

down on them. If a Doig clan buckaroo married into the family, then he had simply been lucky enough to gain himself some family, by her notion of it.

So, the motives I found in those factions that I grew up between still howl true. As far as they go. What I was too near to my father and my grandmother to see was their greater ground of dispute, beyond a winter of veer to Arizona, beyond the ornery jousts of being in-laws. Their deadly tussle was over my mother.

"...Not another cookie. Honest to Eleanor, Mom, you'll have him so spoiled..."

"...Growing boy needs a little something to grow on, don't you, Ivan, yes..."

All said and done, although for an iron eon yet it would not be, the contest of spite between my grandmother and my father was about treatment of my mother. Nothing to do with medical terms, nor in any physical or even emotional sense; one thing neither could ever accuse the other of was lack of pure devotion to the girl and woman Berneta. Call it the geography of risk, of how best to situate my mother. My

grandmother desperately wished that my parents (my father) would simply choose someplace in Montana--right about across the road from her would be ideal--and hunker in there at whatever the job happened to be and hope for the best. Surely-for-gosh-sakes it couldn't be good for Berneta to be living here, there, and everywhere, could it? To my father, just as desperately trying out footings until one felt secure for us, the worse risk was to sink so economically low we couldn't afford my mother's medical costs and whatever else might help her. He saw permanent ranch wagework as more of the mire of Moss Agate for her, and surely-to-Jesus-H.-Christ that can't be the best anybody can do, can it?

"...sure awful glad, dear, to have you back where..."

"...couldn't tell beforehand how Phoenix..."

Now comes the moment my mother has been bracing toward ever since we arrived on this visit. My grandmother wants to know where next; where my mother and my father and I will spend the summer.

"Gee gosh, Berneta!!" Grandma lets out when told, which from her is high-octane blue language. "I dread to think of you out there!"

"We don't know for absolute sure we're going," is resorted to by

my mother the daughter. "Maybe something closer will turn up."

"You just get back from old Arizona and then you're gone to out there." It is the mark of my grandmother that she can blurt this and yet not have it scald out as complaint or blame or pain or plea, but simply her thought of the moment. The headturn of her endurance toward what needed to be faced next.

I help myself to the cookie plate, in child's sly wisdom that another oatmeal cookie or two won't even weigh in the scale of what's occurring around me just now. My mother is busy telling my grandmother whatever good sides she can of our next notional move. My grandmother would dearly like to be reassured but, with a catch in her throat, at last can't help but sound her worst warning:

"You be careful with yourself, dear."

To that my mother utters nothing, for answer is none. If careful could make a great enough difference in the chokehold in her lungs, then that most enormous leap of care, my father's uprooting of us to the lenient altitude and climate of Arizona, ought to have done it. What Berneta Ringer, now Berneta Doig, has grasped out of the discard

of her Moss Agate girlhood is the conviction that she all too easily could careful herself into being an invalid; that the triple pillows of asthma could coax away her days as well as her nights if she didn't adamantly stay upright on the ground, heart-chosen ground. If this constituted reckless, this seemed what she still wanted to be.

"Careful as I can be, Mom," she sizes it down for my grandmother.

"Anyway, we'll write," she announces as if letters will be the reward packets for our vanishing over one more horizon. Suddenly my mother gathers me away from the cookie plate in a big tickling hug, laughing, holding hard to me.

"Ivan and I will write you, won't we, kiddo."



Dear Wally---

It is surely nice to know that the Germans are taken care of,

anyway.

December 25, 1962. Orange as an ember, the canyon plow slips out onto deserted Highway 12 and skims west through an hour ago's snow. Here at the rumbling start of its plowing run the huge bladed truck appears to be grooving a pathway into the crystal heart of a cloud, the highway only barely creasing the snowed-over sagebrush flatland. But this first stretch west of the highway maintenance section house is merely the top-of-the-stairs landing before the road dives between Grass Mountain and Mount Baldy, dropping and dropping like twisty cellar

steps, nineteen unremitting miles of curves and constrictions. Winterlong, Wally drives the plow down the canyon of Deep Creek as many times of day and night as needed.

Beside Wally in the truck cab perches my father, guest passenger for this dusk run before Christmas supper. (I am in bellicose Texas, activated to an Air Force base there during the Cuban missile crisis.) A blue cigarette haze of truce accompanies the men; they both smoked like a fire in a coffin factory. Otherwise as unlike as brothers-in-law chronically are, the two of them get along when they're out like this; a loose fit, somewhere outdoors, has always been the best between the Doigs and the Ringers. There in the snowshoving truck my uncle and my father are still pleased with themselves and each other from their hunting season that autumn, the pinnacle day when, with Wally's eleven- and thirteen-year-old sons Dan and Dave along, they got into a herd of elk on an open slope in the Castle Mountains and blazed away, taking three big bulls in a minute's marksmanship. Dad's aging little Jeep was their hunting vehicle. Somehow the two men and two boys crammed the most massive elk, nearly horse-size, behind the seats, antlers out the tailgate like

bizarre table legs; then strapped the other two beasts across the hood, drew a deep breath and started down the mountain with their ton and a half of elk. Instantly the Jeep's brakes gave up. Dad managed to swerve sideways to a stop, peered down the miles of mountainside to the Smith River valley below and told Wally his nerves were not quite up to this. Taking over (I can see him grin a little at the windshieldsful of elk carcass, hear him give out another of those pronouncements you could always count on: "The main thing is, not to get excited"), Wally hunched his brawn over the steering wheel and crept the Jeep into motion, groaning the load of wild meat down the mountain in low gear.

My father was sixty-one years old that autumn, and with the bad turns of health ahead of him, the elk bonanza was his last great hunt. Now, in the canyon plow, he is keen for another wizardly drive by Wally. Familied up for Christmas, the two men share a past bigger than their in-house divisions from each other. Snow-tented Grass Mountain ahead is something mutual too, Wally's recreational horizon every working day here on his section of highway, my father's remembered summer mountain from the herding honeymoon with my mother. But on this run of the snowblade,

what my father looks forward to most of all is the defeat of Deep Creek Canyon, the one piece of earth I ever knew him to despise. To look at, Deep Creek is a beauty. Summoned by the Missouri River in the Broadwater Valley ahead, the clear creek speeds along within touch of the road, tumbling rhythmically down white steps of elevation, bumping raucously past rockfaced cliffs and between mountain vees of forest, pretty as can be pictured; but as a driver you are inside a snake. "I'd rather take a beating than drive that damn canyon," my father forever declared of this gauntlet he went through during the years of hospital dashes to Townsend with my mother. Deep Creek engorged us as quick as we returned from Arizona in 1945. Took us 4 hours to come home after a supper visit to our relatives in Townsend, my mother wrote to the young Pacific version of Wally. The gas line on the car was plugged and we'd go about a mile, then get out and blow the thing out with the tire pump, all this to be imagined in blackest night with other cars hurtling around Deep Creek's blind curves at our gasping Ford.

My father has never been rapid to credit any Ringer except my mother, but he swears that Wally could drive this treacherous canyon blindfolded.

He gets a particular charge out of Wally's latest stunt with the canyon plow. The highway safety engineers have busily installed reflector posts to mark the shoulders of the road all through the canyon; these are in the way whenever Wally goes to shove a snowdrift off the road, so he has demonstrated to Dad how he is eliminating Deep Creek's new metal posts one by one, accidentally-on-purpose dropping the wingplow at just the right instant to clip a post off at its base and send it zinging up into the timber like a phosphorescent arrow.

At the head of the canyon, my father sits forward to watch, and my uncle gears down the five tons of truck and blade. The snowplow starts down the brink beside Grass Mountain into the first curves of Deep Creek and commences zigzagging.

—————
 When the German half of World War Two was taken care of in May, 1945, V-E Day couldn't even find my father and my mother and me by radio.

As you can see from our address, a map speck called Maudlow which actually was seven miles from us, we have moved again, on into my father's second season of sheepwork that spring, lambing for Frank Morgan. Our chosen land this time was that eye-taking rough horizon where the Big Belt

Mountains and the Bridger Mountains butt up against each other.

The Morgan ranch buildings nestled on the Bridger side of this colliding geography, which is to say the prosperous side. Out the back door of the ranch stood the northmost Bridger peaks, Blacktail and Horsethief and Hatfield, but at its threshold the land took a running start down to the Gallatin valley, fertile as a green dream. Based there on the rim of the broad Gallatin, the Morgans could afford to use the high country only for summer pasture and the rest of the year simply be thankful they were down out of the mountains' commotions of weather. To my parents, whose Big Belt history had been high country or higher, bad weather or worse, this was velvet ranching.

Charlie wrangles bunches, spends some time with the drop band,
works in the lambing shed, in fact anything there is to do. Naturally my father is going like a house afire, but he isn't the only one who feels the green vim of the Gallatin country. Ivan goes wrangling sheep with Charlie after supper....He is growing, getting tall. My mother herself is in command of the Morgan cookhouse this staccato month of May. I have 7 to cook for. Twenty-one appetites a day don't faze her--seem

to have plenty of time so far--but our mute radio does. Sent for a
battery. A person hates to be without a radio when there are so many
things happening. Elderly Frank Morgan and his son Horace are wonders
to work for, ranch bosses who pitch in at all tasks themselves in a style
that shames the baronial Smith River country. Mr. Mor. hardly stops a
minute, sure gets a lot done for a man his age. Because the war is still
on, the Morgan lambing crew is short-handed and my mother views a couple
of them as short in the head, too. The kid herding the drop band--the
maternity ward of ewes--has a saddle horse and he never gets off all day
long outside of to eat lunch. I fabulously come into wealth when Frank
Morgan promises ten dollars to anybody who kills a coyote, Dad's rifleshot
bowls one over, but the corpse can't be found. Charlie said he didn't
want the money as he couldn't produce the coyote, so Mr. Mor. gave the
money to Ivan. Winona pops in for a weekend visit and sets off flutters
among the bachelor ranch hands. Did she tell you one of the sheepherders
fell for her? my mother can't resist passing along to Wally. Poor Winona,
we razzed her so much. When did any of us ever sleep?

Maudlow, though. Any tinier and it would have been microscopic,

any more remote and it would have been off the planet. Maudlow was the deepest depot along the Milwaukee Railroad's route through the stubborn canyons of the Big Belts, a maintenance spot which had accrued a post office and a store of sorts. Here around the corner from the Bridger Mountains, the country went wild in a hurry. Hardly anybody possessed the mental compass to settle in this isolated bottom end of the Big Belts. Even my mother from none too cosmopolitan Moss Agate and Ringling called the Maudlow country the sticks.

Maudlow mattered because of the summer ahead of us.

#

I never saw such muddy roads in my life and as you know we've traveled some pretty muddy ones.

The storm is coming toward us on lightning stilts. CRACKuunnggg, the thunder-and-echo.

"Rain some more, why don't ye," my father responds from the mudhole where the Ford sits axle-deep.

We want to get a horse pasture fixed up and a few odd jobs done,
but all we did was get out of town as far as the Dave Winter place and
got stuck.

My mother waits behind the steering wheel, wearing the look that says she and muddy roads do not get along. I am out of the car clumping around in her overshoes, not about to miss this chance to wallow in the mire in an almost official capacity.

And actually, if you have to be stuck hubcap deep in mud, this is a scenic spot for it. Willows cluster nearby in testimony of the seep of springwater that causes the mudhole. Wild roses and wild carrot and lupine bloom around. Nor, in spite of an absence of other people for fifteen miles in either direction, are we alone. Gophers are plentiful that rainy spring, and a hawk is having a feast. Silently drifting down he makes his grab and flies off, the snatched gopher's back legs pedaling in air.

"Try it now, Berneta," my father directs, standing on the Ford's back bumper hoping his 130 pounds will add vast traction. "Just give it the littlest bit of gas--"

"I know."

"--until it starts going--"

"Charlie, I know."

"--and then gun it."

While my father bounces energetically on the bumper, my mother eases down on the gas pedal as if trying to tiptoe out of trouble, but the back wheels spin like greased tornadoes.

"No good," my father calls a halt to my mother's accelerator foot and hops down off the bumper, fresh freckles of mud all over him. He chews the inside of his mouth as he tries to see through buttes to Maudlow, a lot of miles away, and then in the other direction to Ringling, just as many miles. Closer than either is the coming island of lightning, thunder, and rain. My mother appears distinctly unsurprised at the verdict my father reaches.

Had to jack the car up, put boards under it.

The boards are the old Dave Winter homestead, collapsing at the foot of a butte about a quarter of a mile from us. My mother makes me sploosh back to the car so she can have her overshoes, administers me into my own, which seem even more babyish now after the roominess of hers, and the two of us march out of the mudhole. My father is waiting for us, barely, at the brow of the little dip that holds the mudhole. Here we all take off

our overshoes, because they're not needed on the shaley ground across to the old Winter place; the Maudlow road has the monopoly on mud.

At the Winter buildings we scavenge fast, plucking boards from the dilapidated sheepshed and anywhere else we can find loose ones.

What's left of the windowless house of this homestead, though, we studiously avoid in our plunder; Dave Winter in his time had married into the Doigs, and so this house of his is in a way us, too.

Back to the mudhole we totter with our armloads of boards. Our overshoes are there waiting for us like three sizes of floppy puppies.

Hurrying to beat the rain, we ferry the boards to the car and my father seizes the widest one and lays it into the soupy area beneath the rear bumper as a base to set the jack on. He rolls his sleeves to the elbow. "Time for the Armstrong method," he says as general encouragement. However frazzled the rest of my father may be, his arms always are strong and they now pump the jack handle vigorously, whup-down whup-down whup-down. During these exertions my mother stands arms-crossed and watches him as if trying to reach a diagnosis.

Charlie feels pretty good most of the time. Says he gets a pain

in his side once in awhile, but not often.

When Dad stands up from the bumper jack to rest for a moment, my mother steps in and teeters her full weight, such as it is, on the jack handle. The jack head ratchets slowly up and catches in the next higher notch, ratchets up another oh so slow notch when she does it again. She manages to contribute half a dozen notches up the jack stem before my father judiciously takes over again.

No matter who works the jack handle, though, the rear bumper rises very little but the board submerges steadily. My father cusses, releases the jack, and layers more boards on top of the first one.

This time the jacking brings up the entire back of the car enough to slip boards lengthwise under the tires, and, the first spits of rain beginning to find us, the three of us hastily lay paths of boards in the ruts ahead far enough--we hope--to give us a running start out of the mudhole.

This time my father mans the gas pedal and steering wheel. The Ford shoots ahead the length of the first-laid boards, onto the next set, then slews off and drops, mired, again. My father cusses and we all

climb out to start over on the jacking.

CRACK!

--from a lightning bolt striking the butte nearest us.

"Ivan, get in the car, right now," my mother commands, flinging the passenger-side door open and poising to follow me in. "Charlie...?"

Even in a fuming mood, my father knows enough to listen to thunder that is too close to cast an echo. He ducks into the coupe on the driver's side as more lightning slams to earth not very far, and here we are in the insulating rubber-tired Ford. Grounded, in numerous meanings of the word.

Again we perform the kicking off of overshoes, as the rain tapping on the car roof lets us know it is going to be around for a while. I promptly squirm into the back seat and ledge myself crosswise in the rear window, a la Arizona. I find I don't fit as well as I did. True, there'd been enough rain in the Maudlow country this spring to shrink the Ford, but I knew I was growing, outgrowing. Lying curled against the car glass, this is maybe my final chance to childspy on the mysteries in the front seat.

My father lights a cigarette to try to bribe his nerves. Then he contemplates the ruts ahead, troughs of brown jelly. "We could use about a hundred feet of that Arizona desert just now."

My mother says nothing.

My father's Stetson is damp and he takes it off and crimps the crown and brim here and there to make sure it keeps the crease he likes. Under the disguise of that comes his question.

"Ye feeling all right, are you?"

I've been having a little more asthma, her report to Wally during the strenuous Morgan lambing season just past, but not so bad.

"Tuckered out on mud, is all," my mother answers. "When we get through being stuck, let's don't fight this road any more today."

My father weighs that. Beyond the mudhole are the day's chores that all need doing: fixing the fence of the saddle pasture, then rounding up into it the necessary horses of summer, Tony, Duffy, Sugar, Star.

"Berneta, we need to lay hold of those damn horses."

"This isn't getting it done."

My father ~~inspects~~^{inspects} the rain pittering onto the windshield and now

he says nothing.

Bunked where I am, I carefully stay more silent than their silence.

Sure as the world, my father rouses to the weather, the freshening season. "All this rain is bringing the grass, ye have to say that for it."

He smokes as if thinking over something my mother had just asked.

"We can come out good on this sheep deal, don't ye think?"

The sheep deal. It has been in the air all the way back to Wickenburg. My father had not given up on Arizona for good, in those desert nights of talking things over, but he'd discerned that he had to be stronger in his wallet and a few other parts of himself to niche us a new life there. The other side of the Arizona mirror went toward north: one more mountain summer in Montana, a last high season of livestock while they were drawing fancy prices. The sheep of war. In a band of sheep--a thousand ewes, their thousand and some lambs, and their wool--you were looking at a worth of maybe ten thousand dollars, and these were dollars of 1945. Wages would never add up that fast, even if they could be found and ^{hung}~~run~~ onto. Would be nice here for the summer, my mother allowed herself to pine momentarily at the Morgan cookhouse near the end of that spring, trees in the yard,

a lilac bush out in front. But the capable Morgans ran their ranch by themselves once lambing was over, and she recognized that by the first of June we would* have to load and aim the Ford again. Somehow, summer had to be mined for all it was worth. So when my father began to think out loud about a sheep deal, she was ready to listen. Looks like we should be able to make quite a little money at it. The sheep deal was a masterpiece of carvery. Dad and his favorite brother, Angus, a good business head, went in together and bought the band of a thousand ewes and their new lambs from Frank Morgan, turned right around and sold them for delivery that fall. Shearing time came before that, so the wool money came to us and Angus. But the summer range to run the sheep on needed to be rented from the Morgans, at so much per head; on the other hand, Dad would ameliorate that charge with some work for the Morgans--

When everybody had taken every whittle they could out of the hypothetical profits, up we would go into the high country with the actual band of sheep.

"Looks like," letter becoming life in the dreamchamber of the Ford, "we should be able to make quite a little money at it," my mother repeats her vote for the sheep deal, for the summer of calculated risk we are

trying to get to. "Give you a chance to take life a little easy, too."

"What, easier than this?" my father indicates our immobile condition.

"Just sitting here letting the tires rest?"

"I'll rest you," my mother rejoins. I can't see her smile, but her voice has it.

"This sheep deal, Berneta." This comes serious, pledge-like, from my father. "If it ever gets to be too much for ye, we'll back down out of there."

"Don't worry, I hired out to be tough," she heads him off on that. She makes a fist and rubs a hole in the breath fog on her window to peek at the weather.

"See there, the rain's letting up," my father points out. "Ivan, you're not having much to say for yourself. What do ye think, ready to build some more road?"

Back to the jacking, and trying to roof the ruts with boards, a task which I adore. Then a miracle. Bob Campbell--one of Dad's army of Scotch relatives riding the Big Belt coulees--happened along on a saddle horse and gave us a pull, and we finally did get out.

As he coils his lariat Bob Campbell tells us what we already have figured out, that any passing shadow of a cloud is enough to turn the Maudlow country into a gumbo quagmire. Then he cheerily wishes us luck and resumes his riding. Which again leaves the three of us, and the nearby homestead-haunted butte, and the horizon mountains, a bit farther from us than usual, of our past. Such home as we have is this country where my parents are trying and trying to taste the risk for each other. Married to the place.



Dear Wally--

The herder we had planned on lost 30 lambs in about 10 days,
so at that rate we'd have to buy him another band of lambs by fall.

For the first time in half a year, Berneta's letters seem to catch their breath.

#

June 8, 15, and 19, 1945. Her glad reports begin with what neighbored our meadow cabin on the face of Hatfield Mountain, a nice stream. Where my father, getting caught up on his fishing, made its waters our supperland of rainbow trout. Almost as softly as if talking to herself, she puts to the pages the three of us starting up our spiral staircase of summer.

We aren't working very hard at present. Were out for a horseback
ride this afternoon, first time I've been on a horse for ages. Ivan & I
rode Duffy, Charlie rode Sugar. That tandem ride likely was our last;
this was the getting-big-for-my-britches period when I took it into my
head to require not only a horse all my own but the ruggedest possible
saddle, a sawbuck packframe, for myself.

Received our band of sheep last Mon. Nice bunch of lambs, 1230
of them. Sure hope they weigh good this fall and we can keep the loss
down....

We have a herder for now, but when the sheep go on the Forest Reserve
the 1st of July or about, Charlie, Ivan & I may herd them. We aren't
sure yet. Charlie is going up to look at the Reserve range & see how
tough it is....

Don't know just yet when we will shear. I shouldn't have a lot of
work to do after shearing, and that should only last one day unless a
rainstorm catches us....

Ivan is busy drawing pictures. Does pretty good. He'll soon have
a birthday, doesn't seem possible he'll be six....

#

When my father shouldered open the door of that cabin of then, packhorses and wife and child and twenty-two hundred sheep at his back, a mouse nest fell down onto the brim of his Stetson. Ceiling paper drooped in shreds. The greenblinds on the windows were speckled with mashed flies, the floor was soiled with mouse droppings and pack rat leavings.

The place was a sty, but not for long. The floor of a housing project cubicle on the factory outskirts of Phoenix, maybe Berneta would wash with tears. But this cabin on the summer mountain she launched into with soapy water. Led by the hurricane broom of my father, who cocked a look out every window he swept past to check on the behavior of the sheep.

To dream us this last time, into the twists of June, I harbor there at the very first hours of the swabbed cabin.

And watch Berneta as she gives her mop a conclusive wring. On the go,

beds and plenty else to be seen to, she brushes by the foot of the scant cot beneath the southmost window and sings out, "Ivan, look how you'll just fit." I inspect, solemnly bob my head, and claim the bunk with my tarp-wrapped bedroll. A corner of my own, all I ask. My parents will share the plank-sided bed in the opposite corner, snug for two but they do not seem to mind the prospect. No pillows to this sheepcamp existence, so Berneta mounds our three mackinaw jackets at the head of her side of the bed to prop herself against asthma in the night.

Bleary windowpanes to be washed next. Berneta debates to herself whether to do away with the nasty greenblinds--nobody for five miles around to see in on us--but ends up scouring the fly matter off them. Blank windows have never seemed right to her.

Even though the morning outside is wearing its summer best--hasn't rained the last 2 or 3 days, really seems good to see some sunshine--I tag after Berneta there in the cabin. Follow her eyes while she inventories this domestic side of the sheep deal, the three-month ^{one-room} future. The cookstove is frankly puny, a midget two-lid job not much more than kneehigh even on her, but it will fire up fast and then not hold hot through these summer days.

The elderly table, scarred and stained from extra duty as a butcher block, at least presides at the proper window, the west one which lets in a good view of the willow course of the creek. Across the room, the canned-goods cupboard for once is huge enough, homemade logic of someone who, like her, has needed to store away most of a season of groceries at a time. And she is glad of the smaller cool cupboard, the outside cabinet of shelves handy beside the door and tinned against rodents; leftovers will keep ^{for} a day or so in there, and for longer term, butter and cheese and any grouse my father manages to hunt can be sealed in jars and coldstored in the creek.

Could be worse, her kitchen veteran's appraisal and our recent history of the drab White Sulphur Springs house and drabber Alzona Park both say. At the other end of the cabin's single room hunkers a heating stove big as a blast furnace, so close to the main bed that it seems to be trying to sneak under the covers. Winter here halfway up a Montana alp must be icily beyond even what we were accustomed to at the Faulkner Creek ranch, according to the double set of stoves only a dozen feet apart and the triplicate cabin walls--broad rough boards undermost, then clapboard siding nailed to their outside, and a surprisingly cozy interior of short boards pieced together

bricklike--and the roof of corrugated tin sheeting for snow to slide off.

We are summering here, not wintering. Could be worse.

My father tromps in with a heaping armload of firewood, goes to dump it in the woodbox, cusses and lets the wood thunder down next to the box instead of into it. "We're going to have to get after the pack rats, first thing," he declares as he scoops out of the woodbox yet another junk trove accumulated by them. Marauders so quizzical, swiping a torn handkerchief one night, a thimble the next, you had to wonder if they did it from sense of humor.

The trapper Berneta kids him, "So if I catch them, think that'll make them easy enough for you to shoot?" Two scabbards are slung on my father's saddlehorse. In one, the .22 rifle that is the shooting machine for pack rats and grouse. In the other, his .30-06 coyote artillery.

"Other way around, any I shoot first ye can sneak up and clamp a trap on, can't ye," he gives her back and starts lugging in the contents of the packs.

Groceries to the big cupboard, enough to last until the Morgan camp tender begins weekly provisioning. Our change of shirts and pants onto tempenny nails spiked in a row on the wall next to the door. Washbasin,

floursack towel. Frying pan and tin plates and pair of cooking pots and a dishpan. Utensils and box of wooden matches and lantern. Luxury item, a flashlight. Habitation is 95% habituation, so the cabin begins to seem familiar as soon as our own clutter is in place. Rexall ^{drugstore} calendar to keep track of the days. Small pane of mirror on the washstand for my father to shave by, Berneta to groom by. Our own galvanized bucket for our drinking water, because there's no telling what has visited any bucket you find in a disused cabin.

My father, everywhere today, is at the barn unsaddling the horses. I hesitate. But Berneta too has reached a last chore, stretching to arrange her writing materials on the top shelf of the tin-lined cool cupboard, the only place where stationery and black little bottle of ink and her inscribed fountain pen can be safe until the pack rats are dealt with. I unmoor from the completed cabin and speed out toward the saddle side of things.

Outdoors here is more elaborate than in. The cabin site is cuddled against the girth of the Bridger Mountains like a tyke on a giant lap. All directions from this perched place, you see to forest-tipped peaks of Bridgers or Big Belts and grassed ridgebacks of fetching green; view,

No pillows to this sheepcamp existence, so Berneta mounds our three
mackinaw jackets at the head of her side of the bed to prop herself against
asthma in the night.

view, view, gangs of views. Nearly three twisty miles by horseback down the gulch is the Maudlow road, where the Ford sits stashed behind chokecherry bushes. The timberline of the Gallatin National Forest, with its Reserve range where the sheep can graze come July, stands in back of the cabin another couple of miles, mainly up. High country and higher, this nestled but abandoned homestead, even by Doig and Ringer standards. The place has the feel of getting away with something, pulling a trick at odds with the surrounding geography. The ever so level deck of meadow; how in the world did that slip in here between convulsive gulches that nearly stand on end? Then the cabin knoll, just enough of an ascension to lord it over the meadow; terrace in the wilderness, no less? And the water helling off down the gulch is a surprising amount of creek, yet its flow is disguised away, hidden beneath steep banks until you peek straight down into the disturbed glass of its riffles.

Barn smells never masquerade, though. Musty hay and leathery harness and almost neutral old manure tinge the air as I clock in on my father and the saddle stock. Unexpected as a chateau, the steep-peaked barn holds stalls for all four horses and there even ^{were} ~~are~~ enough fenceposts

as pretty as you please.

There are two things

which concern every man's life, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a third thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a fourth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a fifth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a sixth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a seventh thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is an eighth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a ninth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a tenth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is an eleventh thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a twelfth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a thirteenth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

There is a fourteenth thing, which is to be long-lived, and that is to be rich and to be healthy.

around it, askew but still standing, to resurrect a pasture. Liberated from the chore of picketing Sugar and Duffy and Tony and Star on thirty-foot ropes, Dad moves through the unsaddlings whistling the same chorus over and over in pleasure.

He and I emerge to the cabin knoll again, and the next unexpected construction.



"Daddy, the outy is logs!"

"That's a new one on me," he has to admit. So overbuilt is the immovable log outhouse that it's more like a blockhouse, hefty to the point of ponderous.

"He must've wanted to make sure it wouldn't pick up and run away," my father says as if he knew such cases. An earlier Charlie had striven on this mountain shelf of earth. Bachelor homesteader Charles Rung, who applied himself enough to assemble the cabin and the barn and the preposterously redoubtable toilet, but his intended two-story house was still stacked as lumber, a mighty pile of weathered boards sitting neatly amid the weeds. The Morgans, maybe halfway meaning it, had joked to us that they bought old Rung out for that stack of lumber, with the rest of the place thrown in.

Not much known about Rung, said the Morgans. He filed his homestead claim ~~here~~ back in the time of World War One, slaved away at the place except to get a little money ahead as a fieldhand in the Gallatin Valley grain harvest some years; wintered all by his lonesome in here. Whoever he'd been, Charlie Rung had the knack of putting up with his own company in style. In the timber of the gulch a little way from the cabin was his cache-hole where he stashed homebrewed wine and the venison he shot out of season, which was to say virtually all the time.

On our way across the knoll from the barn to the cabin, my father can't help but stop for a minute and palm his hands into his hip pockets, happily proprietary as he scans the gray grazing band. The sheep can't believe their good luck. They stand in their tracks gobbling the lush meadow grass like a serving of hay, then plunge ahead three quick steps to gorge the same way, time and again. By noon they are so roly-poly they don't even head for the brush to shade up, simply flump down in the open meadow.

Our own meal, this first cabin lunchtime, is Spam sandwiches, drawing the accusation from my father that it's a plot to send him directly out fishing. Berneta teases back that that sounds to her like the right idea.

But both stay sat, in the beginning of the afternoon, and quietly take in the cabin, the country outside, this first stairstep of summer. Our reward to ourselves after the Spam is ^{Kool-Aid}~~leclade~~, the family passion for lime-flavor glinting green in our three tin cups. As if he's just thought of something, my father leans across the table toward the window to check the position of the sun, then compares the alignment of the cabin. "At least the place sits straight with the world," he verifies. What is it

that arranged us this way in our thinking: the squares of a mile each that the land in the West was surveyed into, the section-line roads that ruled us wherever we drove in that country, the boxlike rural rooms fitting no other logic? Whatever ingrained edge it is, to this day I have some of the family unease with any house whose axis angles off from a compass reading of absolute north-south or east-west.

The cabin wasn't through with my father. He tips his chair back and aims his most studying look at where the door stands open, pleasant cool of noon breezing in. "But what the hell was he thinking of with a north door?" North is storm country, snow and blow waiting to swarm in any time you ~~touch~~^{reach for} the doorknob between November and April.

Berneta sends her gaze out the rickety screen door, down the lunge of gulch toward the Maudlow road. "Bet you a milkshake I can guess why," she mischievously arrives at. "He wanted a good long look at who was coming."

My father chuckles at her point about that other Charlie, the in-season-and-out homesteader Rung. "Like maybe a game warden, could be."

So, straight with the world or not, we've come to rest in notorious territory. Not simply in terms of the comatose old homestead's history of

contraband venison, either. Where we are, this start of June, is the extremity of the Sixteen country. Under those horizon-bumping views from this meadow, Sixteenmile Creek scampers through the confused geography from every direction, the main channel twisting down from the Wall Mountain basins in the north and skewing west to its union with the Missouri River, joined midway by the Middle Fork sailing in from the east and the Ringling country through a sharp canyon. Then there is a last, orphan section of the creek springing from entirely different drainage, the sly tether of the Big Belts to the Bridger range. The stream streaking down our gulch is that offshoot, the South Fork of Sixteenmile Creek. Behind us, Hatfield Mountain of the Bridgers sits like a mile-tall apartment building facing down on the rock alleys of the Big Belts. We are in for a climbing summer, the saddlehorses huffing constantly on the slopes behind the cabin, we know that much. But the meadows of the back of the lofty Bridgers are going to be worth it--such grass, this rain-fed early summer, that the sheep will fatten on it as if it were candied.

#

Dog, we're rife with dogs again.

Sheepdogs, at least in theory; Flop with a wonderful half-mast ear that begs affection and Jack with the pale eyes, barely blue, of a born chaser.

Even my father can find no grounds to object to their instant conversion by Berneta into housedogs, because it just as fast became plain that only one or the other can be used on the sheep each day. When the two dogs are worked together, they add up to less than one. Jack sulks whenever Flop is sent around the sheep with him, Flop takes a yipping fit any time he is held back from a mission with Jack.

"Whoever invented dogs," my father appraised^d this nerved-up pair, "has a hell of a lot to answer for."

But perhaps our prima donna canines figured they were putting in



their shifts just as much as anybody else. Charlie has been watching the sheep early in the morns. & late in the eves. while the herder gets his meals, ran Berneta's latest report to the Ault. The sheep deal had advanced to a phase known as tepee herding. Day-and-night sentry duty with the band of sheep because of coyotes and the tough terrain, it amounted to. Occupied enough with settling us in at the Rung place and trying to gauge Berneta's hardiness and readying for shearing and thinking over a big haying contract that was being dangled (Walter Donahoe wants us to put up the hay on the Loophole-back in the White Sulphur Springs country-- again, but don't know whether we will be able to take that on), even my father couldn't find a second twenty-four hours in the day to spend with the sheep and was resorting to a hired herder. The one who came recommended didn't seem to be any whiz--"I wouldn't call him the greatest," Dad left it at--but he trooped through the day with the sheep as required and bedded down on the mountain with them every night without complaints. Except for those turns at sheepwatching while the herder fed himself, we had only to move the herder's tepee to a new bedground for each night and generally supervise.

"Pretty easy living," Dad has to admit as he and I bounce back into the cabin, day of our own yet ahead, after a morning shift with the sheep.

"About time you tried some," Berneta ratifies with a pleased look up from the letter she is writing.

This lasted an entire week and a half, until the morning my father and I found a lamb gut-eaten by a coyote practically at the doorflap of the herder's tepee.

The instant the sheep shaded up at mid-day my father was sifting his way into them on a walkthrough count of the lambs. Tricky to do, step by ever so slow step, negotiating a route without roiling the sheep. Low at his hip, his right hand flicks its little stroke of arithmetic at each lamb he tallies, and every time a hundred is reached his left thumbnail gouges a mark in the soft wood of his pocket pencil. [#] His walkthrough marks out at twelve hundred lambs, thirty short of what we had handed over to the tepee herder just ten days ago. (At that rate we'd have to buy him another band of lambs...) This herder is a scenery inspector, idling away under tree or tepee while the coyotes have been using the band as a meat market.

My father wheeled, strode over to the herder and snapped, "Roll your damned bed."

The next herder, escorted in by the Morgan camp tender, my parents immediately dub Prince Al for his rapidfire consumption of Prince Albert tobacco. When he isn't smoking the twisty shreds from the red can, he ~~chews it.~~ ^{the stuff.} Brown parentheses of snoosejuice, apparently permanent, hang at the corners of his mouth, but what really catches attention are the tracks of his roll-your-own habit down the front of his shirt, the burn specks where dribbles of ash fall from his handmade cigarettes. My father is heard to mutter we'll be lucky if this one doesn't burn down the mountain and the sheep with it.

Dad and I are barely back from moving the herder's tepee the first morning when rifleshots break out on the mountain behind us. KuhWOW!

KuhWOW-kuhWOW-kuhWOW.

~~I was all~~
Naturally ~~in~~ ^{I was all} in favor of any form of bombardment, but my father the coyote marksman listens skeptically to the herder's fusillade. If you don't knock over a coyote with your first shot you're probably wasting your lead.

Berneta comes out of the cabin to cock an ear at the uproar. "Makes you wonder if the coyotes are shooting back at him, doesn't it."

When the three of us ride up that evening, ^(we see that) the sheep and Jack the dog are as jittery as if they, not the coyotes, have been under barrage all day. Not that any casualties can be counted among the coyotes. Prince Al, it develops, has the philosophy of touching off a shot whenever a stump or a shadow looks as if it conceivably might be a coyote. My father tells him that's an interesting theory, but how about saving his ammunition unless he's goddamn-good-and-sure about the target.

The next morning, Dad and I just reach the cabin when a new salvo of kuhWOWs thunder from the mountainside.

Very soon the Jack dog comes arcing across the meadow in a neurotic slink, belly to the ground as if begging us please don't blame me please I simply can't take any more of that commotion until ending up, inevitably under Berneta's merciful petting hand.

She and I watch my father with apprehension. [#] He, though, seems downright gratified to see the deserter dog. "We'll just let Mister Prince Al have a day of handling those sheep without a dog. See if that slows

him up on the shooting."

By that evening, having chased sheep over half the Bridger Mountains, the herder was the frazzled one and the cannonading was cured.

— But a few more days into Prince Al's term of herding, on the fifteenth morning of June, my father comes into the cabin disgusted. Right there with him as usual, I'm excited, a bit traitorously, by this latest bulletin.

"Can ye believe it," he lays it out for Berneta, "that scissorbill of herder has to have a trip to town already. Compensation papers of some ~~damn~~ kind he needs to fix up."

She too is getting her fill of wartime sheep help. "Quite an imposition on these herders, isn't it, to ask them to actually herd."

My father steams out the choices. Deny Prince Al the trip and he'll most likely quit the job. Or much worse, sulk for several days of misbehavior with the sheep and then quit. Hang onto Prince Al until shearing if we can, is the least nasty conclusion. The only virtue evident in him is the one that counts, he isn't losing lambs left and right.

"I better take the sheep tomorrow," my father brings himself around to the necessary, "while you run him in to Bozeman, how about." She has

done this endless times before, ferrying a hired man so that a toothache or a case of boils or, as now, a pesky piece of government paper could be taken care of; for any ranch wife, as usual as a can of coffee on a grocery list. A day away from the Rung place, medicine against monotony, it provides too.

My father is going on, "It'll give you your chance at the mail and some fresh goods, and while you're in there do something nice for yourself and shop for--"

He stops. Berneta is shaking her head.

I'll play sheepherder tomorrow.

"What, instead of making the trip to town? How'd ye get that in your head?"

I'd rather herd than to take him in. The roads in this country
get my goat.

My father rethinks. A possibly slippery drive through the Maudlow mudholes, versus a horseback day with the sheep for her. "That's what you'd really rather, is it." Then the central concern: "You're sure ye feel up to that?"

"I can get by with the herding," she reassures him. "The horse and the dog will do the most of it. Don't worry none, I'm not about to walk myself to death chasing after fool sheep."

She cheerfully turns to the matter of me. "Which for you, Ivan? Playing sheepherder or into town?"

I blink. It had never occurred to me the town trip might not include me. By now I am practically the child gazeteer of towns, Phoenix to Maudlow. Later it dawns on me, too late, that going herding with her would have been an entire dreamday aboard my own horse. But instead I choose horsepower, the Ford, habit of journey and whatever obtains: "Town, I guess."

#

The next morning my father and I and Prince Al slewed our way first of all into Maudlow. Maudlow gumbo: a bum go, Maudlow. Whipping the Ford's steering wheel this way and that, my father comes up with the sarcastic theory that the only reason the railroad was routed through this country was because the mud is thick enough to float a train. Prince Al, chawing away, mutely doesn't get it.

Six miles of slip and slide, and we tromp into the tiny Maudlow post office to collect our backed-up mail. Wally is heard from, Winona, Anna and Joe, of course my grandmother (three of those envelopes), four or five other friends or relatives, the weekly paper from White Sulphur Springs and a batch of my comic books which I would have read before we were out of the post office if Dad had let me. Berneta has hungered for these letters: haven't had the mail for 2 wks. Went down to get it Tues. but the road was washed out this side of Maudlow. Her letters in turn cascade into the Maudlow mail slot, away to the Ault goes her dispatch of us written just yesterday. We are all pretty well. Some days I don't feel too good but can't complain most of the time.

More mire, between us and Bozeman. The windshield keeps threatening to go blind from mudspots, so whenever my father guns the car through ruts of standing water he flips the wipers on after the splash. Dirty water to wash dirtier. The slap of the wipers sounds frantic, as if the Ford is trying to bat away the accumulating muck.

We smear our way past ranches now, fundamental sets of buildings, then the Morgans' workstained sheepshed. The arched backs of the Bridger

Mountains slowly file along beside us.

Eventually the road drops, and drops some more, into an eyelet of gap between farmed ridges, and the Gallatin Valley opens up prosperously for twenty miles ahead.

Downhill now, glide all the way to the long main street of Bozeman. My father points out a field where as a young man he worked in the grain harvest. (Land that later grew four lanes of freeway and a Holiday Inn.)

Downtown in Bozeman, we let Prince Al out at the government office and tackle our own chores. First thing, fill the Ford with gas; rationing still rules. Then something I was distinctly not keen on; under orders from Berneta, what my father calls getting our ears lowered.

Normally our haircuts were homemade, and a barbershop's fuss and strangenesses spooked me. Green eyeshade worn by the hovering barber; why put lime color atop the eyes, why not skyblue? The barber chair with those corrugated arm-ends as if the chair was enough of a participant to tense its own knuckles. The mirrors on the walls both in front and back of the haircut victim, I actually could see the use of; ease of glance for the barber so that he wouldn't snip you lopsided. But the

surplus of reflections echoing away, where do those bounces ever stop
and why don't they?

Even my hair seemed to know it was in odd circumstances. The barber tucked the whispery cloth in around my collar and critically combed my flop of red shag across my head. Then asks, as though it might matter in how he proceeds: "Where you fellows from?"

Where indeed, given our road record since the Ford was loaded and aimed to Arizona last November. But my father flaps a wrinkle out of the newspaper he is reading and encompasses everything from the root years of the Doig homestead to the Morgan summer range of the moment. "We're out here on Sixteen--"

—————
Sixteen kinds of weather a day this year, Berneta is saying to herself as she unties the yellow slicker from behind the saddle and slips it on. Knots the saddlestrings firmly down on the mackinaw jacket she'd been wearing since she left the cabin, and climbs back on Duffy to ride through the sun shower, freshet of rain about the size of a sprinkler can's output but thoroughly damp. Makes you wonder why June days need to be so unpredictable. Hour to hour there's the sense that summer is being

invented over again, one sky after another.

She rides with a bit of deliberate jangle, from the ring of cans-- empty condensed milk ones, strung on a loop of baling wire, which you shake for a clatter to make sheep hustle along--hung handy on her saddlehorn.

Ahead of her the trail zigs and zags up the mountain like a carpenter's rule unfolding. A quarter of the way up the mountainside, no, already more like a third of the way up, a mob of wool is expanding in many to many directions at once, helter-skelter. Say for Prince Al that he started the sheep out onto the big slope decently enough, this morning, but their behavior is disintegrating in a hurry, and she and the horse and dog ~~need~~ ^{have} to get right at it to head them off. She'd decided first thing to leave Jack leashed at the cabin and use Flop for the day, eagerness over temperament, and the bent-eared dog ~~flirts~~ ^{flirts} sideways at her in gratitude as they travel the trail.

Ten minutes' hard climb by the saddlehorse carries Berneta through the rain climate--off with the slicker, back into the mackinaw--and up to

where she feels she can start dealing with the herd situation. The sheep are full of run this morning. Every second minute, the lead ewes have to be turned, bent back from ~~a sudden~~ ^{their abrupt} mania to quit the country, stream out across the mountain just to be traveling. You'd think the fools had appointments somewhere. Here and there a bunchbreaker erupts, a solo sheep dithering off toward the ^{tall} timber with forty lambs following like a tail on a kite. The worst vagabond, a haughty high-headed ewe determined to stomp off back to the bedground, Berneta slings the ring of cans at and has the satisfaction of clouting her in the rump and causing a panicked veer back to the protection of the herd. Don't dare do much of that, as it means the exertion of climbing off and on the horse to retrieve your ~~ring of cans~~ ^{noisemaker}, but it shows the old biddies you mean business.

She uses the dog to take the run out of them, directing him with backhand sweeps of her arm as if clearing away a curtain of air. "Go around them, Flop. Around them, boy." The dog races ~~ahead~~ of the sheep in short arcs, stopping every fifty yards or so to give her an enough? look.

~~Sheep~~ ^{Ewes} still are stubbornly squirting off in tangents of their own on

the other side of the band from the dog, so Berneta keeps sending him on his rainbow dashes until he's circled the whole bunch. Just as obstinately as they'd been scattering to the four winds, the sheep now keg up, huddle there in a two-acre knot of wool blinking at her and the dog.

She catches her breath and, ugly though a non-eating band of sheep wrapped around itself is to any self-respecting herder, she waits. And waits some more, facing down the twenty-two hundred saturnine sheepheads. Let them get tired of being bunched up, the lunatics weren't gaining any grass into themselves anyway cantering off across creation the way they'd been.

The sheep mill a little in an unruly circle, eyeing the dog problem. All at once the whole bunch catches the inspiration to mother up with their lambs. The epidemic now is ewes sniffing furiously to make sure the offspring is their own, lambs diving to their knees to suckle. After the session of this, the band of sheep begins to graze up the slope as polite as you please.

Even when sheep are on their best behavior, you don't simply

lollop across the countryside with a band of them, especially if the country is as mountainy as this. Eight thousand eight hundred hooves to control, in a more or less simultaneous pursuit of grass, while avoiding coyotes and bear and deadfall snags and poisonous weeds and any other assassins that shadow the travels of sheep. Berneta sheds the mackinaw--coat on, coat off, that kind of day--and takes stock. Today's grazing territory is from the gulch on up the flank of Hatfield Mountain toward the timberline, then down again. "Bring them into camp tonight, let 's do," Charlie had formulated with her. "Halfway up along there is a great plenty for the day, then swing them back down. I ought to have that geezer of a herder back here by the time you head them down." Which will mean, for her, seeing to it that the band grazes as far up as the halfway point on the mountainslope before shading up, then easing them in a half-circle turn back down this afternoon, toward the upper end of the cabin meadow for the night. Getting sheep to do anything by halves goes against their nature, but she hired out to herd for all she 's worth, didn't she.

"That includes you, Duffy," she converses to the horse. "Let's go, boy."

As the horse answers that and the dig she gives him with her heels by grunting his way up the slope, Berneta is glad her body is becoming accustomed to the saddle again. Getting toward toughened in, although not entirely there yet. Already, this early, she can notice that horsecwork is work for the rider too. She always marvels at Charlie. Beat up as he is in various parts of himself, he can climb on a horse and go at it all day without ever feeling an effect.

The sheep fan out a little as she wants them to, their interest perfectly where it ought to be, one clump of grass to the next. She reins up beside the hooved cloud, her horse pointed upslope a certain neck-bowed way, herself posed attentive to the moment a certain way, and it happens. The years peel away and she is the photographed horsewoman again, arch of a mountain framing her. Some differences; there always are. Here, she is dressed not for the camera lens but for the job; workshirt, workpants, workshoes that she knows she must be careful not to thrust through the stirrup when climbing on even imperturbable-seeming old Duffy--

one of Charlie's worst poundings hit him when his horse shied at a snake as he was mounting and the stirrup snared his foot through to the ankle, dragging him like a gunnysack alongside the kicking hooves of the runaway. Nor is she quite the hatbrim-shaded leather-chapped cowgirl cometing against the stone sky of Wall Mountain, any more. No leg-swatting sagebrush grows at this altitude, and the best that she could find for headgear to herd in is Charlie's winter cap. But in wanting to be herself on horseback; in the neighborhood of high eye-opening earth; in June dreamscape of her own; in the solitary essentials of her outline today, she is enough like that picture of girl-turning-woman again.

—————
 Dreams give us lift, she's known that ever since Moss Agate. The trick is to bear up after the weight of life comes back.

Slamjam it all into herself at once and what an avalanche everybody's circumstances make. Her father in his coughing old age, ancient choreboy stuck in an annex to a chickenhouse. Wouldn't think a life could go downhill much from Moss Agate, but his has. Her mother, tough as a grindstone against her father and yet putting up with all the allowances asked by the Norskie. And her mother and Charlie, scarcely able to be

civil to each other. Berneta knows too well she is at the heart of that situation, daughter-wife tug of war, but can't see much of anything to be done about. Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer neither one is ever going to be quick to give in, and a person had better charge it off as one more price of family. You can pick your clothes/you can pick a rose/ but kin and nose/you can't pick those. Includes brothers, who're somehow both easier and harder than parents. Paul, closest to her in age and outlook, but a distancer and being made more so by the war; there in the army in Australia, he has married a Queensland nurse and gives every indication he may stay on there after the war. Wally, out on the Ault. She thinks his is the unfairest story, in a way. The one of all the fate-begrudged Ringers who has his essentials intact, youth and health and a warmth toward life's possibilities. Instead of the duty of war, he could be devising a life with Winona. Even when he isn't in battle, it must be hard, penned up with so many people. How she'd hated that herself at Alzona Park. Aboard ship must be a double confinement. Wally lately wrote that he wonders sometimes if he is really informed about how things are with the family, whether hard news of the never-easy state of the

Ringers is kept from him. Not knowing can be worse than knowing, Berneta has always savvied that too, and so she has written back a line which came out odd yet is in the pointblank attitude he seems to need from somebody on the homefront. Don't worry, Wally--if there is anything very bad happens here at home, I'll write and tell you.

———
A few lines once again to let you know that I am fine, my grandmother works away at her weekly letter to him from her Norskie kitchen captivity. And I hope these find you the same, Wallace.

Her third-grade penmanship toils for whatever can be reported.

Another hard rain slowing up the plowing but helping the hay. A fire in a neighbor's chickenhouse. The chance of maybe going into town to a rodeo on the Fourth of July.

Then, amid her account of rhubarb canning and doing a big load of wash, suddenly here is Winona being written off. She's a nice enough kid in a way. But Mama learned Winona's ways what little time I spent with her. I nearly got my head bit off several times over nothing. It kind of amuses me about these silly girls.

Wally's break-up loyally ratified, my grandmother makes the usual

turn toward closing. Well, dear, there doesn't seem to be much of any thing more to write about...

She determinedly says nothing, yet, about Berneta out there farther than ever in the Sixteen country.

#

"Sixteen Creek. Sixteen Creek." The barber contemplates with his comb still trying to find some natural order to my hair. "Never been up into that country. Can a man catch a fish there if he holds his mouth right?"

"Oh-it's-so-so; the-water's-pretty-riley; ye've-got-to-fight-brush," my father guards the stream which is all but tossing trout into our frying pan.



The scissors are starting to operate around my ears. "Hold still, Sunny Jim," the barber warns me. To my father again: "Suppose we about have this war won? What do you think of this man Truman?"

Affairs of world and nation get pronounced on while I goggle out the barbershop window at all-business Bozeman. Women and more women beeline into the shops and stores. An occasional calcified male goes creaking past to a bar. Cars have the street in frequent but not frantic use. This is neither martial Phoenix nor windworn White Sulphur Springs, this is a sound-as-a-dollar little city catering to its plump valley.

Here comes the part of barbering I really hate, the hair tonic. This of course is a barber who likes to slosh on the pooh-pooh water, positively dousing a person's scalp with the smelly stuff and rubbing it in like analgesic. Gabbing a mile a minute while his fingers mess around up there: "This'll fix you up for the Fourth of July, got your firecrackers picked out yet?"

Now it's my father's turn under the scissors. You have to look at him twice to figure out that he only slimly has the majority of a head of

hair left. The sides from the temples back are perfectly full, and

the stand of hair in the middle of his head is still holding strong;

it is

~~it's~~ either side of the middle that has thinned away, widow's peaks that

kept on going. He has had his glasses on for reading the Bozeman paper,

and looks abruptly younger again with them off.

"Always have to have the noon news," the barber announces, and turns

on the radio.

~~##~~ Broadcasting the sheep, Berneta's patient activity now is called,

in the original sense of the word. Casting them broad across the range,

in a scatter so that there is maximum grass for each.

"So far so good, Flopper," she says aside to her dog partner.

Their morning pandemonium forgotten, the ewes and their copying lambs

have drifted comfortably up the mountain nearly to timberline; this far up,

stray jackpines stand dark against the otherwise open slope, drifters from

the belt of timber. A slow-motion gamble, letting the band scatter from-

hell-to-breakfast this way, but the best kind of herding if you can manage

to do it. Doesn't take much tickle of the imagination to see the lambs

putting on pounds as they nibble along. Keeps the herder and horse busy,

though, riding a community loop around the wide-spread band to watch ~~for~~ ^{against} all the things that sheep can get into and that can get into them. Even prettiness serves as a poison to sheep, the standing white blossoms which Berneta charges into atop Duffy and hyaahs a bunch of lambs away from. Fight them away from deathcamas in spring bloom, and away from lupine when it forms peas in autumn, you have to.

As broadcaster of sheep her mind is free to go while the rest of her has to ride the horse, and she dreams ahead now. Wouldn't know it to look at her this instant, but she is tired of being portable. She and Charlie have talked things through, the evenings in the cabin when dusk lasts in the air for hours, and reached their decision against contracting hay this summer. Stay here at the Rung place instead, is the impulse they both have. Take on the herding themselves once shearing is out of the way, using the cabin as their camp. Charlie could stand a slow summer of mending his health some more and, truth is, so could she. She can't account for it, how much better she feels in mountain circumstances, but that's the physical how of it. Not easy traveling, this rifleshot country, but you can't beat it for grass, scenery, verve

of the mountain air. The rest of June and July and August here, on their own, will be a rhythm she and Charlie have not had since Grass Mountain. Even the Maudlow road can't stay muddy all summer.

Beyond, though. After August when the sheep deal is over, she and Charlie are going to have to quit thinking in seasons. Settle down and stay settled a good long while. With Ivan starting school we are going to have to stay in one place, Wally has been confided in, the wish told to him more than once lately. Some place of our own.

Time of her own, how different that'll be too. Ivan out of her mid-day hours. She enjoys a sardonic moment thinking of that transfer, like handing along a clock that boings whenever it feels like doing so. Going to be a handful for the first-grade teacher, he is. Try start him out on c-a-t and first thing he'll show her he can read catalog and everything in it. There are times she has wondered whether it was such a smart idea to further him in the reading as she tirelessly did, there in the winter and night of Faulkner Creek and since; he's quite enough of a little old man, growing up around adults all the time instead of other children, and having his nose in a book all the time will make him more so. But she