain goat, nursing Stanley along, lightning, any number of self-cooked meals, the hangover I'd woke up with--what sad sonofabitch wouldn't realize he was being used out of the ordinary?

Yet right then, 18-inch pincers would not have pulled the confession of that from me. I wouldn't give the universe the satisfaction.

So, "No," I had answered Stanley shortly and gone on over to do my cinching. "No, it's all been an education."

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