"Kind of a racehorsey pair of bastards, aren't they?" Good Help evaluated the 99 and 99; the stacker team Clayten had been using.

"There? Huh-uh," I reassured him. "They're the tamest team on the place, Garland. That's why Pete uses them on the stacker."

"Horses," proclaimed Good Help, as if he had just been invited to address Congress on the topic. "You just never can tell about horses. They can look logey as a preacher after a chicken dinner and the next thing you know they turn themselves into goddamn mustangs. One time I--"

"Garland, these two old grandmas could pull the stacker cable in their sleep. And just about do. Come on, I'll help you get them harnessed. Then we got to go make hay."

The next development didn't dawn on me for quite some time.

That is, I noticed only that Wisdom Johnson today had no cause to complain of coolness. This was an August day with its furnace door open. Almost as soon as all of us got to the haystack, Wisdom was stripping off his shirt and gurgling a drink of water.
How Wisdom Johnson did it I'll never know, but he drank water

oftener than the rest of us on the hay crew all together and yet

never got heat-sick from doing so. I mean, an ordinary person had
to be careful about putting cool water inside a sweating body. Pete
and Perry and Clayton and I rationed our visits to the burlap-wrapped
water jug that was kept in the shade of the haystack. But Wisdom had
his own waterbag, hung on the stacker frame up there where he could
reach it anytime he wanted. A hot day like this seemed to stoke
both Wisdom's stacking and his liquid consumption. He'd swig, spit
out the stream to rinse hay dust from his mouth. Swig again, several
Adam's apple swallows this time. Then, refreshed, yell down to
Pete on the buckrake: "More hay! Bring 'er on!"

Possibly, then, it was the lack of usual exhortation from Wisdom that

first tickled my attention. I had been going about my scatter raking
as usual, my mind here and there, and only eventually noticed the

unusual silence of the hayfield. Above the brushy bend of the creek

between me and the stack, though, I could see the stacker arms and
fork taking load after load up, and Wisdom was up there pitching hay

energetically, and all seemed in order. The contrary didn't seep

through to me until I felt the need for a drink of water and reined

around the bend to go in to the stack

Blanche and Fisheye toward the stack to go in and get it.

This haystack was distinct from any other we had put up all summer.
This one was hunched forward, leaning like a big hay-colored snowdrift against the backframe of the stacker. More like a sidehill than a stack. In fact, this one so little resembled Wisdom's tower straight like style of haystack that I whoaed and sat to watch the procedure that was producing this tower of Pisa.

The stacker fork with its cargo of hay rose slowly, slowly, Good Help pacing at leisure behind the stacker team. When the arms and the fork neared the backframe, he eased Jocko and Pep to a stop and the hay gently plopped onto the very front of the stack, adding to the forward-leaning crest.

Wisdom gesture vigorously toward the back of the stack. You didn't have to know pantomime to decipher that he wanted hay flung into that neighborhood. Then Wisdom's pitchfork flashed and he began to shove hay down from the crest, desperately parceling it to the lower slope back there. He had made a heroic transferral of several huge pitchforkfuls when the next stacker load hovered up and plopped exactly where the prior one had.

Entrancing as this was, I stirred myself and went on in for my drink of water. It wasn't up to me to regulate Good Help Heimer, although it was with difficulty that I didn't make some crack when
yipedia

Good Help yelled to me: "Yessir, Jick, we're haying now, ain't we?"

From there on Wisdom's sidehill battle was a lost cause. When that haystack was done, or at least Wisdom called quits on it, it was time to move the stacker to the next site, even Perry quieted down in the field next door and for once came over to help.

The day by now was without a wisp of moving air, a hot stillness gave every appearance of growing hotter. Yet here was a haystack that looked as if it was leaning into a 90-mile-an-hour wind. Poles and props were going to be necessary to keep this stack standing until winter, let alone into winter.

Wisdom glistened so wet with sweat, he might have just come out of swimming. Side by side Perry and I wordlessly appraised the a little like mourners to the fact that cattywampus haystack, as if wondering how our raking efforts had come to such a result. Pete had climbed off the buckrake and got his first full view and now looked like he might be coming down with a toothache.

"Pete," Wisdom started in, "I got to talk to you."

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me," said Pete. "Let's get the stacker moved, then we'll gab."
After we got the stacker to the new site and Pete bucked in some shut down loads as the base of the next stack, he stopped the buckrake and called Wisdom over. They had a session, with considerable head-shaking and arm-waving by Wisdom. Then Pete went over to Good Help, and some more discussion and gesturing ensued. Finally Good Help shook his head, nodded, spat, squinted, scratched and nodded again. Pete settled for that and climbed on the buckrake.
For the next little while of stacking hay, there was slightly more snap to Good Help's teamstering. He had Jocko and Pep moving as if they were only half-asleep, instead of sleepwalking. Wisdom managed to get his back corners of the stack built, and it began to look like we were having respectably again.

Something told me to keep informed as I did my scatter raking, though, and gradually the new of this new stack became clear. Hay was creeping up and up in a slope against the frame of the stacker, again. But that was not the only slope, due to Wisdom's determined efforts to build up the back corners, the rear also stood high. Something new again in the history of hay, a stack shaped like a gigantic saddle: prominent behind, low in the middle, and loftiest at the front where Good Help was dropping the loads softly, softly.

Wisdom Johnson now looked like a man standing in a coulee and trying to shovel both sidehills down level.

My own shirt was sopping, just from sitting on the rake. Wisdom surely was pouring sweat by the glassfull. I watched as he grabbed his waterbag off the backframe and took a colossal swig. It persuaded me that I ought to come in and visit the water jug again.
I disembarked from my rake just as
Wisdom floundered to the exact middle of the swayback stack

and jabbed his pitchfork in as if planting a battle flag.

"Drop the next frigging load right on that fork!" he shouted down
to Good Help. Then he stalked to the back of the haystack, folded
his arms, and glowered down toward the pitchfork-target he had
established for the next volley of hay.

This I had to watch. The water jug could wait, I planted
just myself far enough from the stack to take in the whole drama.

Good Help squinted, scratched, spat, etcetera, which seemed to
be his formula of acknowledgment. Then he twirled the ends of the
reins and whapped the rumps of Jocko and Pep.

I suppose a comparison to make is this: how would you react
if you had spent the past hours peacefully dozing and somebody jabbed
a thumb between your ribs?

I believe even Good Help was more than a little surprised at
the flying start his leather message produced from Jocko and Pep.

The pair of horses jogged away at a harness-rattling pace. Holding
their reins, Good Help toddled after the team a lot more rapidly than
I had imagined he was capable of. The cable whirred snakelike through
the pulleys of the stacker. And the load of hay was going up as if
it was being shot from one of those Roman catapults.
I spun and ran. If the arms of the stacker hit the frame at
that runaway velocity, there was going to be timber flying throughout
the vicinity.

Over my shoulder, though, I saw it all.

Through some combination of stumble, lurch, and skid, Good Help
at last managed to rare back on the reins with all his weight and
yanked the horses to a stop.

Simultaneously the stacker arms and fork popped to a halt just
inches short of the frame, the whole apparatus quivering up there in
the sky like a giant tuxing fork.

The hay. The hay was airborne. And Wisdom was so busy glowering
he didn't realize this load was arriving to him as if lobbed by Paul
Bunyan. I yelled, but anything took some time to sink in to Wisdom.

Bunyan: "His first hint of doom was as the hay, instead of cascading
down over the pitchfork Good Help was supposed to be sighting on,
kept coming and coming and coming. A quarter of a ton of timothy
and bluestem on a trajectory to the top of Wisdom's head.

Hindsight is always 20-20. Wisdom ought to have humped up and
accepted the avalanche. He'd have had to splutter hay the next several
minutes, but a guy as sturdy as he was wouldn't have been hurt by
the big loose wad.

But I suppose to look up and see a meteorite of hay dropping on you is enough to startle a person. Wisdom in his surprise took a couple of wading steps backward from the falling mass. And had forgotten how far back he already was on the stack. That second step carried Wisdom to the edge, at the same moment that the hayload spilled itself onto the stack. Just enough of that hay flowed against Wisdom to teeter him. The teetering carried him over the brink.

"Oh, hell," I heard him say as he started to slide.

Every stackman knows the danger of falling from the heights of his work. In Wisdom's situation, earth lay in wait for him 20 feet below. This lent him incentive; powerful as he was, Wisdom clawed his arms into the back of the haystack as he slid down. Like a man trying to swim up a waterfall even as the water sluices him down.

"Goshdamn!" Good Help marveled somewhere behind me. "Will you look at that!"

Wisdom's armwork did slow his descent, and meanwhile a sizable quantity of hay was pulling loose and coming down with him, somewhat cushioning his landing. As it turned out, except for scratched and chafed arms and chest and a handful of hay Wisdom met the ground intact.
He also arrived to earth with a full head of steam, all of which he now intended to vent on Good Help Hebner.

"You satchel-ass old son of a frigging goddamn!"—Wisdom's was a rendition I have always wished I'd had time to commit to memory. An impromptu opera of cussing, as he stalked from the saddleback stack. But more than Wisdom's mouth was in action, he was trying to lay hands on Good Help. Good Help was prudently keeping the team of horses between him and the stackman. Across the horses' backs they eyed one another, Wisdom feinting one way and Good Help going the other, then the reverse. Since the stacker arms and fork still were in the sky, held there only by cable hitched to the team, I

and grabbed the bridles of Jocko and Pep so they would stand moved in to grab Jocko and Pep by their bridles and steady.

By now Pete had arrived on the buckrake, to find his stacking crew in this shambles. "Hold everything!" he shouted, which indeed was what the situation needed. Pete got over and talked Wisdom away from one side of the team of horses, Good Help pussyfootered away from their opposite side, and I backed Jocko and Pep toward the stack to let down the arms and fork.
Diplomacy of major proportions now was demanded of Pete. Dilemma was this: If he didn't prune Good Help from the hay crew, Wisdom Johnson was going to depart soonest. Yet Pete needed to stay on somewhat civil terms with Good Help, for the sake of hanging on to Clayton and the oncoming lineage of Hebner boys as a ready source of labor. Besides all that, it was simply sane general policy not to get crosswise with a neighbor such as Good Help, for he could just as readily substitute your livestock for those poached deer hanging in his jackpines.

Wisdom had stalked off to try to towel some of the chaff off himself with his shirt. I hung around Pete and Good Help. I wouldn't have missed this for the world.

"Garland, we seem to have a problem here," Pete began with sizable understatement. "You and Wisdom. He doesn't quite agree with the way you drive stacker team."

"Pete, I have stacked more hay than that guy has ever even seen."

By which, Good Help must have meant in several previous incarnations, as none of us who knew him in this lifetime had ever seen a pitchfork in his hands. "He don't know a favor when it's done to him. If he'd
let me place the loads the way they ought to be, he could do the
stacking while setting in a goshdamn rocking chair up there.

He doesn't quite see it that way.

He don't see doodly-squat about putting up hay, that fellow.

I sure don't envy you all his haystacks that are gonna tip assy-turvy
before winter, Pete.

Garland, something's got to give. Wisdom won't stack if you're
going to drive.

The hint missed Good Help by a mile. Kind of a stubborn bozo,
I was
ain't he? he commiserated with Pete. It's you, I'd of sent him down
the road long since.

Pete looked at Good Help as if a great idea had just been presented.

As, indeed, it had.

"I guess you're right, I'd better go ahead and can him," Pete
judiciously agreed with Good Help. I gaped at Pete. But he was

going right on: "I don't need to have somebody on

the stack who knows what he's doing, though. Lucky as hell you're

on hand, Garland. Nobody else on this crew is veteran to the job
to make a roll of eighth-inch guywire on one side of the pack saddle

equivalent to some canned goods on the other side of it, but finally

my father had proclaimed: There, looks to me like you got it

\underline{Isidore.}

\underline{Evidently I had indeed, for I didn't find that the packs or ropes
But I went ahead and,}

Melander watched the surface of Kaigani intently, and what he
dreaded sprung to creation. Wind streaks on the water, long ropey
crawlers of white. "Neptune's snakes," Melander knew them as from his
shipboard years, and knew too that they are the spawn of a thirty-knot
gale.

The sky began to fleck, snowflakes like tiny gulls riding down
the wind which now steadied into a constant whirl past the canoemen's
ears. Melander looked away from his compass only to monitor the stroking
of his crew and to glance at the angle of the swells to the canoe. The
compass could not be wrong, daren't be, yet there was constant urge to
check it against the evidence of his eyes...

\underline{Later you finding it's way into the canoe. Melander needed rapid...}
like you are. What we'll do, I'll put you up on the stack and we'll make some hay around here for a change, huh?"

Good Help went as still as Lot's wife, and I believe he even turned about as white.

"Ordinarily, now"--I didn't get to hear all of the ensuing catalogue of excuse, because I had to saunter away to keep my giggles in, but--"this goddammed back of mine"--I heard more than enough--"if it'll help you out with that stubborn bozo I can just head on home, Pete"--to know that it constituted Good Help's adieu to haying.

That night at English Creek, my father and mother laughed and laughed at my retelling of the saga of Wisdom and Good Help.

"A pair of dandies, they are," my father adjudged. He seemed to take particular pleasure in the fact that jugheaded behavior wasn't a monopoly of the Forest Service.

But then a further point occurred to him, and he glanced at my mother. She looked soberly back at him; it had occurred to her, too.

She in fact was the one who now asked it: "Then who's going to drive the stacker team?"

"Actually," I confessed, "I am."
So that was how I went from haying's ideal job to its goddamn dullest.

Back and forth with that stacker team. All of haying until then I had idly glanced at those paths worn into the meadow, out little towpaths identical routes the exact length of the stacker cable, from the side of each stack we put up. Now it registered on me how many footsteps, horse and human, it took to trudge those paths into creation. The scenery meanwhile constant: the rear ends of the cab from the side of each stack we put up, now it registered on me patterns.

Jocko and Pep looming ahead of me like a pair of circus fat ladies bending over to tie their shoes. Too promptly I discovered a charm of Pep's, which was to hoist his tail and take a dump as soon as we were hitched up at a new stack site, so that I had to remember to watch my step or find myself ankle deep in fresh horse apples.

Nor did it help my mood that Clayton with his tender ankle was able to sit on the seat of the scatter rake and drive it. My scatter rake. My first long hours of driving the stacker team, I spent brooding about the presence of the Hebner tribe in the world.

Shortly I will say, the stacker team job cured me of too much thinking. The first time I did daydream a bit and was slow about starting the load up onto the stack, Wisdom Johnson brought me out of it by
shouting down: "Hey, Jack! Whistle or sing, or show your thing!"

I was tempted to part Wisdom's hair with that particular load of hay, but I forbore.

Maybe my stacker team mood was contagious. Suppertime of the second day, when I got back to English Creek I found my mother frowning over the *Cleaner*. "What's up?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said and didn't convince me. When she went to the stove to wrestle with supper and I had washed up, I zeroed in on the article she'd been making a mouth at.

It was one on the Random page:
Phantom Woman:

When Fire Ran

On the Mountain

Editor's note: The fire season is once again upon us, and lightning needs no help carelessness of from the booby traps. It is just ten years ago that the Phantom Woman conflagration provided an example of what happens when fire gets loose in a big way. We reprint the story as a reminder: when in the woods, break your matches after blowing them out, crush cigarette butts, and douse all campfires.

Forest Service crews are throwing everything in the book at the fire on Phantom Woman mountain—but so far, the roaring blaze has thrown it all back.

The inferno is raging in up-and-down country near the headwaters of the North Fork of English Creek, about 20 miles west of Gros Ventre. Reports
from Valier and Conrad say the fire's place of be seen from those communities. How many acres of forest have been consumed is not known. It is certain the loss is the worst in the Two Medicine National Forest since the fire season of 1910.

One eyewitness said the crews seemed to be bringing the fire under control until late yesterday afternoon. Then the upper flank of the fire broke loose "and started going across that mountain as fast as a man can run."

H.T. Gisborne, fire research specialist at Missoula, explains the "blowup" phenomenon: "Ordinarily the front of a forest fire advances like troops in skirmish formation, pushing ahead faster
here, slower there, according to the timber
type and fuels, but maintaining a practically
unbroken front. Even when topography, fuels,
and weather result in a crown fire, the sheet
of flames leaps from one tree crown to the
next at a relatively slow rate, from one-half
to one mile an hour. But when such 'runs'
throw spots of fire ahead of the advancing
front, the spots burn back to swell the main
front and add to the momentum of the rising
front. Literally, a 'blowup' of the
mass of heat. It can be literally a 'blowup,'
front of the fire may then happen."

No word has been received of casualties
in the Phantom Woman fire, although reports
are that some crews had to flee for their
lives when the 'blowup' occurred.
When my father came in for supper, my mother liberated the Gleaner from me and handed it to him, saying: "Mac, you might as well see this." Meaning, you might as well see it before our son the inquisitor starts in on you about it.

The headline stopped him. Bill Reinking always got in touch with him about any story having to do with this district of the Two Medicine National Forest. "Why's this in the paper?" my father now demanded of the world at large.

"It's been ten years, Mac," my mother told him. "Ten years ago this week."

He read it through. His eyes were intent, his jaw was out, as if stubborn against the notion that fire could happen in the Two Medicine National Forest. When he tossed the Gleaner aside, though, he said only: "Doesn't time fly."
The next day, two developments.

I took some guilty pleasure at the first of these. Not long before noon, Clayton dropped one wheel of the scatter rake into a ditch that was closer than he’d noticed, and the impact broke one of the brackets that attaches the dumping mechanism to the rake frame.

Clayton himself looked considerably jarred, although I don’t know whether mostly by the jolt of the accident or the dread that Pete would fire him for it.

But Pete being Pete, he only said: "These things happen, Clayton. We’ll cobble it with wire until we can get a weld done on it." And once I got over my secret satisfaction about the superiority of my scatter raking to Clayton’s, I was glad Pete didn’t come down hard on the boy. Being a son of Good Help Hebner seemed to me punishment enough for anybody.

Then at the end of the workday, as Pony and I came down the benchland to the ford of English Creek, I saw a second Forest Service pickup parked beside my father’s. I figured the visitor might be Cliff Bowen, the young ranger from the Indian Head district just south of us, and it was. When I swung by the ranger station
to say hello, I learned Cliff had been to headquarters in Great Falls.

...had come by with some fire gear for my father. And

...rangerly gripes to share as well. Normally Cliff Bowen was

...mild as milk, but his headquarters visit left him pretty well steamed.

"Mac, Sipe asked me how things are going." Sipe was Ken Sipe, the superintendent of the Two Medicine National Forest. "I told him, as good as could be expected, but we need more fire guards."

"How'd that go over with him?" my father wondered.

"About like a fart in church. He told me it's Missoula policy.

Hold down on the hiring, on these east-side forests. Goddamn it, This forest is as dry as paper. Mac, I don't know what the Major's thinking of. We get one good lightning storm in the mountains and we'll have fires the whole sonofabitching length of the Two."

"Maybe the Major's got it all arranged with upstairs so there isn't going to be any lightning the rest of the summer, Cliff."

"Yeah, maybe. But if any does get loose, I hope to Christ it aims for the rivets on the Major's hip pocket."

My father couldn't help but laugh. "You think snag strikes are trouble. Figure how long the Major'd smolder."
Two developments, I said back there. Amend that to three.

As I led Pony to her pasture for the night, the heat brought out sweat on me, just from that little walk. When I reached the house the thermometer in our kitchen window was catching the western sun.

92°, it read. The hot heavy weather was back. The kind of weather that invites lightning storms.

But all we got that night was a shower, a dab of drizzle. When I climbed out of bed in the morning, I debated whether Pete's hay would be too wet to stack today. So I wouldn't make my ride for nothing, I phoned the Reese ranch.

"Pete thinks it'll be dry enough by middle of the morning,"

Marie's voice told me. "Come on for breakfast. I have sourdough hotcakes."

It turned out that the sourdough hotcakes were the only gain of the morning for our hay crew. We took our time at the breakfast table and then did a leisurely harnessing-up of our teams and made no hurry of getting to the Ramsay place's hayfields, and
still Perry and Bud and Wisdom had a lot of smoke time while Pete felt of the hay and gandered at the sky. Finally Pete said, "Hell, let's try it." We would do okay for a while, put up a dozen or so loads, then here would come a sun shower. Just enough to shut us down for an hour or so. Then we'd hay some more, and another sun shower would happen. For a rancher trying to put up hay, that is the most aggravating kind of day there can be. Or as Pete put it during one of these sprinkly interruptions: "Goddamn it, if you're gonna rain, rain." By about 2 o'clock and the fourth or fifth start-and-stop of our stacking, he had had enough. "The hell with it. Let's head for home."

I naturally anticipated an early return to English Creek, and started thinking about where I might go fishing for the rest of the afternoon. My theory is, the more rotten the weather, the better the fishing. But as I was unharnessing Jocko and Pep, Pete came out of the house and asked:

"Jick, how do you feel about a trip to town?"

Inasmuch as we were rained out anyway, he elaborated, I might just as well take the scatter rake in to Grady Tilton's garage and get the broken bracket welded, stay overnight at the Heaneys' and in the morning drive the
repaired rake back here to the ranch. "I checked all this out with headquarters"—meaning my mother—"and she said it'd be okay."

"Sounds good to me," I told Pete. The full fact was, after the days of trudging back and forth behind the stacker team it sounded like an expedition to Africa.

So I set off for Gros Ventre, about mid-afternoon. Roving scatter raker Jick McCaskill hitting the road, even if the route only was to town and back.

The first couple of miles almost flew by, for it was remarkable what a pair of steppers Blanche and Fisheye now seemed to me; speed demons in comparison to Jocko and Pep. My thoughts were nothing special. Wondering what Ray Heaney would have to report. Mulling the rest of the summer. Another week or so of haying. The start of school was--

Christamighty, only 30 days away. And my 15th birthday, one day were doing their jobs. As it turned out, lucky damn thing that they less than that. I ask you, how is it that after the Fourth of July each summer, time somehow speeds up?
I like to believe that even while curlicues of this sort are going on in my head, the rest of me is more or less on the job. Aiming that scatter rake down the Noon Creek road, I took note of Dill Egan's haystacks, which looked to me like poor relations of those Wisdom built.

Way over on the horizon to the northeast I could see specks that would be Double W cattle, and wondered if Alec was riding or fence-fixing today.

And of course one of the things a person always does a lot of in Montana is watching other people's weather. All that sky and horizon around you, there almost always is some atmospheric event to keep track of. At the top of the county road's rise from Dill Egan's place, I studied a black anvil cloud which was sitting over the area to the northwest of me. My father was not going to like the looks of that one, hovering along the edge of his forest. The Ramsay place is going to have itself a bath, I told myself.

In a few more minutes I glanced around again, though, and found that the cloud wasn't sitting over the Ramsay place. It was on the move, toward Noon Creek and me. A good thing I was bright enough to bring my slicker along on the rake; it was going to save me from some wet.
But the next time I glanced back, rain was pushed entirely off my mental agenda. The cloud was bigger, blacker, and closer. A whole hell of a lot closer. It also was rumbling now like it was
the engine of the entire sky. That may sound fancy, but view it from my eyes at the time: a dark block on the move, with pulses of light coming out of it like flame winking from firebox doors. And even as I gawked at it, a jagged rod of lightning stabbed from the cloud to the earth. Pale lightning, nearer white than yellow. That kind a true electrical storm employs.

As I have told, I am not exactly in love with lightning anyway.

Balling the reins in my left hand in both my hands, I slapped Blanche their rumps. you two! some encouragement across her rump. "Hwah, Blanche! Let's go!" Which may sound drastic, but try sitting on a 10-foot expanse of metal rake with lightning approaching and then prescribe to me what you would have done.

Go we did, at a rattling pace, for the next several minutes.

I was trying to count distance of the thunder, but it was that grumbling variety that lets loose another thump before you've finished hearing the one before. My eyes rather than my ears had to do the weather forecasting, and they said Blanche and Fisheye and the rake and I were not going as fast as the stormcloud was traveling or growing or whatever
the hell it was doing. The route ahead stretched on and on, for
immediately after coming up out of Dill Egan's place the Noon Creek
road abandons the creek and arrows along the benchland between Noon
Creek and English Creek until it eventually hits the highway north
of Gros Ventre. Miles of exposed country, I tell you, a situation
like that reminds a person that skin is damn thin shelter against
the universe.

One thing the steady thunder and the pace of the anvil cloud
did tell me was that I somehow had to abandon that road,
find a place to pull in and get myself and my horses away from this
ten-foot lightning rod on wheels. The question was, where? Along
the English Creek road I'd have had no problem; within any little
way there, a ranch could be pulled in for shelter. But around
here the Double W owned everything, and wherever there did happen
to be a turnoff into one of the abandoned sets of Noon Creek ranch
buildings, the Double W kept the gate padlocked against fishermen.
As I verified for myself, by halting my team for a quick look at
the gate into the old Nansen place.

A lack of choices can make your mind up for you in quite a hurry.
I whapped Blanche and Fisheye again and on down the county road we clattered, heading for a high frame of gateposts about three-quarters of a mile off. The main gate into the Double W.

It took forever, but at last we reached those gateposts.

The Double W turnoff. From the crosspiece supported by the gateposts—the size and height of telephone poles, they really were—hung the sign:

WW RANCH

WENDELL & MEREDICE WILLIAMSON

The sign was creaking a little, the wind starting to stir in front of the storm.

Neither the sign nor the wind I gave a damn about just then, though. What I had forgotten was that this turnoff into the Double W had a livestock crossing, set in there between the gateposts. A pit overlaid with pipes, which vehicles could cross but hoofed creatures such as cattle couldn't. Hoofed creatures such as cattle and horses.

To put Blanche and Fisheye through here, I would have to open the barbwire livestock gate beside the crossing to put Blanche and Fisheye through.

You know what I was remembering. "GODAMIGHTY, get away from that!"—Stanley's cry as I approached the wire gate at the cabin
during our camping trip. "You happen to be touching that wire and lightning hits that fence--" This coming rumblebelly of a storm made that June one look like a damp washcloth. And nowhere—

Every time I glanced in its direction now, lightning winked back.

And nowhere—

around this entrance to the Double W was there a stick of wood, not one solo single goddamn splinter, with which to knock the hoop off the gate stick and flip the wire gate safely aside.

Holy H. Hell. Sitting here telling this, all the distance of years between that instant and now, I can feel again the prickling that came across the backs of my hands, the sweat of dismay on its way up through my skin there. Grant me three moments which could be erased from my life, and that Double W gate scene would be one.
I wiped my hands against my pants. Blanche swished her tail, and Fisheye whinnied. They maybe were telling me what I already knew. Delay was my worst possible behavior, for that storm was growing nearer every second that I stood there and stewed. I wiped my hands again. And jumped at the gate as if in combat against it. One arm grappling around the gatepost, the other arm and hand desperately working the wire hoop up off the gatestick—oh yes, sure, this gate was one of those snug obstinate bastards, I needed to mighty hug the stick and post together to gain enough slack for the hoop to loosen. Meanwhile every place my body was touching a strand of barbwire I could feel a kind of target line, ready to sizzle: as if I was trussed up in electrical wiring and somebody was about to throw the switch.

I suppose in a fraction of what it takes to tell about it, I wrestled that gate open and slung it wide. Yet it seemed an immense passage of time.

And I wasn't on easy street yet. Blanche and Fisheye, I have to say, were taking all of this better than I was, but even so they were getting a little nervous about the storm's change in the air and the loudening thunder. "Okay, here we go now, nothing to it, here we go!" I soothed them and started them through the gate. I
ten feet wide and this gate was only about eleven. Catch a rake wheel behind a gatepost and you have yourself a first class hung-up mess. 

In my case, I then would have the rake in contact with the barbwire fence, inviting lightning right up the seat of my pants, while I backed and maneuvered the rake wheel out of its bind. This I did never have I aimed anything more carefully than that wide scatter rake through that just-wide-enough Double W gateway.

We squeaked through. Which left me with only one more anxious act to do. Closing the gate, for there were cattle in this field.

Even if they were the cattle of the damn Double W, even if they got out and scattered to Tibet--if you have been brought up in Montana, you close a gate behind you.

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

Again on the rake, I broke all records driving us down from approach road, down the benchland from the benchland to where the ranch buildings were clustered on the north side of Noon Creek. Across the plank bridge the rake rumbled, my thunder against the storm's thunder, and I sighted refuge. The Double W barn. In minutes I had my team unhitched--leaving the scatter rake out by a collection of old machinery, so that lightning would have to do some
Okhotskans, simply had made humankind's usual blunder, forgot to get themselves highborn.

Abruptly Melander stood up, a process like staves suddenly framing themselves together into a very large scarecrow. Amid a card game several bunks away, a shipwright from Karlskrona flicked a nervous glance at him. Melander grinned at so easy a giveaway, awarded a mocking nod to his derider, and in galumphing strides went from the barracks.

Outside was another sort of confinement, but at least airier than in. Melander as ever looked a moment, as if in calculation, at the peak which thrust over all their lives at New Archangel, dark Verstovia. Its summit a triangle of rough rock atop a vaster triangle...
sorting to find it--and was ensconcing them in barn stalls. They were lathered enough that I unharnessed them and rubbed them dry with a gunny sack. In fact, I looked around for the granary, went over there, and brought back a hatful of Double W oats to Blanche and Fisheye as their reward.

Now I could look around for my own benefit. The Double W had buildings and more buildings. This barn was huge, and the two-story white Williamson house across the yard could have housed the governor of Montana. You would think this was ranch enough for anybody, yet Wendell Williamson actually owned another one at least as big as this. The Deuce W--its cattle brand was 2W--down in the Highwood Mountains between Great Falls and Lewistown, a hundred or more miles from here. More distance than I'd been in my whole life, and Wendell goddamn Williamson possessed both ends of it.

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

I knocked at the front door.
The door opened and Meredice Williamson was standing there smiling and saying: "Yes?"

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

That seemed to be news to her. But she smiled on and commented:

"That was good of you. I'm sure Wendell will be pleased."

I sought to correct her impression that a delivery of Blanche was involved here. "Well, no, she'll only be there until it clears up. I mean, what it is, I was driving my scatter rake to town and the storm came up and I had to come in here on account of lightning, so I unhitched Blanche and put her in the barn there, I hope that's all right?"

"I'm sure it must be," she acceded, pretty plainly because she had no idea what else to say. Meredice Williamson was a city woman--a lawyer's widow, it was said--whom Wendell met and married a few years before. The unkind view of her was that she'd had too much sun on the brain down there. But I believe the case honestly was that because Meredice north Williamson only came to spend summers at the Double W, she never got clued in to the Two country; never quite caught up with its rhythms of season and livelihood and lore. At least, standing there within
the weathered doorway in her yellow sun frock and with her graying hair in perfect waves, she looked much like a visitor to her own house.

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

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

"Wendell thinks highly of Alec," she confided, as if I gave a hoot in hell about Mr. Double W's opinion. So far as I could see, Wendell Williamson was a main contributor to Alec's mental delinquency, encouraging him in his damn cowboy notions. The summer's sun of my family followed a faultline which led directly to this doorstep.

Fair is fair, though, and I couldn't see how Meredice Williamson could be blamed for Wendell's doings. Innocent as a bluebird on a manure pile, this lady seemed to be. Thus I only said back:

"Yeah. So I savvy."

Just then the leading edge of rain hit, splattering on the stones of the walk. Meredice Williamson peered past me in surprise at the blackening
"It looks like a shower," she mustered. "Wouldn't you like to step in?"

I was half-tempted. On the other hand, I knew she wouldn't have the foggiest notion of what to do with me once I was in there.

Furnish me tea and ladyfingers? Ask me if I would care for a game of Chinese checkers? "No, that's okay," I declined her invitation inside. "I'll wait in the bunkhouse. Aleta likely will show up there pretty quick. I'll shoot the hooey with him until the rain's over and then head on to town." Here Meredice Williamson's expression showed that she was unsure what hooey was or why we would shoot it.

Hurriedly I concluded: "Anyway, thanks for the borrow of your barn."

"You're quite welcome, Jake," she was saying as I turned and sprinted across the yard. The rain was beginning to pelt in fat drops now, pocking the dust. A flash of light at the south edge of the storm and the immediate rumble made me thankful as hell that I was in off the rakes, even if the haven was the Double W.
Strange, to be in a bunkhouse when its residents are out on
the job. Like one of those sea tales of stepping aboard a ship
where everything is intact, sails set and a meal waiting on the
galley stove, but the crew has vanished. Any bunkhouse exists only
to shelter a crew. There is no feel of it as a home for anybody,
although even as I say that I realize ranch hands spent their lives
some in a bunkhouse. Alec himself was a full-timer here, until he and
Leona tied their knot. Even so, a bunkhouse to me seems a place
you can put up with for a season but that would be enough.

If you are unaccustomed to a bunkhouse, the roomful of beds
is a medley

of odors. Of tobacco in three incarnations: hand-rolled cigarettes,
snoose, and chewing tobacco—these last two, in fact, had a permanent
existence in the spit cans beside about half the bunks; I took special
note of them, not wanting to kick one of them over. Of too many bodies
and not enough baths; yet I wonder why it is that we now think we
have to deodorize the smell of humanness out of existence. Of ashes
and creosote; the presence of an elderly stovepipe. All in all, the
smell of men and what it takes them to lead the ranch hands' life.
I gandered around to try and figure out which bunk was Alec's.

An easy enough task. The corner bunk with the snapshot of Leona on the wall above the pillow.

Naturally the picture deserved a closer look. It showed Leona on a horse in a showring—that would be Tollie Zane's, during one of his horse sales—and wearing a Stetson hat and leather chaps. She had a smile that probably fused the camera. But I managed to get past the top of Leona, to where something else was tugging my eyes.

Down the length of the chaps, something was spelled out in silver tool letters with spangles. I moved in for a closer look yet, and my nose almost onto the snapshot, and I was able to make out:

```
M
O
N
T
A
N
A
```

Well, that wasn't the message that ordinarily would come to mind from looking along Leona's leg. But it was interesting.
I could hear voices, and men came trooping in. The hay crew and right after them Alec, who looked flabbergasted to see me sitting on his bunk.

"Jigger, what in blazes--" he began as he came over to me. I related to him my scatter rake situation and he listened keenly, although he didn't look perceptibly happier with my presence.

"As soon as it lets up, I'll head on to town," I assured him.

"Yeah, well. Make yourself at home, I guess." Now to my surprise, my brother seemed short of anything more to say.

He was saved from having to, by the arrival of the Double W foreman, Cal Petrie, and the other two riders, Thurl Everson and Joe Henty. Both had leather gloves and fencing pliers, so I imagined they were glad enough to be away from barbwire for a while, too.

Cal Petrie spotted me sitting on the bunk beside Alec, nodded hello, and came over to ask: "Looking for a job?" He knew full well I wasn't, but as foreman it was his responsibility to find out just what brought me there.

Again I explained the scatter rake-lightning situation, and Cal nodded once more. "A
stroke of that could light you up like a Christmas tree, all right.

Cal

Make yourself to home. Alec can introduce you around." Then

announced generally: "I got to go to town after supper for some
sickle heads for the mowers, jaspers
mower parts, and I can take two of you shes in with me in the
pickup. I'll only be in there an hour or so, and you got to be
ready to come home when I say. No staying in there to drink the town
dry, in other words. So cut cards or Indian rassle or compare dicks
or however you want to choose, but only two of your are going."

And he went off into the room he had at the end of the bunkhouse.

In a hay crew such as the Double W's there were 8 or 10 guys,
putting up two stacks at once, and what struck me as Alec made me
known to them was that 8 of the crew were named Mike—a gangly
one called Long Mike, and a mower man naturally called Mike the Mower,
and then one who lacked either of those distinctions and so was called
Plain Mike. The riders who had come in with Cal Petrie I already knew,
Thurl and Joe. Likewise the choreboy, Dolph Kuhn,
one of those codgers who get to be as much a part of a ranch as
its ground and grass. So, I felt acquainted enough even before

somebody chimed out:
"What, are you another of the famous fist-fighting McCaskills?"

Alec's flooring of Earl Zane was of course the natural father of that remark.

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

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

There followed some more comment, probably for the fortieth time, about how Alec had whopped Earl, and innumerable similar exploits performed in the past by various of this crew. You'd have thought the history of boxing had taken place in that bunkhouse. But I was careful not to contribute anything further. The main rule when you join a crew, even if it's only for the duration of a rainstorm, is to listen more than you talk. With me abiding by that principle, pretty soon the Double W crew wasn't paying any special attention to my presence.
Alec still didn't look overjoyed that I was on hand, but I couldn't help that. I didn't order up the damn electrical storm, which still was rumbling around out there.

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

"Enough to get by on," Alec allowed. "How's the haying going at Pete's?"

"Like a house afire. We're only about a week from done. How're they doing here?"

"More like a couple weeks yet, I guess."

That pretty well covered the topic of haying. Alec and I just listened for a little to what everybody else was discussing, the two slots for town. Some grumping was going on about Cal Petrie's edict that only two of them were going to get to see the glories of Gros Ventre on a Saturday night. That was standard bunkhouse grouse, though. If Cal had said the whole shebang of them could go to town with him, there'd have been grumbling that he hadn't offered to buy them the first round of drinks as well. The larger issue was just beginning to come out: more than half the hay crew, six or so guys, considered themselves the logical town candidates. The variety of
reasoning—the awful need for a haircut, a bet to be collected from a guy who was going to be in the Medicine Lodge only this very night, even a potential toothache that necessitated preventive remedies from the drugstore—was remarkably well-rehearsed. This was the kind of crew, as the saying went, who would begin on Thursday to get ready on Friday to go to town on Saturday to spend Sunday.

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

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

Inasmuch as Plain Mike had efficiently whittled off one contender, the other four felt more or less obliged to go along with a card game. "We need an honest banker," Plain Mike solicited. "You're talking contradictions," somebody called out. "Damn, I am at that. Honest enough that we can't catch him, will
do. Hey there, Alec's brother! How about you being the bank for us?"

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

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

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

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

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

Uh huh, at least you will, I thought to myself as I added my presence to the circle of card players. But I will say this for the Double W yahoos, they played pitch in the classic way—high, low, game, jack, jick, joker. It would just surprise you, how many people go through life under the delusion that pitch ought to be played without a joker in the deck, which is a skimpy damned way of doing it, and how many others are just as dim in wanting to play with two jokers, which is excessive and confusing.
My job of banker didn't amount to all that much. Just being in charge of the box of Diamorrl wooden matches and paying out to each player as many matches as he'd made points, or taking matches back if he went set. Truth be told, I could have kept score more efficiently with a pencil and sheet of paper, and Alec simply could have done it in his head. But these Double W highrollers wanted to be able to squint around the table and count for themselves how much score everybody else had.

From the very first hand, when the other players were tuning up with complaints like "Is this the best you can deal, a mess like this?" and Plain Mike simply bid three, "in them things called spades," and led with a queen, it was worth a baccalaureate degree in the game of pitch to watch Plain Mike. He bid only when he had one sure point, ace for high or deuce for low, with some other point probable among his cards, so that when he did bid it was as good as made. But during a hand when anybody else had the bid, he managed to run with some point, for himself, or at least--this, a real art of pitch--he managed to sluff the point to somebody besides the bidder. I banked and admired. While the other cardsters' scores gyrated up and down, every hand Plain Mike added a wooden match or two to his total.
Around us, the rest of the crew was carrying on conversation. If you can call it that. There is no place like a bunkhouse for random yatter.

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

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

From how they had been razzing one another about quantities of
five
hay moved, three of the pitch players—Plain Mike and Long Mike
and a heavy-shouldered guy—were the horse buckrakers. I was pretty
sure about how they shaped up on the job. The heavy-shouldered guy,
who looked like a horseman, was the best buckraker. Long Mike was the
slowest, and Plain Mike did just enough more work than Long Mike to look better.
A couple of younger guys, around Alec's age but who looked about a fraction as bright, likely were the stacker team drivers in this outfit. Then a slouchy guy in a khaki shirt, and a one-eyed one—I suppose it doesn't say much for my own having status that I was working down through this Double W crew, getting to the bunch rakers and whoever the scatter raker was, when the phone jangled at the far end of the room.

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

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

"Come on up for supper with us," the foreman directed at me.

"Give the mud a little more chance to dry out, that way."

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

Meredice Williamson.
Not long after, sound the end

The supper bell concluded the card game. The heavy-shouldered
and yes, Plain Mike had the next. Now

that they were the town-bound pair, they received a number of suggestions
of entertainment they might seek in there, as the crowd of us sloshed
over to the kitchen door of the house. While everybody scraped mud
off their feet and trooped on in I hung back with Alec, to see what
the table lineup was going to be.

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

The meal was in the summer room, a kind of windowed porch along
the side of the house, long enough to hold a table for a crew this
size.

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

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

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

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

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

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

cup of coffee.

Wendell Williamson always looked as if he'd been made by
the sackful. Sacks of what, I won't go into. But just everything
about him, girth, shoulders, arms, even his fingers, somehow seemed
fuller than was natural; as if he always was slightly swollen.

Wendell's head particularly stood out in this way, because his hair
had retreated about halfway back and left all that face to loom out.

And the other odd thing up there was, what hair Wendell had left

was thick and curly and coal-black—a real stand of hair there at
the rear of that big moonhead, like a sailor might wear a watchcap
pushed way back.

The cook came in from the kitchen with a bowl of gray gravy
and handed it to Wendell. She was a gaunt woman, sharp
cheekbones, beak of a nose. Her physiognomy was a matter of interest
and apprehension to me. The general theory is that a thin cook is
a poor idea; why isn't she more enthusiastic about her own grub?
Plain Mike was sitting at my left, and at my right was a scowling
guy who'd been one of the losers in the pitch game. As I have always
liked to keep abreast of things culinary, I now asked Plain Mike in
an undertone; "Is this the cook from Havre?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

The first bowl to reach me contained a concoction I've never known
the actual name of, but in my own mind I always dub Tomato Smush.
Canned tomatoes heated up, with little dices of bread dropped in.

You sometimes get this as a side dish in cafes, when the cook has run out of all other ideas about vegetables. Probably the Lunchery in Gros Ventre served it four days a week. In any case, Tomato Smush is a remarkable recipe, in that it manages to wreck both the tomatoes and the bread.

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

Then arrived a long platter of fried liver. This suited me fine, as I can dine on liver when it is overcooked and tough, as this was. But I have observed in life that there is no middle ground about liver. When I passed the platter to the guy on my right, he mumbled something about "Lethbridge leather again," and his proved to be the majority view at the table.
There was some conversation at the head of the table, mostly between Wendell and the foreman Cal about the unfairness of being rained out at this stage of haying. In light of what followed, I see now was largely responsible for Wendell's mood. Not that Wendell Williamson ever needed a specific excuse to be grumpy, so far as I could tell, but this suppertime he was smarting around his wallet. If the rain had started before noon and washed out the haying, he'd have had all this hay to pay the crew for only half a day. But since the rain came in the afternoon he was laying out a full day's wage for not a full day's work. I tell you, there can be no one more morose than a rancher having to pay a hay crew to watch rain come down.

Anyway, the bleak gaze of Wendell Williamson eventually found its way down the table to me. To my surprise, since I didn't think anybody's welfare mattered to him but his own, Wendell asked me: "How's your folks?"
"How's your folks?"

"Real good."

"Nuhhuh."

Wendell took a mouthful of coffee, casting a look at the cook as he set down his cup. Then his attention was back on me: "I hear your mother gave quite a talk, the day of the Fourth."

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

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

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

Meredice went right on: "Was he, do you think?"

"Was he what?" retorted Wendell.

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

"Meredice, how in hell--" Wendell stopped himself and swigged some more sour coffee. "You was mighty much out of line. He might've been Swedish, for all I know."

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

"Fitting? Fit what?"

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

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

"Take of English earth as much

As either hand may rightly clutch.

In the taking of it breathe

Prayer for all who lie beneath."

Then Meredice Williamson dipped her fork and tried a dainty bite of Tomato Smush.
All around the table, though, every other fork had stopped.

Even mine. I don't know, maybe Kipling out of the blue would have that effect on any group of diners, not just hay hands. But in any case, there was a mulling silence as Wendell contemplated Meredice and the rest of us contemplated the Double W boss and his wife.

Not even a "Nuhhuh" out of Wendell.

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

"Real good," I said. "Would somebody pass the liver, please?"

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

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

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

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

"I said, what have they--"

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

"Which job?"

Silence.

"Which--"
"Raking."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For the first time since he stepped into the bunkhouse and
cought sight of me, Alec came alive. He stood now in front of Blanche,
holding her haltered head. But looking squarely at me, as I stood
in front of Fisheye. The tall and blue-eyed and flame-haired Alec
the Alec who faced life as if it was always going to deal him aces.
I tried again, maybe to see if I was understanding my brother's
words. "Christamighty, though, Alec—they haven't even got you
doing what you want to do here. You hired on as a rider. Why're
you going to let goddamn Wendell do whatever he wants with you?"

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

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

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

"That it's my own."

"Well, yeah, I guess it is," was all I could manage to respond.

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

What they were up against was the basic Alec.

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

"What is it?"

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

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

"Yeah. I will."

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

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

"How's Leona?"

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

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

"No. Why?"

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

"Like what?"

"Well, like--" I gazed across the lawn at the Heaney house, pale white in the dark. Ed and Genevieve and Mary Ellen had gone to bed, but Ray and I won permission to lie on the grass under the giant cottonwood until Ray's bedroom cooled down a bit from the sultry day. The thunderstorm had missed Gros Ventre, only left it its wake of heat and charged air.

"Promise not to laugh at this?"

"You couldn't pay me to."

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

By the look of him."

"Tell about what?"

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

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

"Same thing."

"Going to happen and not going to happen are the same thing?"

Jick, sometimes—"

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

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

"Yeah?" Ray responded, with what I believe is called elaborate indifference.
The next day I returned with the rake to the Reese place, confirmed with Pete that the hay was too wet for us to try, retrieved Pony, and by noon was home at English Creek in time for Sunday dinner. During which I related to my parents my visit to the Double W.

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

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

"No," came flying out of me from some nest of brotherly allegiance I hadn't been aware of. Lord, what a wilderness is the thicket of family. "No, he's just riding around."
This is what I meant, earlier, about the chain of events of that last week of haying. If Clayton Hebner had not grab-assed himself into a twisted ankle, I would not now have been the sole depository of the news of Alec's Double W situation.
The second Saturday in August, one exact month since we started haying, we sited the stacker in the last meadow along Noon Creek.

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

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

So that final haystack began to climb. Bud Olson, now that mowing was over, was on top with Wisdom, helping with the stacking. Perry too was done with his part of haying; he tied his team in his creaky way in some shade by the creek and was dabbing around the stack with a pitchfork, carrying scraps of hay to the stacker fork.

Clayton, I am happy to report, had mended enough to do the stacker team again and I had regained my scatter rake.

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

At last every stem of hay was in that stack.
"How the hell do we get off this thing?" called down Bud from the island in the air, only half-joking.

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

In actuality, the descent of Wisdom and Bud was provided by Clayton running the stacker fork up to them, so they could grab hold of the fork teeth while they climbed down onto the frame.

Marie had driven up from the main ranch to see this topping-off of the summer's haying, and brought with her cold tea and fresh-baked oatmeal cookies. A crew about to scatter, we stood and looked and sipped and chewed. Perry to head back into Gros Ventre and a winter of leather work at the saddle shop. Bud tonight onto a bus to Anaconda, his smelter job. Wisdom had been worked on by Pete and Bud and they got him to agree that he would ride the bus with Bud as far as Great Falls, at least getting him and his wages past the Medicine Lodge saloon. Clayton, over the English Creek-Noon Creek divide to the North Fork and Hebner life again. Pete and Marie, to fencing the haystacks and then shipping the lambs and then trailing the Reese sheep home from the Reservation, and all too soon feeding out the
hale we had put up. Me, to English Creek daytime dweller at English Creek instead of a nightly visitor. And the tall, tall last haystack, standing over us as if it was a holy mound we had come to, to hear where each of us was to go next in life.
"Either this weather is out of control," declared my mother, "or I'm getting old."

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

Nor was my mother, for all her lament about August's warmth, helping the situation any. The contrary. She was canning. It started in June with rhubarb, and then would come a spurt of cooking home made sausage and putting it in crocks with the fat over it, and next would be the first of the garden vegetables, peas, and after them beets to pickle, and then the various pickings of beans, interspersed with making berry jams, and by late August the arrival of flat in Gros Ventre of the flat boxes of canning peaches and pears. We ate all winter on what my mother put up, but the price of that was
that during a lot of the hottest days of summer, the kitchen range also was blazing away. So whenever canning was the agenda I steered clear of the house as much as I could. It was that or melt.

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

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

Poor Chet. His reward for reporting all this was to have my father say, "Is that the best news you can come up with?" My father said it lightly, or tried to, but both Chet and the assistant ranger Paul Eliason knew these were touchy days. Touchy day. Chet and Paul were young and in their first summer on the Two, and I know my father
suffered inwardly about their lack of local knowledge. Except for
being wet behind the ears, they weren't a bad pair. But in a summer
As dispatcher
like this, that was a big except. Chet was in charge of the telephone
setup that linked the lookout towers and the fire guard cabins to
the ranger station, and he was in touch with headquarters in Great
Falls by the regular phone system. His main site of operation, thus,
was the switchboard behind a partition at one side of my father's
office. I think it was my mother who gave that cubbyhole the name
of "the belfry" from all the phone signals that chimed in there.
The belfry took some getting used to, for anybody, but Chet was an
unhurryable type best fitted for the job of dispatcher. Of the two,
Paul Eliason gave my father more grief than Chet did. Paul did a
You'd have thought he was born looking glum about it. Actually the case was that
lot of moping. Late the previous winter, just before he was transferred
to the English Creek district as my father's assistant ranger, Paul
and his wife had gotten a divorce and she'd gone home to her mother
in Seattle. According to what my father heard from Paul, it was one
of those things. She tried for a year to put up with being a Forest
Service wife, but Paul at the time was bossing CCC crews who were
building trail on the Olympic National Forest out in the state of Washington,
and the living quarters for the Eliasons
was a remote one-room cabin which featured pack rats and a cookstove as temperamental as it was ancient. Perfect circumstances to make an assistant ranger-city wife marriage go floopy if it ever was going to.

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

If I rationed myself and didn't get in the way of business, my father didn't mind that I hung around in the ranger station. But there was a limit on how much I wanted to do that, too. Whenever something was happening—the lookouts up there along the skyline of the Two calling in their reports to Chet in the belfry; my father tracing his finger over and over the map showing the pocket fires his smokechasers and fire guards already had dealt with—the station was a lively place to be. But in between those times, rangering wasn't much of a spectator sport.
Each day is a room of time, it is said. In that long hot
remainder of August I knew nothing to do but go from one span of
sum to the next with as little of rubbing against my parents as possible.

My summer's work was done, they were at the zenith of theirs.

Consequently a good deal of my leisure or at least time-killing
was spent along the creek. I called it

fishing, although it didn't really amount to that. Fish are not dumb,

they won't exert themselves to swallow a hook during the hot part
of the day. So until the fish showed any signs of biting I would
shade up under a cottonwood, pull an old magazine from my hip pocket
and read.