

TUESDAY:

start with Angus sense of waiting--"Its voices were several", p. 157

--more about winter? work on the pace of ~~the~~ their winter together.

—————
So that is the sheep's-eye view of Gros Ventre. Although one

last jot of description does need to be added. A glance over the
shoulder from there by the Sedgwick House and the Medicine Lodge and
the Lunchery would readily provide it. The passage of a
thousand ewes and their lambs through a town cannot happen without
evidence being left on the street, and occasionally the sidewalks.
Sheep are nervous enough as it is and being routed through a canyon
of buildings does not improve their bathroom manners any. Once
Carnelia Muntz, wife of the First National banker, showed up in the
bank and said something about all the sheep muss on the streets.
Ed Van Bebber happened to be in there cashing a check and, I give
him full due, he looked her up and down and advised: "Don't think
of them as sheep turds, Carnelia. Think of them as berries off the
money tree."

—————

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early versions of
ms chunks -
some written in Montana,
summer of '82.

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

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, June 1

That month of June swam into the Two Medicine country. In my

life until then ~~and only a time or two since~~, I had never seen the

sidehills

~~hills~~ come so green, the ~~draws~~ ^{coulees} stay so spongy with run-off. A wet

May evidently could sweeten the universe. Already my father on his

first high patrols was encountering cow elk drifting up and across

the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side.

They, and the grass, and the hay meadows, and the benchland barley,

all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which ~~accounted~~ of course

accounted for the fresh mood everywhere across the Two. ~~They say~~ ^{It's said} spring

early draft

A few years back, the report from down in the Dust Bowl had it that Lady Godiva could ride through the streets there without even the horse seeing her. This spring's rains have thinned the air sufficiently are said to be ~~sufficient~~ to give the steed a glimpse.

^{Weekly}
--Gros Ventre ~~Gleaner~~, June 1

I am at the time now where I try to think what my life might have been like had I not been born in this Two Medicine country and

into the McCaskill family. Oh, I know what's said. How home ground

and kin ^{together} lay their touch along us as ^{inevitably} ~~naturally~~ as the banks of a

stream direct its water. But that doesn't mean you can't wonder.

Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror

if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. Whether some

other place of growing up would have turned you wiser or dumber,

^{Here} more contented or less. ~~In~~ my own instance, whether my years would

be pretty much as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say,

China or California instead of Montana.

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cleared
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inevitably

Well, rain we
had hadmost
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weather
has
dram-
Rained.

rain in range country is as if someone is handing around halves of
~~ten~~-dollar bills with the remainder promised at shipping time. And so
 in the sheepmen, the cowmen, the Forest Service people, the store-
 keepers in Gros Ventre, in just everyone that start of June, hope
 was up and would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Montana at last

Talk even could be heard that maybe ~~we~~ had seen the bottom
 of the Depression. After all, the practitioners of this notion ^{went around pointing} ~~pointed~~
 out, last year was a bit more prosperous, or ^{anyway} ~~maybe~~ a bit less desperate,
 than the year before. ^{nice} A close point of measurement which managed to
 overlook that for the several years before ^{last,} ~~that~~ the situation of people
 on the ^{out here} land had been purely godawful. I suppose I ought not to dwell
 on dollar matters when actually our family was

scraping along better than ^{a good} ~~many~~. Even though during the worst years
 the Forest Service did lay off some rangers--Hoovered them, the saying
 went--my father was ^{never} ~~was~~ among them. True, his salary was ^{jacked down} ~~chopped~~ from
 000 to 000 a month and Christ only knew when it might ever go back
 up again, but we were getting by. Nothing extra, but getting by.

But it has always grveled me that stock market players who happened
 to lose their paper fortunes are the remembered figures of those times.
 The eastern professors who



write as if the Depression set in the day Wall Street tripped over itself in 1929 seem not to know it, but by then Montana had been on

The winter of 1919--some of the men my rocky sledding for ten entire years. ~~Hard times were delivered to the~~ father's age and older still just called it that sonofabitch of a winter--

was the one that delivered hard times to the stockmen. Wholesale.

As Dode Spencer, who had the ranch farthest up the south fork of English Creek, used to tell: I went into that ~~winter~~ '19 winter

with four thousand head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to

five hundred. Trouble never travels lonesome, so about that same time

livestock and crop prices nosedived because of the end of the war in

right along with that, Europe, and drought and grasshoppers showed up to take over the dry-land

It began to be a hell of a situation. at farming. Then when drought came back again ~~in~~ the start of the Thirties

and joined company with Herbert Hoover, bad progressed to worse. Year upon year in my own memory, to take just one example from a possible

many stateful, the exodus stories had been coming

out of the High Line country to the north and east of us, and down there on

the very highway which runs through Gros Ventre we saw for ourselves ~~had seen~~ the truth

of those tales, the furniture-loaded jitney trucks with farewells to Montana painted

across their boxboards in big crooked letters: GOODBY OLD DRY and AS FOR

HAVRE YOU CAN ~~make it~~ HAVE 'ER.

So it was time hope showed up.

Jick! Set your mouth for it!

Supper, and my mother. I remember that all

this began ~~right~~ ^{there} at the very ~~start~~ ^{outset} of June because I was ~~getting~~ ^{out}
 my saddle ready, lengthening the stirrups to account for how much I
 had grown in the past year, for the ride up with my

father on ~~a~~ ^{the} counting trip the next morning. ~~Probably~~ I can even

safely say what the weather was, one of those brockle ^{late} afternoons

under the Rockies when tag-ends of storm ~~are~~ cling in the mountains

and sun is ~~coming~~ ^{reaching} through wherever it can between the cloud piles.

Details like that, saddle stirrups a notch longer than last year or
 sunshine dabbled around on the foothills ^{some} a certain way, seem to be the
 allowance of memory while the bigger points

of life hang back. At least I have ~~always~~ found it so, ~~and~~ particularly

now that I am at the time where I try to think what my life might

have been like had I not been born in the Two Medicine country and

into the McCaskill family. Oh, I know what's said. How home ground

and kin together lay their touch along us as ~~inescapably~~ ^{unalterably} as the banks

of a stream direct its water. But that doesn't mean you can't wonder.

Whether substantially the same person would meet you in the mirror

if your birth certificate didn't read as it does. ^{or} Whether some other

place of growing up ~~would~~ ^{might} have turned you wiser or dumber, more contented

or less. Here in my own instance, ~~whether my years would be pretty much~~
 some mornings I will catch myself with a full cup of

coffee yet in my hand, gone cold while I have sat here stewing about whether
 my years would be pretty much



as they are by now had I happened into existence in, say, China or California instead of ^{northern} Montana.

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not ^Going Around with our Heads Stuck in Yesterday. Provocation for it, I will say, came from my father as reliably as a dusk wind out of a canyon. Half a day at a time he might spend listening to old Toussaint tell of the roundup of 1882, when the ^{cowmen} ~~men~~ fanned their crews north from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian line and brought in a hundred thousand head. Or the tale even bigger and earlier than that, the last great buffalo hunt, Toussaint having ridden up into the Sweetgrass Hills to see down onto a prairie that looked burnt, so dark with buffalo, the herd pinned into place by the plains tribes. Strange, but I can still recite the tribes and where they pitched their camps to surround

those miles of buffalo, just as Toussaint passed the lore of it to

my father: Crows on the southeast, Gros Ventres and Assiniboines on the

northeast, Piegans on the west, Crees along the north, and Flatheads

here to the south. "Something to see, that must've been," my father

in his recounting to the rest of us at supper. come right back at him
would say, "Varick, somebody already saw it," my mother would ~~answer.~~

"What you'd better Put Your Mind To is the Regional Forester's Visit

Tomorrow." Or if she didn't have to work on my father for the moment,

there was Alec when he began wearing a neck hanky and ~~saying he was~~ ^{considering}

~~himself a cowboy.~~
~~going to choose cattle over college.~~ That my own particular knack

for remembering, which could tuck away entire grocery lists or whatever

someone had told me in innocence a couple of weeks before, made me

seem likely to round out a houseful of men tilted to the past must

the final stem on her load.
have been her ~~final straw.~~ "Jick," I can hear her yet, "there isn't

any law that says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody

else. Just because your father and your brother--"

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do.

In the time after, it was her more than anyone who would return and

her thoughts
return here to where all four of our lives made their bend. "The summer

when--she would start in, and as if the three-note signal of a chickadee had been sung, it told me she was turning to some happening of that last English Creek summer. She and I were alike at least in that, the understanding that

such a season of life provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

"Jick! Are you coming, or do the chickens get your share?" I

know with all certainty too that that call to supper was double, because I was there at the

age where I had to be called twice for anything. Anyway, that second

^{of hers} summons brought me out of the barn just as the pair of them, Alec and

Leona, ^{topped} ~~came galloping~~ ^{at the eastern rise of the county road.} into view. That is, I knew my brother as far

as I could see him by that head-up way he rode. Leona would need

to be somewhat nearer before I could verify her by her blouseful,

~~those days~~ but ~~at that time~~ if you ~~saw~~ saw Alec you were pretty sure to be

seeing Leona too.

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

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

Well, that will pahhen in a family. A moment of absent-mindedness, or the tongue just slipping a cog from what was intended. Ordinarily it wouldn't have riled me at all. But all this recent business about Alec, and my own wondering about where anybody in this family stood any more, and I don't know what all else--it now brought a response which scraped out of me like flint: I'm the other one.

Surprise passed over my father; then I guess what is called conciliation.

You sure as hell are, he said. Unmistakably Jick.

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Only the ^{very} northmost portion of the national forest actually has anything at all to do with the Two Medicine River, ^{or Two Medicine Lake.} It's up in that vicinity ^{where} ~~that~~ the forest joins onto the south boundary of Glacier National Park, fitting ⁱⁿ ~~there~~ between the park, the continental divide and the Blackfeet reservation like a big square peninsula on the map. The Two Medicine, the river that is, has its source up in the Rockies like all the ~~other~~ water of this region, but cuts a distinctive canyon across the plains as it pushes east to meet the Marias River.... So, apparently it is just the ring of the words, Two Medicine, that has carried the name south all the way along the mountains to our English Creek area. The derivation as I've heard it ~~is~~ is that the Blackfeet made their medicine lodge two years in a row in the valley near the lake, and the name lasted from that. By whatever way Two Medicine came to be, it is a pretty interesting piece of language, I think.

The fracture of a family is not something that happens clean
and sharp, so that you at least know ~~from~~ ^{will} that from here on it ^{will} begin
to be over with. No, it is like one of those worst bone breaks, a
shatter. You can mend the place, peg it and splint it and work to
strengthen it, and while the surface can be brought to look much as
it did before, it always remains a spot that has to be favored.

And if I didn't ^{grasp} ~~know~~ much, I at least ~~knew~~ that last night's rift
in our family
was nowhere near over.

8 1/4
did. & know
much &
at last
never

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Where horses were concerned, my father's imagination took a vacation. A black horse he invariably named Coaly, a blaze-face was always Star. Currently, though, he was riding a big dun gelding who, on my mother's suggestion when she first saw the dim-colored colt, ~~carried~~^{bore} the name of Mouse. I was on a short-legged mare called Pony.

Frankly, high among my hopes about this business of growing up was get a considerably that I would ~~get~~ more substantial horse out of it. If and when I did, I vowed to give the creature as much name as it could carry, such as Rimfire or Chief Joseph or Calabash.

considerably

We also were leading one pack horse with us, to deliver some bolts and flanges and cable to the crew building a fire lookout on Billy Peak, after we did the sheep counting. That third horse was an elderly sorrel whom my father addressed as Brownie but the rest of us called by the name he'd been given before the Forest Service deposited him at the English Creek station ~~Homer~~. Having Homer along was a cause for mixed emotions. One more horse is always a nuisance to contend with, yet the presence of a pack horse also made the journey seem more substantial; testified that you weren't just jaunting off to somewhere, you were transporting. Packstrings had been the lifeblood

of the Forest Service ever since its birth, the hoofed carriers of supply into the countless mountains of the west. I know for a fact that my father considered that the person most important to his job as English Creek ranger was not anyone up the hierarchy from him, the forest superintendent or the regional forester or any of those, but his packer, Isidor Pronovost. Probably the story my father told oftenest was of being with Isidor on one of the highest trails in this part of the mountains, where a misstep by one pack horse might pull all the rest into a tumble a few thousand feet down the slope, when Isidor turned in his saddle and called: Mac, if ~~was~~ we was to roll this packstring right about here, the bastards'd roll until they stunk.

Since the lookout gear and our food ~~only~~ amounted to a load for one horse, ^{it} it hadn't been necessary to ^{hire} ~~call on~~ Isidor for this counting trip of ours. But even absent he had his influence as we ^{arranged} ~~tied~~ the packs on Homer that morning, both my father and I total converts to Isidor's ^{perpetual} preachment that in ^{a horse,} ~~packing,~~ balance is everything. It took some finagling, say to make a roll of half-inch cable on one side of Homer equivalent to some canned goods on the other side of him, but finally my father

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proclaimed: There, looks to me like we got it Isidored.

Some winters ago, Isidor and his brother Gabe, a noted packer in his own right, and my father brought out the

pilot and co-pilot ^{from} ~~of~~ the airplane ~~that~~ crashed above the north fork

of English Creek. My mother and Alec and I heard that plane as it buzzed past west of the ranger station, then when we heard the motor noise again we looked at one another, as if confirming that a machine

^{could be} ~~was~~ circling in the overcast next to these mountains, and then my mother spun to the telephone and rang the airport in Great Falls. All the passengers had been ^{taken}

off there because of ^{how} the weather ^{looked,} but the plane was ^{trying to go} going on to Spokane

with the mail. Evidently its instruments went wrong, ^{for} ~~because~~ it ^{slammed} ~~flew~~

^{east} directly into the ^{like a sagehen hitting a truck windshield.} side of ^{Spring} ~~the~~ Mountain. The next day a National Guard

search plane managed to spot the wreckage, and then a couple ^{more} ~~of~~ days

ensued while a postal inspector ^{trotted} ~~came~~ out from Spokane ^{to see} ~~and saw~~ to the

salvage of the mail, and after all that was concluded it was up to my

father and Isidor and ^{Gabe} ~~George~~ to bring down the two bodies. ^{of course} Both were

frozen stiff in the positions they had been flung into, so the packers

wrapped them in a manti apiece as they were and slid the bundles ^{on the snow} ~~down~~

the mountain to the trail and that night's camp. The intention was ~~in~~

^{next} the morning to fold each body face-down across a pack saddle. That

like a
propeller
with a
windmill
truce

night turned clear and cold, however, and ⁱⁿ the ~~next~~ morning the bodies

couldn't be bent at all. Isidor proclaimed ^{that, by the God,} ~~that~~ of all the packing he ever

had done, this problem was a new one on him. ^{He saw no choice} ~~There was nothing to do,~~

though, except tie both bodies on one horse, one ^{lengthwise} ~~on~~ each side. ~~But~~

And that is the way we saw them arrive, with that balanced cargo of

what had been men, to the English Creek station where a hearse from

Great Falls was waiting.

his thousand
or more years

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So the day was summed and we had dined on trout and the campfire was warmth and light against the night, and we had nothing that needed doing except to contemplate until sleep overcame us. My thoughts circled among Alec and my mother and my father--somewhat onto Leona, too--and what had happened last night. But mostly, I suppose because he was there next to me in the firelight, ~~because~~ it was my father at the center of my mulling.

I am hard put to know how to describe him as he seemed to me then. How to lay him onto paper, for a map is never the country itself, only some ink suggesting the way to get there. Season somehow seems to bring out more about him than sketchwork does, and so I believe that to come close to any understanding of Varick McCaskill you would have had to spend a full year at his side--

Despite what the calendar indicates, autumn was the onset, or threshold you could say, of a McCaskill year. The Two Medicine National Forest got reworked by my father each autumn almost as if making sure to himself that he still had all of that ~~kingdom~~ ^{zone} of geography. Of course every ranger is supposed to inspect the conditions of his forest at

the end of the grazing season. My father all but X-rayed the Two.

South Fork and North Fork, up under the reefs, in beyond Heart Butte,

day after day he delved ~~his forest~~ ^{the Two}. And somehow too when the bands

of sheep trailed down and ~~flowed~~ ^{streamed} toward the ~~ship~~ railroad chutes

at Blackfoot or Pendroy, he was on hand there to look them over, talk

join in the jackpot bets about how much the lambs would weigh. with the herders, the ranchers, the lamb buyers, I suppose it was

the time of year when he could ~~set up~~ ^{assess} his job, see right there on the

hoof the results of his rangering. In a man who sometimes seemed

doubtful whether his life totted up to what it should, that must have

been a necessary ^{inventory} season, autumn.

He never wintered well. Came down with colds, sieges of hacking

and sniffing, strange ^{fissures} in a man of his size and strength. Had it not

he tutored Alec and me in, been for the trapping, he might have gone through all those winter months

which in Montana could amount to five or six, like someone you would

think was a permanent pneumonia candidate. The trapping, though, was

an excuse to defy the season and put in hours outdoors. ^{(as well as being} Also, it was

a way to add to ^{the family} our income, which never was too much. At that time,

there still were plenty of beaver ~~in~~ in English Creek. Too many, in

the view of the ranchers who would find their meadows flooded. And

weasels were a considerable ^{creek} population, too, and occasional mink.

My father

~~He~~ never said so--again, not what you'd expect, because otherwise he

seldom minded talking--but the way ^{a trapped} ~~the animal~~ died must have bothered

him. However many gnawed-off feet it had taken to persuade him, by the

~~he was teaching Alec and me he insisted that we set~~
time ~~I knew anything of his trapping he was setting~~ spring poles on

at least the weasel traps; beaver of course are trapped at their hutches,

promptly. ^{mink}
in such a way that they drown. With a spring pole, the weasel or ~~or~~

would be snapped up off the ground and hung into the air to freeze to

death within an hour or so, rather than fighting the trap for days or

I suppose that my father's view was that a
gnawing its own foot off. ~~that~~ spring pole was not much mercy in a
cruel situation, but some.



Spring is the uneven season on the Two. You can't ever be sure when it's going to arrive, then if it happens to, whether it's going to stay beyond the next twenty minutes. More than a few times I have known mid-May snowfalls, the damp heavy ~~doughy~~ ^{blanket} ones, to hit this country, and I see in my father's day book that this particular year, the record wetness of May included one of those bread dough snows, on the weekend of the 20th and 21st. That these spring snowstorm are perilous to the lambs and calves but also are magnificent grass-bringers is your usual,

Montana situation of on the one hand this, on the other hand that. I sometimes think if ^{a person} ~~you~~ had third and fourth hands, there'd be some ^{damn soon} other hard Montana proposition on ^{those} ~~them~~, too.

no 4

Anyway, my father seemed to green up with the country each spring. Paperwork he had put off all winter would get tackled and disposed of. All of the gear of the English Creek station got a going-over, saddles, bridles, pack saddles, fire equipment.

no 4

And from the first moment that charitably might be classified as spring, he read the mountains. Watched the snow ~~down~~ ^{down} hem along the peaks, judging how fast ~~the~~ the drifts were melting. Cast a glance to

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English Creek various times of each day, to see how high it was running.

Kept mental tally of the wildlife, when the deer started back up into

the mountains, when the fur of the ~~so~~^{washed} turned from white to ~~so~~^{gray},

how soon the first fresh pile of coal-black crap in the middle of

a trail ~~would~~^{ed} show ~~that~~^{ed} bears were out of hibernation. To my father,

and through him to the rest of ~~the~~^{us in} family, the mountains were their own

almanac, you might say. That being true, our specific chunk of the

Rockies, the Two country, seemed to us a special gold-leaf edition:

positioned as it was along the east slope of the divide of the continent,

its water and welfare touching out to the plains. ~~xx~~ In spring, with

the Two opening itself in newness and promise wherever you happened to

glance, I believe that my father could not imagine any better neighborhood

of the planet.

~~And~~^{finally} summer. Well, we were embarking on summer now, and how it

would turn out I truly could not imagine. Nor did it come any clearer

to me in ~~the~~^{that} span of time from supper until my father said See you

in sunshine and we both turned in.

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1
Myself, I liked sheep. Or rather, I didn't mind sheep as such,
which is the best a person can do towards creatures whose wool begins
in their brain, and I liked the idea of sheep. ~~Maybe because sheep~~

True,
~~And while~~ sheep had to be troubled with more than cattle did, but
the troubling was on a smaller scale. Pulling a lamb from a ewe's
womb is nothing to untangling a leggy calf from the inside of a heifer.
And a sheep you can brand by dabbing a splot of paint on her back,
not needing to invite half the county in to maul your livestock
around in the dust of a branding corral. ~~There were~~ More and more in
life I ~~find myself favoring proportion, and~~
~~think proportion counts for a lot~~ sheep somehow simply ~~a~~

looked proper to me on those slopes of the two. To my notion, cattle
on the same pasture stick out like pepper on meringue, but sheep
blend with the country as sage or some other ~~natural~~ ^{normal} coloration would.
A kind of instant ~~perpetual~~ ^{natural} crop, sheep somehow are; under a strong-
eyed herder who has them in graze across a half-mile of wildflower
slope, sheep seem as if generations of them always have been right
there, cloudlike but ~~everlasting~~ ^{yet perpetual}, and the grass and the ~~blossoms~~ ^{flowers} just
now have been put in ~~under them~~ ^{under them} fresh for the year. ~~under them~~

but somehow that point never seemed to need announcing as it did with cowboys.) By and large, though, the Montana philosophy of make-do, as practiced by our sizable ranching proportion of Scotchmen, Germans, Norwegians, and Missourians, meant that ranchers simply tried to figure out which species did best, sheep or cows, and often ended up with both.

And so sheep in those Depression years were the sustenance, the manna, of the Two country. For a month solid at the start of summer, a band of sheep a day would pass through Gros Ventre on the way north to the Blackfoot Reservation, Tommy Larson and Guy Miller each trailing several bands from all the way down by Choteau, and the Bartley brothers and Broadhurst Smith and Ira Perkins and the others bringing theirs from around Bynum and Pendroy, and even Charlie Farrell from here on English Creek took his three bands to the Reservation instead of up onto the national forest. That was a time on the Reservation when you could see a herder's wagon atop practically every rise: a fleet of white wagons anchored across the land. And off to the east, out of

view, the big sheep outfits from Washington were running their tens of thousands, too, and of course to the west here my father's forest pastured the many English Creek bands--sum it how you will, from the sides of the Rockies out onto the plains where the farming began, the whole country was sheep.

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

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

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

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

I didn't care for the way that was put, and just said back: "Jick McCaskill." Too, I was wondering how many more times that day I was going to ~~have to~~ ^{need to} identify myself to people I'd had no farthest intention

2.

of getting involved with.

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

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

Canada Dan shook his head as if my sanity was at issue. "He's
gonna regret charity when he sees the goddamn chore we got for ourselves
up here.

"What would that be, Dan?"

"About fifteen head of goddamn dead ones, that's what. They
got onto some death camas, maybe three days back. Poisoned themselves
before you could say 'sic 'em. Canada Dan reported all this as if
an accidental passerby
he was a bystander instead of being responsible for these animals.

Former animals, they were now.

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

"Happened right up over here," Canada Dan went on as if he
hadn't heard, gesturing to the ridge close behind him. "Just glommed
onto that death camas like it was goddamn candy. C'mon here, I'll
show you. The herder shrugged out of his coat, tossed it down on



the grass, pointed to it and instructed his dog: "Stay, Rags." The ~~came and lay~~ dog ~~was~~ on the coat, facing the sheep, and Canada Dan trudged up the ridge without ever glancing back at the dog or us.

I began to dread the way this was trending.

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

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

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

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

"Well," Stanley expounded next. "There's no such thing as one-handed

4 ✓

skinning. Which doubled the sense of ~~the~~ dread in me. I thought to myself, But there is one-handed tipping of a bottle, and one-handed dragging me into this campjack expedition, and one-handed weaseling out of what was impending ^{here} next and... All this while, Stanley was looking off in some direction carefully away from me. "I can be unloading the grub into Dan's wagon while this goes on, then come back with the mare so we can lug these pelts in. Guess I ought to get at it."

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

So for the next long while, I was delving in ewe carcasses, slicing the hides loose around the hooves and then down the legs and around the milk bag, and at last the big incision along the belly ^{your jackknife} which, if ~~you~~ ~~wasn't~~ slipped just a little bit, would bring the guts ^{all over} pouring out ~~into~~ your project. It ~~all~~ had to be done, because the pelts at least would bring a dollar apiece for the Busby brothers and a dollar then was still worth holding in your hand. But that it was necessary did not make it any less snotty a job. I don't know whether you have ever skinned a sheep which has lain dead in the rain for a few days, but the clammy wet wool adds into ^{the} your situation the possibility

of wool poisoning, ^{that} so the thought of puffed painful hands accompanied

all your handling of the pelt. *That and a whole lot else on my mind,*

no # So I slit and slit ^{and slit,} tugging pelt off bloated belly and stiffened

legs. I started off careful not to work fast, in the hope that Canada

Dan would slice right along and thereby skin the majority of the carcasses.

It of course turned out that his strategy was identical and that he

had had ~~more~~ countless more years of practice at being slow than I did.

In ~~any~~ other circumstances I might even have admired the drama in the way
he would

stop often, straighten up to ease what he told me several times was the

world's worst crick in his back, and contemplate my ^{scalpel} ~~skinning~~ technique *skeptically*

before finally ^{bending} ~~getting~~ back to his own. Out of his experience, my father

always testified that he'd rather work any day with shearers rather

than cowboys. You might come across a herder that's loony now and then,

but at least they aren't so apt to be such self-inflated sonsabitches.

Right about now ^g I wondered about that choice. If Canada Dan was

representative, shearers didn't seem to be any bargains of companionability

either. [#] Finally I gave up on trying to outslow Canada Dan and went at

the skinning ~~as~~ quick as I could, to get it over with.

Canada Dan's estimate of fifteen dead ewes proved to be eighteen.

Also, ^g I noticed that six of the pelts were branded with a bar above

the number, signifying that the ewe was a mother of twins. Which

summed out to the fact that besides the eighteen casualties, there

6

✓

were two dozen newly mother less lambs who would weight light at shipping time.

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

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

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

ride back out with him for the second batch, load them, ride back in and unload--seeing it all unfold I abruptly spoke out: Stanley!

Yeah, Jick? The brown Stetson turned most of the way in my direction. All the ways to say what I intended to competed in my mind.

Stanley, this just isn't going to work out...Stanley, this deal was

my father's brainstorm and not mine, I'm heading down that trail for

home....Stanley, I'm not up to--to riding herd on you and doing the work

of this ~~dingbat~~ ^{wampus cat} of a sheepherder and maybe getting wool poisoning and--

but when my mouth ^{did} moved ~~again~~, I heard it mutter:

Nothing, I guess.

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

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

The upper part of Canada Dan appeared at the dutch door. Right there in front of you, he pointed to a gummy sack hanging from a corner

8. ✓
of the wagon. Your eyes bad?

I dried off as best I could on the gunny sack, feeling now as if I'd been rasped from elbow to fingertip, and swung on into the sheepwagon. The table of this wagon was a square ^{of wood} about the size of a big checkerboard, which pulled out from under the bunk at the far end of the wagon and then was supported by a gate leg which folded down, and Stanley had tucked himself onto the seat on one side of it. Canada Dan as cook and host I knew would need to be nearest the stove and ~~so would~~ sit on a stool at the outside end of the table, so I slid into the seat opposite Stanley, ^{going real} being careful because three people in a sheepwagon is about twice too many.

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

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

Or it may simply have been his pleasure over the meal he had concocted. Onto the table ~~now~~ the herder plunked a metal plate with a boiled

~~Onto the table the herder plunked a metal plate with a ~~x~~ boiled~~
 chunk of meat on it, then followed that with a stained pan of what
 looked like small moth balls.

"Like I say, I figured you might finally show up today, so I
fixed you a duke's choice of grub," he crowed. "Get yourselves
started with that hominy." Then, picking up a hefty butcher knife,

Canada Dan slabbed off a thickness of the grayish greasy meat and

"You even got your wide choice of meat. Here's
 toppled it aside. "You got your choice of mutton." He sliced off

~~more~~ another slab. "Or then again there's growed-up lamb." The

butcher knife produced a third plank-thick piece. "Or you can

always have sheep meat." ^{Canada Dan} He divvied the slices onto our plates

and concluded: "A menu you don't get just everywhere, ain't it?"

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

The report crossed my mind that I had just spent ^{a couple of hours} ~~an hour and a~~

~~half~~ elbow-deep in dead sheep and now I was being expected to eat

some of one, but I tried to keep it traveling. Time, as it's said,

was the essence here. The only resource a person has against mutton

is to eat it fast, before it has a chance for the tallow in it to

congeal. So I poked mine into me pretty rapidly, and even so the

min
of
eat.
Here's

last several bites were greasy going. Stanley by then wasn't much more than getting started ~~on his~~.

into digestive process
While Canada Dan forked steadily through his meal and Stanley mused

around with his. I finished off the hominy on the theory that anything into the digestive process you mixed with mutton was probably all to the good. Then I ~~looked~~ *gazed*

out the dutch door of the sheepwagon while waiting on Stanley.

The afternoon was going darker, a look of coming rain. My father more than likely was done by now with the counting of Dode Spencer's band. He would be on his way up to the Billy Peak lookout, and the big warm dry camp tent there, and the company of somebody other than Canada Dan or Stanley Meixell, and probably another supper of brookies. I hoped devoutly the rain already had started directly onto whatever piece of trail he might be riding just now.

Canada Dan meanwhile had rolled himself a cigarette and ~~filled~~ *was filling* the wagon with blue smoke while Stanley worked himself to the halfway point of his slab of mutton. "Staying the night, ain't you?" the herder said more as observation than question. "You can set up

the tepee, regular goddamn canvas hotel. It only leaks a little
where it's ripped in that one corner. Been meaning to sew the
sonofabitch up.

"Well, actually, no," said Stanley. This perked me up more
than anything had in hours. Maybe there ^{existed fingernail of} ~~was~~ some hope for Stanley

after all. "We got all that pack gear to keep dry, so we'll just
go on over to that line cabin down on ^{Spencer's school section.} ~~Cooper's.~~ Fact is"--Stanley

here took the chance to shove away his still mutton-laden plate and

as if night was stampeding toward him--
get to his feet. "we better be getting ourselves over there if we're
gonna beat dark. You ready, Jick?

Was I.

as if night
was stampeding
toward him

##



Spencer's line cabin stood just outside the eastern boundary of the forest, through a barbwire fence. We had ridden more than an hour to get there, the weather steadily heavier and grimmer all around us, and Stanley fairly grim himself, I guess from the mix of alcohol and mutton sludging around beneath his belt. ~~He hadn't said a word nor~~ happened to see him Once when I glanced back to be sure I still had him I ~~saw Stanley make~~ *high-armed* an awkward lob into the trees, that exaggerated way when you throw with your wrong hand. So he had run out of bottle, and at least I could look forward to an unpickled Stanley from here on. I hoped he wasn't the kind who came down with the DTs as he dried out.

The whole way from Canada Dan's sheepwagon he never said a word nor even glanced ahead any farther than his horse's ears; didn't even stir when we reached the boundary fence. In a hurry to get us into the cabin before the weather cut loose I hopped off Pony to open the gate.

My hand was just almost to the top wire hoop when there was a terrific yell: GODaMIGHTy, get aWAY from that!

I jumped back as if ~~burned~~ *flung*, looking around to see what ~~the hell~~ had roused Stanley like that.

"Go find a club and knock it open with that," he instructed.

"You happen to be touching that wire and lightning hits that fence,

I'll have fried Jick for supper.

So I humored him, went off and found a sizable dead limb of
jackpine and tapped the hoop up off the top of the gate stick with it,
and then used it to fling the gate off to one side the way you might
flip a big snake. The hell of it was, I knew Stanley was ^{out-and-out} right. A
time, lightning hit ^{Ed Van Belber's} ~~the~~ fence ^{up} across the road from the English Creek



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station and the whole top wire melted for about fifty yards in either direction, dropping off in little chunks as if ~~you'd cut it up with~~ ^{it'd been minced}

^{by} fencing pliers. I knew as well as anything not to touch a wire fence

in a storm: why then had I damn near done it? ~~Why but for having~~ ^{All I can say in my own}

~~defense is that you just try going~~
~~Stanley Meixell on my mind; my~~ around with Stanley Meixell on your

mind as much as he had been on mine since mid-morning, and see if

you don't do one or another thing dumb.

^{was resigned by now to}
I ~~knew~~ what was in store for me at the cabin, so started in on

^{right away, the} it, ^{unpack} unpacking the mare and Bubbles. Already I had size, my father's

long bones the example to mine, and could do the respected packer's

trick of reaching all the way across the horse's back ^{to} ~~and unpack~~ lift

^{off-side} those packs ~~off~~ from where I was standing, instead of going back and

forth around the horse all the time. I did the mare and then carefully

began uncargoing Bubbles, Stanley hanging onto the bridle and matter-of-factly

promising Bubbles he would yank his goddamn head off if he gave any

trouble. Then as I swung the last pack over and off, a hefty lift

I managed to do without bumping the pack saddle and giving Bubbles an

excuse for excitement, Stanley pronounced:

Oh, to be young and fucking twice a day again. # He took notice

no 91

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of the considerable impact of this on me. 'Scuse my French, Jick.

It's just a saying us old coots have.

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

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

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

"Yeah," Stanley agreed. "About a foot."

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

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

#

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

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

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

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

Stanley roused. Feels like it's been places. He moved his gaze past me and around the cabin interior. Not so bad quarters. ^{Not much} ~~No worse~~ peck rat palace, than I remember this place, anyway.

Maybe we ought to have a look, I persisted. That wrapping's seen better times. Before he could ^{walty} enunciate off onto some other topic I stepped over to him and untied the rust-colored wrapping.

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

Jesus H. Christ, I breathed.

Aw, could be worse. I'll get it looked at when I get to town. There's some

18
bag balm in my saddlebag there. Get the lid off that for me ^{will you,} and

I'll dab some on."

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

"The tail off my clean shirt."

"Your ma's gonna like to hear that."

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

"Well," Stanley said, moving his bandaged hand with a wince he
didn't want to show and I didn't really want to see. The Stanleys
of this world do not show pain easily.

It seemed to me time to try get Stanley's mind off his wound, and
to bring up what I figured was a natural topic. So I queried:

"What are we ^{going to} gonna do about supper?"

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

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

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

So now things ~~have~~ had reached the point where I had lost out
even on my father's scattershot version of cooking, and was going
to have to invent my own. After fighting the stove for awhile to
get any real heat from it, I managed to warm a can of pork and beans
and ate them with some slices of ~~anyone's~~ bread smeared with mayonnaise
knew the butter would be down deeper in the pack with other unbreak-
because I ~~came across it in the pack before I did the butter.~~ ables.
Canada Dan's cooking must have stuck with me more than I was aware,
though, as I didn't even think to open any canned fruit for dessert.

Meanwhile ~~The weather seemed to be getting steadily more rambunctious.~~

Along those mountainsides thunder can roll and roll, and claps were
arriving to us now like beer barrels tumbling down stairs.

In my head I always counted the miles to how far away the lightning
find myself doing--
had hit--something I still ~~was~~ so when the next bolt winked, some ~~was~~ where
began the formula:
out the south window, I ~~begin the formula~~

One, a-thousand.

20.
Two, a-thousand.

Three...The boom reached us then, the bolt had ~~hit~~ ^{struck} just more than two miles off. That could be worse, and likely would be. Meanwhile rain was raking the cabin. We could hear it drum against the west wall as well as on the roof.

Sounds like we got a dewy night ahead of us, Stanley offered.

He looked a little perkier now. Myself, I was beginning to droop, the day catching up with me. The cabin didn't have any beds ~~such~~ as such, cobbled-together just a ~~double~~ bunk arrangement with planks where you'd like a mattress to be. But any place to be prone looked welcome, and I got up from the table to untie my bedroll from behind my saddle and spread it onto the upper planks.

The sky split white outside the cabin. ~~The~~ ^{That} crack of thunder I honestly felt as much as heard. A jolt through the air; as if a quake had leapt upward out of the earth.

I believe my hair ^{swept} ~~was~~ straight on end, from that blast of noise passing through. But Stanley didn't show any ruffle at all. "The quick hand of God, my ma used to say."

"Yeah, well, I'd just as soon it grabbed around someplace else."

I stood waiting for the next cataclysm, although what really was on my mind was the saying that ^{you'll} ~~you~~ never hear the lightning bolt that hits you. The ~~rain was~~ ^{rattled} constantly loud now. At last there ~~was~~ ^{came} a big crackling sound quite a way off, and while I knew nature is not that regular I told myself the lightning portion of the storm had moved beyond us, and I announced to Stanley, I'm turning in.

What, already?

Yeah, already--a word which for some reason annoyed me as much as anything had all day. I swung myself into the bunk.

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

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

Stanley ~~had~~ ^{up} lanked himself and casually went over to the packs.

Doctor Hall, he repeated as he brought out his good hand from a pack,

a brown bottle of whiskey in it. Doctor Al K. Hall.

—

The night I suppose continued in ^{commotion} ~~tumult~~. But at that age I could ~~have slept~~ ~~sleep~~ through a piano tuners' convention. Came morning, I was up and around--the nearest reef and the peak south beyond it both ^{stood} ~~were~~ in sun, as if the little square of window had been made into a picture from the Alps--while Stanley still lay flopped in the lower bunk. I lit a fire and went out to check on the horses and brought in a pail of fresh water, and even then he hadn't budged, just was breathing like he'd decided on hibernation. The bottle ^{which had} ~~was down~~ nursed him into that condition, I noticed, was down by about a third. Telling myself he could starve to death in bed for all I cared, I ~~saw~~ ~~showered~~ fashioned breakfast for myself, heating up a can of peas and more or less ^{roasting} ~~broiling~~ some slices of bread by holding them over the ^{pinpointing the commotion} ~~open~~ ~~fire~~ stove on a fork.

Eventually Stanley joined the day. As he worked at getting his boots on I gave him some secret scrutiny, but couldn't see that he ~~assayed~~ ~~was~~ ~~seemed~~ much better or much worse than the night before, Maybe he just looked that way, sort of absent-mindedly pained, all the time.

I offered to heat up some peas for him but he said no, thanks anyway.

At least he seemed ready for campending again, and I broached what was heaviest on my mind: the calendar of our continued companionship.

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

"Well, you seen what we got into yesterday with Canada Dan.

Herders have their own quantities of trouble." Stanley could be seen to be calculating, either the trouble capacities of our next two herders or the extent of my impatience. "I suppose we got to figure that it could take most of a day apiece for this ~~next~~ pair, too."

Two more days of messing with herders, then the big part of another day to ride back to English Creek. ~~it~~ it loomed before me like a career. "What about if we split up?" I suggested as if I was naturally business-like. Each tend to ~~one herder~~ ^{one herder's camp} today?"

Stanley considered some more. You would have thought he was doing it in Latin, the time it took him. But finally: I guess that'd work. You know this piece of country pretty good. So, okay. Which yahoo do you want, Gufferson or Preston Rozier?"

I thought on that. Preston Rozier was a young herder in his second or third year in these mountains. Maybe he had entirely outgrown high-country of the sort the ~~mountain~~ whims Canada Dan was showing, and maybe he hadn't.

Andy Gustafson on the other hand was a long-timer in the Two country probably and had been given the range between Canada Dan and Preston, ~~probably~~

Rocky Mtn
hi country?
timber?
H. sort -

Hand me
his camp

for the reason that he was savvy enough not to let the bands get mixed.

"I'll take Andy."

"Okay. You know he's in west of here, ~~probably~~ about under the middle of the reef. Let's go see sheepherders."

Outside in the wet morning I discovered the possible drawback to my choice, which was that Andy ~~and~~ Gustafson's camp supplies were in the pack rig that went on Bubbles. That bothered me some, but when I pictured Stanley and his bandaged hand trying to cope with Bubbles for At least in my father's universe matters fell that way. a day, I figured it fell to me to handle the knothead anyway. So I worked the packs onto the mare for Stanley--she was so tame she all but sang encouragement while the load was going on her--and faced the spotty-nosed nemesis. But Bubbles

on horse
seemed no more snorty and treacherous than usual, and with Stanley taking a left-handed death grip ~~holding his bridle and~~ ^{again} on the bridle and addressing a steady stream of threats into the horse's ear, and with me staying well clear of hooves while getting the packsacks roped on, we had Bubbles loaded in surprisingly good time.

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

I suppose now hardly anybody knows that horseback way of life on a trail. Even in the situation I was in, that morning was a scene to store away. Pointed west as I was, the horizon of the Rockies extended wider than my vision; to take in the total of peaks I had to move my head ~~as far as I could through an arc~~ to either side. It never could be said that this country of the Two didn't offer enough elbow room. For that matter, shinbone and cranium and all other kind, too. Try as you might to be casual about a ride up from English Creek into these mountains, you were doing something sizable. Climbing from the front porch of the planet up into its attic, so to speak.


And this was a morning I was on my own. Atop my own horse and leading a beast of burden, even if the one was short-legged and pudgy and the other too amply justified the term of beast. The twin feelings of aloneness and freedom seemed almost to lift me, send me up over the landscape like a balloon. Of course I know it was the steady climb of the land itself that created that impression. But whatever was responsible, before long I could look back out onto the plains and see the blue dab of Lake Frances, and the water tower of Valier on its east shore--what would that be: fifty miles away, sixty? Somewhat closer was the bulge

of trees which marked where Gros Ventre sat in the long procession of English Creek's bankside cottonwoods and willows. I liked to think I could ~~pick~~ ^{single a} out the tiny toothpick-point which was the top of the Catholic steeple there amid the Gros Ventre grove, but realistically that was mostly imagination.

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

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

~~The constancy of a forest is an illusion, though:~~
~~One thing about a forest, though: trees too are mortal and they~~
 come down. About in the middle of one of the straight tilts of trail between switchbacks, there lay a fresh downed one poking out over our route, just above



~~There was a downed tree poking out over the trail, just above~~
~~the height of a horse. Because of the steep hillside it~~ ^{made} ~~was an~~
~~awkward place to~~ ^{try} ~~do any chopping,~~ and I didn't have a saw of any
 sort. Besides, I was in no real mood to do ~~any~~ trail maintenance
 for my father and the United States Forest Service. I decided I'd ^{need} ~~have~~ to get off
 and lead Pony and Bubbles through. But given the disposition of
 Bubbles, I knew I'd ^{damn well} ~~better~~ do it a horse at a time.

I tied Bubbles' lead rope to a middle-sized jackpine--doubling
 the square knot just to be sure--and led Pony up the trail beyond
 the windfall. "Be right back with that other ^{crowbait} ~~senofabitch,~~" I assured
 her as I ^{looped} ~~tied~~ her reins ^{around} ~~to~~ the leftover limb of a stump.

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

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

Bubbles didn't like the prospect of the downed tree when we got
 there. I could see his eyes fix on the shaggy crown limbs overhead,

and his ears lay back a little. But one thing about Bubbles, he didn't lead much harder when he was being reluctant than when he wasn't.

I had him most of the way past the windfall when somehow he managed to get a hoof ^{too close} ~~way~~ in against the hillside, where it brushed against a ~~broken~~ ^{dangling straight} broken branch ^{tree} hanging down from the trunk. The along that side of him and then branch whisked in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch, and Bubbles went straight sideways off the mountain.

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

I can't say how far downslope I ^{flew} ~~hit~~, but I was in the air long enough to get good and worried. Plummeting sideways as well as down is unnerving as hell, your body trying to figure out how to ^{travel} ~~go~~ in

And a those two directions at once. A surprising number of thoughts fan out in your mind, such as whether you are most likely to come down on top of or under the horse below you and which part of you you can best afford to have broken and how long before a search party and why you ever in the first place--

I landed standing up, though. Standing about shin-deep into the sidehill, which had been softened by all the rain.

Horse nostrils could be heard working overtime nearby me, and I discovered the lead rope still was taut in my hand, as if the plunge

off the trail had frozen it straight out like a long icicle. What I ~~saw~~

~~saw~~ was first, though, was not Bubbles but Pony. A horse's eyes are big

anyway, but I swear Pony's

were the size of Lincoln Zephyr headlights as she peered down over

the rim of the trail at Bubbles and ~~me~~ all the way below.

"Easy, girl!" I called ^{up} to her. All I needed next was for

Pony to get excited, jerk her reins loose from that stump and quit

the country, leaving me down here with this tangled-up packhorse.

"Easy, Pony! Easy, there. Everything's gonna be--just goddamn dandy."

Sure it was. On my first individual outing I had rolled the

inveterate packstring, even if it was only one ~~goddamn~~ jughead of a horse named

Bubbles. Great wonderful work, campjack McCaskill. Keep on in this

brilliant way and you maybe someday can work your way up to moron.

Sure it
was.
On my 1st
outing I
had rolled
packstring
even if it
was only
one goddamn
jughead
of a horse
named B.

all way
below

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Now I had to try to sort out the situation. A little below me
on the sidehill, Bubbles was floundering around ^{a little} and snorting a series
of alarms. The favorable part of that was that he was up on his feet
not only up, but showing a greater total of vigor than he had during
the whole pack trip so far. So Bubbles was ~~intact~~, ^{in one piece,} I ~~was~~ ^{seemed to be} intact, and
the main damage I could see on the packs was a short gash in the canvas
where something ~~had~~ snagged it on our way down. Sugar or salt was
trickling from there, but it looked as if I could move a crossrope
over enough to ~~close off~~ ^{pinch} the hole ^{shut.}

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

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

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

Bubble's downhill excursion had broken the lash cinch, the one that holds the packs into place on a horse's back. So I had a packhorse whole and ~~is~~ healthy---

and my emotions about Bubbles having survived in good ~~health~~ ^{fettle} were now getting ~~extremely~~ ^{radically} mixed--but no way to secure ~~the~~ ^{his} load onto him.

I was going to have to ride somewhere for a new cinch, or at the very least go get this one repaired.

Choices about like Canada Dan's menu of mutton or sheep meat, those.

Stanley by now was miles away at Preston Rozier's camp. Besides, with his hand and his thirst both the way they were, I wasn't sure he would be much of a repairer anyway. Or I could ~~get~~ ^{climb} on Pony, head back down the trail all the way to the English Creek station, and tell that father of mine to come mend the fix he'd pitched me into.

That second notion ~~had~~ ^{held} appeal of several kinds. I would be rid of Stanley and responsibility for him. I'd done all I could, it was in no way my fault that Bubbles had schottished off a mountaintop. Most of all, delivering my predicament home to English Creek would serve my father right.

Yet when I came right down to it, I was bothered by the principle of anyone coming to my rescue. There was that about this damned in-between age, too. I totally did not want to be in the hell of a fix I was. ^{Yet somehow} but I just as totally did not relish resorting to anybody else to pluck me out of it.

So I got to wondering. There ought to be some way in this world to contrive that ^{damn} cinch back together. "If you're going to get by in the Forest Service you better be able to fix anything but the break of day," my father said every spring when he set in to refurbish all

the English Creek equipment. ^{Not that I was} ~~I wasn't~~ keen on taking him as an example just then, but--

No hope came out of my search of Bubbles and the packs; any kind of thong or spare leather was absent. The saddlestrings on my saddle up there where Pony was I did think of, but couldn't figure how to let go of Bubbles while I went to get them; having taken up mountaineering so passionately, there was no telling where Bubbles would crash off to if I wasn't there to hang onto him.

I started in to look myself over for possibilities. Hat, ~~slicker~~ ^{joseph coat,} coat, shirt ~~no~~ [:] help. Belt--though I hated to think of it, I maybe could cut ~~that~~ ^{it} up into leather strips. No, better, down there: ~~boots~~ my forester boots, a bootlace: a bootlace just by God might do the trick.

By taking a wrap of Bubbles' lead rope around the palm of my left hand I was more or less able to use the thumb and fingers to grasp the lash cinch while I punched holes in it with my jackknife. When accomplished I had a set of them on either side of the break, I threaded the bootlace back and forth, and at last back and forth, ~~and~~ tied it to make a splice. Then, Bubbles' recent uppermost in my mind, standard of behavior ~~occurring to me,~~ I made one more set of holes farther along each part of the cinch and wove in the remainder of the bootlace as a second splice for safety's sake. ~~I~~ ^{now} had a boot gaping open at the top like an unbuckled overshoe, but the cinch looked as if it ~~would~~ ^{ought to} lift a boxcar.

Now there ~~remained~~ only the matter of getting Bubbles back up where he had launched from.

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Probably the ensuing ruckus amounted to only about twenty minutes of fight-and-drag, though it seemed ~~some~~ hours. Bubbles would take a step and balk. Balk and take a step. Fright or exasperation or obstinance or whatever ^{other} mood can produce it had him dry-farting like the taster in a popcorn factory. Try to yank me back down the slope. Balk again, and let himself slide back down the slope a little. ~~Some~~ Sneeze, then ~~another series.~~ fart ~~some more.~~ Shake the packs in hope the splice would let go.

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

I sat for awhile to recover my breath--after tying Bubbles to the biggest tree around, with a triple square knot--and sort of take stock. There's this to be said for exertion, it does send your blood tickling through your brain. When I was through resting I directly went over to Bubbles, thrust an arm into the pack with the canned goods and pulled cans out until I found the ones of tomatoes. If I ever did manage to get this expedition to Andy Gustafson's camp I was going to be able to

say truthfully that I'd had lunch and did not need feeding by one more shepherd. Then I sat back down, ~~my~~ opened two cans with my jackknife, and imbibed tomatoes. One thing about canned tomatoes, my father every so often said during a trail meal, if you're thirsty you can drink them and if you're hungry you can eat them. Maybe, I conceded, he was right once in his life.

—

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

Andy's band was spread in nice fashion along ~~and in the~~ both sides of a timbered draw. If you

have the courage to let them, sheep will scatter themselves into a

slow comfortable graze even in up-and-down country. But it takes a

herder who is sure of himself and has a sort of sixth sense against

coyotes and bear. Les Withrow claimed that the best herder he ever

had on the Two, prior to ^{Pete} ~~Pet~~ Hoy, was an irrigator he'd hired ⁱⁿ ~~one~~ of

the war years when he couldn't find ^{body} ~~any~~ else. The guy never had

herded before and didn't even take much interest in the band of sheep;

What he did was ride the canyon and shoot at everything that was just a little suspicious. If it was black, a burnt stump, he'd have to blaze away at it. Tending his camp this one time, I happened to look up over onto the opposite ridge and I said, "Say, there's something over there that kind of resembles a bear." Jesus, he jumped for that rifle and BOOM! BOOM! After he got those touched off he stopped to take a look. "No," he says, "no, I guess it ain't, it didn't run." While he terrorized

anything shaggy ~~while~~ the sheep did pretty much as they pleased, and Les said that year's lambs ^{were just beautiful,} ~~came down from the mountains~~ averaging ⁹¹ ~~83 1/2~~ pounds.

^{of Andy's} These sheep in contentment along this draw were going to yield the

Busby brothers some dandy poundage, too. They would need to, to offset

^{jumpy} Canada Dan's band.

Andy Gustafson had no trove of dead camased ewes, nor any particular complaints, nor even much to say. He was wrinkled up in puzzlement for awhile as to why it was me that was tending his camp, even after I explained as best I could, and I saw some speculation again when he noticed me slopping along with one boot unlaced. But once he'd checked through ~~his~~ the groceries I'd brought to make sure that a big can of

coffee and some tins of sardines were in there, and his weekly newspaper as well--Norwegian sheepherders seemed to come in two varieties, those whose acquaintance with the alphabet stopped stubbornly with the X they used for a signature and those ~~men~~ who would quit you in an instant if you ever forgot to bring their mail copy of Nordiske Tidende--Andy seemed perfectly satisfied. He handed me his list of personals for the next campending--razor blades, a pair of socks, Bull Durham--and away I went.

#

—



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

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

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

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

"Preston's on top of things, too," Stanley reported. "Hasn't lost any, and his lambs ^{just} ~~are~~ are looking real good." Plain as anything, then, on the Busbys' allotment there was one sore thumb up here and its name was Canada Dan. # Stanley extended the thought aloud. "Looks like Dan's asking for a ticket to town."

name
1900-
1912-

I didn't follow that. In all the range ritual I knew, and even in

(no 4)

the perpetual wrestle between Dode Spencer and Pete Hoy, the herder always was angling to provoke a reason for quitting, not to be fired. Being fired from any job was a taint; a never-sought smudge.

pursued me on into the cabin.
The puzzle ~~of what Stanley had said~~ As Stanley stepped
to the stove to try rev the fire a little, I asked: You mean Canada
Dan wants to get canned?

smudge
"Looks like. It can happen that way. A fellow'll get in a
situation and try make it worse so he'll get chunked out of it.
My guess is, Dan's feeling thirsty and is scared of this timber as
well, but doesn't want to admit either one to himself. Easier to
blame onto somebody else." Stanley paused. "Question is, whether
to try disappoint him out of the idea or just go ahead and can him.
I will say that Canada Dan is not such a helluva human being that I
want to put up with an entire summer of his crap."

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

Naturally the day was too far gone for us to ride ~~down~~^{home} to English Creek, so I embarked on the chores of wood and water again, at least salving myself with the prospect that tomorrow I would be relieved of Stanley. We would rise in the morning--and I intended it would be an early rise indeed--and ride down out of here and I would resume my summer at the ~~English Station~~^{Creek ranger station} and Stanley would sashay on past to the Busby ~~bro~~ brothers' ranch and that would be that.

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

That'd help, I answered shortly.

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

I waited while Stanley paused to speculate out the cabin~~at~~ window to where dusk was ~~just~~ beginning to deepen the color of the peaks. But I wasn't in any mood to wait very damn long.

~~"Well. I don't like to tell anybody how to wear his boots."~~

~~But if it was me ^{now} -~~

~~I waited while Stanley paused ~~for~~ to speculate out the cabin window to where
work on his cup and the bottle.~~

~~to wait very damn long.
But I wasn't in any mood for much waiting.~~

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

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

I did the halving, and the boots then laced firm as far as my instep. ^{high}
The ^{now} tops pooched out like funnels, but at least I could get around without
^{always} one boot threatening to slop off.

One chore remained. I went over to my bunk, ^{the} reached into my bedroll
and pulled out my clean shirt. The ⁵ remainder of the tail of it, I jackknifed
The ~~tail of it was all but gone~~
off. Stanley's hand didn't look quite so hideous this time when we
rewrapped it, but still was no prize winner.

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

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

--to supper, Stanley finished for me. I had something when I got back from Preston's camp. But you go ahead.

It dawned on me that now that we had tended the camps the packs were empty of groceries, which meant that we--or at least I, because so far I had no evidence that Stanley ever required any food--were at the mercy of whatever was on hand in Stanley's own small supply pack. I dug around in ~~it~~^{there}, but about all I saw that looked promising was an aging loaf of bread and some Velveeta cheese. So I made some sandwiches out of that and mentally marked up one more charge against my father.

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

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Right then, ^{though,} a big idea came to me. ⁴ I cleared my throat to make way for the words of it. ^{Then:}

"I believe maybe I'd ^u have ^{me} one, too."

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

"One of those--doctor visits. A swig."

^{This} That drew me a considerable look from Stanley. He let go of his ~~own~~ cup and scratched an ear. "Just how old 're you?"

"Fifteen," I maintained, borrowing the next few months.

^{get hand to} "Well," ⁴ Stanley did some more considering, but by now I was ^{chances were he wouldn't} figuring out that if he didn't say no right off the bat, he ~~probably~~ ^{at last:} get around to saying wouldn't say it at all. "Got to wet your wick sometime, I guess."

^{Charles was} ^{had his hand over} Can't see how a swallow or two can hurt you." He transferred the bottle to a place on the table nearer ~~to~~ me.

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

⁴ ~~It is just remarkable how a little piece of memory~~ It is just remarkable how a little piece of memory can help you out at the right time. I recalled something I'd ~~heard~~ heard when I was in ^{with my father} once in the Medicine Lodge saloon and repeated it now in salute to Stanley: "Here's how."

only back

said back
"How," Stanley ~~responded~~ automatically.

Evidently I swigged somewhat deeper than I intended. By the time I set my cup ~~back~~ ^{down} on the board table, I ~~was blinking~~ ^{had to blink} hard. While I was at this, Stanley meanwhile had got up to put ~~a stick in~~ ^{shove wood into} the stove while I was at this.

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

I didn't know about that, but the elixir of Doctor Hall did thaw my tongue. Before long I heard myself asking, "You haven't been in this country the last while, have you?"

"Naw."

"Where you been?"

"Oh, just a lot of places." Stanley seemed to review them.

on the cabin wall.

on cabin wall ceiling

"Down in Colorado for awhile. Talk about dry. Half that state was ~~chasing~~ seemed to be blowing around in a chase after the other half. And

Wyoming. I was association rider in that ^{Cody} country a summer or two.

Montana here again for a while, Then back up here, over in the Big Hole Basin. A couple of haying

seasons there." He considered, summed: "Around." Which moved him to another ~~drink~~ ^{drag} from his cup.

I had one from mine, too. "What're you ^{d/} going back up ^{in this country?} here?"

"Taking up a career in tending camp, as you can plainly see. Don't you know, ^{jack,} they advertise in those big newspapers for one-handed raggedy-ass camp tenders? You bet. they do."

they do.

He seemed sort of sensitive on that topic, so I switched around to something I knew would take him in a different direction. Are you from around here originally?

Not hardly. Not a Two Medicine man by birth. He glanced at me.

Like you. Naw, I--



Stanley Meixell originated in Missouri, on a farm east of St.

Joe in Daviess County. As he told it, the summer he turned thirteen

he encountered the down-row of corn--that tumbled line of ~~row~~ cornstalks

knocked over by the harvest wagon as it straddled its way through the

field. Custom was that the youngest of the crew always was put on

the down-row, and Stanley was the last of ~~the~~ five Meixell boys. So,

ahead of him stretched a green gauntlet of down-row summers. Except

that by the end of the first sweltering day of stooping and ferreting

for ears of corn, Stanley came to ^{his} a decision about further Missouri

life. Within the week I was headed out to the Kansas high plains.

If you're like me you think of Kansas as one ^{eternal} ~~big~~ wheatfield, but

actually western ^a ~~Knsas~~ then was cattle country; Dodge City was ^{out} there,

after all. ⁹ Four or five years of ranch jobs ensued for Stanley, and

also a reputation for being able to cope. We were dehorning these

Texas steers one time. There was one old ornery sonofabitch of a

buckskin steer we never could get corralled with the rest. After so

long the forman said he'd pay five dollars for anyone that would bring

this steer in. Another snot-nose kid and I decided we'd just be the

ones and bring him on in. We come onto him about three miles away

from the corral, all by himself, and he was really on the prod.

Tried to drive him and couldn't. Well, then we figured we'd rope
him and drag him in. Then we got to thinking, three miles is quite
a drag, ain't it? So we each loosed out our lariat, about ten feet
of it, and took turns to get out in front of him and pop him across
the nose with that rope. When we done that he'd make a hell of a
big run at us and we'd dodge ahead out of his way, and he choused us
back toward the corral that way. We finally got him up within about
a quarter of a mile of the dehorning. Then each of us roped an end
and tied him down and went into the ranch and ^{hitched} ~~hitched~~ up a stoneboat
and loaded him on and boated him in in high old style. The foreman
was waiting for us with five silver dollars in his hand.

I was surprised at how interesting I found all this. As Stanley
talked ^{my} my cup had drained itself without ~~really~~ noticing. When Stanley
stopped to tip another round into his cup, I followed suit. The whiskey
was weaving a little bit of wooze around me, so I was especially pleased
that I ^{was able to} ~~could~~ dredge back from something I'd overheard yet another toast.
I offered it heartily:

Here's lead in your pencil!

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

48

As happens, Stanley's story went on, something came along to dislodge him from that cowboying life.)

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

Toward the end of that hairwork winter [#] on the 17th of March of
1898, to be real exact, Stanley boarded the first train of his ^{life} life. From someone he had heard about Montana, and a go-ahead new town called Kalispell. Two days and two nights on that train. The shoebox full of fried chicken one of those Kansas girls fixed for me didn't quite descended from the Rockies to last the trip through. As the train ~~approached~~ the Flathead Valley Stanley became curious as to what kind of country he was getting into.

49

Just in east of Columbia Falls I went out on the back platform and
stood there all the way to Kalispell, and you'd never believe it now, *pick,*
but it was solid timber across that valley, forest and more forest just
whirling past that train. Two or three times, I saw cabins in little
clearings. The sight is still clear in my mind because it was early
in the morning and each one of those cabins had a little thread of
smoke rising out of it, *having just got* *ed* *in*
evidently people getting up and starting the
day's fire.

In Kalispell then, you could hear hammers going all over ~~the~~ town.
the community.
For the next few years, Stanley grew up with ~~Kalispell.~~ He worked mill
jobs, driving a sawdust cart, sawfiling, foremaning a lumber piling crew.
during one of the log drives on the
Another spell, he even was a river pig, ~~(explain)...~~
north fork of the Flathead.
Then in '02, a fellow came to me and wanted to know if I would manage
his outfit that winter. He had a contract for hauling lumber from
Lake Blaine into Kalispell. Had a bunch of four-horse teams, about half
Three four-horse teams and
a dozen of them, on this job, and the scissorbill he'd had in charge
was inclined to hang around the saloons and poker tables and let the
setup ~~generally~~ go to general hell. So right away I made it taw that

the drivers had to be at the barn at 6:30 every morning so as to hitch
up and be on ^{that} ~~the~~ road by 7. It'd been their habit under the scissorbill,
see, to get away from the barn late as 8 or 9 o'clock and then trot
those horses out about ten miles to Lake Blaine. Well, hell, by the
time they got out there to the lumber mill naturally they were all warmed
up and then would stand there and get cold during the loading and so of
course were all getting sick and losing flesh. All I did was to make
the drivers walk those teams both ways, and we hever had a sick horse
all that winter.

Teamstering, river pigging, foremanning: all this history of Stanley's
was unexpected to me. I'd supposed, from my distant memory of him having
been in our lives when I was so small, that he was just another camp
tender or maybe even the association rider ~~in~~ back when this range was
occupied by cattle instead of sheep. Then something else peeped in a
corner of my mind. You said when we got here that you'd been to this
cabin before?

Lot of times. I go back farther than it does: I seen it being
built. We were sighting out that fenceline over ~~there~~ there when Dode
Spencer's daddy started dragging in the logs for it.

Being built? Sighting the boundary fenceline? The history was ^{skipping to} ~~getting~~
^{times of the Two} ancient ~~now~~, and it and the whiskey together were compounding my confusion.
What, were you up here with a

~~"I helped draw most of ~~forest~~ them."~~

5/-

✓
This compounded my confusion. ~~"What, were you up here with a Geological Survey crew or something?"~~

The look Stanley fastened on me ~~there~~ now was the levellest thing in that cabin. ⁴ "Jick, I was the ranger that set up the Two."

Surely my face hung open so far you could have trotted a cat through it. It was part of all I could remember, hearing my father and the other Forest Service men of his age mention those original rangers, the ~~one~~ ones who were sent out in the first years of the century with not much more than the legal description of a million or so acres and orders to transform them into a national forest. The forest arrangers, the men of my father's generation nicknamed them. Glen Smith down on the Custer National Forest, Ellers Koch on the Bitterroot, Brady Coover on the Libby, Joe Quisenberry on the Beaverhead; the tales of them still circulated, refreshed by the comments of the younger rangers. ^e

wondering how they'd managed to do all they had. I could imagine that once, young officers in blue and gray had talked in similar tones about Grant and Lee. Everybody in the Forest Service ~~had~~ told forest arranger stories at any chance. But that Stanley

Al K. Hall, Meixell, wronghanded campjack and frequenter of Doctor ~~Al Se-hol~~, had been the original ranger of the Two Medicine National Forest, I had never heard a breath of; and ^{this} ~~that~~ was strange.

#

1

If the foothills of the Two were the edge of habitable country, some of English Creek's people had sited themselves up on the lip of the edge.

wind clouds - can't see wind coming over mountains

Merle Dorrance, ^{a bachelor} who had the place farthest ⁱⁿ up under the mountains, ^{which} homestead land [^] butted right against the national forest line, faced almost combat conditions. In winter the wind slammed through there like you wouldn't believe, and snow drifted until it covered Merle's fenceposts and left him guessing its depth beyond that. Summers, Merle retaliated on at least three fronts. His days he spent ransacking the ranch for hay, mowing every coulee that showed enough grass to fill a sheep's belly. Then each dusk he went over to the north fork with his shotgun and sat sentry for beaver. His contention with beaver about the north fork--Merle of course wanting water for his hay coulees, ^{the beaver insisting} ~~they figuring~~ they deserved it for their dams and lodges--was never-ending.

Mink have got all the reputation, but these buggers outbreed them all to hell, Merle said in half-admiration. His third field of contention, though, made the beaver battle look like a skirmish. Bears. Merle was a burly man with a big low skape jaw his neck sort of sloped up into, in a way that always reminded me of a picture of a pelican. The notion of him out after a bear was strange enough to be amusing, that pelican jaw in pursuit of, say, a half-ton grizzly. I

2
suppose the bears never saw the entertainment in the situation, though,

remorselessly
for Merle trapped them ~~relentlessly~~ ^{remorselessly}. More than once my father veered off from some little stand of timber where Merle had laid poles to keep

livestock out and nailed up a sign saying WATCH OUT BEAR TRAP to warn

humans; in there would be a can of bacon grease dangling over a huge

steel trap, or if the pole pen showed disturbance, in there would be

perpetrated
the bacon grease bait and the trap and a damn ^{ed perturbed} ~~upset~~ bear. No man's land,

my father called Merle's neighborhood of the Two, and gave it the widest

berth he could.

Next to Merle's place George and Aggie ~~Emrich~~ ^E ran a shirt-tail outfit, a few cattle and a little

hay and a broken-backed barn for the benefit of both. The Emrichs

lived on terms no one else could penetrate, let alone savvy. About

99 99/100ths of the talking for the two of them was done by ~~Mag~~ ^{Aggie,} and it was all pretty general.

Whatever might have been going on in George's head got translated by

her. ^{this time} George figured we'd try lumber on that shed roof that keeps

ablowing off, ^{in her near-baritone,} she would declare, ^{his wisdom was} as if George were dead and being

recalled. Which may, in fact, just have been habit with ~~Mag~~ ^{Aggie,} for

she'd been a widow when she married George, and her first husband,

Tom Felton, she always referred to as "the other one."

in her near-baritone

The third of the ranches on our into-the-mountains route was Walter Craig's. Although he was ~~much~~ the oldest of these North Fork ranchers Walter was

much the newest to the area. Only three or four years ago he had moved here from down in the Ingomar country in the southeastern part of the state, where he had run several bands of sheep. I have never heard of a setup like it before or since, but Walter and a number of other Scotch ~~5~~ sheepmen, dedicated bachelors all, lived there in the Ingomar Hotel and operated their sheep outfits out of their back pocket, ^{and hat,} you might say.

Not a one of them possessed a real ranch, just grazing land they'd laid their hands on one way or aⁿ other, plus wagons for their herders, and of course sheep and more sheep. Away each of those old Scotchies would go once a week, out from that hotel with boxes of groceries in the back of a Model T to tend camp. For whatever reason, Walter pulled out of hotel sheep tycooning--my father speculated that one morning he turned to the Scotchman next to him at the table and burred, Jock, for thirrrty yearrs ye've been eating yourr oatmeal aye too loud, got up and left for old Flatley good--and bought the ~~so~~ ranch ~~here~~ here for next to nothing.

The general opinion was that the isolation up here under the mountains had bent these people, as a prevailing wind will hunch a tree. Walter Craig for instance would have nothing to do with banks; the ~~shaky~~ theory ran that whatever money he had was planted around his place in Mason jars. (Although, as my father pointed out, who's to say Walt's not just a helluva lot smarter about banks than the rest of us.) Merle's beaver and bear fixations, George and Aggie's one-tongued conversation: they could be spoofed at, but generally by persons who had no idea what it took to survive in the very shadow of the Two's mountains.

1

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

I knew better than to have my mother call me time number three.

not description of station, - kitchen

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

The word always ^{will} ~~does~~ draw an audience.

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

after pace - a short sentence

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

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

Actually, that sort of thing was starting to occur to me. I was fourteen.

Fourteen, hard on to fifteen, as I once heard one of the beerhounds

around the Medicine Lodge saloon in Gros Ventre describe that complicated age.


But there wasn't any of this I was ^{about} ~~going~~ to confide to my mother, who
 now instructed: "When you're done there you'd better bring in that
spare chair from your bedroom." She ^{cast} ~~gave~~ the pots and pans atop the
 stove a calculating look, then as if having reminded herself turned
 toward me and added: "Please." ~~When I went~~ ^{left} ~~By the time I was out of~~ the room
 she already had rattled a fresh stick of wood into the kitchen range
 and ^{was} ~~starting~~ ^{in an} ~~to do~~ whatever it is cooks like her do to ^{connive} ~~multiply~~ contrive
^{food} ~~a supper~~ for three into ^{a supper} ~~one~~ for five.

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

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

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

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



By the time I came back into the kitchen with the ^{spare} chair which had been serving as my nightstand, Alec and Leona were arriving through the doorway, him inquiring Is this the McCaskill short-order house? and her ^{beaming} ~~looking~~ up at him as if he'd just recited all of Shakespeare. I will always admit, they were a pair to look on. By now Alec was even taller than my father, and had the same rich red head of hair; atop each of them, a blood-sorrel flame which several hundred years of kilts and skirts being flung off had fanned into creation.

^{necessarily}
Resemblance isn't ~~duplication~~,

though, and I see in my mind's eye that there was the message of that ~~as~~ as promptly as my father and my brother were in the same room that evening. Where my father never seemed to take up as much space as his size might warrant, Alec somehow took up his share and more. I noticed this now, how Alec had begun to stand in that shambly wishbone way a cowboy adopts, legs and knees spraddled farther apart than they need to be, as if hinting to the world that he's sure longing for a horse to trot in there between them.

Alec was riding for the big WW ranch, his second summer as a hand there.

It had caused some ruction, his going back to cowboying instead of

taking a better-paying town job this summer, such as driving truck for

Adam Kerz as my mother particularly suggested. But the past year or so

he had had to shut off his ears to a lot of opinions my parents had

about his cowboy phase. Last Fourth of July when Alec showed up in

rodeo clothes which included a red bandanna around his neck, my father

asked him: What, is your Adam's apple cold? ^{4/} Not that you could ever

dent Alec for long. I have told that he had a head-up ^{way} ~~went~~ of riding,

as if always trying to see over a ridgeline in front of him. A young

king might ride that way going home from his coronation. How I should

have said it is that on horseback Alec looked as if he was riding the

world itself, and even afoot as he was here in the kitchen he seemed

as if he was being carried to where he wanted to go. Which, just then,

I guess you could say he was. Everything had been coming up aces for

him that year. Beating Earl Zane's time with Leona. Riding for the ~~big~~ ^{Double W} this green high-grass summer.

~~WW ranch, his second summer as a hand there.~~ And in the fall he would

be headed for Bozeman, the first McCaskill ^{to manage} to go to college. Already ^{enough of} my parents had pieced together the financing of it, a loan from my

my mother's brother Pete Reese, and my father arranging a part-time

job for Alec with a range management professor at the college who knew

us from having spent some time up ^{here} ~~her~~ studying the Two. College

cost was going to take some exerting, ^{by us all,} but then, what didn't? Besides,

Alec hadn't hit anything in life yet that had stopped him. We none of

us ^{held} ~~had~~ a doubt that four years from now, ^g he would step out of Bozeman

as an engineer, if he listened to my father, or as an architect, if my

mother's ambition for him prevailed. ^{Alec} ~~He~~ was a doer, as people said of

him. My own ^{earliest} ~~first~~ memory of this brother of mine was the time--I must

have been four, ^g and him eight--when he took me into the pasture where

the ranger station's saddle horses were grazing and said Here's how you

mooch them, Jick. He eased over to the nearest horse, waited until it

put its head down to eat grass, then straddled its neck. When the horse

raised its head Alec was lifted, and slid down the neck into place on its

back and simultaneously gripped the mane to hang on and steer by. Now


you mooch that mare he called to me, and I went beside the big chomping animal and flung my right leg over as he had, and was elevated into a bareback rider just as he was.

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


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

not ~~A~~ Leona too was a horseperson, I guess you'd call it these days. Tollie When ~~Tom~~ Zane held his auction of fresh-broke saddle horses in Gros Ventre every year, he always enlisted Leona to ride them into the auction ring because there is nothing that enhances a ~~horse~~ ^{saddle pony} more than a good-looking girl up there on his back.

Right now, though, ^{entering} ~~in~~ my mother's kitchen ^{Leona's} ~~her~~ role was to be milk and honey. Which she also was ^{first-rate} ~~good~~ at. A ~~man~~ ^{stepped} kind of pause ~~came~~ in with Leona whenever she arrived somewhere, a long breath or two or maybe even three during which everyone seemed to weigh whether her hair could really be so gold, whether her figure actually lived up to all it advertised on first glance. I noticed once that her chin was pointier than I like, but by the time any male looked Leona over enough to reach that site, he was prepared to discount that and a lot more.



We still were getting used to the idea of Leona, the three of us in the family besides Alec. His girls before her were from the ranch families in here under the mountains or from the farm folks east of Gros Ventre. Nor was Leona in circulation at all for the past few years, going with Tollie Zane's son Earl as she had been. But this past spring, Alec's last in high school and Leona's next-to-last, he somehow cut Earl Zane out of the picture. Swap one cowboy for another, she might as well have stayed put, my mother said at the time, a bit perturbed with Alec about his intention for the Double W job again and also, I can see back now, about the instant enthusiasm both Alec and Leona were bringing to their romance. Well, it will happen: two people who have been around each other for years and all of a sudden finding that nobody else in history has ever been in love before, they're inventing it all themselves. At least it was that way with Alec and Leona then.



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

Working hard?

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

Just times I've seen you hardly working.

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

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

I suppose every household has some habited way to begin a meal.
 Ours, though, said grace only once every three hundred sixty-five days,
 and that one a joke--my father's New Year's Day invocation in that
 Scotch-preacher burr he could put on: Hogmanay that's born today, gi'
us a year o' white bread and nane o' your gray--and other than that,
 a McCaskill meal started at random, the only tradition to help yourself
 to what was closest and pass the food on clockwise.

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

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

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

I had the bright idea this conversation could benefit from my help, so I chimed in: Counting starts tomorrow, Alec. Dad and I'll be up there a couple three days. Remember that time

you and I were along with him and Spencer's herder's dog Moxie got full of porcupine quills and we both--"

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

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

2 seemed
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 three day

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~~7-23-54~~

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OK

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than
this
#

Melander dabs that bit of stick to the New Archangel earth;

Baranof Island he draws, and the Queen Charlotte group, and Vancouver

Island, and fourth, last, this coastline between the Strait of Juan

de Fuca and the mouth of the Columbia River. ^{One hundred fifty} ~~900~~ miles lie between

strait and river, although Melander did not ^{know} ~~have~~ that number when

he drew, nor does Karlsson have so much as a ~~measured~~ cross-eyed guess

of it as he cadences in the dark off this ^{final} ~~last~~ coast. The miles of this shore,

Even had either of these unlikely canoe captains known the total,

the miles of this shore do not much resemble those of the Alaska-

British Columbia coast to the north, that crammed seaboard of waterside

mountains and proliferated islands. In certain profiles, in the ancient

pewtered light of continent and ocean alloying, this cousin coast ^{does} ~~stands~~

handsome; but strong in detail rather than soaring gesture. Tidepools,

arches of rock, the tidemark creeping higher on its beaches with each

are they feeding
"How ~~do they feed~~ at the Double W?" My mother, here. "Leona,

take some more ham and pass it on to Jick. He goes through food like

a one-man army these days." I might have protested that too if my plate

hadn't been nearly empty, particularly of ^{fried} ham.

It's--filling. The question seemed to put Alec a little off

balance, and I ^{noticed} ~~saw~~ Leona provide him a little extra wattage in her next gaze at him.

disc.
Y-L. saw
give him a

"So is sawdust," said my mother, plainly ^{awaiting} ~~waiting for~~ considerably more report.

"Yeah, well," Alec fumbled, I was beginning to wonder whether cowboying had dimmed his wits, maybe driven his backbone up ^{through} ~~into~~ the

judgment part of his brain. "you know, it's usual ranch grub." He

sought down into his plate for further description and finally ^{proclaimed} ~~said~~

again: "Filling, is what I'd call it."

"How's the buttermilk business?" my father asked Leona, I suppose

to ^{steer} ~~get~~ matters off Alec's circular track. Her parents, the Tracys,

ran the creamery in Gros Ventre.

"Just fine," Leona responded along with her flash of smile. She

seemed to be on the brink of saying a lot more, but then just passed


a full share to my father and another
that smile around to the rest of us, ~~a share~~ to my mother and then one

to me that made my throat tighten a little, ^{then} letting it rest last and

^{coziest}
~~warmest~~ on Alec. She had a natural ability at that, producing some

pleasantry ~~and~~ then lighting up the room so you thought the remark

amounted to a whole hell of a lot more than it did. I do envy ^{a that knack} ~~smoothness~~ in
^{a person} ~~people~~, though likely wouldn't have the patience to ^{use} ~~practice~~ it myself even
if I had ^{it} ~~the knack~~.



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

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

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

"How come?"

Even yet I don't know why I said that. I mean, I was plenty old enough to know why people got married. There were times, seeing Alec and Leona mooning around together, when I seemed to savvy more than I actually had facts about, if that's possible.

Focused as he was on how our parents were going to respond,
the philosophy question from my side of the table jangled Alec.

"Because, because we're--we love each other, why the hell do you think?"

~~about notice~~

"Kind of soon in life to be so certain on that, isn't it?"

suggested my father.

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

"When's all this taking place?" my father came up with next.

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

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

"Yeah. It's what I want to do." The unsaid part of this was
huge, more colossal than anything I had ever felt come into our kitchen
huge: Alec was choosing against college.
before. Alec was choosing against college.

"Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle

Stiff, and I for one Will Not--"

as big as
anything I
had ever felt
in our fam.

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

"You two did, at first."

"We starved out at it, too."

We ain't going to starve out. Alec's grammar seemed to be
 cowboyifying too. Walt'll let me draw ahead

on my wages for a few heifers this fall, and winter them with the rest
of the outfit's. It'll give us our start."

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

I don't see there's any what's what about it, Alec declared.

People get married every day.

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

Mom, now damn it, listen--

We all better listen, my father tried again. →

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"Leona, we got nothing against you. You know that." Which was somewhat short of true in both its parts, but I'll delve into that situation a little later. "It's just that, Godamighty, Alec, cattle have gone bust time after time these last years. That way of life just has changed. Whether anybody'll ever be able to start off from scratch in the cow business and make a go of it, I don't see how--"

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

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

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

with that litany of the local optimists.

"Last year was better than the one before," Alec defended. "This

one looks better than that."

"And if about five more come good back-to-back, everybody'll be

almost to where they were fifteen or twenty years ago."

Dad--Dad, listen. We ain't starting from fifteen or twenty years

ago. We're starting from now, and we got to go by that, not whatever
the hell happened to--to ^{any} ~~some~~ body else.

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

That's as maybe. But we got to start. Alec looked at Leona as
if he was storing up for the next thousand years. And we're going to do
it married. Not going to wait our life away.

We aren't
starting from
15 or 20 yrs
ago. We're
starting from
now.

1

Les Withrow's sheep were late, I don't know whether because of a ~~late~~^{slow} start by his herder or if it just was one of those mornings when sheep are reluctant. I had learned from my father to expect lateness, because if you try to follow some exact time when you work with sheep you will rapidly drive yourself loony.

I might as well go up over here and have a look at that winter-kill, my father decided. A stand of pine about ~~half~~^{half} a mile to the north was showing the rusty color of death.

How about you hanging on here in case the sheep show up. I won't be more than an hour. He forced a grin. Think about how to grow up saner than that brother of yours.

This whole family could stand some thinking about, I thought in reply but didn't say. My father climbed on Mouse and went to worry over winter-kill on his forest.

I took out my jackknife and started putting my initials into ~~the~~^{bare} fallen ~~on~~ log I sitting on. The J ~~wasn't too bad~~^{wasn't too bad} ~~was easy enough~~^{needed} but the c's of McC ~~had~~^{needed} to be carefully done. So that ~~was absorbing~~^{absorbed me, to}

the point where I was startled by the first blats of the Withrow sheep.

I headed on down through the timber ^{on foot} to help bring them to the counting

vee ^{could} a sheepman ~~might~~ have the whole Seventh Cavalry pushing his

band along ^{and he'd still} ~~but always~~ seem ^{of} glad ~~for~~ further help. Les Withrow

^{spotted} ~~saw~~ me and called, "Morning, Jick. That father of yours come to his

senses and turn his job over to you?"

"He's patrolling to a winter kill. Said he'd be back by the

time we get ^{up} to the vee."

"At the rate these sonsabitches want to move ^{along} this morning, he's

got time to patrol the whole Rocky Mountains. ^{This was} ~~Les~~ said ~~this~~ loud

by Les figured alone. enough ~~that~~ I ~~know~~ it was not ~~just~~ for my benefit. Sure enough,

an answer ^{shot} ~~was~~ out of the timber to our left: "You might just remember

the sonsabitches are sheep instead of racehorses." Into view over

there came Les's herder, Pete Hoy. For as long as I had been ac-

companying my father on counting trips and I imagine for years before,

Les and Pete ^{Hoy} ~~had~~ been wrangling with each other as much as they wrangled
their sheep.


"Hello ~~there~~, Jick. Don't get too close to Les there, he's on the
prod this morning. ~~Wants~~ the job done before it ~~gets~~ started."

insert
this was
spotted
by
that
figure

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

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

That set all three of us laughing as we pushed the band along, for
one of the anthems of the Two was Les Withrow's lament about staying on
and on in the sheep business. According to Les, both the sheep and the
humans who had anything to do with them would have shown Job true affliction.



no 4

This one time, the herder I'd had lost the band and was sitting in the wagon quivering that the bear were gonna get him, so I fired him and then was so hard up for a new herder that I hired a guy right

off the street there in Gros Ventre. Never'd herded sheep before, but

Well, he ^{must have} stood ~~about~~ six-six or so, said he was game to. ~~He was about big enough to eat hay~~ about big

enough to eat hay, and I guess I figured that if nothing else, he

might be good bear-wrestling material. So we got up there onto the

range and I happened to look down and see he was wearing oxfords.

"Where's your other shoes?" I say. "Got none," he says. ~~Well~~ I told

him to go off along the mountainside and look for the sheep while I

^{to try} rode up on top of the reef. Of course it started in raining, and fog,

and cold and miserable. No sheep, anygoddamnwhere. ~~Well~~ I'd been up

there most of the afternoon when all at once my horse stopped dead.

Couldn't get him to move. So I climbed off and walked ahead about

fifteen or twenty feet to take a look, and here there was a cliff that

dropped off about eight hundred feet, right down the north end of the

reef onto ^{Billy} ~~the~~ Creek. If the horse hadn't had good sense we'd've dove

right off that. So that was enough hunting sheep for that day, and when

I got back to the wagon the big guy was in there feeding his face and

he says, "I'm gonna have to have new shoes." Walking in those rocks up

there had just tore those oxfords all to hell. So, okay, I told him

I'd go to town in the morning and bring him out some damn shoes.

"What size do you take?" "Thirteens," he says. Drove into Gros Ventre
first thing the next morning, and do you think there was a shoe in the
whole damn town that big? I ended up going all the way to Conrad to
get a pair. Got back up onto the range about noon, the guy was sitting
in the wagon waiting and eating up the groceries. So I had this gonna-be
herder, with a pair of shoes I'd had to buy him out of my own pocket
as an advance on his wages, if he ever stuck with the job long enough
to earn that much wages, and still no sheep. So I sent him off around
the mountainside the other way from yesterday, and I started working
the timber on horseback, and of course here comes the rain again, harder
and colder than ever. I kept saying to myself, "This is the end of the
sheep business for me. If ~~then~~ I ever find those damn sheep this time,
this is it." About four hours of that and ^I~~we~~ finally came onto the sheep.
So I got the big guy over there and told him, "All right, now you got
something to herd, push the sonsabitches back down toward camp," and I
rode down to the wagon to try dry out. I remember standing in there
some of the water out of them,
over the stove, all my clothes draped around trying to get them dried out,
standing there with goosebumps all over me and saying, "This is it. This

does it. I am going to get out of the sonofabitching sheep business."

That was about fifteen years ago and yet here I am, still in the ^{sonofabitching} sheep business. God, what a man puts himself through.

On up the mountainslope Les and Pete ^{Hoy} and I shoved the sheep. It took a while, because up is not a direction sheep particularly care to go, at least at someone else's suggestion. Sheep seem perpetually leery of what's over a hill, which I suppose makes them either terrifically dumb or terrifically smart.

My father was waiting for us at the counting vee, and after greetings had been said all around among him and Les and Pete Hoy,

Les handed my father a gunny sack with a couple of handfuls of cottoncake in it, said Start 'em, Mac, and stepped ^{around} ~~back~~ to his side of the counting gate.

Up at Palookaville, where the dozen bands that summered on the north end of the Two entered the ^{all at the same place} mountains, there was an actual counting corral. But here on the ^{spread-out} English Creek range the count was done on each allotment through a vee made of poles, ^{spiked onto trees,} the sheep funneling through while my father and the rancher stood beside the opening at the narrow end and counted. To head off arguments my father used a tallywhacker, a gadget about the size of a pocket watch which recorded a hundred each

time he clicked it. There weren't all that many disputes, though, the English Creek sheepmen and my father generally getting along like hand and glove.

41 ~~the narrow gate~~ ~~vee,~~
My father went through ~~into the corral,~~ to the front of the sheep. He shook the sack in front of him, where the sheep could see it, and let a few cottonseed pellets trickle to the ground. Then it came, that sound not even close to any other in this world, my father's coax to the sheep: the tongue-made ~~prrrrr~~ ~~prrrrr~~ ~~prrrrr~~, approximately a cross between an enormous cat's purr and the ~~cooing of a dove.~~ ~~rattling buzz of a rattlesnake.~~ Maybe it was all the rs built into a Scotch tongue, but for whatever reason my father could ~~do~~ ~~croon~~ that luring call better than any sheepman on the Two. Les and Pete and I watched now as a first cluster of ewes, attentive to the source of the prrrrs ~~prrrr purr~~, caught the smell of the cottoncake. They ~~swarmed~~ scuffled, did some ewely butting of each other, as usual to no conclusion, then forgot rivalry and swarmed after the cottoncake. As they snooped forward on the trail of more, they led ~~the~~ other sheep out the gate and started the count. You could put sheep up Mount Everest if you once got the first ones going so the others could turn off their brains and follow.

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

to the enterprise

Not that I had much to add, when Pete Hoy was on hand~~s~~ at the back of the sheep. I ^{always} watched ~~him~~ Pete all I could without seeming to stare to try learn how he mastered those woolies as he did. Someway, he was able ~~to~~ just to look ewes into behaving better than they had in mind.

One old independent biddy or another would step out, size up her chance figure out who she was facing and of breaking past Pete, then shy off back into the rest of the bunch.

This of course didn't work with lambs--^{who} they have no more predictability ~~to them than chickens in a hurricane--~~ ~~behavior than quicksilver does--~~ but in their case, all Pete had to do

was say Round 'em, Taffy, and his carmel-colored shepherd dog would be sluicing them back to where they belonged.

mod
There was no better herder anywhere than Pete Hoy the ten months of

stayed
the year when he ~~was~~ sober and behind the sheep, and because this was

what
so, Les put up with ~~everything else~~ that was necessary to hang onto him.
after the lambs are shipped and then another one

The sonofagun has to have a binge just before lambing time, go down to

all
Great Falls and get bent out of shape. He's got his pattern down real

pat. The Star Cigar Store, Lena's place, he makes his headquarters, and

for the first week he drinks whiskey and his women are pretty good lookers.

The next week or so he's mostly on beer and his women are getting a

little shabby. Then for about two weeks after that he's on straight

Generally
wine and squaws. ~~Often~~ it took Les three or four trips to Great Falls

to fish Pete out of a spree. I'll get there to Lena's and track him

down and sober him up a little and have him all lined out to bring home,

and ~~then~~ he'll say, "Oh hell, I about forgot, I gotta have ^{ten} five dollars

to go pay a fellow." Then he takes off with that ten ~~dollars~~ and that's

the last I see of him. I wish to hell I had a nickel for every hour

I've spent leaning up against the cigar counter in that joint, trying

that buggin
~~him out.~~ that buggin out. *will*
to wait ~~that instant~~ Jesus, one time I ~~will~~ never forget, I drove

bound and
down there just determined to get him back on the job, and I went into

the Star, and no Pete. Lena told me, "He's around here somewhere, Withrow,

you just wait, he'll blow in here." So I waited. And waited. Leaning
a hole into that goddamn counter. The bar was full of guys, it's^d been
railroad payday, and Lena's whores were working the crowd, Big Tit Lou
and Bouncing Betty and Nora Buffalo and some others. Bouncing Betty
had the first table, right in front of me, and she'd smile like a
million dollars at everybody who came in. And all the time those gandy
dancers were getting more and more boozed up, the place sounded like
sitting there at the bar
Hell changing shifts. So ~~there~~ was this one pretty good-looking gal,
about twenty, ^{one of} ~~in~~ Lena's bunch, and she was well-dressed, in a good gray
suit and I couldn't help noticing her. So did some big brakeman, who
kept buying her booze and putting his arms around her and patting her
back, down a little lower every pat. He must have been a live one,
because this girl wouldn't leave her seat at the bar for anything, I
guess figuring one of the other girls'd pick him off. Eventually of
course she wet her pants. A big wet splotch there in back of her skirt.
I could see this brakeman patting lower and lower until finally, sure
enough, he hit that spot. He had just brought his hand up in front
of his face, trying to figure out how come he's struck water, when Bouncing
Betty got up and came over to me and said, "Withrow, I think you need some
fun. On the house. We'll make it up out of Pete's next wages." I thought
about how I'd been leaning there ~~half~~ ^{two-thirds of}

the night watching all this disgusting stuff, and I thought to myself,

"By God, she is about a hundred percent right. I think Withrow does

need some fun." Right then, wouldn't you just know, in the door comes

goddamn Pete. "You looking for me?" he says. "I'm ready, let's head

on home."

Type as separate page

no #

I was misfortunate enough to come out here to work for old Unk about
the time he bought his first car. A Model T. He figured it was a
wonderful advance, you know. Any time he wanted now he could scoot in
to Gros Ventre and get liquored up. The only thing was, going home
there were two bobwire gates between the county road and the ranch, and
the old bugger'd be so lit up he couldn't be bothered to stop and open
them. Just hit the sonsofguns with that Model T and break them down
and drive on through. And it'd be my chore the next morning to have
to go out and fix those damn gates up. I finally said, by the Christ,
I'm getting a little bit fed up with all this. I went and got me a
couple great big old railroad tie cornerposts, set them way down in the
ground, you know, and then strung just a hell of a stout gate--I put
on six strands of bob and then hog wire over that, and nailed in a
bunch of stays besides. I thought, old boy, that'll fix you. Then
a week or so, and off Unk goes on another spree, and next morning at
the breakfast table he says, "You know, Murray, you sure built some
good gates down there. I had to back up and take a run at them three
times before I could get them broke down."

type as separate page ✓

~~4~~ 7

Ed Van Bebber's parents had homesteaded not far south of Pendroy,
next to the ~~Shle~~ Sheble place. In the summer of 1917 when a four-man
surveyor crew arrived to run the route for the railroad to push north
from Bynum to Pendroy, two of them boarded with the ~~Shle~~ Shebles and the
other pair with the Van Bebbers; probably the best crop either family
ever did get off those homesteads was those surveyors. When the railroad
arrived in a few years it brought with it Ed's vision of his future.
I'd see those cowmen come into Pendroy when they shipped their stock,
they'd be pretty sorry lookers, cook over a campfire and sleep under
their wagons and kind of slink off home the next day. But sheepman,
hell, they'd arrive and ship their wool and then hang around and drink and whoop
and raise general hell, maybe party for three or four days before they'd
drive off in a fancy car of some kind. And five months later they'd
be back to ship their lambs and do it all again. Right then, I
figured the money was in sheep.

1

The day book ^{constituted} ~~was~~ my father's worst bother about being a ranger.

Early on, someone ~~had~~ told him the story of a rider-turned-ranger down

on the Shoshone ^{forest.} Cut short my horses tail and the wind blew all day,

read the fellow's first day book entry. Then with further thought,

he concluded: From the northeast. My father could swallow advice if

he had to, and so he did what he could with the ~~perpetual nag of having to jot~~ ~~daily perpetual jotted~~

^{his activities} ~~reports~~ into the day book. When he did it was entirely another matter.

Two or three weeks he would ^{stay} ~~be daily~~ dutiful, then ^{came} ~~would come~~ a

Saturday morning when he had seven little yellow blank pages to show

for his week, and the filling in would start.

"Beth, what'd I do on Tuesday? That the day it rained and I
worked over the horse stalls?"

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

"I thought that was Thursday."

"You can think so if you like, but you'd be wrong." My mother was
careful to seem half-exasperated about these ^{scribing} ~~sessions~~, but I think she
looked forward to the chance to set my father straight on history, even
if it was only the past week's. "Thursday I baked, and you took a

rhubarb pie for the Bowens when you went to the Ear Mountain station.

Not that Louise Bowen is capable of recognizing a pie."

"Well, then, when I rode to the Billy Peak lookout, that was--

only yesterday? Friday?"

"Today is Saturday, yesterday was Friday," ^{most likely} ^{was glad to confirm} my mother ~~confirmed~~

for him.

When I became big enough to go into the mountains with him for

some days at a time, my father perceived relief for his day book

situation. I think we had not gone a mile along the trail above

the North Fork that first morning when he reined up, said "Whyn't

you kind of keep track of today for me?" and ^{presented} ~~handed~~ me a fresh-sharpened

stub pencil and a pocket notebook.

It did take a little doing to catch onto my father's style. But

after those first days of my reporting into my notebook in the manner

of We met up with Dill Egan on the south side of Noon Creek and talked

with him about whether he can get a bigger allotment to run ten more

steers on and my father squashing it down ~~it~~ ⁱⁿ in his day book to Saw

D. Egan about steer proposition, I adjusted.

1

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

out of all
I hadn't considered this before, but by then the John must already have been amended ~~beyond~~ ^{out of all} recognition, too. At least I ~~have~~ ^{can find} no memory of ever being called that, so the change must have happened pretty early in my life. According to my mother, it next became plain that "Johnnie" didn't fit the boy I was, either. "Somehow it just seemed like calling rhubarb vanilla," and she may or may not have been making a joke. With her you couldn't always tell. Anyhow, the family story goes on that she and my father were trying me out as "Jack" when some visitor, noticing that I was fair-complected but didn't have the freckles they and Alec all did, said something like: "He looks to me more like the jick of this family."

So I got dubbed for the off-card. For the jack that shares only the color of the jack of trumps. That is to say, in a game such as pitch, if spades are led the jack of clubs becomes the jick, and in

the taking of tricks the abiding rule is that jack takes jick but
jick takes joker. I explain this a bit because I am constantly
astonished by how many people, even here in Montana, no longer can play
a decent hand of cards. I believe television has got just a hell of
a lot to answer for.

Anyway, Jick I became, and have ever been. That is part of the
pondering that I find myself doing now; whether some other name would
have shifted my life any. Yet, of what I might change, I keep deciding
that ~~that~~ would not be among the first.

1

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

^{an applebutter}
We had eaten a ~~chokecherry~~ jelly sandwich and a half apiece and were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when a rider appeared at the bend of the trail downhill from us. He was on a blaze-face sorrel, who snorted at the sight of us. A black pack mare followed into sight, then a light gray with spots on his nose and his neck stretched out and his lead rope taut.

2 ✓
"Somebody's new camp tender, must be," my father said.

The rider sat in his saddle that permanent way a lot of those old-timers did, as if he lived up there and couldn't imagine sufficient reason to venture down off the back of a horse. Not much of his face showed between the buttoned-up slicker and the pulled-down brown Stetson, but thinking back on it now, I ~~believe~~ ^{am fairly sure that} my father at once recognized both the horseman and the situation.

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

"Hullo, Mac."

"Thought it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?"

"Still able to sit up and take nourishment. Hullo, Alec or

Jick, as the case may be."

I hadn't seen him since I was five or six years old, yet right then I could have told you a number of matters about Stanley Meixell. That he had once been an often presence at our meals, stooping first

over the wash basin for a cleanse that included ~~his~~ the back of his neck, and then slicking back his hair--I could have said too that

it was ^{crow-}black and started from a widow's peak--before coming to the

table. That unlike a lot of people he did not talk down to children,

never delivered them that phony ~~guff~~ guff such as, "Think you'll ever

amount to anything? That he was taller than he looked on that sorrel,

built in ^{the}~~that~~ riderly way of length mostly from his hips down.

Of his eight or nine years since we had ~~last~~ last seen him, I couldn't

have told you anything whatsoever. So it was odd how much immediately

^{arrived}
~~came~~ to mind about ~~this~~ this unexpected man.

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

It was my father's turn to pick up the conversation. "Heard

you were gonna be campjack for the Busby boys."

"Yeah." Stanley's ^{that} "yeah" was the Missourian slowed-down kind, huskier than it ~~it~~ ought to, as if almost in two parts: yeh-uh. And his voice sounded as if a rasp

had been used ~~across~~ across the top of it. "Yeah, these times, I guess

being campjack is better than no jack at all." Protocol was back

to him now. He asked, "my father, "Counting them onto the range, are you?"

~~"Yeah."~~ ^{Spencer's} Withrow's band yesterday, and Dode ~~Cooper's~~ today."

"Quite a year for ^{feed} ~~grass~~ up here. This's been a million dollar

4 ✓
rain, ain't it? Brought the grass up ass-high to a tall Indian. Though

I'm getting to where I could stand a little sunshine to thaw out with, myself.

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

"Could be." Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just noticing that it continued on from where we stood. "Could be," he repeated. Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father, and it began to come through to me that this conversation was seriously kinked in some way. These two men had not seen each other for the larger part of ten years, so why didn't they have anything to say to one another besides this small-change talk about weather and grass?

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

"Naw, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have sheepherders after my hide."

My father fished out another peach slice and handed me the can to finish. ~~At the same time~~ Along with it came his casual question,

"What was it you did to your hand?"

It took me a blink or two to realize that although he said it in my direction, the query was intended for Stanley. I saw then

that a handkerchief was wrapped around the back of Stanley's right hand, and that he was resting that hand on the saddle horn with his ~~left~~ left hand atop it, the reverse of usual procedure there. Also, as much of the handkerchief as I could see had started off white, but now showed stains like dark rust.

"You know how it is,

~~"Aw,~~ that Bubbles cayuse"--Stanley looked over his shoulder to

the gray packhorse--"was kind of snakey this morning. Tried to kick into next week. me. Took some skin off, is all."

We all contemplated Bubbles. As horses go, he looked capable not just of assault, but ^{maybe} pillage and plunder and ^{probably} ~~maybe~~ arson too. He was ewe-necked, and accented it by stretching stubbornly against the lead rope even now that he was standing still. constellation of dark The ~~nose~~-spots which must have given him his name--at least I couldn't see anything else ^enamable about him--^{just} drew a person's look, but if you happened to glance beyond them, you saw that Bubbles was looking back at you as if he'd like to be standing on your spine. How such creatures get into pack strings, I ^{I suppose} just don't know. ^{Good Help} The same way ~~Hebners~~ get into the human race, ~~I suppose.~~

insert description
 1 *Burke*
 "I don't remember you as having much hide to spare," my father
~~then to Stanley.~~
 said. Then, as if the idea had just ~~walked~~ *strolled* up to him out of the

trees: "How'd you like some company? I imagine it's no special fun
running a packstring one-handed."

Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about
 something he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set
 to remind him of our appointment with Dode ~~Cooper's~~ *Spencer's* sheep when he
 added on:

~~put in:~~ "Jick here could maybe ride along with you."

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

→



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

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

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



"Aw, ~~that~~ well," Stanley began, and stopped. He seemed to be
considering. Matters were passing me by before I could even see
them coming.

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

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

The corner of my eye told me my father ^{suggested} ~~expected~~ a ^{enthusiastic} ~~prompt~~
response to any of this.

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

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

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

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

Well, then. The brown Stetson tipped up maybe two inches, and Stanley swung a slow look around at the pines and the trail and the mountainslope as if this was a site he might want to remember. I guess we ought to get to getting. Got everything you need, Jick?

I had no idea in hell what I ~~might~~^{ad} need for going off into the ^{Rocky} mountains with a one-handed campjack, but I managed to ~~say~~^{blurt}: "I guess so."

Stanley ~~gave~~^{delivered} my father the longest ~~look~~^{gaze} he had yet. "See you in church, Mac," he said, then nudged the sorrel into motion. →

black ^{ugly} and the light gray one
The ~~two~~ packhorses had passed us by the time I swung onto Pony,

and my father was standing with his thumbs in his pockets, looking

at the series of three horse rumps and the back of Stanley Meixell,

reined around onto the trail.
as I ~~rode past him.~~ "Don't forget the day book," I muttered as I
rode past him.

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

#

Any of this of course goes against what my mother forever tried to tell the other three of us. That the past is a taker, not a giver. It was a warning she felt she had to put out, in that particular tone of voice with punctuation all through it, fairly often in our family. When we could start hearing her commas and capital letters, we knew the topic had become Facing Facts, Not Going Around with Our Heads Stuck in Yesterday. Provocation for it, I will say, came from my father as reliably as a dusk wind out of a canyon. Half a day at a time he might spend listening to old Toussaint tell of the roundup of 1882, when the cattlemen fanned their crews north from the elbow of the Teton River to the Canadian border and brought in a hundred thousand head. Or ^{the} ~~a~~ ^{bigger and earlier than that,} tale even before ~~that,~~ the last vast buffalo hunt, Toussaint having ridden up into the Sweetgrass Hills to see down onto a prairie that looked burnt, so dark with buffalo, the herd penned into place by the plains tribes. Strange, but I can still recite the tribes and where ^{they pitched} ~~their~~ camps ^{to surround} ~~were around~~ those miles of buffalo, just as Toussaint passed ^{the lore of it} ~~them~~ to my father: Crows on the southeast, Gros Ventres and Assiniboinés on the northeast, Piegiens on the west, Crees along the north, and Flatheads here to the south.

provocation
in it

commen

great

to
surround

"Something to see, that must've been," my father would say at supper.

"Varick, somebody already saw it," my mother would answer. "What you'd better Put Your Mind To is The Regional Forester's Visit Tomorrow."

Or if she didn't have to work on my father for the moment, there was

Alec when he began wearing a neck hanky and saying he was going to choose cattle over college. That my ^{own particular} knack for remembering, which

could tuck away entire grocery lists or whatever someone had said

a couple of weeks before, made me seem

likely to round out a houseful of men ~~men~~ tilted to the past must have

been the ~~last~~ final tweak. "Jick, there isn't any law that

says a McCaskill can't be as forward-looking as anybody else. Just

because your father and your brother--"

Yet I don't know. What we say isn't always what we can do.

In the time after, it was ^{her} ~~she~~ more than anyone who would ^{and return} return to

where all four of our lives made their bend. "The summer when--" she

would start in, and as if an old three-note trill had been sung, I

knew she was turning to some memory of that last English Creek summer.

We were alike ^{at least} in that, the understanding that such a season of life

provides more than enough to wonder back at, even for a McCaskill.

#

That month of June swam in. In my life until then and only a time or two since, I had never seen the hills come so green, the draws stay so spongy with run-off. A wet May evidently could ^{sweeten} change the universe. Already my father ~~had~~ encountered cow elk drifting up and across the Continental Divide to their calving grounds on the west side. They, and the grass, and the hay meadows, and the benchland crops, all were a good three weeks ahead of season. Which accounted for the fresh mood across the Two Medicine country. They say spring rain in range country is as if someone is handing around halves of dollars bills with the remainder promised at shipping time, and so in the sheepmen, the cowmen, the Forest Service ^{people} personnel, the storekeepers in Gros Ventre, in just everyone that start of June, hope was up and would stay strong as long as the grass did.

Talk even could be heard that maybe we had seen the bottom of the Depression. Last year, after all, ^{after all, a practitioner of no notion said} ~~had been~~ ^{was} a little better than the year before; ⁼⁼ a close point of measurement which managed to overlook that the several years before that had been ^{purely} godawful. The eastern professors who write as if the Depression set in the day ~~the~~ Wall

Street nosedived in 1929 seem not to know it, but Montana had been

on hard times for ten years by then. The winter of 1919-20 delivered

the stockmen terrible losses. As ^{Dode} Jim Cooper, who had the ranch

farthest west up English Creek, used to tell: "I went into that winter

with 4,000 head of ewes and by spring they'd evaporated to 500."

Livestock and crop prices of course ^{had fallen} fell when the war in Europe

ended. And the homesteaders who'd flocked into Montana after the

turn of the century now started flocking right back out again. It's

not much remembered, but half the banks in the state went under in

the early Twenties. You could still see that right in Gros Ventre,

the English Creek Valley National Bank in business there on the

east side of the main street, and ^{catty} kitty corner across from it the

West Pondera Stockmen's closed down and boarded over all those years.

So it was time hope showed up.

tripped
over
itself

mostly

drought-
hoppers
(see
Malone)

about same time
fell
began to fall
because of
and 1. war

but eh
it up

come

"Supper's in the creek," my father said. "Hide behind a tree to bait your hook, or they'll ^{swarm} ~~come~~ right out of the water after you."

Up here ~~in~~ its north fork English Creek wasn't very big. Most places you could cross it in a running jump. But ~~it~~ ^{stream} had ^{pretty} some riffles and pools with fish in them...

Each of us took our hat off and unwound the fishline and hook wrapped around the hatband. On our way up, before the willows gave out we'd cut a pair of decent length, and now notched them about an inch from the small end, tied each fishline snug into each notch so it couldn't pull off, and were ready for business. My father still had a reputation in the Forest Service from the time ^{some} ~~one~~ of ~~another~~ District One muckymuck who was quite a dry-fly fisherman asked him what these English Creek trout took best. Those guys of course have a whole ^{catechism} ~~liturgy~~ of hackles and ~~OO and OO and OO and OO~~ ^{muddlers and goofus bugs and stone flies} and nymphs and midges. ~~and OO.~~ "Chicken guts," my father informed him.

We didn't happen to have any of those along with us, but just before leaving home we'd gone ~~out~~ ^{near} to the old haystack bottom behind the barn and dug ourselves each a ~~tabax~~ tobacco can of anglegorms.

if fish might
lay in either
or both.

advised

did
but to
much

Why the hell anyone thinks a fish would prefer a dab of ~~horsehair~~

hank
(~~deer~~
hair?)

to something as plump as a stack-bottom worm, I never have understood

the reasoning of. ⁹ The fish in fact began to prove that, right then.

I do make the concession to sportsmanship that I'll fish a riffle

as a
riffle
out of a
place...

now and again, and I pulled out my half dozen in the next quarter

hour or so. It pleased me a little that my father, at the pool

^{to loot,} ^{some} he'd chosen, took ~~about~~ five minutes longer to complete his six.

to work
over
to loot

Those little brookies, Eastern brook ~~xxx~~ trout, are among

the best eating there is...

There was a downed tree~~s~~ poking out over the trail, just above the height of a horse. I'd have to get off and lead Pony and Bubbles through. But given the disposition of Bubbles, I thought I'd better do it a horse at a time. I tied Bubbles' lead rope to a tree ~~with~~ ^{with} doubling ~~and doubling~~ the square knot just to be sure--and led Pony up the trail beyond the windfall. "Be right back with that other sonofabitch," I assured ~~him~~ ^{her} as I tied ~~his~~ ^{her} reins to the leftover limb of a stump. ~~was standing with~~ Bubbles ~~had~~ his neck in the one position he seemed to know for it--stretched out like ~~it~~ ^{he} was being towed--and I had to haul hard on his lead rope for enough slack to untie ~~the~~ my knots. "Come on, crowbait," I said as civilly as I could, and tugged ~~Bubbles~~ ^{some} ^{ing} ^{got} ^{him} into motion.

~~He~~ ^{Bubbles} didn't like the prospect of the downed tree when we got ~~up~~ ^{there.} ~~to~~ I could see his eyes fix on the shaggy trunk overhead, and his ears laid back a little. But one thing about Bubbles, he didn't lead much harder when he was being reluctant than when he wasn't.

I had him most of the way past the windfall ~~he~~ when he managed to ~~step on~~ brush against a broken branch hanging down from the trunk. It whisked in across the front of his left hip toward his crotch, and Bubbles went straight sideways off the mountain.

"Just how old're you?"

"Fifteen," I maintained, borrowing ^{the next} ~~a~~ few months.

"Well. I guess a swallow or two wouldn't hurt you." He passed me the bottle.

I swigged somewhat ^{deeper} ~~more~~ than I intended, and was blinking hard when I set the bottle back on the board table. Stanley was ^{feeding} tending the ~~fire~~ stove while I was at this.

"So, what d'you think? Will it ever replace water?"

I didn't know about that, but ^{thaw} ~~it~~ did loosen my tongue. Before long, I heard myself asking, "You haven't been in this country the last while, have you?"

"Naw. ~~4~~ "

"Where you been?"

Wyoming?
"A lot ~~lots~~ of places." He seemed to review. "Down in Colorado for Talk about dry. ^{Then} awhile. ~~And~~ over in the Big Hole Basin, a couple of haying seasons."

He considered, summed: "Around." Which moved him to another drink from the bottle.

I had one, too. "What ~~are~~ you doing back up here?"

"Tending camp, as you can plainly see. Don't you know, they advertise in those big newspapers for one-handed camptenders?"

Got to
7:00
sometime
wet your
neck

Grand
name
007
In Hall

y'know

you
bet.

Alec and I had gone to the South Fork school, along with the children of the ^{families} ranchers along that stretch of English Creek--the Busbys, the ^{Spencer} ~~Cooper~~ girl, ^{the Withrows,} ~~Gronlunds,~~ ^{the Van Bebbers,} our Reese cousins, ~~Van der Wendes,~~ and then of course the Hebner kids who made up about half the school by themselves. Alec got along well enough, but I think the South Fork school did me more good than it did him. You know how those one-room schools are, that the younger students overhear the teacher giving the older ones their lessons. By a fluke, Twyla Hebner and I were the only ones of our age at South Fork, so as a class of two, Mrs. Thorkelson didn't need to spend much time lining us out. By the time Twyla and I reached, say, the sixth grade, ^{in our slack time} we already had heard the geography five times. I still know what the capital of Bulgaria is, and not too many people I meet do. Parts of poems lodged in the mind then, too. "The holiest of all holidays are those kept/by ourselves in silence and apart./The secret anniversaries of the heart."

we didn't
take up
much of
the time to
line us
out as
others.

~~Canada Dan's~~

~~Frank Dant's~~ band was sort of bunched in the ~~timber~~ ^{trees}. A herder

who is good in the timber probably is good in open country too, but not necessarily vice-versa. A herder new to timber country and uneasy about it will dog his sheep, keep them together. I saw Stanley study the way these sheep were crammed along the slope.

~~Canada Dan~~

"Been lookin' for you since day before yesterday," ~~Frank Dant~~

^{goddamn near}
greeted us. "I'm ~~about~~ out of canned milk."

^{near}
"Lucky thing ~~that about~~ isn't the same as out," Stanley said.

~~Canada Dan~~

~~Frank~~ was looking me over now. "You ^{that} ~~the~~ ranger's kid?"

I didn't like the way that was put, and just said back: "Jick McCaskill." Too, I was wondering how many more times ^{that day} ~~today~~ I was going to have to identify myself to people I'd had no intention of getting involved with.

~~Canada Dan~~

^{targeted on}
~~Frank~~ ^{again.} turned back to Stanley. "Got to have a kid along with you now? Must be gettin' on in years, Stanley."

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

~~Canada Dan~~

~~Frank~~ shook his head as if my sanity was at issue. "He's gonna regret ~~charity~~ ^{goddamn} charity, when he ~~sees~~ ^{goddamn} the ~~chore~~ ^{goddamn} chore we got for ourselves up here."

^{Dan}
"What would that be, ~~Frank~~?"

"About fifteen head of ^{goddamn} dead ones, that's what. They got onto
back.
maybe three days, ~~and~~ ^{and} themselves
some death camas, ~~Poisoned~~ before you could say 'sic 'em.'" ^{Canada Dan} ~~Frank~~

reported all this ~~in~~ as if he was a bystander instead of being
responsible for these animals.

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

"Happened right ^{up} over there," ^{Canada Dan} ~~Frank~~ went on as if he hadn't heard,
gesturing to the ridge close behind him. "Just glommed onto that

death camas like it was ^{goddamn} candy. C'mon here, I'll show ya." ~~Frank~~

The herder took off his coat, tossed it down on the grass, pointed
to it and ~~xx~~ said to his dog: "Stay, Rags." The dog sat on the coat,
facing the sheep, and ~~Frank~~ ^{Canada Dan} trudged up the ridge without
a glance back at the dog or us.

→ I dreaded the way this was trending.

^{Canada Dan}
The place ~~Frank~~ led us to was a pocket of OO-grass meadow with
gray mounds here and there on it. The mounds were the dead ewes.
Even as cool as the weather had been, they were bloated large.

Former
animals,
they were
more.

gesturing
to
ridge
close
behind

even
glancing

dark
camas
or
lupine

more?

"What are we gonna do about supper?"

"I don't just feel like any, right now. You go ahead."

So now things had reached the point where I had lost out even
on my father's ^{scattered} version of cooking, and was going to have to invent

my own. After fighting the stove for awhile to get ^{any real heat out of it} it going, I

managed to ^{warm} heat a can of pork and beans and ate them with some

~~slices of bread smeared with mayonnaise because there wasn't any butter.
unbuttered slices of bread.~~ Frank Dant's cooking must have stuck with

me more than I was aware, ^{as} ~~because~~ I didn't even think to open any

canned fruit for dessert.

S: I seem to
distinctly remember
Canada has
feeding us.

J: That was a
while back.

I defended

I know
there was
be any
butter in
a pack
out of

"That's them," ~~the herder~~ ~~Frank Dan~~ announced. "It's sure good timing

of you fellas to show up, I can stand some help with all that goddamn skinning."

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

~~expounded~~
"Well," Stanley said next. "There's no such thing as one-handed skinning." Although, I thought to myself, there is one-handed tipping of a bottle. He was looking off in some direction carefully away from me. "I can be unloading the grub ~~into the wagon~~ while this goes on. Guess I ought to get at it."

My head
dropped +
I felt said
what was
streaming
from
my head
that time to...
though.

all
some
while

Canada Dan

~~Frank~~ beaded on me. "Don't just stand there in your tracks, kid.

Plenty of these goddamn peltsers for both of us."

So for the next considerable time, I was arm-deep in sheep carcasses,

slicing the hides loose...

Canada Dan

At first I was careful not to work fast, in the hope that ~~Frank~~ would

thereby skin more of them than me. It of course turned out that he had

a similar strategy, and I finally went at it quick as I could, to get it

done with.

Canada Dan's

~~When I finished, Frank's~~ estimate of fifteen turned out to be eighteen. Also,

I noticed that six of the pelts were branded with a bar above the

number, signifying that the ewe was a ~~mother~~ mother of twins. Which

summed out to the fact that besides the eighteen casualties, there

were two dozen newly motherless lambs who would weigh light at shipping

time.

This came to Stanley's attention too as we put the pelts into

the packs. "Guess we know what all that lamb blatting's about, now."

Canada Dan

~~Frank~~ didn't seem to hear this, either.

pelts brought
= a dollar each
Bulky 2000
a dollar each
was worth
up to 1000

I had had
yrs more
slow
disposal than
I had
Begin
raining

change

Have
you
ever
skinned
a sheep?

Instead, he
was
climbing
into
a wagon
to produce
lunch

Canada Dan

Onto the table ~~Frank~~ plunked a metal plate with a boiled chunk of meat on it, followed by a ~~blacked~~ stained pan of what looked like small moth balls. "Like I say, I figured you might finally show up today, so I fixed you a duke's choice of grub," he crowed. "Help yourself ^{yes} to that hominy." Then, picking up a hefty butcher knife,

~~Frank~~ Canada Dan

~~Frank~~ slabbed off a thickness of the grayish greasy meat and toppled it aside. "You can have mutton." He sliced off more. "Or then again there's growed-up lamb." The butcher knife produced a third plank-thick piece. "Or you can always have sheep meat."

add sentence -
Frank
dined...

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

choices
choices.

The report crossed my mind that I had just spent an hour and a half elbow-deep in dead sheep and now I was being expected to eat some of one, but I tried to keep it ^{traveling} moving. ~~Anytime~~ Time, as ^{it's said} they say, was

^{here.} the essence. The only resource a person has against mutton is to eat it fast, before it has a chance to congeal. . . I poked mine into me pretty rapidly, and even so the last several bites were greasy going.

Follow

Stanley by then wasn't much more than getting started.

"Stayin' the night, ain't ya?"

actually,

"Well, no," Stanley said. Maybe there was some hope for him

after all. "We got ~~the~~ all this pack gear to keep dry, so we'll just

go on over to that line cabin ^{down} on Cooper's. Fact is, we better be

getting ourselves over there, if we're gonna beat dark. You ready,

Jick?"

Was I.

"Aw, I'll get it looked at when I get to town." There's some
bag balm in my saddlebag. ^{there. the lid off that} Get ~~that~~ open for me and I'll ^{dab} ~~smear~~ some
on."

Stanley slathered the balm ^{thick} across the back of his hand ~~and~~ and I ^{stepped over}
^{& began to}
rewrapped it for him. He noticed that the wrapping was not the
blood-stained handkerchief. "Where'd you ^{come up with} ~~get~~ that?"

"~~Get~~ ^{off} the tail ~~of~~ my clean shirt."

~~Stanley~~ "Your ma's gonna like to hear that."

I shrugged. Trouble seemed lined up deep enough in these next
few days that my mother's ~~share in it seemed far off.~~ ^{was a long way from having its}
~~turn at it was a long way off.~~

~~turn yet.~~

"Well," Stanley said, ^{moving} ~~looking at~~ his bandaged hand with a wince
he didn't want to show and I didn't really want to see. "Sounds like
we got a ^{deary} ~~wet~~ night ahead of us." The rain was steady now. Stanley

got up and casually went over to the packs. "Guess I'm more foresighted
than I knew," he said, "to bring Doctor Hall along."

"Who?" I asked. Gros Ventre's physician was Doctor Spence, and I
knew he was nowhere in our vicinity.

repeated
"Doctor Hall," Stanley ~~said~~ as he brought ~~up~~ out his good hand

color
with a bottle in it. "Doctor al-co-hol," he ~~pronounced.~~

Out like this, my father tended to survive on whatever ~~came~~ ^{jumped}

out of the food pack first. He did have the principle that supper

needed to be a hot meal, but as for the rest of the day, he was

likely to offer up a couple of slices of headcheese and a can of

plums or peaches ^{as} ~~and~~ breakfast, and if you didn't watch him he might

do the ~~same~~ ^{exact} again for lunch. My mother consequently always

made us up enough slab sandwiches for three days' worth of lunches.

By the third noon ^{in that high air} ~~at these elevations~~ the bread was about dry enough

to strike a match on, but still a better bet than ^{whatever} ~~what~~ my father was

apt to concoct.

We had eaten a currant jelly sandwich and a half apiece and

esp. by
if he
could
fish

whatever
anytime

chocolate

~~We~~ were sharing a can of peaches for dessert, harpooning the slices out with our jackknives to save groping into the pack for utensils, when a rider appeared at the bend of the trail down ~~the~~ hill from us. A sorrel packhorse followed into sight, then a gray with his neck stretched out and his lead rope taut.

"Somebody's ~~Camp~~tender, must be," my father said.

The rider sat in his saddle that permanent way a lot of those old-timers did, as if he was up there because life looked a little better from the back of a horse. Not much of his face showed between the buttoned-up slicker and the pulled-down Stetson, but thinking back on it now, I believe my father at once recognized both the horseman and the situation.

The ~~white animal~~ packstring climbed steadily to us, the ears of the horses up in interest at us and our horses. The rider showed us no attention until he was right up to us.

"Hullo, Mac."

"Thought it might be you, Stanley. How the hell are you?"

Alec or Jick, as the

"Still able to sit up and take nourishment. Hullo, Jick, I guess case may be."

~~it'd be? Alec favors your ma more in looks, as I remember."~~

old: help
tent

Wagon?
gray?

Pony
→
Cordeli
Mound

sharp in
interest

re call

4 I hadn't seen him since I was small, yet I ^{right then} could have described ~~him~~ ^{Stanley Meixell}

to you in a ^{number} ~~couple~~ of ways. That unlike a lot of people, he never
talked down to children, ^{phony guff} met them with that hateful question, "Think

you'll ever amount to anything?" That he had once been a presence

at our meals, stooping first over the washbasin and slicking ^{back} his hair--

I could have told you too that it was OO--before coming to ~~the~~ the table.

neatly

Stanley Meixell was a fairly far memory for me. I couldn't, in fact, have told you anything whatsoever about his eight or nine years since we had last seen him.

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

*It is strange
how much came
to mind of him*

"Heard you were gonna be campjack for the Busby boys."

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

almost in two parts: yeh-uh. And his voice ~~xxxxxxx~~ sounded as if

a rasp had been used on it... "Yeah, these times, ^{I guess} being campjack is

~~"Campjack is~~ better than no jack at all."

Busby
Boys
run 3 bands

or "yuh"?

"Counting them onto the range, are you?"

"Yeah. Haugland's yesterday, and ^{Dode} George Cooper's today."

"Quite a year for grass," ^{This is} ~~Stanley said.~~ "Been a million-dollar
^{ain't it?} rain, ^{to thaw out with,} Though I'm getting to where I could stand ~~in~~ a little sunshine
myself."

"Probably have enough to melt you, soon enough."

"Could be." Stanley looked ahead up the trail, as if just noticing
that it continued on from where we stood. "Could be," he repeated.
Nothing followed that, either from Stanley or my father, and ~~in~~ it
began to come through to me that this conversation was kinked in some
way. ~~Nothing~~ Finally my father offered:

"Want some peaches? A few in here we haven't stabbed dead yet."

^{after my hide.} ^{Naw} "Nope, thanks. I got to head on up the mountain or I'll have
sheepherders cussing me up one side and down the other."

<sup>make
apparent
gm is to S</sup> My father fished out another peach slice and handed me the can
to finish. "What'd you do to your hand?"

I saw then that a handkerchief was wrapped around the back of
Stanley's right hand. The handkerchief had started off white, but
showed stains like dark rust.

seriously
These
men
had
been
each
other
for years
so why
did I leave
how
anyone
to say
besides
small -
chge
talk
weather
to guess

"Aw, that Bubbles ^{cayuse} ~~horse~~"---Stanley looked over his shoulder to the

gray packhorse--"was kind of snakey this morning. Tried to kick me.

Took some skin off, is all."

"How'd you like some company? I imagine it's no ^{special} ~~great~~ fun running a packstring one-handed." ⁴ Evidently my father had gone absent-minded again, this time about something he'd mentioned not ten sentences earlier. I was just set to remind him of our appointment with ^{Dode} ~~George~~ Cooper's sheep when he put in: "Jick here could maybe ride along with you."

"Aw, no, Mac. Jick's got better things to do than haze me along."

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

"Well. I'll be out a couple ^{or three} ~~days~~, you know. Longer if any of those herders have got trouble."

"Jick's ^{s been} ~~be~~ out that long with me ^{any number of times.} ~~anyway~~. And your cooking's bound to be better for him than ~~mine~~ mine ~~was~~ was."

Matters were passing me by before I could even see them coming.

I will always credit Stanley Meixell for ^{putting} ~~saying~~ the next two questions ~~things~~ in the order he did.

"It ought to be up to Jick." Stanley turned to me...

"How do you feel about playing nursemaid to somebody ^{so goddamn} ~~dumb~~ ^{as} ~~enough~~ to get himself kicked?"

The corner of my eye told me my father expected a pretty prompt response to this.

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

Stanley looked down at my father now.

"Mac"
"You double sure it'd be okay?" asked Stanley. # Even I was able to translate that. What was my father going to face from my mother for sending me off campjacking into the mountains with Stanley for a number of days?

"Sure," my father said, as if doubt ^{wasn't worth the breath for it.} ~~had never found its way~~ ^{wrinkling the brain for.}

"Bring him back when he's dried out behind the ears."

"Don't forget the day book," I muttered as I rode past him.


"Thanks for reminding me," ^{my father} ~~he~~ said poker-faced. "I'll give it

my utmost."

The Busby brothers, I knew, ran three bands of sheep on their forest allotment, which stretched north of us from the north fork of English Creek. "Which camp do we ^{head for} ~~go to~~ first?" I inquired.

"~~Canada Dan's,~~
~~Frank Dan's,~~ he's the furthest south. If we sift right ^{couple} along for the next hour ^{or so}, we'll be there."

Stanley's notion of steady progress turned out to be different from mine. It couldn't have been more than ^{fifteen minutes} ~~half an~~ a quarter of an ~~hour~~ after we left my father when



Stanley ~~had~~ reined his horse off the trail into the clearing and the packhorses followed. When I rode up alongside, he said:

~~Jick.~~
~~"You go on ahead, I'll catch up. I got to go visit a tree."~~
"I got to go visit a tree. You keep on ahead, Jick. I'll catch right up."

I had the trail to myself for the next ~~several~~^{some} minutes, and just when I was about to rein around and see what had become of Stanley, he came into sight. "Be right there," he called, motioning me to go on.

He caught up very gradually, though, and in fact must have made a second stop when I went out of sight around a switchback. This time, I was determined to ~~wait~~^{was} until he ~~caught~~^{with me} up. And this time, I could hear him long before I saw him:

"My name, she is Pancho,

I work on a rancho.

I make a dollar a day."

His singing voice surprised me, a clearer, younger tone ~~than~~ than his raspy talk. So did his song.

"I go to see Lucy,

To play with her poosy.

Lucy take my dollar away."

There was a lot of blatting and a kind of uneasiness among ^{these} ~~the~~ sheep.

this
Even though they were on a slope of the entire continent, they seemed
penned.

this herder's

My father told me his last name was something like Canaday,

which I guess accounted for what he was called.

That next afternoon, Friday, was the homestretch of my digging.

It needed to be, with my father due home sometime the next morning.

And so ~~once more unto~~
~~one more time I went~~ into the bowels of the earth, so to speak,

Taking down with me into the outhouse pit an old short-handled lady

shovel Toussaint Rennie had given my father and a bucket to pack the dirt out with.

My mood was first-rate. My mother's ~~performance~~^{discourse} from the evening before still occupied my thinking. The other portion of me by now was accustomed to the pit work, muscles making no complaint whatsoever, and in me that feeling of endless stamina you have when you are young, that you can keep laboring on and on and on, forever if need be. The lady shovel I was using was perfect for this finishing-off work of

To make it handy
dabbing dirt into the bucket, ~~for handiness~~ in his ditch-riding,

Toussaint always shortened the handle and then ground off about four

inches of the shovel blade, ~~making it into~~^{cutting it down} a light implement about

two-thirds of a normal shovel but which still, he proclaimed, "carries

all the dirt I want to." And working as I had been for a while each day

1A

without gloves to get some good calluses started, now I had full

benefit of the smooth old shovel handle in my bare hands. To me,

calluses have always been one of the marks of true summer. ~~My Body and~~

~~soul, I could not have been better than right then.~~



13

How long I lost myself to the rhythm of the lady shovel and ^{the} bucket,
I don't know. But definitely I was closing in on the last of my project,
bottoming the pit out nice and even, when I stepped toward my ladder to
heft up a pailful of dirt and found myself looking into the blaze face
of a horse. And above that, a hat and grin which belonged to Alec.

"Going down to visit the Chinamen, huh?"

Why did that get under my skin? I can run that remark ^{of Alec's} through
my ears a dozen times now and find no particular reason for it to be
rilesome. ~~I'd likely have commented something similar,~~ in my brother's ^{lofty}
I'd likely have commented something similar.
position. But evidently there is something about being come upon in
the ^{unhinge} very bottom of an outhouse hole that will ~~dander~~ me, for I ~~said~~ snapped
right back to Alec: ^AYeah, we can't all spend our time ^{roosting} sitting on
top of a horse and looking wise."

Alec let up on his grinning at that. "You're a little bit owly
there, Jicker. You maybe got a touch of shovelitis."

I continued to squint up at him and had it framed in my mind
to retort "Is that anything like wingwangwoo fever?" when it dawned
on me that Alec was paying only about half-attention to our conversation
anyway. His gaze was wandering around the station buildings as if he

2

✓

hadn't seen them for a decade or so, yet also as if he wasn't quite seeing them now either. Abstracted, might be the twenty-five cent word for it. A fellow with a lot on his mind, most of it blonde and warm.

find out:

One thing did occur to me to ask. ~~ask~~ "How much is 19 times 60?"

"1140," replied Alec, still looking absent. "Why?"

"Nothing." Damned if I was going to bat remarks back and forth with somebody whose heart wasn't in it, so I simply asked, "What brings you in off the lone prairie?", propped an arm against the side of my pit and waited.

Alec finally recalled that I was down there and maybe was owed some explanation for the favor of his presence, so ~~he~~ ^{he} announced: "I just came by for that ~~wine~~ ^{town} shirt of mine. Need it for ~~the~~ rodeo day."

*four
hit*

Christamighty. The power ~~of~~ ³ of mothers. ~~It had been about 26 hours~~ ^{Barely a full day had passed} since Mom forecast to Pete that it would take the dire necessity of a shirt to draw Alec into our vicinity, and here he was, shirt-chaser incarnate.

It seemed to me too good a topic to let him have for free. "What, are you entering the pretty shirt contest this year?"

Now Alec took a squint down at me from the summit of the horse, as if I only then really registered.

on him. "No, wisemouth, the calf ~~roping~~ ^{roping}." Hoohoo. Here was going to be another Alec maneuver just popular as ~~hell~~ ^{all} with our parents, spending money on the entry fee for calf ~~roping~~ ^{roping}.

"I guess that color of shirt does make calves run slower," I deadpanned. The garment in question was dark purplish, about the shade of chokecherry juice, distinctive, to put it politely. "It's in the bottom drawer there in our--the porch bedroom." Then I figured since I was being helpful anyway, I might as well ~~xxx~~ clarify the terrain for ^{also} ~~him~~. "Dad's in Missoula. But maybe you'd already heard that, huh?"



But Alec was glancing around in that absent-minded way again, which was nettling me a little more every time he did it. I mean, you don't particularly like to have a person choosing when to ~~ignore~~ phase in and out on you. We had been brothers for about 14 5/6 years, so a few seconds of consecutive attention didn't strike me as too ^{angry} much to expect of ~~him~~ Alec. ~~Didn't happen, though.~~ Evidently so, though.

^{more}
^{was in}
^{good}
^{around}
^{mod}
you. He had reined his horse's head ^{up} to start toward the station ^{before} when he thought to ask: "How's Mom's mood?"

"Sweet as pie."

~~Good enough.~~ He might as well know there was an early limit

on my aid to this visitation of his. "How's yours?"

~~I~~ I got nothing back from that. Alec simply ~~With that Alec passed from sight, his horse's tail giving a last~~

little waft as if wiping clean the field of vision which the pit

framed over me. ~~But~~ ^{as} I was reaching down to resume with my bucket, though,

of earth ⁴¹ I heard the hooves stop and the saddle creak. "Jicker?" Alec's voice came.

"Yeah?"

"I hear you been running the mountains with Stanley Meixell."

While I knew you couldn't have a nosebleed in the English Creek valley without everybody offering you a hanky for a week afterward,

it had never occurred to me that I too was ^{automatically} part of this public pageant.

I was so surprised by Alec knowing of my Stanley sojourn that I could

only send forth another "Yeah?"

"You want to be a little more choosey about your company, is all."

"Why?" I asked earnestly of the gape of the pit over me. ~~Today~~ Two days ago I was hiding out from Stanley in this very hole like a bashful badger, and now I sounded like he was my patron saint. "What the hell have you got against Stanley?"

No answer floated down, and it began to seem to me that this brother of mine was getting awful damn cowboyish indeed if he looked down on a person for tending sheep camp. I opened my mouth to tell ^{him} something along that line, but what leaped out instead was: "Why's Stanley got everybody in this damn family so spooked?"

Still nothing from above, until I heard the saddle leather and hooves again, moving off toward the ranger station.

—

→

The peace of the pit was gone. Echoes of my questions to Alec drove it out. In its stead came a frame of mind that I was penned seven feet below the world in a future outhouse site, down here, ~~in a hole~~ while two members of this damn McCaskill family were resting their bones inside the ranger station and the other one was gallivanting off in Missoula. To each his own and all that, but this situation had gotten considerably out of proportion.

The more I steamed, the more a dipper of water and a handful of gingersnaps seemed necessary to damper me down. And so I climbed out with the bucket of dirt, flung it on the pile as if burying something smelly, and headed into the house.

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the station.

"Your mind is still set," my mother was saying as I came through
the doorway ^{into the kitchen.}

Alec, but warily.

"Still is," ~~Alec~~ agreed. Neither of them paid me any particular

attention as I dipped a drink from the water bucket. That told me

^{plenty} something about how ^{hot and heavy} intense the conversation was in here.

"A year, Alec." So she was tackling him along that angle again.

Delay and live to fight again another day. You could try college
for a year and decide then. Right now you and Leona think the world
begins and ends in each other. But it's too soon to say, after just
these few months."

"It's long enough."

"That's what Earl Zane likely thought, the day before Leona dropped
him for you." That seemed to me to credit Earl Zane with more thought
capacity than he'd ever shown. Earl was a year or so older than Alec,
and his brother Arlee was a year ahead of me in school, and so far as
I could see the Zane boys were living verifications that the human head
is mostly bone.

"That's past history," Alec was maintaining.

41 I punctuated that for

him by popping the lid off the Karo can the ginger snaps were kept in.

Then there was the sort of scrabbling sound as I dug out a handful.

And after that the little sharp crunch as I took a first bite. All

of which Alec waited out with the ^{too-patient} ~~forced~~ annoyance of somebody held

up while a train goes by. Then declared: "Leona and I ain't--aren't

skim-milk kids. We know what we're doing."

My mother took a breath which probably used up half the air in

the kitchen. "Alec. What you're doing is rushing into trouble."

You can't get ahead on ranch wages. And just because Leona is horse-

happy at the moment doesn't mean she's going to stay content with a

ranch hand for a husband."

"We'll get by. Besides, Wendell says he'll boost my wages after we're married."

This stopped even my mother, though not for long. "Wendell Williamson," she said levelly, "has nobody's interest at heart but his own. Alec, you know as well as anybody the Double W has been the ruin of that Noon Creek country. Any cattle ranch he hasn't bought outright, he has sewed up with a lease from the bank--"

"If Wendell hadn't got them, somebody else would have," Alec recited.

"Yes," my mother surprised him, "maybe somebody like you. Somebody who doesn't already have more money than he can count. Somebody who'd run one of those ranches properly, instead of gobbling it up just for the sake of having it. Alec, Wendell Williamson is using you the way he uses a handkerchief to blow his nose. Once he's gotten a few years of work out of you"--another kitchen-clearing breath here--"and evidently gotten you married off to Leona, so you'll have that obligation to carry around in life, too--once he's made enough use of you and you start thinking in terms of a ^{real} raise in wages, down the road you'll go and he'll hire some other youngster--"

"Youngster? Now wait one damn min--"

"--with his head full of cowboy notions. Alec, staying on at the Double W is a dead end in life."

While Alec was bringing up his forces against all this, I crunched into another ginger



4# snap. My brother and my mother sent me looks from their opposite ~~side~~ sides of the room, a convergence about as taut as being roped with two lassoes simultaneously. She suggested: "Aren't you supposed to be shoveling instead of demolishing cookies?"

"I guess. See you ^{around,} Alec."

"Yeah, ^{Around.} ~~See you.~~"

—

11

Supper that night was about as lively as dancing to a dead march.

~~4~~ Alec had ridden off toward town--Leona-ward--evidently altered not one whit from when ~~he~~ arrived, except for gaining ^{himself} the rodeo shirt. My mother was working ^{out} her mood on the cooking utensils. I was a little surprised the food didn't look pulverized when it arrived to the table. So far as I could see, I was the only person on the place who'd made ^{true} any progress that day, finishing the outhouse hole. When I came in to wash up I considered cheerfully announcing "Open for business out there," but took a look at my mother's stance there at the stove and decided against.
~~not to~~

So we just ate, which if you're going to be silent is probably the best thing to be doing anyway. I was doubly glad I had coaxed as much conversation out ^{of} her last night as I had. I sometimes wonder if life is anything but ^{an} averaging out ~~of~~ ^{one} kind of day and then its opposite, ~~and then it's all over~~

Likely, though, the mother of Alec McCaskill would not have agreed just then that life has its own simple ^{average.} ~~arithmetic.~~ For by the time my mother ~~she~~ washed the supper dishes and I was drying them, I began to realize she wasn't merely in a maternal snit, she was thinking ~~and~~ hard about

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something. And if I may give myself credit, it occurred to me

that her thinking ^{deserved} ~~merited~~ my absence. Any ~~idea~~ new idea anybody in

the McCaskill family could come up with deserved all encouragement.

4 "Need me any more?" I asked as I hung the dish towel. "I thought I
ride up to check on Walter's and fish my way home till toward dark."
~~might fish till dark.~~ The year's longest

day was just past, twilight would go on for a couple ^{or three} ~~of~~ hours yet.

"No. No, go ahead." Her cook's instinct roused her to add: "Make

it a mess big enough for three, your father'll be home tomorrow."

And then she was ^{back} ~~into~~ the thinking.

debated
country
in Beth...

Nothing was amiss at Walter Kyle's place. As I closed the door on that tidy sparse room, I wondered if Walter didn't have the right idea. Live alone and let everybody else knock bruises on one another.

The fishing was ^{as} close to a cinch as fishing can ever be. ~~Now~~
~~that~~ ^{Since} I was using an honest-to-God pole and reel and ~~since~~ it was a feeding time of evening, the trout in those North Fork beaver dams all but volunteered. Do I even need to say out loud that I limited? One more time I didn't owe my father a theoretical milkshake, and there still was evening left when the gill of that fifteenth trout was threaded onto my willow fish hanger and I went to collect Pony from the tall meadow grass where she was grazing.

My mother still was in her big think when I came back into the ranger station toward the last of dusk. I reported that the mess of cleaned fish were in a ^{pan} ~~bucket~~ of water in the spring house, then stretched myself in an obvious sort of way, kissed her goodnight, and headed for the north porch and my bed. I honestly didn't want to be around any more heavy cogitation that day.



That north porch, ^a ~~one the length of~~ ^{affair,} ~~screened-in for summer,~~ had been built to take
 advantage of the summer shade on that side of the English Creek station,
 but in late spring Aled and I ~~had~~ always moved out there to use it as
 our bedroom. Now that he was bunking at the Double W ~~if~~ I of course
 had the room to myself, and I ~~do~~ ^{testify here that} have to ~~say,~~ gaining a private
 bedroom goes far toward alleviating the absence of a brother. ~~Not~~
 just the privacy did I treasure, though. It seemed to me at the
 time, and still does, that a person could not ask for a better site
 than that one for day's end. That north porch made a sort of
 copperwire bubble into the night world. ~~and English Creek~~ Moths would bat
 and bat against the screening, especially if I'd brought a coal-oil
 lamp out with me. Mosquitoes, in the couple of weeks ^{in early} ~~each~~ June when
 they are fiercest, would alight out there and try to needle their
 way in, and there's a real reward to lying there knowing that those
 little whining bastards can't get at you. Occasional scutterings and
^{in the grass} wishes brought news of an owl or skunk working on the fieldmouse
 population, out there beyond the lampshine. Many an evening, though,
 I would not even light the lamp, just use the moon when I went out

to bed. Any bright night filled the width of that porch with the shaggy wall of English Creek's cottonwoods and aspens, and atop them like a walkway the flat line of the benchland on the other side of the water. Out the west end of the porch, a patch of the mountains stood: Roman Reef, and Billygoat and Phantom Woman Peaks on top of it. With Alec's

cot folded away I had room to move mine longways into the east end of the ~~porch~~^{room}, so that I could lie ~~there~~ looking ~~there~~ at the mountains, and ~~get~~^{enjoy} the bonus too that, ~~the morning~~ with my head there below the east sill, the sunrise would overshoot me instead of beaming into my face.

I recall that this was a lampless night, that I was flopping into bed without even any thought of reading for awhile, more tired from the day than I'd realized, when I heard my mother at the phone.



"Max?"

~~Ira~~? I'll do it. I still think your common sense has dried up and blown away. But I'll Do It." And whanged down the receiver as if her words might sneak back out of the telephone wire.

What that was about, I had no clue. ~~Ira~~? ^{Max} The only ~~Ira~~ ^{Max} I could conjure up was Max Devlin, the assistant supervisor at the national forest office down in Great Falls, and why she would be calling him up this time of night just to doubt his common sense, I couldn't figure. But maybe the go-round with Alec had put her into her mood to deliver the Forest Service a little of what she considered it generally deserved. I definitely was ^{not} ~~not~~ going back out there to inquire. Sleep was safer.

4 ~~The next day~~ my father arrived back from Missoula full of sass and vinegar. He always came away from a Region Headquarters session avid to get back to the real planet again.

Even the fact that it was Saturday and he had a blank week of daybook entries to catch up on didn't dent his spirits. "Always" easy enough after one of these ^{Mayoola} ~~Missoula~~ schools. Let's see--Monday: snored. Tuesday, tossed and turned. Wednesday, another restless day of sleep."

Fort Peck crew
As for my handiwork out back, he was duly impressed. "The entire ~~see~~

~~GOH~~

couldn't have ~~done~~^{dug} better."

—

What ought I to tell about the days between then and the Fourth of July? The outhouse got moved in good order, ~~rolling~~^{fitting} over my pit like a hen ~~on~~^{onto} a ~~new~~^{fresh} nest, and I put in another shovel day of tossing the dirt into the old hole. My father combed the Two up, down, and sideways, checking on the fire lookouts and patrolling the allotments to see how the range was looking and siccing Paul Eliason and the CCC crews onto trail and road work and any other ~~improvements~~^{improvements} that could be thought up. Shearing time came and went; I helped wrangle Dode Withrow's sheep in the pens the shearers set up at the foot of the South Fork trail to handle the Withrow and Hahn and Kyle bands, then Pete came and took me up to the Blackfeet Reservation for a couple more days' wrangling when his were sheared out there on the open prairie north of the Two Medicine River. Nothing more was seen of Alec at English Creek. My mother no doubt posted my father about the going-over she had given Alec when he came by for the shirt, although a reaming like that has to be seen and heard to be entirely appreciated.

Beyond that, I suppose the ~~news~~ main news by the morning of the Fourth when the three of us began to ready to go to town for the holiday was that we were going. For my father didn't always get the Fourth of July off; It depended on fire danger in the forest. I in fact was getting a little nervous about this year. The ~~weather~~ ^{cool summer} ~~of the summer~~ ^{itself} turned around on the ~~the~~ last day of June. Hot and sticky. Down in Great Falls they had first a dust storm--people trying to drive in from Helena reported hundreds of tumbleweeds ~~rolling~~ rolling across the highway on Gore Hill--and after that, about fifteen ~~minutes of rain that came down~~ ^{thunderstorm with rain coming down} as if from faucets. But then, the Falls receives a lot of bastardly weather we don't; particularly in summer, its site out there on the plains gives storms a chance to build and build before they strike the city. The mountain weather was our concern, and so much of May and June had been cool and damp that ~~the~~ even this hot ~~start~~ of July wasn't really threatening the Two yet. Final persuasion came from the holiday itself. That Fourth morning arrived as a good moderate one, promising a day warm enough to be comfortable but nowhere near sweltering, and my father said his decision at breakfast: It came complete with a sizable grin, and the words of it were: "Watch out, Gros Ventre. Here we come."

I had a particular stake in a trouble-free Fourth and ~~holiday~~
 parental ~~moment~~, good humor. By dint of recent clean living and
 some careful asking, and I suppose the ~~recent~~ example of son-in-
 rebellion provided ^{to my parents} by Alec, ^{won} I had permission to make a separate
 horseback sojourn into town in order to stay overnight with my best
 friend from school, Ray Heaney. # As I cagily pointed out, "Then the
^{after the Fourth,} ~~next~~ morning, I can just ride back out here and save you ~~an~~ trip into
 town to get me." # "Strange I didn't see the logic of all this before,"
 commented my mother. "You'll be saving us a trip we wouldn't have
 to make if you didn't stay in there in the first place, am I right?"
 But it turned out that was just her keeping in practice. # Of course,
 Receiving
 permission from your parents is not the same as being able to hang
 onto it, and I was stepping pretty lightly that morning to keep from
 inspiring any second thoughts on their part.

^{not} In particular, as much as possible I was avoiding the kitchen and
 my mother's culinary orbit. Which was sound Fourth of July policy
 in any case. A reasoning person would have thought she was getting

As much as possible I was avoiding the kitchen and my mother's culinary orbit. A reasoning person would have thought she was getting ready to lay siege to Gros Ventre, instead of only going in there on a picnic.

My father ventured ~~in~~ through for a cup of coffee and I overheard my mother say "Why I said I'd do this I'll never know" and him respond "Uh huh, you're certainly downright famous for bashfulness" and then her response in turn, but with a little laugh, "And you're notorious for sympathy." As I was trying to dope that out--my mother bashful about a creek picnic?--my father poked his head into where I was and asked: "How about tracking down the ice creamer and putting it in the pickup?"

I did so, meanwhile trying to dope out how soon I could decently propose that I start my ride to town. I didn't want to seem antsy about it; ~~but~~ on the other hand I sure ^{desired} ~~wanted~~ to get the Fourth of July underway.

But here came my father out and over to me at the pickup. Then commemorated himself with me forever by saying, "Here. Better carry some weight in your pocket so you don't blow away." With which, I was handed a half dollar.

I must have looked my startlement. Other Fourth of Julys, if there was any ~~change~~^{ing} spend^{ing} money bestowed on Alec and me, it was more on the order of ~~25¢~~^{10¢}. If there was any.

"Call it shovel wages." My father stuck his hands in his hip pockets and studied the road to town as if he'd never noticed it before. "You might as well head on in. We'll see you there at the park." Then, as if in afterthought: "Why don't you ride Mouse, he can stand the exercise."

41 When you are fourteen you take a step up in life wherever you can find it and meanwhile try to keep a mien somewhere between At last!

and Do you really mean that? I stayed adult and stately until I was behind the barn and into the horse pasture, then gave in to a grin the dimension of a jack-o-lantern's. A by-God full-scale horse, mine for the holiday. In the corner of the pasture where Pony was grazing she lifted her head to watch me but I called out, "Forget it, midget," and went on over to ~~slip~~^{and} the bridle ~~onto~~ Mouse.

—

~~Up on~~ ^{and} Mouse, I scooted right along that road toward Gros Ventre.

He was a fast walker, besides elevating me and my spirits more than

I'd been used to on Pony. The morning--mid-morning ^{and past,} by now--was full

of sun, but enough breeze was following along English Creek for a

person to be ~~just~~ ⁱⁿ pure comfort. The country still looked just glorious.

All the valley of English Creek was fresh with hay. Nobody was mowing

quite yet, except for the one damp green swath around Ed Van Bebbler's

lower field, where he had tried it a week too early as he did every year.

In most ways, then, I was more than ready for the Fourth. A lot seemed to have happened since that evening, back at the start of June, when I looked up and saw Alec and Leona parading down the rise to join us for a family supper. One whole hell of a lot. No longer was I even sure that we four McCaskills ^{quite} were a family. It was time we all had something else on our minds. Alec plainly already did, the way he intended to trig up on behalf of Leona and a calf. And given how my mother was whaling into the picnic preparation and my father was grinning like a Chessy cat about getting the day off from rangering and I was strutting atop this tall horse with coinage heavy in my pocket, the Fourth was promising to the job for the other three of us as well.

to cage 7
up to units
up to 4

Yet in one ^{little} way, this was ^{also} a day I ~~always~~ hated to see come and go.

It might well be asked how I could both hunger for the Fourth and then ^{turn around and}

be leery of it. But the case was this, that for all the glory of the holiday, the Gros Ventre creek picnic and then the rodeo and then the

dance and on top of that my overnight ^{stay} ~~visit~~ with Ray--at my age then,

the day that ^{promised} ~~held~~ all this also meant to me the mid-point of the ^{season} ~~summer~~.

The bend beyond which my English Creek summer would begin to trickle away.

By the calendar ^{this} ~~that~~ wasn't anywhere near true. School had been out

not much more than a month, and there still lay the remainder of July

and all of August and even the front edge of September--which in fact included ^{that 15th} ~~the~~ birthday I was anticipating, two months from this very day--before I would be in a classroom again. Nonetheless the Fourth


seemed the turn of the summer. I sensed, almost the way you can feel a change of weather ^{coming} ~~ahead~~, that faster time waited beyond this day.

^{-and-five/sixths years} ^{possible}
 # Life. Maybe fourteen ~~wasn't~~ the highest ~~ground~~ to view it from ⁹

But I was seeing enough this summer to get at least a beginner's notion of its complications.

 In maybe an hour and a half, better time than I would have thought possible for that ride in from the English Creek station, Mouse and I were topping the little rise near the turnoff to Charlie Finletter's place, the last ranch before town.

From there a mile or so outside ~~of town~~, Gros Ventre looked like a green cloudbank--cottonwood trees billowing so thick that it took some inspection ~~at first~~, to find traces of houses among them. My own hunch is that the cottonwood example was taken from Choteau, the next town south down the highway, where trees were spaced along all the streets early on so that restful tunnels of shade developed with the town. If that theory is correct, it surely follows that the early civic thinkers of Gros Ventre told themselves they could damn well do twice what Choteau ever could; for when they went along Gros Ventre's neighborhood streets they proceeded to plant double. A line of trees along the front yards, then another between sidewalk and street. Then the same colonnade again on the other side of the street. All this



of course had been done fifty or more years before, a period of time that will grow you a hell of a big cottonwood. By now every street of Gros Ventre was lorded over by these twin files of fat gray trunks, so wrinkled and gullied they looked as if rivulets of rain had been running down them ever since the deluge floated Noah. Nor did this tree domination stop there. Together with the original cottonwoods that already rose old and tall along English Creek before Gros Ventre was ever thought of, the streetside plantation produced almost a roof over the town. This cottonwood canopy was particularly wonderful

just before a rain, when the leaves began to shiver, rattle in their papery way. The whole town seemed to tingle then, and the sound picked up when ^{a gust of} ~~the~~ wind ~~arrived~~ from the west ^{ushered in} ~~with~~ the rain, and next the air was filled with the seeth^e of water onto all that foliage. In Gros Ventre, even a dust-settler sounded like a real weather event. ✓



The English Creek road enters ^{ed} town past the high school--one of tan-brick those two-story ~~brown-brick~~ crates that seemed to be the only way they knew how to build ^{high schools} them in those ~~days~~ days--and I nudged Mouse into ^{an even} quicker pace so as not to dwell on that topic any longer than necessary.


We were aiming ourselves across town, to the northeast end where the Heaneys' house stood.

Block on block as we made our way, the trees more than ever looked like the most thriving things around. Gros Ventre of those Depression years looked--I don't know how else to say it but roadworn.

That I can remember this state of appearance in itself says something of the ~~importance~~ attraction of Gros Ventre, for I am

not naturally a person who cares a lot about towns. I suppose the case ^{though,} is that if any town stays with you, it will be the one from your high school years; for good or ill, the details from then last and last, piled up in your memory by your ^{growing} ~~increasing~~ capacity at the time to take them in, to realize that you yourself are lengthening out into a member of the community rather than being merely a waist-high tourist in it. Whatever accounts for it, the look of Gros Ventre then is vivid in me yet. Not a decrepit community, for the neighborhoods had been quite substantially built in the first place: a lot of dignified dormers and tidy picket fences and inviting porches. Nor even really lackadaisical.

Although Gros Ventrians, I suppose like people anywhere, had had to pull back from the earlier boom mood that anybody could come to Montana and take up a homestead and prosper as a farmer, or slap together ~~some kind of a building~~ ^{four walls} and thrive as a merchant (I have always subscribed to the observation Bill Reinking once wrote in the Gleaner, that the one benefit of hard times is ~~that~~ they make you do some things the sensible way you ought to have been doing them all along anyway), I recall no falling off of energy during the Depression. If anything, many people were working harder



than they ever had, contriving like hell to try to make ends meet.

, for instance, Mouse and I were passing
I knew without looking that behind each house ~~there~~ was a vegetable

garden, and the gardens of that time were tremendous, any food that

could be grown was that much less to have to buy. Too, a lot of town

~~families~~ people still raised chickens, and quite a number, the Heaneys among

~~them~~, had a milk cow. Besides doing as much as possible to feed

themselves, people did a great deal of puttering around. Men with

no other job in sight ~~did~~ ^{tackled} house ~~repairs~~, or fenced the yard, or split

wood--almost every back yard held a woodpile like a small hill. The

women planted flower gardens to splash some color into life. So

anything that was a matter of energy, of puttering and contriving,

the hard times didn't particularly quench in Gros Ventre. What had

come to a standstill were the parts of life requiring actual money.

Build or repair something, but then you couldn't afford to paint it.

(That lack of paint, houses fading toward gray and machinery turning

to rust, to me is the ~~time~~ ^{tone} of those Depression years.) Cars got more

and more jalopy-like, the triumph simply was to keep them running.

~~and~~ Whenever somebody moved away, the house or business simply stood there

empty, the life cored out of it.

Just, as I say, a roadworn town. Weathered by all it had been through in those Depression years.

Mouse and I now had crossed Main Street at the bank corner, ^{past} ~~where~~ the First National ~~Bank stood~~, and were into the Heaneys' side of town. An early priest ~~had~~ persuaded the Catholic landowners, who platted this particular neighborhood

to name the streets after the first missions in Montana, which in turn bore the names of ~~many~~ ^{current} saints. This created what the Gros Ventre postmaster, Chick Jennings, called "the repeater part of town," with mailing addresses such as St. Mary St., St. Peter St. and ^{St. Ignatius St.} ~~so on.~~

It was at the end of St. Ignatius St. that the Heaney house stood, a white two-story one with sills of robin's-egg blue. Ed Heaney owned the lumber yard, and so was the one person in town with ^{some} access to paint.

The robin's-egg blue ^{had been} ~~was~~ a shipping mistake by the manufacturer--it to put up against the weather of Montana-- is a shade pretty delicate ~~for western taste~~ and Ed lugged the can

home and made the best of it. ~~It~~ The place looked empty as I rode up, ^{was as I} ~~which I fully~~ expected. 

404F
Heaneys
2-10-1944
in house
no

30

✓

Rather than the creek picnic, the Heaneys always went out to a family shindig at Genevieve's parents' farm, quite a ways east of Gros Ventre on the Conrad road. So with Ray out there, I wouldn't link up with him until the rodeo, and I simply slung my warbag inside the Heaneys' back porch and got back on Mouse again.

I figured I still ought to kill a little time before the creek picnic, plus getting all the use out of Mouse that I could, and so I rode along that far edge of town, out to where the


highway comes in from the south. To me, that is the most interesting approach to Gros Ventre. What might be called the sheep's-eye view, for ~~most~~ every the bands that flowed through town ~~and~~ spring on their way to the Blackfeet Reservation came to Gros Ventre from this direction.

I can't really say that the sheep spent time thinking about this, but for anybody else nearing Gros Ventre, ^{of the} ~~this~~ highway curving down from the southern benchland delivered you into the town in such a way that you had to wonder at first whether the place was anything but cottonwoods and houses. A community where they had forgotten to have a downtown. At least, no sign of any until the road kinked sharply to the right, and



around that bend lay the sudden straight shot of Main Street. A street, let me say, wide enough to turn a freight wagon and an eight-horse team around in, in the early days, and which now made the downtown look bigger than the half-dozen blocks it actually was. ~~On the first~~ Then around another curve, this one to the left, the highway sneaked across the English Creek bridge and out of town to the north, making the route for people traveling through Gros Ventre--or as I have pointed out that the more plentiful visitors were, sheep--a sort of long puzzling Z.

Contained between those civic curves was a community in the same business it had been born to in the early 1870's: supply. The selling of wares. Settlement here dated back to when some weary freight wagoneer pulled in for the night at the nice creekside sheltered by cottonwoods. As the freighters' trail between Fort Shaw on the Sun River and southern Alberta developed, this site became a regular waystop, nicknamed The Middle since it was about midway between Fort Shaw and Canada. (Although some of us also suspect that to those early-day wagoneers the place seemed like the middle of nowhere.) True, the first permanent structure was a more-or-less hotel and definite saloon, put up by a fellow named ^{Luke} Barclay, but before very long Barclay's spa was neighbored by a store, some



other alert freighter having seen that an extra wagon of supplies could be left at The Middle--Gros Ventre-to-be--and draw the business of the cattlemen who were taking up the range north of the Missouri and the Sun. Then grew

the ranches along English Creek and Noon Creek, and with those families a post office and a high school, the Catholic church and then the Presbyterian, and businesses, more and more businesses.

If I put my mind to it, I am capable of reciting every enterprise of Gros Ventre of that Fourth of July day. ~~(This, in itself, says~~

Helwig's grocery and merc, with the Eddy's bread sign in its window.

The Toggery clothing store.

Musgrove's drugstore, with the mirror behind the soda fountain so that a person could sit there over a soda (assuming a person had the price of a soda, not always the case in those times) and keep track of the town traffic

(if you had the price of a soda)
a person could sit there over a soda and keep track of the town traffic

behind him. # Grady Tilton's garage. # Dale Quint's saddlery, and leather repair shop, maybe a

decent description of Gros Ventre of that time was that it still had

a ~~saddlery~~ leather man but not yet a dentist. (A person went to Conrad for tooth work.)



4 Saloons, the Pastime and Spenger's (although Dolph Spenger was a dozen or more years dead.) 4 The Odeon movie theatre, the one place in town with its name in neon script, the other modern touch ~~lent~~ lent by the was its recent policy of showing the Odeon ~~lent to the town was to repeat~~ movie twice on Saturday night--first at 7:30, then the "owl show" at 9. 4 The post office, the one new building in Gros Ventre since I was old enough to remember.

(A New Deal project, ^{this} ~~it~~ had been, complete with a mural of the Lewis and Clark expedition portaging around the great falls of the Missouri River in 1805. Lewis and Clark maybe were not news to postal customers of the Two country, but York, Lewis's Negro slave standing out amid the portagers like a black panther in a snowfield, definitely was.)

Doc Spence's office. Across the empty lot from Doc's, the office of the lawyer, Eli Kinder. (Who, strange to say, was a regular figure in the sheep traffic through this street. Eli was a before-dawn riser and often would arrive downtown just as a band of sheep did. It was odd to see him, in his suit and tie, helping shove those woolies ~~through~~ along Main Street, but Eli had been raised on a ranch down in the Highwood Mountains and knew what he was doing.)

#The sidestreet businesses,

Tracy's creamery and Ed Heaney's lumber yard and Adam Kerz's coal and
trucking enterprise. # The set of bank buildings, marking what might be
called the down of downtown: the First National Bank of Gros Ventre in
tan brick, and cater-corner from it the red brick of what had been the
English Creek



Valley Stockmen's Bank. The Valley Stockmen's went under in the early 1920s when ^{of all} half the banks ⁱⁿ of Montana ^{failed} did,

and the site now was inhabited, if not exactly occupied, by Sandy Stott's one-chair barber shop. The

^{set into} style in banks in those times was to have ^{a fancy doorway in} the door at the corner nearest the street intersection--~~both~~ of Gros ^{pair of} in exactly Ventre's ~~bank's~~ buildings stared down each other's throats ^{Sandy} in this fashion--and when ^{he} took over the Valley Stockmen's building he simply painted barber-pole stripes on one of the fat granite pillars supporting the doorway.

What have I missed? Of course; ~~the Gleaner~~.

Also there on the Valley Stockmen's block, the ^{newspaper} ~~Gleaner~~ office with its name proclaimed ^{ing} on a plate-glass window in the same typeface as its masthead: ^{Gleaner} Next to that, ^{Shaw's} a ~~Pauline's~~ more recent enterprise, Pauline ^{Shaw's} Moderne Beauty Shoppe. The story was that when Bill Reinking, ^{of} the ~~Gleaner~~ first saw his new neighboring sign, he stuck his head in the shop to ask Pauline if she was sure she hadn't left an "e" off Beauty.

^{the business section of} I heard somebody say once that every Western ^{Town} ~~main~~ street he'd ever seen looked as if it originated by falling out the back end of a truck. Not so with Gros Ventre. That is, Gros Ventre never started off from a blueprint, staked off onto the planet before the first outhouse was erected, the way Valier was laid out by ^{its} the irrigation

business section

project bigwigs. But for all its make-do and mix of styles--brick for banks, clapboard for saloons; terra cotta up top if you wanted to sell clothing (The Toggery), an old-style wooden square front (Helwig's Merc) if groceries were your line--to me downtown Gros Ventre held a sense of being what it ought to be. Of aptness, maybe is the term. Not fancy, not shabby. Steady.

Once in a while things are what they seem. As Montana towns go Gros Ventre was an unusually stable one. It grew to about a thousand people when the homesteaders began arriving to Montana in droves,


~~when the homesteaders began arriving to Montana in droves~~
in the first decade of this century. My mother could in her childhood after wagon remember coming to town and seeing wagon~~s~~ of immigrants heading out onto the prairie, a white rag tied on ~~the~~ one spoke of a wagonwheel so the revolutions could be counted to measure the bounds of the claimed land. ~~About 1910~~
and that population total never afterward varied more than a hundred

either way. Nor varied much in quality either, I think it can be

said. Gros Ventre simply tended to

draw people who were there from choice rather than merely lack of
imagination.

Settlers from Scotch Heaven or other homestead areas that played out,
who had come in and found some way to start over in life. Others
who had moved into town for high school for their kids, then stayed
on. The store people; the ranch hands and sheep herders who hung
around to live out their spans when they were beyond work.



The south-to-north exploration Mouse and I were taking through Gros Ventre, I now have to say, had more than sheep-route logic to it. It also saved for the last what to me was the best of the town. Three buildings at the far end of the east side of Main Street: last outposts before the street/highway made its second curve and zoomed from Gros Ventre over the bridge across English Creek. The trio which dealt in life's basics: food, drink, sleep.

The night during our campjacking trip when I was baptizing my interior with alcohol and Stanley Meixell was telling me the history of the Two Medicine National Forest from day one, a surprise chapter of that tale was about the hostelry that held the most prominent site in Gros Ventre. Stanley's arrival to town ^{where he came here to be} ~~as~~ the ranger for the Two was along the route Mouse and I had just done, from the south, and as Stanley rode around the first curve back there and could see along the length of Main Street, ~~here~~ at the far end a broad false-front with a verandah beneath it was proclaiming: