

OK
move to
earlier?

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

"Now and then."

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

"Quite a one."

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

Stanley rubs
neck or
arches back
"uh huh"

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

Times with Velma Simms. Plural. The gray eyes, the pearl-buttoned ears,
rodeo slacks, in multiple. Sweat was already rolling off me that morning,

pearl-
buttoned
ears
rodeo

but this really opened the spigots. I went over to the water bucket
and splashed a handful on my face and another on the back of my neck.

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

"Stanley, I guess this isn't exactly any of my business, but--"

have you seen Velma? Since the Fourth?"

"Now and then."

While I waited for my father I visited here and there among
the bedded-down firefighters.

Stanley flexed his hand a time or two, then went back to cutting

bacon. Tonight's main course was a casserole--if you can do that

by the table--of macaroni and canned corn and bacon slices. "We've

had some times," he allowed.

"If you mean permanent, nope. Velma's gave up marrying and I never got started. We both know there's a season on our kind of entertainment." Stanley slabbed off another half dozen slices of ~~bacon, I peeled away at a spud.~~ ~~ham, I made sandwiches with it.~~ "But a season's better than no calendar at all, is what I've come to think." He squinted at the stacked results of his bacon slicing. "How many more hogs does that recipe call for?"

————— →

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

He was one of the CCs, half-carried and half-supported by two others. Paul hurried across the base camp toward them, calling:

"How bad did he get it?"

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

Paul sent the bearers and their casualty on down to the trailhead where his pickup ~~and~~ was parked, for them to drive in to Gros Ventre and Doc Spence.

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

—————
As yet, no wind. Calm as the inside of an oven, and as hot.

—————
I wiped my brow and resumed peeling.

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

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

"Huh? To where?"

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

I hesitated. We ^{did have our} ~~had~~ ^{fixings} supper pretty well in hand. But to ~~just~~ simply wander off up the mountainside---

"Aw, we got time," Stanley told me as if he'd invented the commodity. "Our stepdaddy"--he meant Paul--"won't be back from the doc's for a while."

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

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

———

I ~~had~~ thought it was hot in camp. The slope was twice so.

Facing south as it did, the grassy incline had been drinking in sun all day, not to mention the heat the forest fire was putting into the air of this whole area.

"Yeah, it's a warm one," Stanley agreed. I was watching him with concern. The climb in the ^{had} heat ~~t~~tuckered me considerably. How Stanley could navigate this mountainside in ^{his} bent-knee ~~position~~ fashion-- more than ever he looked like a born horseman, grudging the fact of ground--was beyond me.

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

Stanley did lean down and put a hand flat against the soil of the slope as if he intended to sit. I was not surprised when he

didn't plop himself down, for this sidehill's surface was so tropical I could feel its warmth through the soles of my boots.

"Looks to me like they're holding it," I evaluated the fire scene opposite us. Inasmuch as we were about halfway up our slope, we were gazing slightly downward on Flume Gulch and the fire crew. Startling how close that scene seemed; these two sides of the North Fork vee truly were sharp. Across there in the gulch we could see the men strung out along the fireline, could even see the strip of turned earth and cleared-away ~~minerals~~ debris, like a stripe of garden dirt, that they were penning the fire with. In a provident moment I had snagged a pair of binoculars from the council tent before Stanley and I set off ~~on~~ on our climb. With them I could even pick out individuals, found my father and

Kratka in conference near the center of the fireline, both of them stood in that ^{peering} ~~leaning~~ way men do ^{up} ~~on~~ a sidehill, one foot advanced and the opposite arm crooking onto a hip. They looked like they could outwait any fire.

The ^{dry} grass creaked and crackled under my feet as I stepped to hand the binoculars to Stanley. He had been gandering here, there

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elsewhere around our slope, so I figured he was waiting to use the glasses on the actual fire.

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

#

—



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

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

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

4 "It jumped our fire line," he told me. "Three places."

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

"Like hell. What do you call that ^{whiff} ~~gust~~ about 4 o'clock?"

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

My father studied me. "All right. Maybe down here, there wasn't any. But up there, some sure as hell came from somewhere. Not much. Just enough." He told me the story. Around 4 o'clock, which must have been not long after Stanley and I ^{took a} ~~had~~ our look at things from the slope, the east flank of the fire made a run. "Jumped the fire line, but we got ^{there} and swatted it out. While we were doing that, it jumped again. Got to that one, got it out. But while we were

doing that, it jumped one more goddamn time." That one flared, and
^{lower-down}
 a stand of lodgepole became orange flame. "I had to pull the men
^{Too damn dangerous.}
~~down~~ away from that flank. So we've got a whole new fire, coming
 right down the mountain. Tomorrow we're going to have to hold
 it here at the creek. Damn it all to hell anyway."

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

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

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

———

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

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

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

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

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

"Tomorrow it'll be just an ugly sonuvabitch of a forest fire.

But tonight, it's pretty."

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

Paul arrived back into camp from his errand of mercy, and my father called him over. "How's Ferragamo?" Joseph Ferragamo was the CC the falling snag had sideswiped.

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

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

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

My father said nothing for a little. Then: "I appreciate the report, Paul. Round up Ames and Kratka, will you. We've got to ~~figure out~~ figure out how we're going to handle this fire tomorrow."

My father and Paul and the pair of crew foremen took lanterns and headed up the creek

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~~My father and Paul and Kratka and Ames had gone up the creek,~~
to look over the situation of ^{tomorrow} the morning's fire line. My father
of course knew the site backwards and forwards, but the hell of it
was, to try ^{to} educate the others in a hurry and in ^{the dark.} ~~the dark.~~ I
could not help but think it: if Alec--

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

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

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Merlyn--

This is one of the pages I've had you type already; I'll fit ^{it} in,
so please just begin the next page (p. 78) at the top of a fresh
sheet of paper.



Marlyn - please do this page separate

REVISED OK

indent 8 spaces

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

leave space of 3 lines

indent 12 spaces

	<u>Percent of Time</u>
Sexual stories, experiences and theories.....	47 ³ %
Personal adventures in which narrator is hero.....	23 ²³ %
Memorable drinking jags.....	8%
Outrages of capitalism.....	8%
Acrimonious remarks about bosses, for ⁵ men and cooks.....	5%
Personal adventures in which someone not present is the goat.....	5%
Automobiles, particularly Fords.....	3%
Sarcastic evaluations of Wilson's war to end war.....	2%
Sarcastic evaluations of ex-President Coolidge.....	2%
Sarcastic evaluations of ex-President Hoover.....	2%
Sears Roebuck versus ^{catalogue} Montgomery Ward versus ^{catalogue}	2%
The meteorological outlook.....	2%
The job at hand.....	1%

From what I
cd hear
no one
just
right

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

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

But no, when I at last ^{spied} ~~saw~~ my father and his fire foremen
return ^{ing} to camp and ^{then ing} head for the tent to continue their war council,
I found Stanley in that same vicinity. Looking neither ^{worse} ~~better~~ nor
~~better~~ than he had during our day of cooking. ⁴ Just to be sure, I
asked him: "How you doing?"

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

My father spotted the pair of us and called over: "Jick, you
hang on out here. We got to go over ^{the} ~~some~~ maps, but ^{it} ~~I~~ won't take

too long." Into the tent he ^{ducked} ~~went~~ with Paul, Kratka and Ames, ^{following.}

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"For crying out loud!

"~~Jesus H. Christ,~~ ^{devil} who ever heard of a fire camp where the cook gets
put in his two bits' worth?
to ~~cast his vote?~~ Mister, I don't know who the ~~hell~~ you think you
are, but--"

"All right, Paul," ^{unpired,} ~~said~~ my father. "Hold on." There was a
moment of silence, which could only have been a scrutinizing one.

My father began to say: "Stanley, once we get this--"

"Mac, you know how much it takes for me to ask ^{this} ~~this~~."

A moment again. Then my father: "All right. There's plenty
of night ahead. We can stand a couple of minutes for me to hear
what Stanley has to say. Paul, you guys go ahead and ^{map out} ~~figure~~ how
we can space the crews along the ^{creek} ~~bottom of the gulch~~. I won't be

long." And bringing one of the gas lanterns out he came, giving Stanley a solid looking-over in the white light.

Side by side the two of them headed out of earshot of the tent. Not out of mine, ~~I tagged along~~ though, for this I was ~~not~~ ^{never} going to miss. They

had gone maybe a dozen strides when I caught up with them.

The three of us stopped at the west end of the camp. ~~The fire~~ ^{Above us the} had on its night face ~~again~~ ^{yet}, bright, pretty. ~~None of the ugly smoke~~ ^{No hint whatsoever} grim

and char it showed by day.

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

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

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

"So where would you tackle it?"

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

in the lantern light
Now it was my father's eyes that showed the hurtful squinch

Stanley's so often did.

that
repelled
him

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

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

Jerking his head around from that thought, my father said:

"Stanley, don't get radical on me here. What in the hell makes you
~~think~~ say the fireline ought to ^{be put} go up there on the mountain?"

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

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

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

"Stanley, these days we've got what's called the 10 a.m. ~~pm~~ policy.

Mazoola got religion about all this a few years ago. The Major

told us, 'This approach to fire suppression will be a dividend-payer.'

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

"Yeah, rules are rules," agreed Stanley. Or seemed to agree,

for I had heard my father any number of times invoke the second part
~~of that~~ *this ranger station* catechism: "and fools are fools."

much-employed
day

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

"All right, Stanley," he said at last. "Run this by me again.

You're saying, give the fire that whole damn slope?"

"Yeah, more or less. Use the morning and as much else of the day as you can get to build a wide fireline along that rocky top.

It's not as nasty a place as ~~this~~ gorge."

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

"Mac, you know what I mean." Stanley spelled it out for my
~~father anyway. "If you put men down in this gorge and the fire~~
~~gets too much for them, you'll be sifting piles of ashes to find~~
~~their buttons."~~

(p. 82A follows) →

father anyway. "That slope is dry as a torch. If you put men down in this gorge and the fire sets off that slope behind them, ^{too} you're going to be sifting piles of ashes to find their buttons."

"I can't see how the fire could set off the slope across ~~that~~ this much ~~kind of~~ distance," my father answered slowly.

"I can," Stanley said back.


~~Still~~ Stubborn as a government mule against the notion of ^{voluntarily} doubling the size of the Flume Gulch burn, my father eyed back up at the slope of Rooster Mountain. "Hell, if we just let the flame get out in that grass, then's when we'll have a bigger fire."

"You'll have a bigger fireline. And rocks instead of men to help stop it."

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

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

"He is," I ~~vouched~~ ^{chimed in.}



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

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

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

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

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

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

"Excuse us again, gents."

Out came my father and Paul, again I ^{made sure to catch} ~~caught~~ up before the ^{could turn} ~~leaved~~ walking ~~leaved~~ into talking.

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

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

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

—

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

———
"Christamighty, Stanley. Twenty loaves again?"

"Milk toast instead of mush to start with this morning," Jick,"
confirmed Stanley from

the circle of lantern light where he was peering down into the

cook book. ~~Then~~ "After the bread, it's Place 20 cans of milk

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

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

My father and Ames were the first ones through the ~~break~~ ^{breakfast} line.

Ames's ~~men~~ ^{earliest} had come off the fireline ~~first~~ ^{were to} last night, so they ~~would~~

be the ~~first~~ ^{early} ones onto it this morning. Wherever that fireline was
going to be.

I was so busy flunkying that it wasn't until a little break ^{after Ames's men and}

before Kratka's ~~men~~ came that I could zero in on my father. He

and Ames brought their empty plates and dropped them in the ~~dishwash~~ ^{dishwash}

tub. My father scrutinized Stanley, who was ~~bringing~~ ^{lugging} a fresh heap

of fried ham to the T table. Stanley set down the ham and met
with a straight gaze of his own.
my father's regard. "Morning, Mac. Great day for the race, ain't
it?"

My father nodded to Stanley, although whether in ^{hello}greeting or
agreement it couldn't be told. Then he turned to Ames. "Okay,
All the way to the top."
^{Andy}Al. Take your bunch up there." And next my father was coming

around the serving table to where Stanley and I were, saying:
"Step over here, you two. I've got ^{something special in mind}~~some special business~~
for the pair of you."

—

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

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

"It's a new theory of fire fighting," my father told him. "We're
going to do it by mail order."

Kratka's men were soon fed. It transpired that my father himself

was going to lead this group onto the slope and show them where he wanted backfires lit.

First, though, he called Paul Eliason over. I heard him instruct:

(no 41)

~~send in~~ tell Great Falls

"Have Chet ~~send in~~ the same thing as yesterday--'No chance

10 a.m. control today.'"

"Mac," Paul began, ~~again~~. "Mac, how about if I at least wait

~~call it in?~~

until toward that time of morning to ~~send it?~~ I don't see any sense

in advertising what--what's going on up here."

My father leveled him a stare that made Paul sway back a little.

"Assistant ranger Eliason, ^{do} you mean to say you'd delay information to headquarters?"

Paul gulped but stood his ground. "Yeah. In this case, I would."

"Now you're talking," congratulated my father. "Send it in at

~~Then~~ my father

5 minutes to 10." He turned and called to the crew waiting to go

up the mountain with him. "Let's go see a fire."

—


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

"You heard the man."

It was almost mid-afternoon, the sweltering heat of so hot a day. The rock formation we were perched on might as well have been a stoked stove. Pony and the buckskin saddlehorse were tethered in the shade of the trees below and behind us, but they stood there drooping even so.

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

I had heard the man. My father, when he herded the pair of us aside there at breakfast and decreed: "I want you two out of here, when the fire hits that slope this afternoon. You understand?" If we did, Stanley and I weren't about to admit it. My father the fire boss spelled matters out for us: "If the wind makes



up its mind to blow or that fire takes a turn for some other reason,
it could come all the way ^{down the gorge} into this camp. So ~~when~~ when you get
the lunches made, clear out of here."

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

"Both of you," stated my father.

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

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

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

Then, ~~more~~ more mild: "I need you to be with Jick, Stanley."

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

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

"Jick," he said as if this had been stored up in him for some time. "Jick, I can't risk you. Right now you're the only son I've got left. Whatever the hell it is that Alec thinks he's accomplishing, he's doing it more as a man than as a son. Maybe we can eventually work it out so that he'll be both. I hope so. But as of now, you're it." His left eyelid came down as he forced a grin to ^{the last of} accompany his words: "You've earned yourself a grandstand seat this afternoon. Lean back and watch the event."

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

x The grass slope of Rooster Mountain lay within clear view. A tan broad ramp of grass, if Pat Hoy had had Dode Withrow's sheep in a scattered graze there, they would have been plain to the unaided eye. In fact, at first it puzzled me that although even my father agreed this rock site was a healthy enough distance behind the fire for Stanley and ~~me~~ me, the slope seemed so close. Eventually I figured out that the huge dark dimension of the smoke made the distance seem foreshortened.

I had snagged the ~~binoculars~~ binoculars again from the council tent, and

every few minutes I would squat--as with the slope yesterday at this time, our island of stone was too damn hot to sit on--and prop my elbows on my knees to steady the glasses onto the fireline work.

The brow of the slope, between its rocky top and the grass expanse stretching down to the North Fork, was beginning to resemble a reflection of the devastation in Flume Gulch opposite it. All

day ~~some~~ ^{many} of my father's fire fighters had been setting backfires, each a little blaze carefully lit, carefully watched, carefully

~~snuffed~~ ^{snuffed} out before it could threaten. Then another small black patch

seared alongside that one. ^{By now a narrow} A dark burn scar had been inflicted ^{across}

^{upper part} the entire width of the slope. Meanwhile the slope's scattered

bullpines and the edge of the lodgepole forest atop the skyline had been cut down, cleared away. Other men were trenching, leaving bare dirt where tan grass had waved. Anything, everything, to deny fuel to the Flume Gluch fire when it came.

^{now and again} Even Stanley ^{to the fireline preparation.} peered through the binoculars ~~now and again.~~ He

wasn't saying anything, though, except his appraisal when we climbed onto the sun-cooked rock: "Hotter than dollar chili, ain't it?"

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

Instead, just this. Nothing seemed imminent yet, the smoke still disclosed the fire as only approaching the creek gorge. ~~1~~ Maybe just brinking down onto the height between the gulch and the gorge, would have been my guess. I deemed that the next little while would start to show whether the fire preferred the gorge or Stanley's slope. So I ^{did} ~~was~~ not even have the binoculars to my eyes, instead was sleeving the sweat off my forehead. When Stanley simply said: "There."

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

The suck of fear that went through me, the sweat popping out on the backs of my hands as I tried to see through smoke with binoculars. I can never--I want never--to forget what went through me then, as I realized what would be happening to my father and his fire crew if they ~~were~~ ^{had been} in the gorge as the avalanche of fire ~~swept~~ ^{swept} into it. The air itself must be cooked, down in there.

Then this. The smoke, all of it, rose as if a windowblind was being lifted. Sixty, eighty feet, I don't know. But the whole mass of smoke lifted that much. Stanley and I could look right into the flames, abruptly they were as bright and outlined as the blaze in a fireplace; ~~and they were~~ ^{already} across the gorge, I was told later by Wisdom Johnson: "Jick,

this is the God's truth, a cool wind blew over us right then, down into that fire." A wedge of air, it must have been, hurling itself under that furiously hot smoke and flame. And that air and those flames meeting--the fire spewed ^{up} across the slope in a wave, a tide.

^{crisp} tan The grass ~~under~~ ^{going} of the slope, ~~gone~~ to orange and black. ~~like~~ In but a minute or two, gone.

The smoke closed down again, boiled some more. But then there began to be clefts in the swirl, thinnings, actual gaps. The binoculars now brought me glimpses of men spaced along the fireline and the rock summit of the slope, stomping and swatting and shoveling dirt onto flame wherever it found fuel enough to catch. But more and more, sentrylike watching instead of fire fighting. Watching the flamestorm flash into collision with a backfired area or trenched bare dirt or the rock comb of Rooster Mountain, and then dwindle.

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

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

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

"You knew the slope would go like that."

P. 94A follows →

"I had the idea it might," was as much as Stanley would admit.

"Superheated the way it was, from both the fire and the sun."

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

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

—————

Dusk. Supper now behind us, only the dishes to finish. ^{My father} ~~Stanley~~ came and propped himself against the worktable ~~and I were nearly done with dishwashing~~ where Stanley and I were dishwashing. He asked Stanley if he could stand one more day of cooking, while the fire crew policed ^{smoking} snags and smolder spots tomorrow, and Stanley replied Yeah, cooking wasn't all that much

—————→

^{anyway}
worse than dealing with sheepherders.

I broke in:

"Tell me the argument."

Nothing, from either of ^{these} ~~the~~ two.

I cited to my father from when he

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I think there is." I was in Stanley's gaze again.

"Phantom Woman," he began. "I let that fire get away from me. Or at least it got away. Comes to the same--a fire is the fire boss's responsibility, and I was him." Stanley turned his head to my father. Then to me again. "Your dad had come up from his Indian Head district to be a fireline foreman for me. So he was on hand when it happened. When Phantom Woman blew up across that mountainside."

Stanley
He saw my question. "Naw, I can't really say it was the same as happened on that slope today. Timber instead of grass, different kind of country, different this and that--every goddamn fire I ever been around is different from every other goddamn fire. But ^{anyhow} ~~anyway~~, up it blew, Phantom Woman. Flames everywhere, all the crew at my flank of the fireline had to run out of there like singed cats.

then that fire went and went and Run for their lives. It was just a mess. And the fire went and

went." Stanley's throat made a dry swallow. "Burned for three weeks.

So that's the history of it, ^{Jick.} The blowup happened at my flank of the fireline. ~~Remember~~ It was over that that your dad and I had our~~---~~ Stanley faced my father--"disagreement."

My father/looked back at Stanley until it began to be a stare.

Then ~~said~~ ^{asked}: "That's it? That's what you call the history of it?"

Stanley's turn to shrug.

My father shook his head. Then uttered:

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

"Turned him in? How? To who?"

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

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

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

"For that and--" My father stopped.

"The booze," Stanley ^{completed.} ~~did the completing.~~ "As long as we're telling, ~~the~~ tell him the whole of it, Mac."

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

sixteen, seventeen?"

"Somewhere there," Stanley confirmed.

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

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

My father paused. "It's a hell of a thing to have to say,
, your grandfather--we
after all this with Alec. But my father and I were on the outs.
Not for anything like the same reason. He did something I couldn't
agree with, and it was just easier all around, for me stay clear
of the homestead and Scotch Heaven for a while. Eventually he got
over it and I got over it, and that's all that needs to said about
that episode." A pause again. This one, I knew, sealed whatever
that distant McCaskill father-son ruckus had been. "Anyway, Stanley
took me on. Started me here on the Two, ~~I spent a couple of years~~ →

*your
grandfather
ask
about*

went

come up with.
giving me any seasonal job he could ~~find~~. I spent a couple of
years that way, until we went into the war. And then after, when
I was the association rider and your mother and I had Alec, and then
you came along--Stanley suggested I take the ranger test."

I wanted to hear history, did I. A headful was now available.

Stanley had been the forest arranger, the one who set up the Two
Medicine National Forest. Stanley had stood in when my father was
on the outs with his father. Stanley it had been who urged ^{this father} Varick
of mine ~~McCaskill~~ into the Forest Service. And it was Stanley whom my father
had--

"It never was any secret Stanley liked to take a drink," I was
hearing the elaboration now. "But when I started as ranger at Indian
Head and ~~Stanley~~ he still was the ranger at English Creek, I started to
realize the situation was getting beyond that. There were ~~was~~ more and
more days when Stanley couldn't operate without a bottle at his side.
He still knew more about the Two than anybody, and in the normal
course of events I could kind of keep a watch on things ^{up here} and catch
any problem that got past ^{Stanley} him. We went along that way for a few

years. Nobody higher up noticed, or at least minded. But it's one thing to function day by day, and ~~under~~ ^{have to do} another to ~~try~~ it during a big fire."

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

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

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

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

"But I'll have one ^{the first} ~~within a minute~~ when I get back to the Busbys'," Stanley ^{forecast} ~~reported~~. "And then a couple to wash that one

down. Naw, Jick. I know myself. I ought to, I been around myself

long enough." As if to be sure I accepted the sum of him, Stanley gave it flatly: "In a pinch, I can go dry for as long as I did here.

But ordinarily, no. I got a built-in thirst."

Now my father. "I never expected they'd come down on Stanley that hard. A transfer, some rocking chair job where the drinking wouldn't matter that much--something to get him ~~out of the Two~~ ^{off the English Creek district.}

I couldn't just stand by and see both him and the Two country go

to hell." The expression on my father: I suppose here was my first

inkling that a person could do what he thought was right and yet

be ~~uncomfortable~~ ^{about} never comfortable ~~about~~ it. He shook his head ~~about~~ ^{over} what

had to be said next, erasing the ~~unease~~ ^{inquiry} that had been building in me.

"You know how the Major is. Put up or shut up. When he bounced

Stanley, he handed me English Creek. I wanted it run right, did I?

Up to me to do it." My father cast a look around the fire camp,

into the night where no brightness marked either Flume Gulch or

the slope. "And here I still am, trying to."

#

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

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

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

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

—

~~That next day was the winding down of the Flume Gulch fire camp.~~

that next

4 All ~~morning~~ my father had Kratka's crew felling suspicious snags in the burnt-over gulch and creek bottom, and Ames's men on the slope to patrol for any sign of spark or smudge amid the char that had been grass. After lunch my father let half the EFFs go back to Great Falls. He predicted, "The thanks I'll get is that headquarters will want to know why in holy hell I didn't get them off the payroll last night." But the rest of the EFFs and the CCs, he put back to watching the burn area.

As Stanley and I recuperated from the lunch preparation and gradually started on supper, neither of us ^{saying} ~~said~~ anything worthwhile.

~~What could be added to all that yesterday produced?~~

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

He came into ~~the~~ camp with the rest of the EFFs. "Paul, the show is all yours," he delegated. "After supper you can have the CCs break the camp. I'm going to head into Gros Ventre now with the rest of these EFFs. Chet can tell Great Falls to get them from there."

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

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

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

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

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

—

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

was as ~~kind~~ tired as I have ever been.

When we had goodbyed Wisdom and the other EFFs, my father and I grabbed a quick supper in the Lunchery. Oyster stew never tasted

better, which is saying a lot. Then my father said he ~~he~~ had to go

Before we could head home, though, my father said he had to go

by the Gleaner office. "Bill is going to want all the dope about the fire. It may take a little while. You want me to pick you up at

Ray's after I'm done?" I did.

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~~_____~~

~~_____~~

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

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

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

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

"Ray-ay!" protested Mary Ellen at his ^{untidy} ~~shortcut~~ across the lawn. But then here she came, ^{raking up after him.} ~~dragging her rake behind him~~

"What do you think?" Ray asked when he reached the tree and me.

"Had I better bring this out to Pete's next summer and make hay with you?"

2
REVISED

"Sounds good to me," I said. "But that's next summer. I want to know where this one went to." The light in the Heaney kitchen ~~dimmed~~ went out, another one came on in the living room, then the murmur of Ed ~~Heaney's~~ radio. 7 p.m., you could bank on it. I thought back to my last visit to this household you could set your clock by, when I pulled in from the Double W and ~~the~~ session with Alec, that first Saturday night of the month. "It's been a real quick August."

"Quicker than you know," ~~answered~~ ^{advised} Ray. "Today is September. School's almost here."

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

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

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

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

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

} Sept-1
Davis-
Copenace
of War, 15

1

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

Gleaner
--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner

Dec. 11, 1941

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

of them, those are the lasting lines within the book, there to be looked on again and again, whenever the mood of wonder asks to.

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

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

→

and my belief is that he grabbed ~~the~~ Deuce W job as a way to
~~the Deuce W job was his~~

put distance between him and that disappointment.

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—

I saw Leona the day of the Gros Ventre centennial, several years ago now. She is married to a man named Wright, and they run a purebred Hereford ranch down in the Crazy Mountains country. The beauty still shines out of ^{Leona} ~~her~~. ~~Her~~ Ranch work and the riding she ~~still~~ does have kept her in shape, I couldn't help noticing. But one thing did startle me. Leona's hair now is silvery as frost. [#] She smiled at my surprise and said: "Gold to silver, Jick. You've seen time cut my value." ^{had}

—

Left to my own devices, I would not tell any further about Alec.

Yet my brother, his decisions, the consequences life dealt him, always are under that summer and its aftermath like the paper on which a calendar is printed.

Before he enlisted in the Army the week after Pearl Harbor, Alec did come back to Gros Ventre to see our parents. Whether reconciliation is the right amount of word for that visit I don't really know, for I was on a basketball trip to Browning and a ground blizzard kept those of us

"We'll be in it inside of six

of the Gros Ventre team there overnight. So by the time I got back,

Alec had been and

gone. And that last departure of his from English Creek led to a

desert in Tunisia. How stark it sounds; yet it is as much as we

ever knew. A Stuka finding

that bivouac at dusk, swooping in and splattering 20-millimeter shells.

~~little~~

Of the cluster of soldiers who were around a jerry can drawing their

water rations, only one man lived through the strafing. He was not

Alec.

So. My last words with my brother were those on the telephone

when I tried to talk him into going to the Flume Gulch fire. I do have

a hard time forgiving life for that.

4 ————— →

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

} checked in
PWC
into on camp
Lewis file
card in
checking file

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

} Attu
into
in
Idaho
file



6

eventually
When the Army turned me loose into civilian life, I used my G.I. bill to study forestry at the university in Missoula. Each of those college summers I ~~was~~ ^{worked as} a smokejumper for the Forest Service, parachuting out of more airplanes onto ~~more~~ ^{damn forest} fires than now seems sane to me. And in the last of those smokejumping summers I began going with a classmate of mine at the university, a young woman from there in the Bitterroot country. The day after graduation in 1949, we were married. That marriage lasted just a year and a half, and it is not something I care to dwell on.

That same graduation summer I took and passed the Forest Service exam, and was assigned onto the Custer National Forest, over in eastern Montana. I suppose one of the Mazoola desk jockeys ~~thought~~ ^{regulation} it scrupulous, or found it in some ~~manual~~ ^{regulation}, that most of the state of Montana should be put between me and my father on the Two. But all that eastern Montana stint accomplished--hell, even the name got me down, that dodo Custer--was to cock me into readiness ~~when~~ to shoot out of the Forest Service when the chance came. ⁴/Pete Reese provided the click. As soon as as his lambs were shipped in the fall of 1952, Pete offered me first crack at the Noon Creek ranch. Marie's health

was giving ~~me~~ out--she lived only a few more years, dark lovely doe

she was--and Pete wanted to seize an opportunity to buy a sheep outfit

^{down} in the Gallatin Valley near Bozeman, where the winters might not be quite

so ungodly. I remember ^{every} ~~the~~ exact words from Pete in that telephone

call: "You're only an accidental nephew, but I suppose ^{maybe} I can give

you honorary son-in-law terms to buy the place."

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

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

Her first marriage, to a young dentist at Conrad, had not panned out either, and she had come back over to Gros Ventre when the job of

librarian opened up. That first winter of mine on the Reese place

I resorted to the library a lot, and it began to dawn on ^{me that} ~~that the library~~

books were not the only attraction. I like to think Marce and I are

both tuned to an echo of Dode: "Life is wide, there's room to take a

new run at it."

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

The thirty-plus years of ranching that Marce and I have put in here on Noon Creek have not been easy. Tell me what is. But so far the pair of us have withstood coyotes and ~~rayon~~ ^{synthetic fabrics} and Two country winters and the decline of sheepherders ~~to~~ ^{damn} persevere in the sheep business--although ~~lately~~ ^{lately} we have ~~been~~ ^{lately} diversifying ^{ied} into some Charolais cattle and several ~~new~~ ^{that new} fields of sanfoin alfalfa. I am never going to be red-hot about being

9

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

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

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

cure yet for those of us in the sonofabitching sheep business?"

Anyway,

except for big aluminum sheds and irrigation sprinklers slinging water

over the fields, you would not find the ranches of English Creek so

different from the way they were.



#

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

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

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

Forest Service posters urging: LET'S DELIVER THE WOODS Sharpen your
ax to down the Axis.

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

than admit it," my father confessed, "but I was kind of getting used
to those goddamn kelleygrams." ^{The Two supervisor} Ken Sipe was tapped for a

wartime job at Forest Service headquarters in Washington, D.C.,
and stayed on back there. Their successors in Region One and the
Two Medicine forest headquarters simply left my father in place,
rangering the English Creek district. I have heard of a ranger

in the state of Washington who spent a longer career on a district,
wasn't far behind.
but my father's record ~~wasn't far behind~~

~~Yet it is.~~ His first winter of retirement in Gros Ventre was a
gloomy and restless time for him, although my mother and I could
never tell for sure how much of that was retirement and how much just
his usual winter. It was a relief to us all when spring perked him

Nevan McCullough
Sanford flor,
5 miles dist.,
32 years -
only 17 letters
in checking
file

up. I had a call from him the morning of the first day of fishing season: "Bet you a beer you've forgotten how to string ten fish on a willow."

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

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

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

"That'll be the day," he rose to my joshing. "When I don't bring home ten fish ^{on a willow,} As will be shown to you personally on Sunday."

When he hadn't returned by dusk of that day, my mother called me at the ranch and I then called Tom Helwig, the deputy sheriff. I drove across the divide to English Creek and just before full dark found my father's pickup parked beside the North Fork, on Walter

Kyle's old place. Tom Helwig and I and the men from the English Creek ranches searched and searched, hollering in the dark, until giving up ~~and~~ about midnight.

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

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

My mother brought this up in the first ~~month~~^{week} after my father ~~died~~^{passed away.} In a time like that, the past meets you wherever you turn.

The days do not use their own hours, ~~and minutes,~~ they find ones you have lived through with the person you are missing.

Only that once, though, in all the years from then to now, did she wonder that question aloud. The other incidents of the summer of 1939 we often talk over, when I stop by to see how she is doing. She has stayed on in her own house in Gros Ventre. "I'm sufficient company for myself," this mother of mine maintains. She still grows the biggest vegetable garden in town and is perpetual president of the library board. What irks her is ~~to be thought of~~^{when people regard her,} as she puts it, "as if I was Some Kind Of A Monument." I had to talk hard when her birthday came this February and the new young editor of the Gleaner wanted to interview her. Gros Ventre Woman 'Leaped In' with 20th Century was the headline. You know how those stories are, though. It is hard to fit such a life into mere inches of words.

I had never told her or my father of Alec's refusal, that noon when I phoned him about the Flume Gulch fire. And I did not when she asked could it, would it all have come out different? ⁹ But what ⁹ did I ~~want~~ say to her was the one truth I could see in that distant English Creek summer. ⁹ "If you two hadn't had the notions you did, you wouldn't have been yourselves. And if Alec hadn't gone his way, he wouldn't have been Alec."

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

"Maybe," I said.

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And Stanley Meixell.

Stanley stayed on with the Busby brothers until their lambs were shipped that fall of 1939, then said he thought he'd go have a look at Oregon--"always ^{did} like that name." Early in the war the Busbys received word that ^{he} ~~Stanley~~ was working in a shipyard out there at Portland. After that, nothing.

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

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

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



"A McCaskill who'll outright say the word sorry," replied Stanley.

He tasted the gravy, then turned to me, ^{his} ~~his~~ dark eyes ~~was~~ steady *calm*

within the weave of squint lines. "I was more right than I even knew, that time."

"What time was that?"

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

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