the pole panels were shoved into place to serve as chute dividers: when the horses came swarming into the open chute pen, flanks heaving, heads up and eyes glittering. From my perch, it was like looking down through a transom into a long hallway suddenly filled with big perplexed animals. Not many sights are its equal.

Above and to the left of Ray and me was the announcing booth and its inhabitants, a nice proximity which added to the feeling that we were part of the inside happenings of the rodeo. To look at, the booth resembled a little woodshed up on stilts, situated there above and just in back of the middle of the bucking chutes. It held elbow room for maybe six people, although only three of the booth crowd did any actual rodeo work. Tollie Zane, if you could call his announcing work. Tollie evidently was in residence at the far end of the booth, angled out of view from us, but a large round microphone like a waffle iron standing on end indicated his site. Then nearest to us was the scorekeeper, Bill Reinking, editor of the Gleaner, prominent with his ginger mustache and silver-wire eyeglasses. I suppose he did the scorekeeping on the principle that the only sure way for the Gleaner to get any accuracy on the rodeo results was for him to originate the arithmetic. Between Bill and Tollie was the space for the timekeeper, who ran the stopwatch to time the events and blew the whistle to signal when a bronc rider had lasted eight seconds atop a bareback or ten in a saddle ride. The timekeeper's spot in the booth was empty, but this was about to be remedied.

"Wup wup wup," some Paul Revere among the chute society cried, "Here
she comes, boys! Just starting up the ladder!"

Heads swiveled like weathervanes hit by a tornado. And yes, Ray and I also sent our eyes around to the little ladder along the side of the announcing booth and the hypnotizing progress up it of Velma Simms. "Tighter than last year, I swear to God," someone below us was contending. "Like the paper fits the wall," testified another. And yet another, "But I still need to know, how the hell does she get herself into those britches?" Velma Simms came of eastern money, plumbing equipment I believe was its source; I have seen her family name, Croake, on hot-and-cold spigots—and in a community and era which considered divorce usually more grievous than manslaughter, she had been through three husbands. That we knew of. Only the first was local, the lawyer Paul Bogan. They met in Helena when he got himself elected to the legislature, and if my count is right, it was at the end of his second term when Velma arrived back to Gros Ventre and Paul stayed over there at the capital in some kind of state job. Her next husband was a fellow named Sutter, who'd had an automobile agency in Spokane. In Gros Ventre he was like a trout out of water, and quickly went. After him came Simms, an actor Velma happened across in some summer performance at one of the Glacier Park lodges. By February of his first Two country winter Simms was hightailing his way to California, although he eventually did show up back in Gros Ventre, so to speak, as one of the cattle rustlers in a Gene Autry movie at the Odeon. Lately Velma seemed to have given up marrying and instead emerged each Fourth with the current beau—they tended to be like the scissorbill following her up the ladder now, in a
gabardine stockman's suit and a too-clean cream Stetson, probably a
bank officer from Great Falls—in tow. I cite all this because Paul
Bogan, the first in the genealogy, always had served as rodeo timekeeper,
and the next Fourth of July after his change of residence, here Velma
presented herself, bold as new paint, to take up his stopwatch and
whistle. It was her only instance of what might be called civic
participation, and quite why she did it, nobody had a clue. But
Velma's ascension to the booth now was part of every Gros Ventre rodeo.
Particularly for the male portion of the audience. For as you may have
gathered, Velma's Fourth appearances were encased in annual new slacks
of stunning snugness. One of the theoreticians in the chute society
just now was postulating a fresh concept, that maybe Velma heated them
with an iron, put them on hot, and let them shrink down on her like the
rim onto a wagon wheel.

I saw once, in recent years at the Gros Ventre rodeo, a young bronc
rider and his ladyfriend watching the action through the pole arena
gate. They each held a can of beer in one hand, and the rider's other
hand was around the girl's shoulders. Her other hand, though, was down
resting lightly on his rump, the tips of her fingers just touching the
inseam of his Levis back there. I'll admit to you, it made my heart
turn around and face north. That the women now can and will do such a
thing seems to me an advance like radio. My awe of it is tempered only
by the regret that I am not that young man, or any other. But let that
go. My point here is just that in the earlier time, only rare self-
advertised rumps such as that of Velma Simms were targets of public
interest, and then only by what my father and the other rangers called ocular examination.

It registered on me there had been a comment from Ray's direction. "Come again?" I apologized.

"No hitch in Velma's gitalong," Ray offered one more time.

I said something equally bright in agreement, but I was surprised at Ray making an open evaluation of Velma Simms, even so tame a one as that. The matter of Marcella maybe was on his mind more than I figured.

Just then an ungodly noise somewhere between a howl and a yowl issued above us. A sort of high HHHRUNGHHH like a cat was being skinned alive. I was startled as hell, but Ray knew its source. "You see Tollie's loudspeaking getup?" he inquired with a nod toward the top of the announcer's booth. I couldn't help but have noticed such a rig. The contraption was a pyramid of rods, which held at its peak a half-dozen big metal cones like those morning-glory horns on old phonographs, pointing to various points of the compass. Just in case those didn't cover the territory, there was a second set of four more 'glory horns a couple of feet beneath. "He sent off to Billings for it," informed Ray, who had overheard this information when Tollie came to the lumber yard for a number of 2 X 4s to help brace the contraption into place. "The guy who makes them down there told him it's the real deal to announce with."

We were not the only ones contemplating Tollie's new announcing machinery. "What the goddamn hell's Tollie going to do," I heard somebody say below us, "tell them all about it in Choteau?" Choteau
was 33 miles down the highway.

"WELCOME!" crackled a thunderblast of voice over our heads.

"To the Gros Ventre rodeo! Our fifteenth annual show! You folks are wise as hooty owls to roost with us here today. Yes sir! Some of everything is liable to happen here today and--" Tollie Zane, father of the famous Earl, held the job of announcing the Gros Ventre rodeo on the basis by which a lot of positions of authority seem to get filled: nobody else would be caught dead doing it. But before this year, all that the announcing amounted to was shouting through a megaphone the name of each bucking horse and its rider. The shiny new 'glory horns evidently had gone to Tollie's head, or at least his tonsils. "The Fourth of July is called the cowboys' Christmas and our festivities here today will get underway in just--"

"Called what?" somebody yelled from the chute society. "That's Tollie for you, sweat running down his face and he thinks it's snowflakes."

"Santy Claus must have brought him that goddamn talking contraption," guessed somebody else.

"Naw, you guys, lay off now," a third one put in. "Tollie's maybe right. It'd explain why he's as full of shit as a Christmas goose."

Everybody below us hee-heeded at that while Tollie roared on about the splendidiferous tradition of rodeo and what heart-stopping excitement we were going to view in this arena today. Tollie was a kind of plodding
talker anyway, and now with him slowed down either out of respect for the new sound system or because he was translating his remarks from paper—this July Christmas stuff was originating from somewhere; had a kit come with the 'glory horns and microphone?—you could about soft-boil an egg between parts of his sentences.

"Anybody here from Great Falls?"

Quite a number of people yelled and waved their hands.

"Welcome to America!"

Out in the crowd there were laughs and groans. And most likely some flinching in the Rotary beer booth; a real boon to business, Tollie cracking wise at the expense of people who'd had 90 miles of driving time to wonder whether this rodeo was worth coming to.

But this seemed to be a day when Tollie, armed with amplification, was ready to take on the world. "How about North Dakota? Who's here from North Dakota?"

Of course, no response. Tourists were a lot scarcer in those days, and the chances that anybody would venture from North Dakota just to see the Gros Ventre rodeo were zero and none.

"That's right!" blared Tollie. "If I was you I wouldn't admit it neither!"

Tollie spied on for awhile, actually drawing boos from the Choteau folks in the crowd when he proclaimed that Choteau was known as a town without a single bedbug: "No sir they are all married and have big families!" At last, though, the handling crew was through messing with the broncs in the chutes alongside Ray and me,
and Tollie was declaring "We are just about to get the pumpkin rolling. Bareback riding will be our first event."

"Pumpkin?" questioned whoever it was in the chute society that was keeping tab of Tollie's excursions through the calendar. "Judy H. Christ! Now the whistledick thinks it's Halloween."

About all that is worth mentioning of the early part of that rodeo is that its events, a section of bareback riding and after that some steer wrestling or mauling or whatever you want to call it, passed fairly mercifully. Ray and I continued to divide our time snorting laughs over something either Tollie or the chute society provided. Plus our own wise-acre efforts, of course: Ray nearly fell off the corral from cackling one time when I speculated whether this much time sitting on a fence pole mightn't leave a person with the crack in his behind running crosswise instead of up and down.

You know how that is, humor is totally contagious when two persons are in the same light mood. And a good thing, too, for by my estimation the actual events of a rodeo can always use all the help they can get. Although like anybody out here I have seen many and many a rodeo, to me the arena events are never anything to write home special about. It's true that bareback riding has its interesting moments, but basically the ride is over and done with about as it's getting started. I don't know, a guy flopping around on the naked back of a horse just seems to me more of a stunt than a sport. As for steer wrestling, that is an absolutely phony deal, never done except there in front of a rodeo
crowd. Leaping onto a running steer has about as much to do with actual cattle ranching as wearing turquoise belt buckles does. And that calf roping. Calf roping I nominate as an event the spectators ought to be paid for sitting through. I mean, here'll come one yahoo out after the calf swinging a community loop an elephant could trot through, and the next guy will pitch a loop so teeny that it bounces off the back of the calf's neck like a spitwad. Whiff whiff whiff, and then a burst of cursing as the rope-flinger's throw misses its mark: there is the essence of rodeo calf roping. If I ran the world there'd be standards, such as making any calf roping entrant dab onto a fencepost twenty feet away, just to prove he knows how to build a decent loop.

Anyway. All I am saying in this rodeo sermon is that the best feature of the whole affair to me--except maybe for the processional of a Velma Simms--is the excuse it gives everyone to gather together for most of an afternoon. Present me several hundred people to gawk around at and speculate on and, yes, somehow be part of, and that is my idea of the highest sort of holiday. If various forms of nonsense with livestock have to be put up with for that, so be it.

"Alec's bringing his horse in," Ray reported from his sphere of the arena. "Guess he's roping in this section."

"So's everybody else in the world, it looks like." Horsemen and hemp, hemp and horsemen. It was a wonder the combined swishing of the ropes of all the would-be calf ropers now assembling didn't lift the rodeo arena off the ground like an autogyro. As you maybe can tell, my emotions about having a brother forthcoming into this event
were strictly mixed. Naturally I was pulling for Alec to win. Brotherly blood is at least that thick. Yet a corner of me was shadowed with doubt as to whether victory was really such a good idea for Alec. Did he need any more confirming in his cowboy mode? Especially in this dubious talent of hanging rope necklaces onto slobbering calves?

This first section of the calf roping now proceeded about as I could have foretold, a lot of air fanned with rope but damn few calves collared. One surprise was produced, though: after a last catch Bruno Martin of Augusta missed his tie, the calf kicking free before its required six seconds flat on the ground were up. If words could be seen in the air, some blue dandies accompanied Martin out of the arena.

The other strong roper, Vern Crosby, snagged his calf neatly, suffered a little trouble throwing him down for the tie, but then niftily gathered the calf's legs and wrapped the pigging string around them, as Tollie spelled out for us, "faster than Houdini can tie his shoe laces!"

So when the moment came for Alec to guide the bay roping horse into the break-out area beside the calf chute, the situation was as evident as Tollie's voice bleating from that tin bouquet of 'glory horns:

"Nineteen seconds by Vern Crosby is still the time to beat. It'll take some fancy twirling by this next young buckaroo. One of the hands out at
The calf chute and the break-out area where each roper and his horse burst out after the creature were at the far end of the bucking chutes from us. Ray cupped his hands and called across to there: "Wrap him up pretty, Alec!"

Across there, Alec appeared a little nervous, dandling his rope around more than was necessary as he and the bay horse waited for their calf to emerge. But then I discovered I was half-nervous myself, jiggling my foot on its corral pole, and I had no excuse whatsoever. You wouldn't catch me out there trying to snare a 75-pound animal running full-tilt.

The starter's little red flag whipped down, and the calf catapulted from the chute into the expanse of the arena.

Alec's luck. Sometimes you had to think he held the patent on four-leaf clovers and rabbit's feet. The calf he drew was a straight runner instead of a dodger. Up the middle of the arena that calf galloped as if he was on rails, the big horse gaining ground on him for Alec every hoofbeat. And I believe that if you could have pulled the truth from my father and mother right then, even they would have said that Alec looked the way a calf roper ought to. Leaning forward but still as firm in his stirrups as if socketed into them, swinging the loop of the lariat around and around his head strongly enough to give it a good fling but not overdoing it. Evidently there had been much practice performed on Double W calves as Alec rode the coulees
these past weeks.

"Dab it on him!" I heard loudly, and realized the yell had been by me.

Quicker than it can be told Alec made his catch. A good one, where all the significant actions erupt together: the rope straightening into a tan line in the air, the calf gargling out a bleahh as the loop choked its neck and yanked it backward, Alec evacuating from the stirrups in his dismount. Within a blink he was in front of the tall bay horse and scampering beside the stripe of rope the bay was holding taut as fishline, and now Alec was upending the calf into the arena dust and now gathering calf legs and now whipping the pigging string around them and now done.

"The time for Alec McCaskill" -- I thought I could hear remorse inside the tinny blare of Tallie's voice, and so knew the report was going to be good -- "seventeen and a half seconds."

The crowd whooped and clapped. Over at the far fence Leona was beaming as if she might ignite, and down at the end of the grandstand my parents were glumly accepting congratulations on Alec. Beside me Ray was as surprised as I was by Alec's first-rate showing, and his delight didn't have the conditions attached that mine did. "How much is up?" he wondered. I wasn't sure of the roping prize myself, so I asked the question to the booth, and Bill Reinking leaned out and informed us, "Thirty dollars, and supper for two at the Sedgwick House."

"Pretty slick," Ray admired. I had to think so myself. Performance is performance, whatever my opinion of Alec's venue of it. Later in the
afternoon there would be one more section of calf ropers, but with the 
main guys, Bruno Martin and Vern Crosby, already behind him, Alec's 
leading time looked good enough to take to the bank.

Tollie was bleating onward. "Now we turn to some 
prairie sailors and the hurricane deck," which translated to the first go-round of saddle bronc riding. I will say for 
saddle bronc riding that it seems to me the one rodeo event that comes 
close to legitimate. Staying on a mount that is trying to unstay you 
is a historic procedure of the livestock business. "The boys are 
hazing the ponies into the chutes and when we 
commence and get started the first man out will be 
Bill Semmler on a horse called Conniption. In this 
meanwhile though did you hear the one about the 
fellow who goes into the barber shop and"--

I never did get to hear Tollie's tonsorial tale, for I happened to 
glance down to my left into the bucking chutes and see disaster in a 
spotted horsehide charging full-tilt at me.

"Hang on!" I yelled to Ray and simultaneously flipflopped myself 
rightward and dropped down the fence so that I had my arms clamped 
around both the top corral pole and Ray's hips.

Ray glommed tight to the pole with his hands. WHOMP! and a clatter. 
The impact of the pinto bucking horse slamming into the chute-end where 
our section of corral cornered into it went shuddering through the pair 
of us, as if a giant sledgehammer had hit the wood; but our double 
gripping kept us from being flung off the top of the fence.
"Jesus!" Ray let out, rare for him. "There's a goosy one!"

Our narrow brush did not escape microphone treatment. "This little Coffee Nerves pinto down at chute six has a couple of fence squatters hugging the wood pretty good!" Tollie was alerting the world. "We'll see whether they go ahead and kiss it!"

"Numbnuts," I muttered in the direction of the Zane end of the announcing booth. Or possibly more than muttered, for when I managed to glower directly up there, Bill Reinking was delivering me a certifying wink and Velma Simms was puckered the way a person does to hold in a laugh.

Ray had it right, the pinto was truly riled and then some, as I could confirm while cautiously climbing back onto my perch and locking a firm arm around the corner post between chute and corral. No way was I going to take a chance on being dislodged down into the company of this Coffee Nerves bronc. The drawback of this flood-the-chutes-with-horses system was that the first horse in was the last to come out, from this end chute next to me. While the initial five horses were being bucked out Coffee Nerves was going to be cayusing around in chute six and trying to raise general hell.

The pinto looked more than capable. Coffee Nerves had close-set pointy ears; what are called pin ears, and indicate orneriness in a horse. Worse, he was hog-eyed. Had small darty eyes that shot looks at the nearest threat all the time. Which, given my position on the fence, happened to be me. I had not been the target of so much eyeball
since the tussle to get that Bubbles packhorse up the side of the mountain. One thing I have skipped in life is any desire toward rodeo riding. With no least regret. Maybe that makes me less a westerner than I ought to be. But it also has made me a less ramshackle human being. Letting a horse scramble your brains and wallop your bones and joints for the fun of it is not my idea of intelligent living. Particularly if the bronc is on the order of Coffee Nerves, touchy anyway and now in a real shitfit of fury about being caged in a chute.

Ray was peering behind me to study Coffee Nerves, so he was the one who noticed. "Huh! Look who must've drew him."

There in back of chute six, Earl Zane was helping the handlers try to saddle the pinto.

My session of watchdogging Leona for Alec of course whetted my interest in the matter of Earl Zane, whom I ordinarily wouldn't bat an eye to look at. Now here he loomed, not ten feet away from Ray and me, at the rear of Coffee Nerves' chute amid the cussing crew of handlers trying to contend with the pinto and the saddle that was theoretically supposed to go on its back. Earl Zane had one of those faces that could be read at a glance: as clear as the label on a maple sugar jug it proclaimed SAP. I suppose he was semi-goodlooking in a sulky kind of way. But my belief was that Earl Zane's one known ability, handling horses, derived from the fact that he possessed the identical amount of brain as the average horse did and they thus felt affinity with him. Though whether Coffee Nerves, who was whanging a series of kicks to the chute lumber that I could feel arrive up through the corral pole I
was seated on, was going to simmer down enough to accommodate Earl Zane or anybody else remained an open question.

In any case, I was transfixed by what was brewing here. Alec looked likely to win the calf roping. Coffee Nerves gave every sign of being the buckingest saddle bronc, if Earl could stay on him. Two winners, one Leona. The arithmetic of that was something to contemplate.

Various geezers of the chute society were peering in at Coffee Nerves and chiming "Whoa, hoss" and "Here now, knothead, settle down," which was doing nothing to improve the pinto's disposition. After all, would it yours?

Distracted by the geezer antics and the Earl-Alec equation, I didn't notice the next arrival until Ray pointed out, "Second one of the litter."

Indeed, Earl Zane had been joined in the volunteer saddling crew by his brother Arlee, the one a year ahead of Ray and me in school. Another horse fancier with brain to match. And full to overflowing with the Zane family swagger, for Arlee Zane was a big pink specimen: about what you'd get if you could coax a hog to strut around on its hind legs wearing blue jeans and a rodeo shirt. Eventually maybe Arlee would duplicate Earl, brawny instead of overstuffed. But at present there just was too much of all of him, up to and including his mouth. At the moment, for instance, Arlee had strutted around to the far side of the announcing booth and was yelping up to his sire: "Tell them to count out the prize money! Old Earl is going to set his horse on fire!"

God, those Zanes did think they were the ding-dong of the world's bell.
"How about a bottle of something?" I proposed to Ray. The mental strain of being Zanebane must have been making me thirsty. "I'm big rich, I'll buy."

"Ace high," Ray thought this sounded, and added that he'd hold our seats. Down I climbed, and away to the beer booth again. The tubs weren't showing many Kessler and Select necks by now. I half-expected to coincide with Dode again, but didn't. But by the time I returned to Ray with our two bottles of grape, I was able to more or less offhandedly report that I had seen Marcella and the other Withrow daughters, in the shade under the grandstand with a bunch more of the girls we went to school with. Leona on one side of the arena, Marcella and the school multitude on the other, Velma Simms in the air behind us; I did have to admit, lately the world was more full of females than I had ever previously noticed.

"Under way again!" Tollie was issuing forth. "A local buckaroo coming out of chute number one"--

Bill Semmler made his ride but to not much total, his bronc a straight bucker who crowhopped down the middle of the arena in no particularly inspired way until the ten seconds was up and the whistle blew.

"Exercise," commented Ray, meaning that was all Semmler was going to get out of such a rocking-horse ride.

At that, though, exercise was more than what was produced by the next rider, an out-of-town guy whose name I didn't recognize. Would-be rider, I ought to say, for a horse called Ham What Am sailed him onto
the earth almost before the pair of them issued all the way out the
gate of chute two. Ham What Am then continued his circuit of the arena,
kicking dirt twenty feet into the air with every buck, while the
ostensible rider knelt and tried to get any breath back into himself.

"Let's give this hard-luck cowboy a big hand!"

Tollie advocated. "He sure split a long crack in the air that time."

"You guys see any crack out there in the air?" somebody below us inquired. "Where the hell is Tollie getting that stuff?"

"Monkey Ward," it was suggested. "From the same page featuring toilet paper."

But then one of the Rides Proud brothers from up at Browning—one or another of Toussaint's army of grand-nephews he wasn't on speaking terms with—lived up to his name and made a nice point total atop a chunky roan called Snuffy. Sunfishing was Snuffy's tactic, squirming his hind quarters to one side and then the other with each jump, and if the rider manages to stay in tune with all that hula wiggling it yields a pretty ride. This performance was plenty good enough to win the event, unless Earl Zane could do something wonderful on top of Coffee Nerves.

Following the Rides Proud achievement, the crowd laughed as they did each year when a little buckskin mare with a flossy mane was announced as Shirley Temple, and laughed further when the mare piled the contestant, some guy from Shelby, with its third jump.

"That Shirley for a little gal she's got a mind
of her own," bayed Tollie, evidently under the impression he was providing high humor. Then, sooner than it seemed possible for him to have drawn sufficient breath for it, he was giving us the next loudspeaker dose. "Now here is a rider I have some acquaintance with. Getting set in chute number five on Dust Storm Earl Zane. Show them how Earl!"

So much for assuming the obvious. Earl had not drawn the pinto, his and Arlee's participation in saddling it was only the Zane trait of sticking a nose into anything available.

The fact remained, though, that Alec's rival was about to bounce out into the arena aboard a bucking animal. I craned my neck trying to get a look at Leona, but she was turned in earnest conversation with a certain calf roper wearing a chokecherry shirt and I could only see a silver-gold floss. Quite a wash of disappointment went through me. Somehow I felt I was missing the most interesting scene of the entire rodeo, Leona's face, just then.

"And here he comes a cowboying son of a gun and a son of yours truly--"

In fairness, I will say Earl Zane got a bad exit from the chute, the cinnamon-colored bronc he was on taking a little hop into the arena and stopping to gaze around at the world just as Earl was all primed for him to buck. Then as it sank in on Earl that the horse wasn't bucking and he altered the rhythm of his spurring to fit that situation, Dust Storm began to whirl. A spin to the left. Then one to the right. It was worth the admission to see, Earl's thought process
clanking one direction and the horse's the other, then each reversing and passing one another in the opposite direction, like two drunks trying to find each other in a revolving door. The cinnamon bronc, though, was always one phase ahead of Earl, and his third whirl, which included a sort of sideways dip, caused Earl to lurch and lose the opposite stirrup. It was all over then, merely a matter of how promptly Earl would keep his appointment with the arena dirt.

"Blew a stirrup," came from the chute society as Earl picked himself up off the planet and the whistle was heard. "Ought've filled those stirrups with chewing gum before he climbed on that merry-go-round."

Tollie, however, considered that we had seen a shining feat.

"Almost made it to the whistle on that rough one! You can still show your face around home Earl!"

Possibly the pinto's general irritation with the world rather than the diet of Tollie's voice produced it, but either way, Coffee Nerves now went into his biggest eruption yet. Below me in the chute he began to writhe and kick, whinnying awfully, and I redoubled my life grip on the corner post as the thunk! thunk! of his hooves tattooing the wood of the chute reverberated through the seat of my pants.

"Careful," Ray warned, and I suppose sense would have been to trade my perch for a more distant site. Yet how often does a person get to see at close range a horse in combat with mankind. Not just see, but feel, in the continuing thunks; and hear, the pinto's whinny
a sawblade of sound ripping the air; and smell, sweat and manure and animal anger in one mingled unforgettable odor.

Coffee Nerves' hammerwork with his hooves built up to a crash, a splay of splinters which sent the handlers tumbling away from the back of the chute, and then comparative silence: just the velocity of air through the pinto bronc's nostrils.

"The sonofabitch is hung up," somebody reported. In truth, Coffee Nerves was standing with his rear right leg up behind him, the way a horse does for a blacksmith to shoe him. Except that instead of any human having hold of that wicked rear hoof, it was jammed between a solid chute pole and the splintered one above it.

As the handling crew gingerly moved in to see what could be done about extrication, Tollie enlightened the crowd:

"This little pinto pony down in six is still proving kind of recaltrisant. The chute boys are doing some persuading and our show will resume in just a jiffy. In the meantime since this is the cowboys' Christmas so to say that reminds me of a little story."

"Jesus, he's back onto Christmas," issued from the chute society. "Will somebody go get Tollie a goddam calendar?"

"Dumb as he is," it was pointed out, "it'll take two of us to read it to him."

"There was this little boy who wanted a pony for Christmas." Somebody had gone for a prybar to loosen the
imprisoning poles and free the renegade pony of chute six, but in
the meantime there was nothing to do but let Tollie wax forth. Even
at normal, Tollie's voice sounded as if his adenoids had gotten
twined with his vocal cords. With the boost from the address system,
his steady drone now was a real ear-cleaner. "Well you see
this little boy kept telling the other kids in
the family that he had it all fixed up with Santa:
Claus. Santa Claus was going to bring him a pony
certain sure. So when Christmas Eve came they all of
them hung their stockings by the fireplace there."

"If I hang up a woolsack alongside my stove," somebody in front of
the chutes pined, "suppose I'd get Velma Simms in it?"

"And the other kids thought they'd teach this little
boy a lesson. So after everybody had gone to bed
they got back up again and went on out to the barn
and got some ladies, excuse my language horse manure."

"Quick, mark that down," somebody advised up to Bill Reinking.
"That's the first time Tollie's ever apologized for spouting horse
shit."

"--and filled his stocking with it. So the next morning
they're all gathered to look and see what Santa Claus left
each one of them. Little Susie says 'Look, he left me a
dollie here in MY stocking.' And little Tommy says 'And
look he left me apples and oranges in MINE.' And they
turned to the little boy and asked 'Well, Johnny what
did Santa leave YOU?' And Johnny looked in his stocking and said 'He left me my pony but he got away.'"

There was that sickly laughter a crowd gives out because it's embarrassed not to; and then one of the chute men called up to the booth that they had the goddamn bronc freed, get the rider on him before he raised any more hell.

"BACK TO BUSINESS," Tollie blared as if he was calling elephants, before Bill Reinking managed to lean across and shove the microphone a little farther from Tollie's mouth "back to business. The bronc in chute six has consented to rejoin us. Next man up last one in this go-round on a horse called Coffee Nerves will be Dode Withrow."

I yanked my head around to see for sure. Yes. Dode was up top the back of chute six, gazing at the specimen of exasperated horse below. Dode did look a little soberer than when I met up with him by the beer booth. He wasn't any bargain of temperance yet, though. His face looked hot and his Stetson sat toward the back of his head in a dude way I had never seen him wear it.

Ray was saying, "I never knew Dode to enter the bucking, before." Which coincided with what was going through my mind, that Dode was the age of my father and Ray's. That his bronc-stomping had taken place long years ago. That I knew for a certainty Dode did not even break horses for his own use any more, but bought them saddle-ready from Tollie Zane.

"No," I answered Ray, "not in our time."
I had a clear view down into the chute as the bronc crew tried to keep Coffee Nerves settled long enough for Dode to ease into the saddle. The pinto went through another symphony of commotion, kicking and slamming sideways and whinnying that sawtoothed sound; but then hunched up motionless for a moment in a kind of sitting squat, evidently contemplating what next to pull from its repertoire. In that moment Dode simply said "Good enough" and slid into the saddle.

As if those words of Dode's were a curfew, the gapers and gawkers of the chute society evaporated from the vicinity where Coffee Nerves would emerge into the arena, some of them even seeking a safe nest up on the corral.

"One of our friends and neighbors Dode is. Rode many a bad one in his time. He'll be dancing out on this little pinto in just one minute."

It honestly occurred no more than a handful of seconds from then. Dode had the grip he wanted on the bucking rope and his arm was in the air as if ready to wave and he said in that same simple tone, "Open."

The gate swung, and Coffee Nerves vaulted into the arena.

I saw Dode suck in a fast breath, then heard it go out of him in a huhhh as the horse lit stiff-legged with its forefeet and kicked the sky with its hind, from both directions ramming the surprise of its force up through the stirrups into Dode. Dode's hat left him and bounced once on the pinto splotch across Coffee Nerves' rump and then toppled into the dust of the arena. But Dode himself didn't shake loose at all, which was a fortunate thing because Coffee Nerves
already was uncorking another maneuver, this time swapping ends before crashing down in all stiff-legged style. Dode still sat deep in the saddle, although another huhhh reamed its way out of him. Maybe imagine you have just jumped from a porch roof to the ground twice in about five seconds, to give yourself some idea of the impact Dode was absorbing. He must have been getting Coffee Nerves’ respect, for now the bronc exactly reversed the end-swapping he had just done, a trick almost guaranteed to catch the rider leaning wrong. Yet Dode still was up there astride the pinto.

I remember tasting dust. My mouth was open to call encouragement to Dode, but there was nothing that seemed good enough to call out for this ride he was making.

Now Coffee Nerves launched into the jump he had been saving up for, a real cloud-chaser, Dode at the same instant raking the horse's shoulders with his spurs, both those actions fitting together exactly as if animal and man were in rhythm to a signal none of the rest of us could hear, up and up the horse twisting into the air and the rider's free left arm high above that, Coffee Nerves and Dode soaring together while the crowd's urging cry seemed to help hold them there, a wave of sound suspending the pair above the arena earth so that we all could have time to fix the sight into memory everlastingly.

Somewhere amid it all the whistle blew. That is, off some far wall of my awareness echoed that news of Dode having ridden Coffee Nerves, but the din that followed flooded over it. I still believe that if Coffee Nerves had lit straight, as any sane horse would do descending
from a moon visit like that, Dode would not have blown that left stirrup. But somehow Coffee Nerves skewed himself half-sideways about the time he hit the ground: imagine now that the ground yanks itself to one side as you plummet off that porch: and Dode, who evidently did not hear the timer's whistle or was ignoring it, stayed firm in the right stirrup, nicely braced as he was, but the pinto's slewfoot maneuver jolted his boot from the left one. And now when Coffee Nerves writhed into his next buck, cattywampus to the left, he simply sailed away from under Dode, who dropped off him back-first, falling like a man given a surprise shove into a creek.

Not water, however, but dust flew up around the form which thumped to the arena surface.

The next developments smudged together. I do know that now I was shouting out "Dode! Dode!" and that I lit running in the arena direct from the top of the corral, never even resorted to any of the poles as rungs to get down, and that Ray landed right behind me. As to what we thought we were going to accomplish I am even less clear; simply could not see Dode sprawled out there by himself, I suppose.

The pickup man Dill Egan was spurring his horse between Dode and Coffee Nerves, and having to swat the pinto in the face with his hat to keep him off Dode. Before it seemed possible my father and Pete were out there too, and a half dozen other men from out of the grandstand and Alec and a couple of others from the far side of the arena, their hats thwacking at Coffee Nerves as well, and through all the commotion I could hear my father's particular roar of HYAH! HYAH! again and again before the bronc finally veered off.
"fell off the rainbow on that one right enough," Tollie was blaring. So that registered on me, and the point that the chute society, this once when they could have been useful out here in the arena, were dangling from various fence perches or peering from behind the calf chute. But the sprint Ray and I made through the loose arena dirt is marked in me only by the sound that reached us just as we reached Dode. The noise hit our ears from the far end of the arena: a tingling crack! like a tree breaking off and then crashing and thudding as it came down.

For a confused instant I truly thought a cottonwood had fallen. My mind tried to put together that with all else happening in this overcrowded space of time. But no, Coffee Nerves had slammed head-on into the gate of the catch pen, toppling not just the gate but the hefty gatepost, which crunched the hood of a parked car as it fell over. People who had been spectating along the fence were scattering from the prospect of having Coffee Nerves out among them.

The bronc however had rebounded into the arena. Piling into that gatepost finally had knocked some of the spunk out of Coffee Nerves. He now looked a little groggy and was wobbling somewhat, which gave Dill Egan time to lasso him and dally the rope around a corral post.

This was the scene as I will ever see it. Dode Withrow lying out there with the toes of his boots pointing up and Coffee Nerves woozy but defiant at the end of the lasso tether.

Quite a crowd encircled Dode, although Ray and I hung back at its edge; exactly what was not needed was any more people in the way.
Doc Spence forged his way through, and I managed to see in past the arms and legs of all the men around him and Dode. And saw happen what I so desperately wanted to. When Doc held something under Dode's nose, Dode's head twitched.

Before long I heard Dode give a long mmm, as if he was terribly tired. After that his eyes came open and he showed that he was able to move, in fact would have sat up if Doc Spence hadn't stopped him. By now Midge and the Withrow girls had scurried out and Midge was down beside Dode demanding, "You ninny, are you all right?"

Dode fastened his look on her and made an mmm again. Then burst out loud and clear, "Goddamn that stirrup anyway," which lightened the mood of all of us around him, even Midge looking less warpath-like after that. I could just hear the razzing Dode was going to take from his herder Pat Hoy about this forced landing of his: "Didn't know I was working for an apprentice bronc stomper, Dode. Want me to saddle up one of these big ewes, so's you can practice staying on?"

Relief was all over my father as he went over to the grandstand fence to report to my mother and Marie and Toussaint. Ray and I tagged along, so we heard it as quick as anybody. "Doc thinks he's okay," my father relayed. "But he's got to take him to Conrad for an X-ray just to make sure."

My mother at once called out to Midge an offer to ride with her to Conrad. Midge though shook her head. "No, I'll be all right. The girls'll be with me, no sense in you coming."

Then I noticed. Toussaint was paying no attention to any of this
conversation, nor to the process of Dode being put on a stretcher over his protestations that he could walk or even foot-race if he had to, nor to Coffee Nerves being tugged into exit through what little was left of the catch pen gate. Instead he, Toussaint, was standing there gazing into the exact center of the arena, as if the extravaganza that Coffee Nerves and Dode had put on still was continuing out there. The walnut crinkles deepened in his face, his chuckle rippled out, and then the declaration: "That one. That one was a ride."

There of course was more on the schedule of events beyond that. Tollie inevitably thought to proclaim "Well, folks the show goes on." But the only way for it to go after that performance by Coffee Nerves and Dode was downhill, and Ray and I retained our fence perch just through the next section of calf roping to see whether Alec's 17½ seconds would hold up. Contestant after contestant rampaged out, flailed some air with a lariat, and came nowhere close to Alec's time.

It had been a rodeo. English Creek had won both the saddle bronc riding and the calf roping.

While the rodeo grounds emptied of crowd Ray and I stretched our attendance as long as we could. We watched the wrangling crew unpenn the broncs and steers and calves. Listened to as much of the chute society's post mortem as we could stand. Had ourselves another bottle of pop apiece before the beer booth closed. Then I proposed that we might as well take a horse tour of Gros Ventre. Ray thought that sounded dandy enough, so I fetched Mouse and swung into the saddle, and Ray climbed on behind.
We had sightseen most of the town before wandering back past the Medicine Lodge, which by now had its front door propped open with a beer keg, probably so the accumulating fume of cigarette smoke and alcoholic breath wouldn't pop the windows out of the place. As Dode Withrow would have said, it sounded like Hell changing shifts in there. The jabber and laughter and sheer concentration of humanity beyond that saloon doorway of course had Ray and me gazing in as we rode past, and that gaze was what made me abruptly halt Mouse.

Ray didn't ask anything, but I could feel his curiosity as to why we were stalled in the middle of the street. Nor was it anything I could put into words for him. Instead I offered: "How about you riding Mouse down to your place? I'll be along in a little. There's somebody I got to go see."

Ray's look toward the Medicine Lodge wondered In there? but his voice only conveyed "Sure, glad to" and he lifted himself ahead into the saddle after I climbed down. Best of both worlds for him: chance to be an unquestioning friend and get a horse to ride as well.

I went into the blue air of the saloon and stopped by the figure sitting on the second bar stool inside the doorway. The Medicine Lodge was getting itself uncorked for the night ahead. Above the general jabber somebody toward the middle of the bar was relating in a semi-shout: "So I told that sonofabitch he just better watch his step around me or there's gonna be a new face in Hell for breakfast." My interest, though, was entirely here at the seated figure.

The brown hat moved around as he became aware of me.
"'Lo, Stanley," I began, still not knowing where I was going next with any of this.

"Well, there, Jick." The crowfoot lines clutched deeper at the corners of Stanley Meixell's eyes as he focused on me. He didn't look really tanked up, but on the other hand couldn't be called church-sober either. Someplace in between, as he'd been so much of our time together on the mountain. "Haven't seen you," he continued in all pleasantness, "since you started living aboveground."

Good Christ, Stanley had noticed my ducking act that day I was digging the outhouse hole and he rode by. Was my every moment visible to people anymore, like a planet being perpetually studied by one of those California telescopes?

"Yeah, well. How you been?"

"Fine as snoose. And yourself?"

"What I mean, how's your hand doing?"

Stanley looked down at it as if I was the first to ever point out its existence. He still had some doozies of scabs and major bruises there on the injury site, but Stanley didn't seem to think this was anything but ordinary health. "It ain't bad." He picked up the bottle of beer from the counter before him. "Works good enough for the basics, anyway."

And tipped down the last of that particular beer. "Can I buy you a snort?"

"No, no thanks."

"On the wagon, huh? I've clumb on it some times myself. All else considered, though, I'd just as soon be down off."

It occurred to me that since I was in this place anyway it didn't cost any more to be cordial. The stool between Stanley and the doorway
was vacant—an empty mixed-drink glass testified that its occupant had traveled on—so I straddled the seat and amended: "Actually I would take a bottle of orange, though."

Stanley indicated his empty beer bottle to Tom Harry, the nearest of the three bartenders trying to cope with the crowd's liquid wants. "When you get time, professor. And a sunjuice for my nurse, here."

Tom Harry studied me. "He with you?" he asked Stanley.

"Closer than kin, him and me," Stanley solemnly vouched to the barman. "We have rode millions of miles together."

"None of it aged him that much," Tom Harry observed, nonetheless setting up a bottle of orange in front of me and a fresh beer for Stanley.

"Stanley," I started again. He was pushing coins out of a little pile, to pay for the latest round. Fishing up a five-cent piece, he held it toward me between his thumb and forefinger. "Know what this is?"

"Sure, a nickel."

"Naw, it's a dollar a Scotchman's been squeezing." The fresh beer got a gulp of attention. For the sake of the conversation I intended I'd like to have known how many predecessors that bottle had had, but of course Tom Harry's style of bartending was to swoop empties out of sight so no such incriminating count could be taken.

I didn't have long to dwell on Stanley's possible intake, for some out-of-town guy wearing a panama hat zigged when he meant to zag on his way toward the door and lurched into the pair of us. Abruptly the
guy was being gripped just above the elbow by Stanley—his right hand evidently had recuperated enough from Bubbles for this, too—and was retargeted toward the door with advice from Stanley: "Step easy, buddy, so you don't get yourself hurt. In this county there's a $5 fine for drawing blood on a fool."

Mr. Panama Hat left our company, and Stanley's handling of the incident reminded me to ask something. "How you getting along with Canada Dan these days?"

"Better," Stanley allowed. "Yeah, just a whole lot better." He paid recognition to his beer bottle again. "Last I heard, Dan was up in Cut Bank. Doing some town herding."

Cut Bank? Town herding? "What, did the Busby boys can him?"

"I got them to give Dan a kind of vacation." Then, in afterthought: "Permanent."

I considered this. Up there in the Two with Stanley those weeks ago, I would not have bet a pin that he was capable of rousing himself to do justice to Canada Dan. Yet he had.

"Stanley--"

"I can tell you got something on your mind, Jick. Might as well unload it."

If I could grapple it into position, that was exactly what I intended. To ask: what was that all about, when we first met you there on the mountain, the skittishness between you and my father? Why, when I ask anyone in this family of mine about Stanley Meixell, is there never a straight answer? Just who are you to us? How did
you cross paths with the McCaskills in the past, and why are you back crisscrossing with us again?

Somebody just beyond Stanley let out a whoop, then started in on a twangy rendition of the song that goes: "I'm a calico dog, I'm a razorback hog, I'm a cowboy on the loose! I can drink towns dry, I can all but fly, I flavor my beans with snooze!" In an instant, Tom Harry was there leaning over the bar and with a pointed finger informing the songster that he didn't care if the guy hooted, howled or for that matter blew smoke rings out his butt, but no singing.

This, Stanley shook his head over. "What's the world coming to when a man can't offer up a tune? They ruin everything these days."

First Dode, now Stanley. It seemed my mission in life this Fourth of July to steer morose beer drinkers away from even deeper gloom. At least I knew which direction I wanted to point Stanley: back into history.

"I been trying to figure something out," I undertook, honestly enough, one more time. "Stanley, why was it you quit rangering on the Two?"

Stanley did some more demolition on his beer, then cast a visiting glance around the walls at Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the stuffed herd, and eventually had to look at me and ask as if verifying:

"Me?"

"Uh huh, you."

"No special reason."

"Run it by me anyway."
"Naw, you'd be bored fast."

"Whyn't you let me judge that."

"You got better use for your ears."

"Jesus, Stanley--"

All this while I was attempting to pry sense out of Stanley, the tail of my eye was trying to tell me something again. Someone had come up behind me. Which wasn't particular news in the Medicine Lodge throng, except this someone evidently had no other site in mind; his presence stayed steadily there, close enough to make me edgy about it, sitting half-braced as I was in case this guy too was going to crash in our direction.

I half-turned on the bar stool to cope with the interloper and gazed full into the face, not all that many inches away, of Velma Simms.

I must tell you, it was like opening a kitchen drawer to reach in for a jelly spoon and finding instead the crown jewels of England. For I had never been close enough, head-on, to Velma to learn that her eyes were gray. Gray! Like mine! Possibly our four were the world's only. And to garner further that her lipstick, on the very lips that ruled the rodeo whistle, was the beautiful dark-beyond-red of ripe cherries. And that she was wearing tiny pearl earrings, below the chestnut hair, as if her ears could be unbuttoned to further secrets even there. And that while the male population of northern Montana was focusing on the backside of Velma's renowned slacks, they were missing important announcements up front. Sure, there could be found a few battlelines at the corners of her eyes and across her
forehead. But to me right then, they simply seemed to be affidavits of how imaginative a life this lady had led.

Unbelievable but so. Out of all the crowded flesh in the Medicine Lodge just then, solely onto me was fixed this attention of Velma Simms.

She just stood there eyeing me while I gaped, until the point of her attention finally prodded through to me.

"Oh. Oh, hello, Mrs.--uh, Velma. Have I got your seat?" I scrambled off the bar stool as if it was suddenly red-hot.

"Now that you mention it," she replied, and even just saying that, her words were one promissory note after another. Velma floated past me and snuggled onto the stool. A little extra of that snuggle went in Stanley's direction.

"Saw you there at the announcing booth," I reminisced brightly.

"Did you," said she.

I may be a slow starter, but eventually I catch up with the situation. My quick gawp around the saloon confirmed what had been trying to dawn on me. This year's beau in the gabardine suit was nowhere.

"Yeah, well," I began to extricate myself. "I got to be getting."

"Don't feel you need to rush off," said Stanley. As if God's gift to the male race wasn't enthroned right there beside him. "The night's still a pup."

"Uh huh. That's true, but--"

"When you got to go," put in Velma, twirling the empty mixed-drink glass to catch Tom Harry's attention for a refill, "you got to go."
"Right," I affirmed. "And like I say, I, uh, got to go."

What made me add to the total of my footprints already in my mouth, I can't truly account for. Maybe the blockade I had hit again in wanting to ask all the questions of Stanley. In any case, the parting I now blurted out was:

"You two in a dancing mood tonight? What I mean, see you at the dance, will I?"

Stanley simply passed that inquiry to Velma with a look. In theory, Velma then spoke her answer to me, although she didn't unlock her gaze from him at all as she said it: "Stanley and I will have to see whether we have any spare time."

So. One more topic clambering aboard my already bent-over brain. Stanley Meixell and Velma Croake Bogan Sutter Simms.

"Ray? What kind of a summer are you having?"

We were in the double-window of his bedroom, each of us propped within the sill. A nice breeze came in on us there, the leaves of the big cottonwood in the Heaneys' front yard seeming to flutter the air our way. Downstairs the radio had just been turned on by Ed Heaney, so it was 7 o'clock—"the dance wouldn't get underway for an hour or so yet, and as long as Ray and I were going to be window-sitting anyway for the next while, I figured I'd broach to him some of all that was on my mind.

"Didn't I tell you? Pilot."

"No, I don't mean that. What it is—do things seem to you kind of
unsettled?"

"How?"

"Well, Christ, I don't know. Just in general. People behaving like they don't know whether to include you in or out of things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things that went on years ago. Say there was an argument or a fight or something, people fell out over it. Why can't they just say, here's what it was about, it's over and done with? Get it out of their systems?"

"That's just grown-ups. They're not going to let a kid in on anything, until they figure it's too late to do him any good."

"But why is that? What is it that's so goddamn important back there that they have to keep it to themselves?"

"Jick, sometimes--"

"What?"

"Sometimes maybe you think too much."

I thought that over briefly. "What am I supposed to do about that? Christ, Ray, it's not like poking your finger up your nose in public, some kind of habit you can remind yourself not to do. Thinking is thinking. It happens in spite of a person."

"Yeah, but you maybe encourage it more than it needs."

"I what?"

"See, maybe it's like this."

Ray's eyes squinched more than ever as he worked on his notion, and the big front teeth nipped his lower lip in concentration. Then: "Maybe, let's say maybe a thought comes
into your head, it's only about what you're going to do next. Saddle up Mouse and take a ride, say. That's all the thought it really needs--then put on the saddle and climb on. But the mood you're in, Jick, you'd stop first and think some more. 'But if I go for a ride, where am I going to go?' Ray here went into one of his radio voices, the words coming deep and crowding each other fast like Kaltenborn's. "'What is it I'll see when I get there? Did anybody else ever see it? And if anybody did, is it going to look the same to me as it did to them? And old Mouse here, is it going to look the same to Mouse as it does to me?"

Raymond Edmund Heaney Von Kaltenborn broke off, and it was just Ray again. "On and on that way, Jick. If you think too much, you make it into a whole dictionary of going for a ride. Instead of just going. See what I'm saying?"

"Goddamn it now, Ray, what I mean is more important than goddamn riding a horse."

"It's the same with anything. It'll get to you if you think about it too much, Jick."

"But what I'm telling you is, I don't have any choice. This stuff I'm talking about is on my mind whether or not I want it to be."

Ray took a look at me as if I had some sort of brain fever that might be read in my face. Then in another of his radio voices intoned: "Have you tried Vick's VapoRub? It sooooothes as it wooooorks."

There it lay. Even Ray had no more idea than the man in the moon about my perplexity. This house where we sat tucked in blue-painted
sills, above its broad lawned yard and under its high cottonwoods, this almost second home of mine: it ticked to an entirely different time than the summer that was coursing through me. The Heaney family was in place in the world. Ed was going to go on exiting the door of his lumber yard at 6 every evening and picking up his supper fork at 10 after 6 and clicking on that Philco radio at 7, on into eternity. Genevieve would go on keeping this house shining and discovering new sites for doilies. Mary Ellen would grow up and learn nursing at the Columbus Hospital in Great Falls. Ray would grow up and take a year of business college at Missoula and then join his father in the lumber yard. Life under this roof had the rhythm of the begattings in the Bible. The Heaneys were not the McCaskills, not even anywhere similar, and I lacked the language to talk about any of the difference, even to my closest friend.
"Swing, swing, and swing 'em high!"

Allemande left and allemande aye!

Ingo, bingo, six penny high!

Big pig, little pig, root hog or die!"

The dance was underway, but only just, when Ray and I wandered down there to the Sedgwick House to it. Which is to say the hall—

I suppose old C. E. V. or maybe even Lila Sedge conceived of it as a ballroom, but everybody else considered it the dance hall—was crammed to an extent that made the Medicine Lodge look downright lonely across the street, but not all that many people were dancing yet. Visiting, circulating, looking everybody else, joking, trying to pry out of a neighbor how many bushels an acre his wheat looked like or what his lambs weighed by now, but only one square of actual dancers out there footing it to Jerome Satterlee's calling. Partly, everybody knew it took Jerome a little while (translate that to a few drinks) to get his tonsils limbered up. And then he could call dances until your shoes fell off your feet.

"A little thin out here on the floor, it looks to me like," Jerome was now declaring, preparatory to the next dance. "You know what I mean? Let's get one more square going here, make it look like we mean business. Adam, Sal, step on out here, you can stand around and gab any time. How about all you Busbys, you're half a square yourselves. Good, good. Come on now, one more couple. Nola plays this piano twice as good when we got two squares on the floor." At the upright, Nola Atkins sat planted as if they'd simply picked up the piano bench from
the creek picnic with her on it and set them both down here on the band platform. Beside her, Jeff Swan had his fiddle tucked under his chin and his bow down at his side as if it was a sword he was ready to draw. "One more couple. Do I have to telephone to Valier and ask them to send over four left feet? Whup, here they come now, straight from supper, dancers if I ever saw any. Leona Tracy and Alec McCaskill, step right in there. Alec, you checked your horse and rope at the door, I hope? Now, this is somewhat more like--"

Stepping in from the Sedgwick House dining room, rodeo prize money in his pocket and free supper under his belt and a grin everywhere on his face there was any space for it, Alec looked like a young king coming home from his crowning ceremony.

Even so, to notice this glorious brother of mine you had to deliberately steer your eyes past Leona. Talk about an effort of will.

Leona took the shine in any crowd, even a dance hall full. The day's green blouse was missing—I mean, she had changed out of it. Now she wore a white taffeta dress, full and flouncy at the hem. In square dancing a lot of swirling goes on, and Leona was going to be a swirl worth seeing.

I shot a glance around the dance hall. My parents had missed this grand entry. They'd gone out to J.L. and Nan Hill's ranch, a couple of miles up English Creek, for supper and to change clothes, and were taking their own sweet time about getting back in. And Pete and Marie were driving Toussaint home to the Two Medicine, so they'd be even later arriving. I was the sole family representative, so to speak,
to record the future Mr. and Mrs. Alec McCaskill come swanking in.

"Ready out there? Sure you are. You'll get to liking this so much, before the night is out you'll want to trade your bed for a lantern."

Jerome, when he got to going good, put a lot of motion into his calling, using both arms to direct the traffic of dancers; kind of like a man constantly hanging things here and there in a closet. His gestures even now said he was entering into the spirit of the night. "All right, sonnies and honeys. Nola, Jim, let's make 'em prance. Everybody, here we go—

First four forward. Back to your places.

Second four follow. Shuffle on back.

Now you're getting down to cases.

Swing each other till the floorbeams crack!"

Here in the time I am now it seems hard to credit that this Fourth of July dance was the first I ever went to on my own. That is, was in company with somebody like Ray instead of being along as baggage with my parents. Of course, without fully acknowledging it Ray and I also were well on our way to another tremendous night, the one when each of us would step through this dance hall doorway with a person neither parent nor male alongside. But that lay await yet. My point just now is that where I was in life this particular Fourth night, closing in on fifteen years of age, I had been attending dances since the first few months of that total. And Alec, the all-winning rodeo-shirted sashayer out there on the floor right now, the same before me. Each, a McCaskill baby bundled in blankets and cradled in chairs beside the dance floor.
Imbibe music along with mother's milk, that was the experience of a lot of us of Two country upbringing. Successors to Alec's and my floor-side infancy were here in the Sedgwick House hall this very night: Charity Frew's half-year-old daughter, and another new Helwig baby, and a couple of other fresh ones belonging to farm folks east of town, a swaddled quartet with chairs fenced around them in the farthest corner of the dance hall.

"Salute your ladies, all together.
Ladies, to the gents do the same.
Hit the lumber with your leather.
Balance all, and swing your dame!"

It might be said that the McCaskill dancing history was such that it was the portion of lineage that came purest into Alec and me. Definitely into Alec out there now with that white taffeta back and forth to him like a wave of the sea, he looked like he could romp on forever. What little I knew of my father's father, the first McCaskill to caper on America's soil instead of Scotland's, included the information that he could dance down the house. Schottisches and Scotch reels in particular, but he also adopted any western square dances. In his twinkling steps, so to speak, followed my mother and father. Dances held in ranch houses, my mother-to-be arriving on horseback with her party dress tied on behind the saddle, my father-to-be performing the Scotch Heaven ritual of scattering a little oatmeal on the floor for better gliding. Schoolhouse dances. In the face of the Depression even hard times dances, the women costumed in gunnysack dresses and the men
in tattered work clothes. And now Alec the latest McCaskill dancer, and me beginning to realize I was on my way.

"Bunch the ladies, there in the middle.

Circle, you gents, and dosie doe.

Pay attention to old Jeff's fiddle.

Swing her around and away you go."

It comes to me that around this exact same piece of time I am telling about, maybe even that same year, I first read what I always think of in this dancing respect. It was when the Irish poet Yeats died, and the At Random page of the *Gleaner* had a story on his life. From his picture the man looked like an uppity sonofagun, wearing those pinchnose eyeglasses, but I read the piece just to be reading something. And gained for all time the lines that lay at the end of that story:

"Oh hands clapped to music, oh brightening glance.

How can we tell the dancer from the dance?"

Which ever since has seemed to me so fascinating, so right, I almost wish I had never come across it. For those words make one of those questions that slip into your mind every time you meet up with the circumstances they suggest. It was so then, even as Ray nudged me to point out the Busby brothers going through a fancy twirl with each other instead of with their wives and I joined Ray and everybody else in laughing, and it is so now. Within all else that Irishman's question, a kind of beautiful haunting. But I suppose that is what poets, and for that matter dances and dancers, are for.
"Gents to the center, ladies round them.
Form a circle, balance all.
Whirl your girls to where you found them.
Promenade all, around the hall!"

This concluding promenade brought Alec and Leona over toward where Ray and I were onlooking, and spying us they trooped right up. Lord of mercy. Leona in the flush of the pleasure of dancing was nearly more than the eyes could stand. I know Ray shifted a little nervously beside me, and maybe I did too.

"Mister Jick again," she greeted me. At least it wasn't "Hello, John Angus." "And Raymond Edmund Heaney," which really did set Ray to shifting around.

So high in flight was Alec tonight, though, that nobody else had to expend much effort. A lank of his rich red hair was down across his forehead from the dancing, and the touch of muss just made him look handsomer. "Here's a pair of wall guards," he observed of Ray and me while he grinned mightily. "You guys better think about getting yourselves one of these things," giving Leona a waist squeeze.

Yeah, sure, right. As if Leonas were as plenty as blackberries. (I have wondered often. If Marcella Withrow had been on hand that night instead of at the Conrad hospital with her father, would Ray have nerved himself up and squired her out onto the floor?) But if you can't carry on conversation with your own brother, who can you? So to keep mouth matters in motion, I asked: "How was it?"

Alec peered at me and he let up on that Leona squeezing. "How
was what?"

"Supper. The supper you won for handcuffing that poor little calf."

"Dandy," he reported, "just dandy." And now Leona awarded him a
squeeze, in confirmation.

"What'd you have, veal?" Ray put in, which I thought was pretty
good. But Alec and Leona were so busy handling each other's waists
they didn't catch it, and Alec said, "Naw, steaks. Dancing fuel." He
looked down at his armful of Leona. "Speaking of which--"

"TIMMBERRR!"

I was not the only one whose ears almost dropped off in surprise.
That cry was a famous one at any dance such as this. It dated back
to Prohibition days, and what it signalled back then was the periodic
availability of Mason jar moonshine for anybody who cared to step
outside for a sip, and the man who threw back his head to invent the
signal and just for the hell of it still would cut loose the call
at least once any dance night—that man was none other than Dode Withrow.

So my surprise was double. That the cry resounded through the hall
this night and that the timber crier there in the doorway, when I spun
around to see, proved to be my father, with my mother on his arm.

He wore his brown pinstripe suit coat, a white shirt and his newest
Levis. She was in her blue cornflower frock with the slight V neckline;
it was pretty tame by today's standards, but did display enough of
throat and breastbone to draw second glances. Togged out that way,
Varick and Lisabeth McCaskill made a prime pair, as rangers and wives
often did.
Calls and claps greeted my father's solo.

"You'd be the one to know, Mac!"

"Hoot mon, Scotch Heaven has arrived!"

"Beth, tell us fair and square: has he been up in the Two practicing that?"

Even Alec wagged his head in—admiration? consternation? both and more? before declaiming to Leona, "There's dancing to be done. Let's get at it before the rowdy element cuts loose with something more."

Ray and I sifted over to my parents' side of the hall. My father was joshing Fritz Hahn that if Dode could still ride a bronc like that, it was Fritz's turn next Fourth to uphold the South Fork reputation. Greta and my mother were trading laughter over something, too. Didn't I tell you a dance is the McCaskill version of bliss?

"Here they are, the future of the race," my father greeted Ray and me. "Ray, how're you summering?"

"Real good," Ray responded, along with his parenthetical grin. "Quite a rodeo, wasn't it."

"Quite a one," my father agreed, with a little shake of his head which I knew had to do with the outcome of the calf roping. But at once he was launched back into more visiting with Fritz and Ray, and I just parked myself and inventoried him and my mother. It was plain my father had timbered a couple of drinks—his left eyelid was down a little, as if listening to a nightlong joke—but no serious amount. My mother, though. My mother too looked bright as a butterfly, and as she and my father traded gab with the Hahns and other people who happened by to say good words about her Ben English speech or his timber whoop,
both her and him unable to keep from glancing at the back-and-forth of the dancers more than at their conversationalists, a suspicion seeded in me. Maybe, more than maybe, my mother had a drink or two in her, too.

"Where you guys been?" I voiced when I got the chance.

And received what I deserved. "Places," stated my mother, then laughed.

Well, I'd had one escape this day. Getting in and out of the Medicine Lodge without coinciding with my own parents there.

Out on the floor, the swirl was dissolving as it does after the call and music have hit their climax, and Jerome was enlisting everybody within earshot for the next variety of allemande and dosie-doe. "Now I can't call dances to an empty floor, can I? Let's up the ante here. Four squares this time, let's make it. Plenty of territory, we don't even have to push out the walls yet--"

"The man needs our help," my father suggested to my mother and the Hahns, and off they all went, to take up places in the fourth square of dancers forming up.

The dance wove the night to a pattern all its own, as dances do. I remember the standard happenings. Supper hour was announced for midnight, both the Sedgwick House dining room and the Lunchery were going to close at one a.m. Ray and I had agreed that supper hour—or rather, an invitation to oyster stew at the Lunchery, as my parents were certain to provide—would be our personal curfew. Jerome at one point sang out "Next one is ladies' choice!" and it was interesting to
see some of the selections they made, Alice Van Bebber snagging the lawyer Eli Kinder and immediately beginning to talk him dizzy, pretty Arleta Busby putting out her hand to that big pile of guff Ed Van Bebber, of all damn people. My parents too made South Fork pairings, my mother going over to Fritz Hahn, Greta Hahn coupling onto my father's arm. Then after one particularly rousing floor session, Jerome announced that if anyone cared to pass a hat he and the musicians could manage to look the other way, and collection was taken to pay him and Nola and Jeff. As I say, all this was standard enough, and mingled with it were some particularities of this night. The arrival of Good Help and Florene Hebner, magically a minute or so after the hat had been passed. Florene still was a presentable looking woman, despite a dress that had been washed to half its original color. Good Help's notion of dressing up was to top off his overalls with a flat cap. My mother once commented, "A poor-boy cap and less under it." The departure of the grocery store family, the Helwigs, with Luther Helwig wobbling grievously under the load of booze he had been taking on and his wife Erna beside him with the bawling baby plucked from the far end chair corral. In such a case you always have to wonder: was a strategic motherly pinch delivered to that baby? My inspiration for Ray and me to kill off the last of my fifty cent stake with a bottle of pop apiece. "How about stepping across for something wet?" was the way I proposed it to Ray. He took on a worried look and began, "I don't know that my folks want me going in that--" "Christ, not the Medicine Lodge," I relieved him, "I meant the Lunchery." And through
it all, dance after dance after dance, my tall redheaded father and
my white-throated mother in the musical swim at one end of the hall,
my tall redheaded brother and Leona starring at the other end.

It was in fact, when Ray and I returned from our pop stop that
we found a lull in the dancing and made our way over to my parents
again, to be as convenient as possible for an oyster stew invite.

"I suppose you two could eat if you had to?" my father at once
settled that issue, while my mother drew deep breaths and cast a look
around the hallfull.

"Having fun?" I asked her, just to be asking something, while
my father was joshing Ray about being girl-less on such a night.

"A ton," she confirmed.

Just then Jerome Satterlee appeared in our midst, startling us
all a little to see him up close instead of on the platform. "What,
did you come down for air, Jerome?" my father kidded.

"Now don't give an old man a hard time," responded Jerome. "Call
this next one, how about, Mac. Then we can turn 'em loose for supper.
Myself, I got to go see a man about a dog."

My father was not at all a square dance caller of Jerome's
breadth. But he was known to be good at—well, I will have to call
it a sort of Scotch cadence, a beat of the kind that a bagpipe and
drum band puts out. Certainly you danced smoother to Jerome's calling,
but my father's could bring out stamping and clapping and other
general exuberation. I think it is not too much to say that, with my
eyes closed and ears stuffed, I could have stood there in the Sedgwick
House and told you whether it was Jerome or my father calling the
dance, just by the feel of how feet were thumping the hall floor.

To make sure their smooth terms could stand his absence, my
father looked the question at my mother, and she told him by a nod
that he ought to go do the call. She even added, "Why don't you do
the Dude and Belle? This time of night, everybody can stand some
perking up."

He climbed onto the band platform. "'Lo, Nola, Jeff. This isn't
any idea of mine, understand."

"Been saving you the best strings of this fiddle, Mac," Jeff
answered. "When you're ready."

Nola nodded, echoed: "When you're ready."

"All right, then. Try make me look like I know what I'm doing."
My father tipped his left shoulder down, pumped a rhythm with his heel
a number of times to get a feel of the platform. Then made a loud
hollow clap with his hands which brought everybody's attention, and
called out over the hall: "Jerome is taking a minute to recuperate.
He said he hates to turn things over to anybody with an English Creek
notion of music, but saw no choice. So you're in for it."

"What one we gonna do, Mac, the Two Medicine two-step?" some
wit yelled out.

"No sir. I've got orders to send you to supper hour in style. Time
to do the Dude and Belle. And let's really do it, six squares' worth."
My father was thinking big. Six squares of dancers in this hall would
swash from wall to wall and end to end, and onlookers already were
moving themselves into the doorway or alongside the band platform to grant space. "All right. You all know how it starts. Join hands and circle left--"

Even yet I am surprised that I propelled myself into doing it. I stepped away from Ray, soldiered myself in front of my mother, and said: "Mrs. McCaskill, I don't talk through my nose as pretty as the guy you usually gallivant around with. But suppose I could have this dance with you anyway?"

Her face underwent that rinse of surprise that my father sometimes showed about her. She cast a look toward the top of my head as if just realizing my height. Then came her sidelong smile, and her announcement: "I never could resist you McCaskill galoots."

Arm in arm, my mother and I took a place in the nearest square. People were marshalling everywhere in the hall, it looked like a major parade forming up. Another thunderclap from my father's hands, Nola and Jim opened up with the music, and my father chanted us into action.

"First gent, swing the lady so fair.

Now the one right over there.

Now the one with the sorrel hair.

Now the belle of the ballroom.

Swirl and twirl. And promenade all.

Second gent, swing the lady first-rate--"

Besides my mother and me, our square was Bob and Arleta Busby, and the Musgroves who ran the drugstore, and luck of luck, Pete and Marie,
back from returning Toussaint to the Two Medicine and dancing hard the past hour or so to make up for time lost. All of them but me probably had done the Dude and Belle 500 times in their lives, but it's a basic enough dance that I knew the ropes. You begin with everybody joining hands—my mother's firm feel at the end of one of my arms, Arleta's small cool hand at my other extreme—and circling left, a wheel of eight of us spinning to the music. Now to my father's call of "you've done the track, now circle back" the round chain of us goes into reverse, prancing back to where we started. Swing your partner, my mother's cornflower frock a blue whirlwind around the pair of us. Now the lady on the left, which in my instance meant hooking arms with Arleta, another first in my life. Now return to partner, all couples do some sashaying right and left, and the "gent" of this round steps forth and begins swinging the ladies in turn until he's back to his own partner. And with all gusto, swings her as the Belle of the Ballroom.

"Third gent, swing the lady in blue—"

What I would give to have seen all this through my father's eyes. Presiding up there on the platform, pumping rhythm with his heel and feeling it multiplied back to him by the 48 feet traveling the dance floor. Probably if you climbed the helmet-spike of the Sedgwick House, the rhythm of those six squares of dancers would have come quivering up to you like spasms through a tuning fork. Figure within figure within figure, from my father's outlook over us, the kaleidoscope of six simultaneous dance patterns and inside each the hinged couple
of the instant and comprising those couples friends, neighbors, sons, wife with flashing throat. Oh hands clapped to music, hands of my McCaskill father, and oh brightening glance, glance of my McCaskill mother, and no, in that hall aswim in motion and music, dancer could never be told from dance.

"Fourth gent, swing the lady so sweet--"

The fourth gent was me. I stepped to the center of our square, again made the fit of arms with Arleta Busby, and swung her.

"Now the one with dainty feet--"

Grace Musgrove, plump as a partridge, didn't exactly fit the prescription, but again I managed, sending her puffing out of our fast swirl.

"Now the one who looks so neat--"

Marie glided forth, solemnly winked at me, and spun about me light as a ghost.

"Now the Belle of the Ballroom."

The blue beauty, my mother. "Swirl and twirl." Didn't we though. "Now promenade all." Around we went, all the couples, and now it was the women's turn to court their Dudes.

First lady, swing the gent who's got sore toes.

Now the one with the great big nose.

Now the one who wears store clothes.

Now the dude of the ballroom.
Second lady, swing the gent in size thirteens.
Now the one that ate the beans.
Now the one in brand new jeans.
Now the dude of the ballroom.

Third lady, swing the gent with the lantern jaw.
Now the one in brand new jeans.
Now the one that yells, "Ah, hah!"
Now the dude of the ballroom.

So it went. In succession I was the one in store clothes, the one full of beans, and the lantern-jawed one—thankful there, not to be the one who yells "Ah hah!" which Pete performed for our square with a dandy of a whoop.

"Fourth lady, swing the gent whose nose is blue—"
My mother and sallow Hugh Musgrave.

"Now the one that spilled the glue—"
Reese reflections dancing with each other, my mother and Pete.

"Now the one who's stuck on you—"
Her and Bob Busby, two of the very best dancers in the whole hall.

"Now the Dude of the Ballroom."

She came for me, eyes on mine. I was the proxy of all that had begun at another dance, at the Noon Creek schoolhouse twenty years before. My father's voice: "Swirl him and twirl him." My moment of Dudehood was an almighty whirl, as if my mother had been getting up the
momentum all night.

"All join hands and circle to the left,
Before the fiddler starts to swear.
Dudes and Belles, you've done your best.
Now promenade, to you know where."

"Didn't know you were a lightfoot," Ray greeted me at the edge of the throng heading through the doorway to supper hour.

"Me neither," I responded, blowing a little. My mother was with Pete and Marie right behind me, we all would have to wait for my father to make his way from the band platform. "Let's let them catch up with us outside, I can use some air."

Ray and I squirmed along between the crowd and the lobby wall, weaseling our way until we popped out the front entry of the Sedgwick House.

I was about to say here that the next historic event of this Fourth of July, Gros Ventre category, was underway as the two of us emerged into the night, well ahead of my parents and the Reeses. But given that midnight had already happened, I'd better call this the first occurrence of July 5.

The person most immediately obvious of course was Leona, white and silver-gold in the frame of light cast onto the street by the Sedgwick House's big lobby window. And then Arlee Zane, also there on that raft of light; Arlee, ignorance shining from every pore.

Beyond them, a bigger two with the reflected light cutting a line
across their chests; face to face in the dimness above that, as if they were carrying on the nicest of private chats. Except that the beamframe build of one and the chokecherry shirt of the other showed them to be Earl Zané and Alec and therefore they were not chatting.

"Surprised to see you without a skim milk calf on the end of a string," Earl was offering up as Ray and I sidled over beside Leona and Arlee so as not to miss anything. Inspiring Arlee to laugh big as if Earl's remark deserved it.

"What, are you out here in the night looking for that cinnamon pony?" I give Alec credit for the easy way he said this, tossing it out as a joke, "He went thataway, Earl."

Earl proved not to be in the market for humor just now, however.

"I suppose you could have forked him any better?" You could all but hear the thick gears move in Earl's head to produce the next remark. "You likely had a lot of riding practice recently."

"Earl, you lardbrain," this drew from Leona.

But Alec chose to cash Earl's remark at face value. "Some of us do get paid to stay on horses instead of bailing off of them. Come on, Leona, let's go get us some supper before the dancing starts again."

Earl now had another brain movement. "Surprised you can dance at all these days, what with marriage on your mind." He leaned a little toward Alec to deliver the final part: "Tell me this, McCaskill. Has it ever climbed out the top of your pants yet?"

That one I figured was going to be bingo. After all, anybody who has grown up in Montana has seen Scotch lawsuits get underway for a
lot less commentary than that. At dances the situation was common enough almost to be a regular feature. One guy with a few too many drinks in him calls some other guy a name none too fond, and that party responds with a fist. Of course the commotion was generally harsher than the combat, but black eyes and bent noses could result.

"Earl, you jugheaded--" Leona was responding, but to my considerable disappointment Alec interrupted her by simply telling Earl, "Stash it, sparrowhead. Come on, Leona, we got business elsewhere."

"I bet you got business all right," Earl冒险ed on. "Leona business. Snatch a kiss, kiss a snatch, all the same to you, McCaskill, ain't it?"

I can't truly say I saw it happen. Not in any way of following a sequence: this and then this and then this. No, the event simply arrived into my mind, complete, intact, engraved before its realization could make itself felt. Versions of anything of this sort are naturally suspect, of course. Like that time Dempsey fought Gibbons up at Shelby for the heavyweight championship. Forty thousand people were there, and afterward about a quarter million could provide you an eyewitness account. But I will relate just as much of this Earl and Alec episode as I can vouch for. One instant Earl was standing there, admiring the manufacture of his last comment, and then in the next instant was bent in half, giving a nasty tossing-up noise, auheughhh, that made my own stomach turn over.

What can have inspired Alec, given that the time-honored McCaskill procedure after loss of temper was to resort to a roundhouse right, to
deliver Earl that short straight jab to the solar plexus?

How much that economical punch of Alec's yielded. Every bit of this I can see as if it were happening over again right now. Earl now in full light, doubled down as he was, Alec stepping around him to collect Leona, and the supper crowd in its long file out of the Sedgwick House stopping and gawking.

"GodDAMN!" exploded between Ray and me, Arlee pushing through and combining his oath with the start of a swing targeted on Alec's passing jaw.

Targeted but undelivered. On the far side of Arlee's girth from me Ray reached up, almost casually it seemed, and latched onto Arlee's wrist. The intended swing went nowhere after that, Ray hanging onto the would-be swingster as if he'd just caught him with that hand in the cookie jar, and by the time Arlee squared around and managed to begin to tussle in earnest with Ray—thank heaven for the clomping quality of the Zane brain—I had awarded Arlee a bit of a shove to worry him from my side.

Where the ruckus could have progressed beyond that, I have ever been curious about. In hindsight, that is. For if Arlee had managed to shake out of Ray's grip, he was elephant enough to provide us both some pounding. But by now my father was on hand, and Pete and two or three other men soldiered out of the crowd to help sort us into order, and somebody was fetching Tollie Zane out of the Medicine Lodge on Earl's behalf.
"Jick, that's enough," my father instructed. "Turn him loose, Ray. It's over."

This too I am clear about. Those sentences to Ray and me were the full sum of what was said by any McCaskill here in this aftermath. What traveled to Alec from my father was a stare, a studying one there in the frame of hotel light as if my father was trying to be sure this was the person he thought it was.

And got back from Alec one of the identical calibre.

Then Leona was in the grasp of my brother, and my mother stepped out alongside my father, and each couple turned and went.

"Ray?"

"What?"

We were side by side in bed, in the dark of his room. Outside the open twin windows, a breeze could be heard teasing its way through the leaves of the giant cottonwood.

"You helped a lot, there at the dance."

"That's okay."

"You'll want to watch out Arlee doesn't try get it back on you."

"Yeah."

There was silence then, and the dark, until Ray startled me with something between a giggle and a laugh. What the hell now? I couldn't see what he was doing, but as soon as words started issuing from him, I knew. He was pinching his nose closed.

"He wants to watch out around me," came droning out in
exact imitation of Tollie's rodeo announcing, "or I'll cut his heart out and drink his blood."

That got me into the act. With a good grasp on my nose, I proposed in the same tinny tone: "Yank off his arm and make him shake hands with it."

Ray giggled and offered: "Grab him by the epiglommis until his eyes pooch out."

"Sharpen the point on his head," I paused for my own giggles, "and pound him in like a post."

"Kick enough crap out of him to daub a log barn," Ray envisioned. "Goddamn booger eater him anyhow."

With each atrocity on Arlee our laughing multiplied, until the bed was shaking and we tried to tone things down before Ray's folks woke up and wondered just what was going on. But every time we got ourselves nearly under control, one or the other of us erupted again—"thump old Arlee as far into Hell"—on and on, laughing anew, snorting it out in spite of ourselves—"as a bird can fly in a lifetime"—sides shaking and throats rollicking until we were almost sick, and then of course we had to laugh at the ridiculousness of that.

Nor, when Ray finally did play out and conked off to sleep, did that fever of humor entirely leave me. I would doze for a while and then be aware I was grinning open-eyed into the darkness about one or another moment of that immense day, that never-can-be-forgotten Fourth.
Here I rest, world, as happy as if I had good sense and the patent on remembrance. My mother on the park stump giving her Ben English speech and Dode at the top of that leap by Coffee Nerves and my father calling out the Dude and Belle to the dancing crowd and my brother one-punching Earl Zane and Ray pitching in on Arlee and, you bet, Stanley Meixell collecting Velma Simms. Scene by scene they fell into place in me, smooth as kidskin and exact as chapter and verse, every one a perfect piece of that day and now of the night.

A set of hours worth the price of the rest of the life, those: to wake up chuckling, give the dark a great Chessy cat grin, and drop off until my own laughter woke me again.