

at least it ^{declares} ~~states~~ Budweiser. Into the saloon we troop. The bartender, sallow figure in sleeve garters, and my mother perched in the lastmost booth pretend each other aren't there as I trek to the m-e-n door.

The drugstore next. Among the sundries there, my mother's triumph is a scarce roll of film for her camera. After paying, she eyes me, gauging how far down in the dumps I am. "We better have ice cream cones," she determines.

Ice cream helps; when did it ever not? But my basic snit was rapidly back. I missed my father at every corner of each day, from his renegade pour of condensed milk into his breakfast coffee to turn it tan as his workshirt, until moonrise when he would burr his voice Scotcher than ever and tell me it was a braw bricht moonlicht nicht. My mother, all at once a single householder in a bareboard cabin ten miles out in the Sonoran desert, with everything there is on her mind, is doing her utmost to fill his absence, I know. But this situation of only one parent...

A carload of Phoenix people interrupts me in mid-mope by depositing themselves on the soda fountain stools with us. We learn from their jabbering to each other that they have driven sixty miles to see the snow

on Yarnell Hill north of town, an excursion my blizzard-bred mother finds so comical that she sneaks a giggle to me between licks on her ice cream. Maybe we can go into the snowman business, my mother and I. If people jaunt from far Phoenix just to look upon snow, what might they pay for genuine mitten-made statuary of the stuff, snow fatsos mocking the saguaros.

Onward to groceries and the mumbo jumbo of ration stamps: Book Four reds, blue C2's, how many red points does butter take, good gosh, twenty-four?

Provisioned, more or less, we embark in the car again, my mother steering as if the traffic is a conspiracy concentrated against the Ford. Wickenburg is an intersection for everything--the Phoenix highway, the California highway, the highway north that we migrated down from Montana, that other earth. CabinsCafeCafeCabinsCafe I watch the chant in neon as my mother conquers the hazards of Wickenburg's main street. The Hassayampa riverbed arrives beneath us, witchy leafless cottonwood trees along its banks. Our errand next is to retrieve some clean clothing from suitcases stashed at the edge-of-town boarding house where we stayed for a few nights before the desert cabin hove into our existence. How

do we do it? In Wickenburg less than a week and already our belongings straddle two places.

Now we face our last destination in town, the one I hate so. My mother's expression is apprehensive, ~~too~~, not to mention child-weary and chore-worn. (A day is shot before I realize it, she has confided to Wally of this go-it-alone treadmill.) As so often in the way she has had to live, this next chore of hers--ours--is medical.

Alongside her, up the savage steps I trudge, braw-bright-moon-light-nicht, the stairstep of chant does not work at all, I go from grumpy to downright cross. I was acquainted with hospitals, don't think I wasn't. In our Montana life my mother's worst asthma attacks meant pellmell dashes into of the Ford ~~through~~ the night, my father rushing us through the black coil of Deep Creek Canyon to the hospital at Townsend, and then a day or two later, her breathing as regular as it ever became, my father and I would fetch her home from the hospital. Hospitals were where parents got substituted into altogether different beings: people who were sick.

Hallway, perpetually a hallway smelling hideously clean. Our footsteps make the hospital sound, doom doom. Now the room with the number on it,

worse even than the smellhall...

My father is sitting in a chair as far as he can get from the hospital bed, dressed and with his stockman Stetson in his lap.

"The medical Jesus says I can go," he tells the two of us in the painted and polished way that only he can. "He claims it'll be the healthiest thing for me and him both if I clear out of here."

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The cure for what had been ailing in my father turned out to be the roulette grace of fate. Here at Wickenburg pop up friends of ours, my parents' nearest neighbors from Montana, an older couple from the ranch next to the Faulkner Creek place. Like us, Allen and Winnie Prescott figured they'd had their fair share of blizzards in the Sixteen country, but very much unlike us, they possessed the family money and genteel level of life to have long since adopted the habit of wintering warm in Arizona. When we made the drive from Alzona Park one Sunday to call on these veteran snowbirds, the Prescotts cast one look at my skin-and-bones father and urged him to do some doctoring with a whiz of a physician they knew there in Wickenburg, they'd help us get settled, be on hand for whatever ensued. As soon as we packed up and removed to Wickenburg, the monthlong skewer

of pain through the middle of my father proved to be not at all the chronic ulcer he'd been treated for in Phoenix, but an appendix seething toward rupture. The Wickenburg doctor hospitalized him on a Tuesday night, extracted the appendix the next morning, and now on Saturday was already turning the impatient patient loose to my mother and me. That's what I call fast work, her pen commends in relief.

This farfetched crossing of paths with the Prescotts probably saved my father's life and definitely it rescued my mother's mood about Arizona. At Wickenburg her ink brightens: Seems good to see somebody we know. The Prescotts were good to us, good for us. I wish I could do better justice of recollection to Winnie, who was ^{as} approximate to me then as in memory: a ranch duchess who did not quite know how to connect with children. I remember only that she would stroll from room to room in their Battle Creek ranch house with her coffee cup in hand as if taking it for a walk. But Allen I can see as if he has been next door these past ~~forty-nine~~ ^{forty-eight} years. Round in the shoulder and middle, squarish of jaw and nose, he resembled a droll upright turtle. Where my father went at ranch tasks in a compelled flurry, Allen entertained himself with them; he thought up a name for

every cow he had and spent the time to teach each one to come running when summoned. My parents were not predisposed to like ritzy cow-naming neighbors, but Allen and for that matter Winnie were so puckish about their own highfalutingness that they were hard not to be fond of. A bit later there at Wickenburg it must have been a sharp loss for my folks when the companionable Prescotts migrated back north to begin spring on their Battle Creek ranch. But they left us with all they could. It was the Prescotts who gave us the desert.

#

The cabin in the cactus-patch foothills wasn't ours and it wasn't even theirs; the place belonged to some Wickenburg acquaintance of the Prescotts who charitably let us cubbyhole ourselves there while Dad recuperated.

Not hot and cold water and so on, but more the ranch style--2 rooms,
but we are just going to use one, my mother described to Wally the bargain castle in the sand. The nice part is it costs no rent.

Fie upon Phoenix, auf wiedersehen to Alzona Park and specters of escaped Germans. Out there where we at first didn't know Joshua from yucca from cholla from ocotillo, the trio of us got up each morning with nothing recognizable around except one another and the weary Ford. Neighbors

now consisted of lizards and scorpions. The mountains wavering up from every horizon around Wickenburg looked ashen, dumpy. The highest lump anywhere around was, gruesomely, Vulture Peak. No pelt of sagebrush to soften this country for us, either; saguaro cactuses, with their spiky mittens out, stubbled the hills. Where the familiar black-green of Montana's jackpines would have shadowed, here the bare green blush of palo verde scarcely inflected the gulches--arroyos--and under every other bristling contortion of vegetation, prickly pears crouched like shin-hunting pygmies in ambush. Even the desert birdsounds had a jab to them, the ha ha of a Gambel's quail invisibly derisive in the bush, the yap of a Gila woodpecker scolding us from his cactus penthouse.

I loved every fang and dagger of it.

Any bloodline is a carving river and parents are its nearest shores. At the Faulkner Creek ranch I had learned to try out my mother's limits by running as fast as I could down the sharp shale slope of the ridge next to the ranch house. How I ever found it out without cartwheeling myself to multiple fractures is a mystery, but the ^{avalanche}~~avalanche~~ angle of that slope was precisely as much plunge as I could handle as a headlong four-

and five-year-old. The first time my visiting grandmother saw one of my races with the law of gravity, she refused ever to watch again. Even my father, with his survivor's-eye view from all the times life had banged him up, even he was given pause by those vertical dashes of mine, tyke roaring drunk on momentum. But my mother let me risk. Watched out her kitchen window my every wild downhiller, hugged herself to bruises while doing so, but let me. Because she knew something of what was ahead? Can it have been that clear to her, that reasoned? The way I would grow up, after, was contained in those freefall moments down that shale-bladed slope. In such plunge, if you use your ricochets right, you steal a kind of balance for yourself; you make equilibrium moment by moment because you have to. Amid the people and places I was to live with, I practiced that bouncing equilibrium and carried it on into a life of writing, freefalling through the language. My father's turn at seeing me toward gravitational independence would come. But my mother's came first and it came early, in her determination that I should fly free of the close coddling she'd had as an ill child. At the Faulkner Creek place she turned me loose in that downhill spree. Here in our second Arizona life,

she daily set me free into the cactus jungle.

Where lessons were quick. One pant cuff instantaneously full of fiendish tiny needles and you know not to brush by a prickly pear again.

The saguaros seemed to welcome me into the desert democracy of light. Morning shadows of several-armed cactus in stretching dance toward Wickenburg, stubby clumps at noon, reversed elongation toward the Hieroglyphic Mountains in honor of evening. Here even I, according to the shadow possibilities of my prowling boy-body and its swoopbrimmed hat, was a hive of wizards.

And so did the Ford play into my newest seizure of imagination, its exaggerated groundcloud of shade the perfect pantomime companion for the game of Allen-Prescott-and-the-runaway-Terraplane. Allen told it on himself, how his Hudson Terraplane--an old behemoth sedan he had cut the back out of, hybridizing it into a kind of deluxe ranch runabout and carryall--hung up on a low shale bank when he was puttering out to fix fence between his ranch and Faulkner Creek. When he got behind the car with a crowbar, his mighty pry liberated the Terraplane but also flung him to his knees. By the time he could clamber back onto his feet the car

was trundling away at a surprising pace. That tale of the Terraplane planing across the terra, Allen in hotfoot pursuit, was tailormade for a lone boy and a suggestible Ford, you just bet it was. In and out of the parked coupe I flung myself, its shadowline and mine the pageant of Allen's frantic chase, a pretend reel of barbwire bucking out and bowling wickedly at his/my shins, mock fenceposts clacketing against each other as they fly out of the bed of the bounding runaway, re-enacted dodging of a five-pound nailbox tipping over, the Terraplane/Ford laying a silver trail of ~~staples~~^{spikes}.

The desert, it is said, makes people more absolute. While I kite around among the cactuses, my father takes on the chore of recuperation, and the indigo of a desert night draws down into my mother's pen.

Everyone else is in bed but I'm not ready to go just yet, so will spend my time writing you. Pretty chilly tonight. Keeps me busy poking wood in the fire....

We are all pretty well at present. Charlie is getting along alright or seems to be, anyway. His side is sore yet, and he has to be careful, but that is to be expected....

This is a good place to rest, & that's what Charlie needs....I

always thought a desert is just nothing, but have changed my mind....

It is really beautiful here, in the desert way....

Got 2 welcome letters from you yesterday. So glad to hear from you,

Wally, and know you're O.K. Was surely too bad about your buddy being

lost in that storm. I don't think any of us have a good idea of what

you guys have to go through.

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Logbook of the Ault, March 19, 1945, off Okinawa:

0814 Sighted enemy plane (Judy) making suicide dive on formation.

Plane was taken under fire and shot down by A.A. fire. Plane fell off

port beam of USS ESSEX....Observed USS FRANKLIN and USS WASP burning at

a distance.

1318 Sighted two enemy planes (Zekes) making attack on formation.

Maneuvered at emergency turns and speeds. Combat air patrol shot down

one distant 5 miles. Other plane made suicide dive on task group and

was shot down by anti-aircraft fire.

2145. . . Covering the withdrawal of USS FRANKLIN, badly damaged

and in tow to westward.

#

March, 1991. I am in Wickenburg again, to write this of us. Now as then, a war is on; this time, American planes are bombing the boots off the Iraqis. Yellow ribbons of hasty patriotism blossom on every streetlight, flagpole, porchpost, in contrast to 1945's here and there glimpses of windows showing gold stars of the war dead. # Compared with Phoenix where an Americanism of another kind, an arterial slum of the dark and poor and addicted, has consumed the Alzona Park housing project without a trace, this town as my mother and father and I met it in World War Two is surprisingly enterable again. Wickenburg then was still mostly burg, with the fancy houses and subdivisions only starting to be poked onto the hills around, but then as now the place banked on the one commodity it knew it had: sun. Basking beside the Hassayampa River composing sonnets for itself--"the wine that is called air" was one trill tried out by the weekly paper while we were there--Wickenburg was likably frank about what it was up to. You didn't need to be the reincarnation of Marco Polo to

recognize that the accommodations along the main street, Wickenburg Way, were there to sieve tourists through, while around the corner along Tegner Street ordinary town life was carried on. Guest ranches were a sideline Wickenburg quickly tumbled to; in a historical blink, Apache territory had given way to Dudeland. Signs for trail rides and chuckwagon dining notwithstanding, my parents must have only ever semi-believed that there existed a class of people willing to pay to mimic, for a few tenderbottom hours at a time, the horseback mode that had governed life at Moss Agate and the Doig homestead and Faulkner Creek.

Requiem for the lariat proletariat. Even then the pools of us were drying up, and we never were many. Maybe cryogenic moments of my parents' existence, museum instances of how she sat small but vivid in the saddle beneath a mountain arch of stone and how he ^{capably} ~~dependably~~ performed in cattle corral and bronc arena, are the only currency by which Berneta and Charlie Doig mean anything to today's world. But coming again to Wickenburg, I find the inscribing shadows of the desert saying much more of them.

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In the cabin of then, my father is mending from his surgery day

by day. He is also growing jumpy, as he tends to do when he doesn't have work in his hands.

We have stuck to cabin routine, except when Dad reports in to the Wickenburg doctor once a week. A Sunday ago, Allen Prescott drove out to say goodbye before their trip home to Montana, so it is Allen who was behind the camera, catching a bit of his own shadow on the side of the cabin, for the only Arizona picture of my mother and father and me together. Dad and I with our workaday hats on (his with that jaunty crimp, mine sitting on me flatbrimmed as a lampshade) while my mother, wearing a striped frock and high heels and with her hair fixed, looks like the one doing the Sunday visiting to this bareboard abode.

Here it is Sun. again, our first visitless week. But even in this pottery landscape we are not as alone as we'd assumed. Regular as breakfast, desert cattle like bony Moss Agate cow ghosts plod past the cabin. My parents keep trying to figure out how many acres, how many miles, of the Sonora each gaunt beef has to range across in a day; the things look like they'd eat the eyebrows off you.

My father and I are on the hoof ourselves, each desert dusk. While

my mother clears up the supper dishes, he and I take his prescribed daily walk. "That doc's favorite medicine is shoe leather," my father has said more than once.

Ever since Dad came out of the hospital I have stayed as close to him as a sidecar, because you never know. Now out we go as always along the road to the foot of the big hill and back, far enough to be dutiful without getting silly about it. Cactus garden to the right of us, to the left of us. Wicks of thorn stand especially sharp in the evening desert light, every saguaro spacing itself prudently away from its neighbors' prickles, all the ocotillos in surprise binge of leaves between their devilwhip barbs. The last of sunlight retreats from us up the foothills and then the ashy mountainslopes. The mountains I have understood to be the Higherglyphics, because obviously they are higher.

"It's going to be a chilly one tonight," my father tastes from the air, and I swear I begin to notice the cool as he is saying it. The feel of existence seems different here from the huge weathers of Montana, the desert temperature instead registering itself degree by degree as if coats of my skin were constantly being added by day and subtracted by evening.

This evening we have barely turned around to start home to the cabin before the wind comes up, strong as soon as it arrives. Around us the entire desert gallops in the sudden blow, the tops of creosote bushes wobbling, the stiff palo verde and mesquite abruptly restless, dust haze mounting into the air between us and the mountains. Everything up and running except the trudging us. For the first time in my life I can walk as fast as my plunge-ahead father, slowed as he is by the incised soreness in his side.

"Wouldn't this just frost your ass," my father mutters as we hang on to our hats, although the wind doesn't seem to me that chilly.

Falling night, the swooping wind, whatever is on my father's mind, all propel us rapidly into the cabin. My mother is not alone.

"Look who I found," she says in a loving tone.

The visitor skeptically sizes up my father and me to see whether we constitute fit company for the likes of himself and my mother, and at last gives us a medium welcome by licking his own nose.

There is a little white slickhaired dog strayed in here today,
an old dog, hasn't been too well fed.

"More like, who found you," my father says in his driest manner.

In his stockman life, dogs had been a natural necessity. Cowdogs, sheepdogs, dogs that were merely dogs and barely even that, the Faulkner Creek ranch had boiled with dogs. So my father got along fine with dogs in their place, which was anywhere but in the house. Or as he had to put it constantly in his years with my mother, not-in-the-damn-house.

Of course I let him in and fed him, you know me.

No neutrals among us, but I was closest. From the time I was big enough to toddle, I possessed a dog of my own, a perfect German shepherd pup who grew up to be a kind of furry gendarme assigned to me as I caromed around next to Faulkner Creek. Pup had lasted until the summer before we embarked to Arizona, when we were living temporarily in White Sulphur Springs. The town had a dog poisoner, some strychninic fiend, and after Pup died in crawling agony before our eyes I was never the same about dogs again. Now I edge up and put in a minority share of petting, but this desert mutt is no Pup.

My father is on that same theme, pointing out that this specimen amounts to more mooch than pooch. My mother, though, is all but pedigreeing

her guest on the spot.

"There you go, yes," as she scratches his mangy ears, "you just want to be petted and petted, don't you," fully doing so.

"Berneta," my father takes his stand. "You're not having that dog with us. We don't need a dog in Arizona."

"I know," says my mother as if she doesn't know any such thing.

"But it's cold out there on that old desert tonight, isn't it, Mooch?

Here, up on the chair, up, Mooch." Professional tramp that he is, the mutt obligingly scrabbles onto the seat of a straightback chair and sits with his head turned toward my mother, who immediately pays off in cookies.

"He gets put back out in the morning," my father tries another declaration. "For good."

The dog looks at my father, gives a sniff, then arranges himself on the chair for a nap. My mother laughs and gets out her letter paper while my father and I settle at the other end of the kitchen table for our other routine of his recuperation. He and I are using his enforced leisure on a jigsaw puzzle of the Grand Canyon, yielded up by the cabin. (Big one, 500 pieces, my mother records appropriately into the letter.

She wisely holds back on helping us except when a piece is so obvious she just can't resist.) Naturally we saw the actual colossus of canyon on our journey from Montana and were properly astonished that the Colorado River, responsible for it all, amounted to a mere brown string of water off in the distance. But whether our own assembling of the Grand Canyon is ever going to catch up with the Colorado's is an open question. The canyon's show of colors, layered as rainbows, lies like chopped up crayons all over our half of the table. This five-year-old me has the unholy patience of a glacier, which means that my father must contend not only with half a thousand puzzle pieces but with my method of torturously trying them one after another in a single amoebic opening. Also, I keep wanting to know how this piece or that looks in terms of his color^fblindness--

"But Daddy, what color do you think it looks like?"

My father chews his lip a lot during our innings at the jigsaw, but he is determined we are going to finish the damned puzzle or know-the-reason-why.

The dog suddenly wakes up, sits up blinking at us as if indignant at the excessive noise of puzzle pieces being moved. My mother puts down

her pen and gives his ears a restorative scratching.

My father has been eyeing the dog as if pretty sure its next trick will be to pick our pockets. But now Dad cocks his head toward the kitchen wall. "Listen a bit, everybody."

Grutch.

The three of us and the dog listen, all right, the very knots in the wall seem to listen.

Grutch grutch.

The sound keeps stopping, then furtively grutching again. A scraping on the desert gravel, whatever this is. Working at--digging under the cabin?

By now my father knows in alarm what--who--this invasion is. And as quick as he knows, my mother and I know. Prisoners of war! More of those German submariners who tunneled out of the Papago Park camp through caliche that the U.S. Army figured was encasing them like vault steel. The SOBs were regular Teutonic badgers.

My father rises out of his chair into whispered action. "Berneta, get in the other room with Ivan and that--" The dog is already gone,

scooted under the bed.

"No," my mother whispers back with utter firmness. "I'm coming with." The time in the Sixteen country when my father tangled with a bear that was marauding nightly into the sheep, he looked up after having thrust the rifle in the bear's ribs for a desperate fatal shot and found my mother standing on the cutbank just above him, holding a lantern, watching the whole show. Now again, for better or worse, she is adding her ninety-five pounds against the submariners of the desert.

"Ivan, then, go in the other room," my father directs.

"But I want to fight the Ger--"

"I-tell-ye, get-in-that-other-room!"

I compromise as far as the doorway to the other room. My father grimly scans the cabin walls, trying to conjure a gunrack and .30-06 rifle out of bare board. GRUTCH, the in-tunneling all but grinds up through the floor.

My father grabs the only weapon at hand, which is the broom, and eases to the door, my mother closer behind him than his shadow.

In the lantern light the lone attacker blinks, as startled to see my father and mother as they are by its incursion.

Then the wandering cow gives a moo and a chew, and goes back to gobbling the potato peelings my mother had dumped in the garbage box, skidding the box bottom across the desert floor with another grutch.

#

My mother and father ribbed each other for days about the cow showdown. Cabin life seemed ready to bloom along with the desert.

We have learned to like Arizona, so far as the country is concerned, my mother at last is able to tell Wally. Probably not coincidentally, her report on my father is also sunny.

Charlie is improving every day. I do so hope he can feel good now.

Meanwhile the issue of the slickhaired dog took care of itself; the next morning after breakfast, the ^{itinerant} ~~tramp~~ pooch demanded to be let out and kept on going.

I still am scooting back and forth from the cabin to the cactus shadow show, fired by my latest chapter of imagination.

Ivan is busy looking for gold. Every rock he picks up he asks Charlie
if it is gold.

Then the weather turned. That last of winter, late March of 1945, Wickenburg as the world's toasty oasis all of a sudden lacked the element of sunshine. Oh, yes, the rains were tinting up the valley of the Hassayampa in rare fashion, as a matter of fact the lushest year since before the war. Everything so green, my mother's pen granted. It wasn't just our outlander imaginations that the saguaro cactuses looked more portly every day; they indeed were fattening on the rain, the precious moisture cameled up inside their accordion-style inner works. But gauge it as you will, such a spate of precipitation still amounts to, well, rainy days. The Wickenburg Sun, trying weekly to convince us its masthead name wasn't a fib, resorted to running the words of a faithful annual visitor who claimed that as chilly and rainy as this season was, he still would not trade the north half of Maricopa County (i.e., Phoenix pointedly excluded) for the whole blooming state of California.

Plainly this desert climate was ^a more complicated proposition than we had thought. My mother and father started working at the weather in earnest, telling each other that a little cloud cover now maybe was no bad thing, shade in the bank, so to speak, for they'd also been hearing

about the local summer temperatures that would by-God-bake-your-eyeballs.

Cross that stovetop ~~if~~ and when we came to it, they took turns maintaining, and in the meantime maybe a little cloud cover...

Then they woke up one morning to the desert under snow.

Sure been having the weather, my mother jabbed onto paper to Wally.

Make you think you're in Montana.

Make you think your mental compass needle was off course for more than just that day, in fact. The snow vanished as spectrally as it arrived, but the climate we sought here stayed elusive, chill and rain in its place. My father couldn't take life easy too much longer, particularly in this uneasy desert spring, and nights now, he and my mother talk things over. The possibly not too distant end of the war. The way Arizona is sorting itself out to them and isn't. Hammers are in song in Wickenburg as they were in Phoenix, the subdividing of Arizona an idea that has occurred to every boomer at once. But what are the prospects for people such as us? Wickenburg aside, there did exist a ranching Arizona too, where they grew something besides blisters on dudes. My father had his eye on the comfortably western town of Prescott--favorably named--in the veldt-like

cattle country across the Hieroglyphic Mountains. The Grand Canyon puzzle more and more becomes my own enterprise as the two of them put up their pieces of I wonder if and What we maybe ought to into the air of our future.

Quite a gabfest, my mother puts down in her desert chronicle to Wally and ultimately to me, and I am surprised when I find she doesn't even remotely mean hers and my father's. The old miner did all the talking, just about.

But yes, the miner. Guerrilla cattle aside, our only caller at the cabin.

Before realizing dudes and tourists were the real lode, Wickenburg originated as a goldstrike town, and prospectors still were tramping around in the hills trying to hit the yellow rainbow again. I dream our miner upward from his visit to my mother's recording pen on the twenty-second day of March, 1945. Story become person, he comes refusing to look like a desert oreseeker is expected to, other than a few missing finger joints. Instead of shag and beard he sports a precise white mustache like a sharp little awning over his mouth, and a snowy pompadour he keeps in place by

lifting his hat straight up when he takes it off in highly reluctant
acknowledgment of my mother, womankind. Or maybe he is simply uncorking
everything stored up since he last kept company with anyone besides himself
in his shaving mirror.



In windjammer style he fast sets us straight about the war (England is who we ought to be fighting) and about the President (Franklin The-Hell-No Roosevelt, in the miner's indignant rendition of the person who took the nation off the gold standard).

Wide-eyed I wait for the battle to erupt over President Roosevelt, great voice that strode out of the radio with every word wearing epaulettes, President for perpetuity if the votes of my parents have anything to do with it.

But skirmish is all anybody wants to risk here, my mother saying only that at least people don't need to eat gophers any more as they did during Hoover's Depression and my father saying at least Roosevelt is aware of the existence of the working man and the miner saying that when you come right down to it England and Roosevelt are only pretty much the same blamed thing, you can hear it in how they both talk.

Politics disposed of, the miner plunges on to his experiences in the desert generally and here in the Wickenburg country in particular, which is what my folks want to hear from him, local knowledge. Arizoniana, not to mention Wickenburg weather wisdom, they could stand to have by the bale.

Used to dealing with loopy sheepherders, my father and mother cross their arms and let the soliloquist unravel while I restlessly wish he'd get going on how to tell gold from rock.

Then one particular squirm of mine seems to remind our filibustering guest of something. Montana he is unacquainted with, he announces, but he has been to Dakota, practically the same.

"I was about the size of your fellow here," he indicates me, then squints as if making a vital adjustment. "Little bigger. Anyways, both my own folks had passed away with mountain fever and so my uncle tucked me into his family. This was when he was running a freight outfit into Deadwood, Dakota, the kind of mule train they called 'eight eights.' Eight teams of eight mules each, three wagons--no, I'm lying again--two wagons to each mule team. This one day my uncle hustled home and got us all, my aunt and his own kids and me, and said we better come downtown and see this. So we went down and here was a big freight jam, right in that one long street of Deadwood. What's happened was, all these freight outfits had lit in from Fort Pierre and Bismarck and Sidney on one side of the gulch and from Cheyenne on the other, and now couldn't none of them

get out either way, frontwards or back. There was teams there of just all descriptions, eight-yoke ox teams pulling three wagons, little outfits with two horses or four horses, mostly mule teams like my uncle's on the Cheyenne end of the traffic. Everything jammed up so tight for about a mile, you could have run a dog on the backs of those freight teams from one end of Deadwood to the other. Everybody's standing around saying 'This is no good,' and finally the big freighters got together and talked it over ~~about eight or ten of them~~. One man in the bunch made a motion to appoint my uncle the captain of straightening this thing out. My uncle said, 'Well, boys, if you want me to, I'll take charge.' They said, 'We want you to take charge. Whatever you say is law and we'll back you.' My uncle said, 'Let's get a little more backing than that,' and he went over to his lead wagon and come back with two six-shooters in his belt. So him and the rest of the bunch started through town looking over the mess and my uncle said, 'We might as well start right here,' and he started them in on moving the little outfits to the sidestreets by hand. The little rigs of two horses, four horses, they put them up alleys and onto porches and just anywhere they could find, and that way

they'd get some room to bend out a big ox or mule team. It took my uncle and them all night and into the next morning, sorting all those outfits out. He did something in getting that jam cleared, my uncle did."

Magical uncles. Out there ropewalking the dream latitudes, Deadwood, Okinawa, sorting oxen and mules by hand, preserving the Ault from submarines below and dive bombers above. Uncle Sam even, in the cartoons kicking the behinds of Hitler and Tojo. Whatever marvel needed doing, uncles were the key. Wait a minute, though. Wasn't this mustache-talker awful old to be in on knowledge about uncles? It was a new thought, that uncles were available to just anybody.

Abruptly the miner declares he has to skedaddle back to his claim, as if needing to collect the nuggets it's laid that afternoon. Dad and I walk with him to the road while my bemused mother makes a start on supper.

Still talking a streak, out of nowhere the miner breaks in on himself and asks what brings us to Arizona.

Dad could answer this in his sleep. "My wife's health--"

"Figured so. Could hear it in her." The miner knocks on his

own chest. "Got a chute-ful of rocks, don't she, there in her lungs.

She's young to have it like that."

My father looks as though he has been hit from a blind side. To him, my mother's breathing is not nearly the alarming wheezes of her Montana seizures, or for that matter of our first harrowing night in Arizona four months ago. North of here in the auto court at the town of Williams, high up on the Coconino Plateau, she had put in a horrendous night of gasping spasms. My father would swear on a stack of Bibles that she had improved every foot of the way down from nightmarish Williams to this desert floor. True, ^{one other} ~~another~~ severe spell hit her during our Phoenix try, but not nearly as bad as that Williams siege, as any of a dozen heart-hammering emergency runs from the Faulkner Creek ranch. Surely to God this desert air is making Berneta better, isn't it? Yet how much better, if an utter stranger can pick out the trouble in her lungs as casually as the tumult in a seashell.

My father stares at the miner. Finally he can say only: "She's... thirty-one."



Dear Wally--

Winona and I spent Saturday making formals and catching mice.

I can hear that day of mice and thread.

The needle of Winona's portable sewing machine sings over the material to the treadlebeat of her foot, our kitchen table is gowned with the chiffon she is coaxing to behave into hem. This way and that and the other, she jigsaws the pattern pieces she and my mother have scissored out. My mother is no bigger than a minute in build and Winona minuter yet, so they are resorting to a lot in these prom dresses. The latest nomination has been ruffles.

"I think ruffles would go okay, Nonie, don't you? Give us a little something to sashay?"

"What the hey, we'll ruffle a bunch up and see," pronounces Winona. Her voice is bigger than she is, deep, next thing to gruff. "If I can find my cussed ruffler." The sewing machine treadle halts while Winona conducts a clinking search through her attachments box. "Did you have the radio on, Berneta, the other day? I didn't know a thing about it until the kiddos told me the next morning. I about dropped my teeth."

"I wish to Halifax I hadn't heard, but I did. I had it on while I was in here trying to scrub down that old--"

Where I am holed up behind the couch in the living room, as usual overhearing for all I am worth, comes the somersault snap of another mousetrap going off.

"My turn at the little devils?" Winona volunteers.

"I'll fling this one," says my mother, "you're doing so good on the dresses."

"I thought Ringling has mice something fierce," Winona gives out with. "But cripes, this place!"

"We tried a cat, did I tell you?" An old marmalade stray one, half tail its ~~tail~~ gone, whom my mother nonetheless cooed kitten-katten to. "He only lasted two days. Charlie swears the mice ran the cat out of town."

Both women laugh, until I hear my mother putting on overshoes to take the expired mouse out to the garbage barrel, feel the wind make its presence all through the house when she opens the back door. Blowy April, a thousand and fifty miles north of our Arizona try. We have reverted to Montana, pulling out of Wickenburg at the end of March (Kind of anxious to get home, see everybody, find out how I'm going to feel, figure out what we are going to do this summer, my mother's last words to Wally from the desert cabin) to climb back up the continent through Flagstaff and Kanab and Provo and Salt Lake City and Pocatello and Dillon and Twin Bridges--and after all that, we still are nowhere much. This rented house on a sidestreet in White Sulphur Springs is as dreary as it is drafty, its only companionable feature the mob of mice.

Busy busy busy, Winona's Singer goes again. I laze in my own territory, the triangle cave of couchback and room corner it angles across. My books, my trucks, my tubby Ault, are cached in here with me out of

the prevailing weather. The wind steadily tries to pry out the nearest windowpane. Seems as though it blows & storms all the time, my mother has reported this polar Montana spring to Wally, we're having our March weather in April. We are having gabstorms and earquakes, if I know anything about it. Since Thursday I've nearly listened myself inside out. This is a job with work to it, this spying on history. Who can tell what will distill next out of the actual air, after Thursday afternoon when my mother had her programs on, Ma Perkins or some such, I wasn't much listening until the news voice cut in: "We interrupt this program to bring you a special bulletin..."

When the bulletin was over, I came out from behind the couch on all fours, then stood up curious into another age.

In the kitchen, stock-still, scrubbing brush still in her hand where she had been slaving away at the rust stains on the ancient sink drainboard, my mother stood staring at the radio as though trying to see the words just said.

"Mama? When Daddy gets home, are we going to wash the car in the creek?"

"I. . .I don't think so, dear. President Roosevelt's funeral isn't going to be here."

Everything rattles on in the kitchen now, full days later; the dressmaking, the chitchat, their medical opinions on my father who, sore side or not, goes winging out of the house every day to put in ten hours in a lambing shed (he really shouldn't be working but then you know Charlie), rosters of who's home on leave from the war and apt to be met up with at the prom (the White Sulphur Springs high school spring formal amounts to a community dance, as any dance in that lonely Big Belt-edged country tends to), denunciations of this wintry spring, you name it and the smart cookies in the kitchen will do you a two-woman chorus of it. This peppy visit from Winona amounts to a special bulletin itself. Cute yet industrious, Winona looks like a half-pint version of Rosie the Riveter except that, slang and gravelly in-this-for-the-duration voice and all, she is a schoolteacher. Winona I suppose I am a bit shy of, her firecracker energy, her sassy eyes. Kiddo, she calls me. But really, kiddo is a hundred times better than the excruciating Pinky which some of White Sulphur's downtown denizens call me because of my

red mop of hair, and in the right tone of voice I think it also makes an improvement over Ivan.

Now Winona is off on hats. She's seen a zippy spring number in the Monkey Ward catalogue she is sure she could make for my mother. Living out of suitcases as we have been for the past half year my mother's wardrobe can stand any first-aid it can get, so the women talk headgear until the next mousetrap springs. This time Winona, insisting she wouldn't want to get out of practice, takes a turn at disposing of the deceased mouse. Quick as she scoots back in from the garbage barrel, the conversation again becomes fabric and color and whether to veil or not, yet how much more than hat chat is going on.

Wally, you asked me my opinion of you and Winona.

"Going together" was the description for Wally and Winona, fine fudge of a phrase. Did it mean merely fooling around with one another while the good time lasted or drawing toward each other into inevitable destiny of matrimony? Evitable or in, that is the question for Wally out there on the Ault with an ocean of time to think. He has put in about a thousand days in the Navy by now, and Winona even more in the

teacherage at Ringling, and across such a space of young life maybe a sag sets in. Her V-mail to him stays bright and kidding, but as she points out, there is only so much of yourself you can provide in 25 words or so.

Nonie has a good education...

Tricky duty for Berneta's pen here. Close chum to Winona, but also Wally's older and married sister being asked for advice.

My mother ends up doing them a tick-tack-toe for going beyond going together.

...is a good cook, a fair housekeeper, and a real seamstress as well as a good sport. She has her faults, so do we all. But I think she is the kind that if she loves a guy she'll stick with him through Hell & high water. So if you think you two can make a go of life together I'm certainly for you. But it is up to you to know what you feel in your heart.

Now she ^{pauses over} ~~comes to~~ the factor that has winked between Wally and Winona since their first moment and is neither X nor O.

There is a few years difference in your age...

Quite the picture of a strapping young beau, the pre-war Wally amounted to. Abundant black teenage hair in the long-may-it-wave 1940's style; that ever likeable face, ready for anything; muscular frame you could pick out clear across town when the town happened to be Ringling.

Decades later when he had become royally bellied, amid one of our trout excursions I came up on him dabbling over his tackle box as he sweetly crooned, "I just want a Paper Doll, to call my own...but those flirty-flirty guys with their flirty-flirty eyes..."

Which way the flirting originally ran between Wally and Winona would be instructive to know, as it would clarify whose waiting out the war was the more serious: the durational teacher holding the fort at the Ringling schoolhouse or the shipboard combatant seven years younger than her.

...but I can't see where that should make much difference. It hasn't in my marriage, I know, and there are more years difference between us than there are you kids. If a couple loves one another enough they can overcome most anything that happens to come along.

itals
and
underlined

Those four words were the only ones my mother underlined, ever, in

her entire set of letters to Wally.

#

September 6, 1990. Winona sits at the table in the double-wide mobile home, thirty-five ^{atrocious} ~~abominable~~ miles from the nearest paved road. Her face is beyond wrinkled, rivuleted, but her eyes still are ^{glamour girl} ~~glamor-girl~~. I flinch at her chronic ripping cough, brutal echo of my mother's lungs. I, though, must be even more alarming to Winona: freckleface redheaded kiddo of forty-plus years ago now silvering like a tree snag. If my mother's face or Wally's reside anywhere beneath the gray storm-mask of beard on me, Winona can't seem to find them.

Nonetheless I have been coffeed, fed, welcomed in out of a past, half a Montana away, where so much happened and just as much didn't. Whichever of them first tapered the enthusiasm for going together by V-mail, Wally and Winona were over with before World War Two was. Not long after, she traded in schoolteaching for a return to this--a remote, almost reckless reach of land which had been her parents', homesteaded by them, clung to somehow through the Depression, through any number of years even more arid than usual in this dry heart of the state. Winona has been married, "since coming home," to a wiry ranchman who patiently

installed twelve miles of pipe to furnish reliable water to their cattle. Evidently a matched set in all ways, Winona and her husband both are pared down to life in this short-grass country, not a gram of excess on them or their ground. I figured I had seen every kind of Montana endurance, but the ranching done here by this weatherstropped pair, now into their seventies, is very nearly Australian-outback in its austerity, a scant herd of cattle specked across twenty entire miles of rangeland. "It's all like this," Winona's husband gives up-and-down motions of his hand to show how their land stands on end in a welter of abrupt buttes and clay cliffs. Their mobile home he catskinned in by tractor, no trailer-truck able to fit around the hairpin curves of the dirt track into here.

From here Ringling seems as distant as Agincourt, but Wally even yet is a chancy topic for Winona. After the war, which is to say after they had gone separate paths to the altar, she met up with him only once, at a rodeo. Neither of them, she tells me carefully, had much to say to the other. Bare word did reach her of his death; but until now she has not heard of his second and third marriages, two wives out of three at his funeral.

After a long moment she says in a voice dry as dust:

"Nice to be so loved."

Winona speaks more gladly of my mother and my father. She remembers regularly mailing cartons of cigarettes to Arizona for my father that war-rationed winter. My mother she paints without surprise as "a real good conversationalist"--then Winona breaks into another terrible coughing spasm, terribly reminiscent. When her breath returns, Winona suddenly switches memory to me when I was a tyke falling in love with words:

"You knew a lot of things. I remember you going through your books, telling me all the things in them."

Smoke interrupts the afternoon. Winona's husband catches the whiff first, she about one sniff later. I still don't, having inherited the useless Ringer nose--substantial in every way except the capacity to smell--but when they pile out of the mobile home and start scanning upwind, I certainly do, too. A prairie fire would burn through this country until the moon was cooked. So I am relieved when Winona and her husband categorize the smoke as general, a haze from far-off forest fires.

Unincinerated one more time, the ranch couple take it for granted

that I'll follow back inside for further gab and caffeine, although I tag behind to keep peering around at this backland enterprise of theirs. In one direction the giant bald ridge which the road kinks down from, in two others sharp slopes eroded at the top into chopped-up formations of pale ashen clay, and for a finale the distant river badlands which aren't much worse than any other of the country crumpled all around here. Every horizon ruptured and stark. Liver-Eating Johnson supposedly lurched through this neck of the weeds, hunting Indians like they were partridges, in the previous mad century. Since then, this stretch of land has been occupied by people willing to give it the benefit of the doubt for forty or fifty years at a time. I struggle to imagine Wally here, superimpose him as the husband coping with this dryland dowry, so far away from his fishing holes and elk meadows. Never.

#

Back in the kitchen arsenal of 1945, my mother and Winona wage on against chiffon, mice, life and fate and budget.

"Before I forget. How much did the material set us back?"

"All of \$4.63."

"Then your time. Nonie, I have to give you something for all

your sewing."

"Like fun you will. You came all the way to Ringling and got me, so you're out the cost of your gas, let's just--"

"No, now, that's not the same as--" Another mortal whack of a mousetrap cuts off both voices.

"Hit 'im again, McGinty!" Winona whoops. "Berneta, how in the world many is that, just since noon?"

"Twelve, this'll make. Keeps a person busy just keeping ^{count} ~~peers~~."

This must be the trap in the grocery cupboard, from the sound of my mother's voice going enclosed. "How many more jillion dozen do you suppose--" Then she exclaims: "Nonie, talk about mouse trappers, we're it! Ivan! Come see!"

Already I am out of my couch cave, scrambling in from the living room. A lilac cloud of chiffon smothers half the kitchen, but over at the cupboard Winona is on tiptoe beside my mother peering in at their catch. I hop up on a chair to see.

Double bull's-eye! Two dead mice in one trap, clamped neck to neck in their permanent race for the bait of cheese.

The victors are already at the next stage, how to hang on to credit for their feat. "Charlie will never believe we're in here catching them two at a time."

"I know what. We'll just save the trap for him the way it is, for proof."

Winona and my mother ruthlessly giggle.

#

What can account for my mother's high spirits at being back in that drafty mousy attic of Montana, the mile-up-and-then-some Big Belt country where sour winter stayed on past the spring dance?

I have stared holes into those mountains, those sage-scruffed flats and bald Sixteen hills, trying to savvy their hold on her and thus on us, particularly there in severe 1945. The village of Ringling, its railroad future already behind it, was waning into whatever is less than a village. The town of White Sulphur Springs had been handled roughly by the Depression and the war, sagging ever farther from its original dream of becoming a thermal-spring resort. Out around the Smith River Valley, the big ownerships still owned. Moss Agate was being borne down by time to that sole leaning barn of today. All the members of the Ringer family besides my mother

were struggling with the armed forces of Japan or with themselves. My father's arena, the Doig homestead and the Wall Mountain rangeland, had fallen from family hands long ago. Looked at clinically, there was not much to come back to, after half a century of Doigs and Ringers hurling themselves at those hills.

But earth and heart don't have much of a membrane between them. Sometimes decided on grounds as elusive as that single transposable h, this matter of siting ourselves. Of a place mysteriously insisting itself into us. The saying in our family for possessing plenty of something was that we had oceans of it, and in her final report from the desert to her silent listener on the Ault, my mother provided oceans of reasons why we were struggling back north to precisely what we had abandoned. One adios to Arizona she spoke was economic. So few possibilities for people with a limited supply of money like ourselves to get anywhere in any kind of business. She saw corporate Phoenix and landvending Wickenburg plain: It might be better after the war but I think it will be worse. And the contours of community were beckoning us. We don't just

like the idea of being way down here and all our folks in Montana.

Valid enough in itself, that ~~heartdeep~~² need for people and places, friends and family, with well-trodden routes of behavior; home is where when you gossip there, any hearer knows the who what why.

Yet, yet...there was unwordable territory, too, in our return to what my mother's letters as early as Phoenix began to mention as home. Refusal to become new atomized Americans, Sun Belt suburbanites, and instead going back to Montana's season-cogged life is one thing. Going back specifically to the roughcut Big Belts, the snakey Sixteen country, the Smith River Valley where we Doigs and Ringers could never quite dodge our own dust, all that is quite another. My parents can only have made such a choice from their bottommost natures, moods deep and inscrutable as the keels of icebergs.

—————



Ivan and I were over to see Mom.

My grandmother could hmpf like a member of royalty. She is hmpfing in a major way to my mother, although not at my mother; Grandma's range of fire simply tends to take in the entire vicinity.

"At least I got letters from you, dear. I haven't heard from Wallace and Paul in ages, darn their hides."

Like her, I can't imagine why a mere war keeps them from writing. Here I am at not quite six, same age as the war, and already I am matchless on this matter of correspondence. Isn't my Christmas greeting of merry divebombers here on Grandma's kitchen wall as though it were by Michelangelo? How natural it comes, hmpfproof artistry, when you are the first grandchild and so far the only.

My mother has been shrewd enough to bring me along handy at her side on this diplomatic mission to her own mother. This is not as supple a scene for her as exterminating with Winona. Our first after-Arizona visit to Grandma carries complications that extend back to the Moss Agate years, where this ^{grayhaired} much-done-to woman provided my mother with that peculiar girlhood, threadbare and coddled, and now there's a deal more to come which my mother

dreads to have to tell.

Say this for the situation, my grandmother never takes long to sort out to you what's on her mind. Rapidfire, she deems our visit tardy (we have been back from Arizona whole weeks) and assigns the logical reason (my father). She is also snorty that this call of ours is going to be so abbreviated (overnight). Her points made, she proceeds to flood us in fresh-baked cinnamon rolls, oatmeal cookies, and all other kinds of doting.

Between pastry feasts we each furnish Grandma our versions of Arizona. Mine is heavier on cactus than my mother's. Both women are tanking up on coffee, and I am intrigued that Grandma cuts hers with cold water dippered from the sink bucket. I negotiate for a sip--a sipe, Grandma's way of saying it--just to confirm that coffee in this diluted fashion is as awful as it figures to be. It is.

Maybe watered coffee sums up my grandmother's lot. Compared with even my parents, who were not exactly at the head of the caste parade, my grandmother's existence was just this side of the poorhouse. It had been that way from Moss Agate where, with at least a roof over their heads,

the Ringers maybe had not been penniless but there were plenty of times when they were dollarless. My grandmother ever after referred to any item that reminded her of Moss Agate as "old junk," which in fact was pretty much what the life there had consisted of--junk cows, a junk ranch.

It wouldn't have taken much for society to consider the Ringer family itself junk. True, this grandmother of mine and even my grandfather had fended greatly better as community members than their economics suggested. My grandmother, only a third-grade education to her name, served on the school board so that the Moss Agate country could have a one-room school, and somehow raised the Ringer kids as though their home life wasn't as patchy as it was. My grandfather Tom at least toughed out their marriage until the four children were grown and gone, and brought in whatever he could from second jobs of carpentry and general craftwork. He, I now realize, may have been deviled by a different damage within him than he was ever ascribed; a house painter in his younger life, his mood and health may have fallen prey to the lead used in paint at the time. By whatever shaping, to the end of their separate existences my grandparents, Tom Ringer choring on ranches, Bessie Ringer cooking on ranches, perpetually shifted

around under mid-Montana's mountain horizon but could never rise.

Now that she had left him, she has taken shelter here in the Shields River country in another lopsided situation, as cook for a Norwegian widower. Living like nun and monk as far as anybody can tell, the pair of them operate the old Norskie's tidy little outfit, part farm and part cow ranch, here under the long slopes on the west side of the Crazy Mountains. I would bet hard money that the old Norskie never saw fit to break his creamy silence and say so, but the place could not have been run without my indefatigable grandmother: she even did the plowing, with a team of horses. My father or any other veteran ranchman would have shouldered labor like this only on shares. For doing much the same work, and the cooking and housekeeping besides, she eked out a wage from month to month and beyond that she literally had nothing--what we call benefits were nowhere in the picture because even Social Security then was regarded as too great a paperwork burden on owners of farms and ranches, and "agricultural workers" such as my grandmother were specifically excluded from its coverage.

Rather, she had what she was. The only thing about my grandmother that ever went gray was her hair. All else stayed brisk, immutable;

the pleasant enough proclamation of face where the origin of my mother's and for that matter mine is instantly read, the body of German sturdiness. The hands and arms of Bessie Ringer were scarred from every kind of barbwire work, yet there she sat hooking away at the most intricate of crochetwork, snowflaking the rough rooms of her existence with doily upon doily. After a ^{schooling} ~~school~~ that petered out so early, she couldn't much more than handle 1 and 2 for you, but anything you could hum she could sit down to a piano and faithfully play. "The baby is born and his name is Dennis," she would rattle off as her proverb of completing anything, fingerlace or ear-taught tune or the perpetual twice a day of milking of cows in that bent-pail life at Moss Agate. There at Moss Agate too, she had been the parent who somewhere always found time to pull on boxing gloves when her sons went through a pugilism phase. And to pamper an asthmatic daughter. Situations she didn't have the foggiest notion of how to handle, she handled. The chicken chapter: softhearted as she was toward all creatures except the human, she could never bear to chop the head off a chicken. Early in her Montana life, when my mother was still a toddler, there came a Sunday when chicken was the only available meal and nobody

else was around to do the chopping. My grandmother caught the chicken, tied its legs, put it in the baby buggy with my mother, and trundled down the road a couple of miles to the next ranch to have a neighbor do the neck deed.

Grandma's straight-ahead set of mind came useful for her here in the Norskie situation, too. On no known social scale ought she have been able to fit into the stolid local women's club---merely an itinerant cook, and beyond that, married to somebody she wasn't living with but who definitely was not the Norwegian widower she was under the same roof with--- but she impressed those farm wives and ranch women with her own stiffbacked rectitude and was brought in. Annually the women drew "secret pal" names out of a hat and each sent whomever they drew little surprise gifts and cards throughout the year. My grandmother undoubtedly was the only peasant plow-woman who was also a secret pal, but she had a saying ready for the way life revealed its surprises, too. "So that's the how of it."

So that was the how of her, my stormfront grandmother. Wide-grained and with hard knots of stubbornness, rilesome and quick to judge and long to hold a grudge. And in the turbulent time to come, I learned

to love her for even the magnificence of her shortcomings.

Back there in our visit it is Grandma, you can bet your boots, who comes out with it about my grandfather. Have we seen the old-good-for-nothing?

Dreadfully, we have. Tom Ringer is living in one room of a shanty, the rest of which is used as a chickenhouse. The alfalfa chaff scratched up by the baby chicks got him down, my mother has passed the word to Wally from our visit; one of those short-winded spells...a bad one.

Gnarled and bent as a Knockadoon walking stick, my grandfather; my grandmother, on the other hand, so sturdy she could carry the rest of us over the Crazy Mountains on her back.

My mother, the product of the extremes, tries to give an unflavored report.

"Hmpf," she receives for her trouble. "I just wish to gosh he'd behaved hisself when we were--"

By now I pretty well know where Grandma is going with this, and out I whip to explore the Norskie country.

As ever, Grandma has a panting overfed dog around like an old lodger. Shep instantly wants to go helling off with me in every direction at once. Him aside, though, this ranch is disappointingly kempt and quiet. No suicide slope for me to roar down as in my Faulkner Creek daredeviltry days. Next I thrash around in vain for the shop, as a blacksmithery is called on a ranch; no alluring rusty nests of iron, no fogge with a fanwheel to turn faster and faster into a wondrous straining screech. Nor, can you believe, is there even a bunkhouse, let alone a mussy crew of ranch hands with names like ^{Zoot}~~Zipper~~ and Diamond Tony; the Norskie's son from up the creek and the Norskie--and Grandma--handle the calving by themselves.

I have been shortchanged. I know to the snick of his jackknife being opened what my father is doing exactly now, fifty miles north of here in his lambing shed kingdom, jacketing a bum lamb with the hide of a dead one and enforcing the suspicious ewe to adopt the newcomer: "That's right, ye old sister, this is your new one. Get under there, Jakey, and get yourself a meal before she catches on to you." I am missing out on that, for this becalmed mission to Grandma?

Gone goofy with the thrill of having someone to romp with, Shep keeps giving me baths with his old tongue. Dog slobber is limited fun.

I evacuate from the ranch yard to the kitchen congress again.

"Sit you down, dear," Grandma welcomes me back to the table as if the sun rises and sets in me, and then their talk buzzes on. At last my mother and her mother have got going on the populace beyond the family. Other people's doings, blessed relief. I nibble the one-more-cookie-but-that's-all which my mother decrees to me while news of this one and that is ruthlessly swapped. So and so is just as much of a scatterbrain as ever and of course thinks she was terribly abused in the service. Had to work a little, something she isn't used to. Thus and such are going to have an increase in the family. Have to feel sorry for any kid with them as parents.

Never more than a sentence away in any of their gossip is the war. The war has consumed Montana. Not in the roaring geared-up military factory fashion of Arizona, but in a kind of mortal evaporation. Young men, and no few women, have been gone for years and in their place the ghostly clink of dogtags from the charnel corners of the world; striplings who

have eaten plateloads at the ranch tables of my grandmother and square-danced with my mother and pranced me on a knee are wasting away in prisoner-of-war camps in Germany, have perished in the Bataan death march, been wounded at Palau, fought in the Aleutians and the Marianas and Normandy.

My ears all but turn inside out when Grandma frets to my mother about Wally, where his ship might be, what's happening there in the Pacific. She is mighty right to do so.

#

Logbook of the Ault, May 11, 1945:

1010 Sighted enemy plane (Zeke) which came out of low cloud astern and dived into the after flight deck of USS BUNKER HILL. Observed another enemy plane to come from astern. Opened fire. Plane crashed into BUNKER HILL flight deck amidships. Maneuvering at emergency turns and speeds. BUNKER HILL was burning furiously.

1023 Observed two enemy planes shot down in dogfight. A third began a run in towards formation at low altitude with a friendly fighter on his tail. Opened fire with all guns as plane passed starboard quarter.... Plane attempted to make suicide dive on this vessel and was shot down by this ship, falling close aboard the port quarter.

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And only days ago, the war ate down into my own age bracket. This had happened a block or so away from us in White Sulphur, during a collection drive of waste paper for the war effort. Schoolchildren darting from house to house, carrying the scrap to the truck, hopping onto the truckbed to ride to the next houses, the truck driver thinking everyone was aboard and starting ahead: crushing under the rear wheels his own seven-year-old son.

Such a death of a child, even these life-calloused Ringer women do not talk of. What happened to that boy has been my interior topic, the imagining of how the wheels couldn't/wouldn't have made their fatal claim if it had been me. The not-quite-six-year-old's dream insulation from the world, quite convinced I am deathproof.

Out of nowhere, which is to say everywhere, I abruptly am hearing:

"...afraid you'd gone to old Arizona for good," my grandmother to my mother. My mother back to her, "Charlie figured--we figured we had to give it a try there."

Grandma manages not to say anything to that, but her silence about my father is as starchy as her apron.

I did not know so until the letters, but the vendetta between my father and my grandmother was already raging. The message inevitably has gone out to Wally from Grandma: Charlie doesn't have much to say to me but I'm used to that now. All the later years of my growing up, trying to solve the world of consequences brought on by this pernicious feud, I hunted wildly in the two of them for the reason. Did our Arizona trip itself set things off, Bessie Ringer with two sons gone to the war simply finding it the last straw that my mother was moving so far away? My grandmother had endured beyond other last straws. No, my in-the-dark guess was that the mysterious matter of family itself, its specific weight and gravity, brought on their wrangle. In the Faulkner Creek ranch years, there had chronically been a cluster of Ringers around, one or two and often all three of my mother's brothers working seasonal jobs for my father, and Grandma visiting every instant she could pry loose from the Norskie's chores. I figured my father then and there wore out on in-laws. But to my grandmother, after Moss Agate--because of Moss Agate?--family was the true tribe, she and the four kids bound together forever by having survived the utmost that my grandfather and the cow ghetto could bring