

herself never could wait, could she, to quit being a kid. Extend yourself full slam; if she has found anything to believe, it's that. It reached her to Charlie, lyrical wire in the wind. It was what pushed her to the gamble of Ivan, chancy pregnancy atop her chancy lung health. No, the reading and the rest of it she would not change. She can't feel regret for how any child of hers ridge-runs the country of his head.

A deep sound suddenly announces itself at her, ~~half~~^{part} owlhoot, ~~half~~^{part} airhorn. A grouse's cry. She is sure the alarm came from a big pine just up the slope from her, out by itself. She checks on the sheep, finds no catastrophe in sight, and turns to the pine. Nudging Duffy slowly toward the tree, she tries to single out the bird. Grouse make a riddle for the eye. Camouflaged virtually to invisible, they can sit as motionless as the treelimps themselves. Berneta reins the horse to a quiet halt as close to the pine as she thinks she dares, and rests forward in the saddle. It takes her five minutes to discern the blend of feather pattern against the bark.

As if dislodged by her view of it, the grouse plunges out of the tree, wings set, sailing down the mountain. Quick and far; a hundred yards,

two hundred, three hundred, the breathtaking unflapping glide goes on. At last, still without the tremor of a wing, the grouse vanishes into another tree.

All as it was; mountainside of businesslike sheep, her horseback self, tin roof of the Rung cabin far below. She notices ^{Flop} ~~the Flop dog~~ straying off in inveterate curiosity and calls him in, her voice drumming back from the mountain. That air dance of echo allures her. The play of words crisscrosses in her trial shout:

"Ringling, Ringer, Rung!"

—————
Charlie Rung teeters in the cabin doorway, a dozen summers before, drawn by a disturbance in the air. The toot of a grouse, was that?

He squints at the meadow, quiet with hay and the blossoms of his potato patch, then up the slope of Hatfield at his handful of cows, their heads already dug into the grass again.

Not sure now he heard anything, he regrets the nips of his chokecherry wine. Homebrew for lunch is not a sound idea.

He steadies himself to look around the place, sort out what wants doing next. As ever, his eye can't get past it; the stack of house lumber, no longer the fresh yellow of when he hauled it here three years ago, four? Took receipt of it straight out of the boxcar at the Maudlow depot, borrowed in the Morgans' big wagon and labored the wood ~~up here~~ load by load, damn near tipping over every time coming up that gulch. And there the pile sits, board footage for four rooms downstairs and three up, not counting attic and screen porch. Rafters and studdings and gables and shingles, the whole shebang.

The thing of it is, the house exists in Charlie Rung's mind. The only discrepancy is that it needs to be framed up and nailed together. Time he did that. He can't fully fathom how it hasn't happened already. Hadn't he done fine with the barn? And been triple careful with the walls of the cabin, so as not to wake up some clear January morning frozen stiff? But the carpentry of the house he has not quite attended to.

Middle of June, already. Haying is about to need doing, then the barn patched and mucked out for winter, then sixty bushels of potatoes to be dug and gunnysacked and stored in the root cellar for winter, and

cord after cord of stovewood to be chopped for winter too, and he is no youngster any more. All at once he knows he will never budge that lumber.

#

Blat is in the echoes now, the sheeps' medley of a thousand calls of baa bouncing here to there on Hatfield Mountain as the ewes are mothering up their lambs. They're ready to shade up, and Berneta too drops down for a rest. Army of mothers, encampment of wool at the top of the mountainslope.



Berneta unwraps her sandwiches for lunch and gives Flop a share.

#

Out of the barbership Dad and I march, shining at the back of the neck, and hurry through egg salad sandwiches at the lunch counter of the drugstore. The day is going and, last bite down, so are we.

Onward to conspiracy. This is the part that is secret from Berneta. My father had confided it to me as soon as we turned Prince Al loose. I outright dance to the idea, and my father looks like he could spring down the street in a burst of jigsteps himself.

At our destination, though, two of the women shoppers who seem to be the occupying force of Bozeman are passing by, one shaking her head and telling the other: "You ought to just see the prices they've got in there."

"'Spensive?"

"Awful. I walked in and walked out."

The Doigs are not daunted. In we plunge, my father's jaw geared forward into determination.

Shelves, counters, racks, boxes. Storeload of stuff, and the saleswoman is busy with a woman customer buying something whispery. We're on our own and glad of it.

"What's it a present for?" I'd asked my father when he unveiled this intrigue of his.

That threw him for a moment. Nearly three months yet to Berneta's birthday, and their wedding anniversary had been six, no, already seven weeks ago.

"The first day of summer," he resorted to. "Approximate."

This was good, though. My father feeling relieved enough, about the arc of the sheep deal so far, about cabin life and the summer range, to think in gift terms. Berneta has been through a lot, this hobo quintet of months since he fell sick in Alzona Park. Time for her to have a surprise of the decent sort.

My father zeroes in on the merchandise he has in mind. Picks one up
 eyes
 and ~~looks at~~ it as if trying to see through it.

"What color would ye say this is, Ivan?"

How to define that it has a kind of off-reddish tint, neither quite one color nor another, stumps me until I think to declare: "Hereford."

"That's no good to us then," he puts it sharply down. "We want straight brown, so it'll go with anything."

I manage to single out undiluted brown, my father decides on the fanciest style, and we're already halfway in business. Away we swagger to another section of the store, for the other ~~grand item~~ ^{item of splurge} to go with this one.

There, the saleswoman catches up with us. We feel we don't noticeably need her help, but she seems to think otherwise.

"This brown is close enough to the other one," she undertakes to show us, "to go together nicely."

"Close enough isn't what we're after," my father lets her know.

Down cascade more boxes of the item, the saleswoman displaying one after another until I exercise our proxy on the precise same color.

Dad names the size, and the saleswoman wonders if that doesn't sound too big. My father gives no ground. He knows the size of everything Berneta wears, and ~~just~~ ^g barely keeps from telling the snooty salesclerk it was all volunteer arithmetic, too.

The saleswoman wants to know what other assistance she can render us. ^{informs} My father ~~tells~~ her the spree is over, how much are the ~~damages~~? She adds up the set of purchases, he flips his checkbook out and writes the

figure as if it was pocket change. Away, rich in gifts, we go again.

Groceries next, by the boxload. The trunk of the Ford swallows it all away and my father looks twice at his wristwatch. All we need now is Prince Al. Naturally he has not shown up, here at the hour Dad absolutely instructed him to.

My father starts to stew. The thirty-five-mile drive yet ahead, mudholes in ambush; a stop at the Morgans to tell them we've done our own campending this week; tarping the groceries into slingpacks behind our saddles; the three-mile horseback ride from the mouth of the gulch up to the cabin--he doesn't want added into all that a door-to-door search of Bozeman for Prince goddamn Al.

"Daddy, are you going to can him?"

"To even do that we need to find the sonofabuck." As much to the lengthy main street of Bozeman as to himself or me, he addresses: "Where do ye suppose a bird like him would hang out?"

Choices are plenty, although all in one category. Just from where we stand I can read the twinkling signs of several nominees--the Crystal Bar, the Rocking R Bar, the Park Bar, the Stockman Bar.

figures as it was pooled change. Away, rich in life, we go again.

it all away and my father looks twice at his wristwatch. All we need

now is Prince Al. Naturally he has not shown up here at the hour had

absolutely instructed him to.

My father starts to start. The thirty-five-mile drive yet ahead,

and he has in embryo; a stop at the Morgans to tell them we've done our

own campaigning this week; turning the groceries into things to be done

our address; the three-mile horseback ride from the mouth of the gulch

to the cabin--he doesn't want added into all that a door-to-door

lengthy rain street of houses as to himself or us, he addresses: "There

[An article
as] interpreted
as a
chateau,

The barn was as unexpected as a chateau. Stall for four horses, and
with the meadow grass around, a horse pasture could be built.

My father casts another ~~look~~^{glance}, this time at the sun, midway down the afternoon sky, and starts us toward the nearest of the bars at his racing pace. "Bastard him anyway, we don't have the time--"

— Time to head down out of here, Berneta can tell from her glance at the sun; start the sheep moving down the mountain toward the place for night.

The sheep, contrary old sisters that ~~they've been all day long,~~^{they can be,} have forgotten their earlier affection for the bedground and want to keep on stuffing grass into themselves. Words fly out over the mountain:

"Around them, Flop. Way around them." While the dog makes his ~~route,~~^{rounds,}

Berneta adds whistling and a clatter chorus of cans. Grudgingly, the ewes shift around and mince slowly down the slope, their lambs skittery at their sides. It will be a push, to make them move down to the cabin meadow before dark. The horse and dog both are showing themselves tired and, message from her body, she is getting seriously that way, too.

Stay on the horse, she again reminds herself. Riding is work, but walking this vast sidehill is more so. She spurs Duffy closer to the herd.

— "Of-all-the-goddamn-times-to-have-to-herd-the-goddamn-herder," my

father tells the world. He and I ransack the drinkeries on the south side of the street first, Dad giving a description of Prince Al which grows more blazing with each bar. But the bartenders shake their heads, ^{laid eyes on} chorus that they sure haven't ~~seen~~ any such specimen. We even resort to the Oaks Cigar Store, on the chance he's in there stoking up on chaw.

No luck. "Worse mess, if we go back out without him," my father reminds himself by stating to me, and we begin canvassing the north side of the street.

Who would have thought it of scruffy gopher-cheeked Prince Al? He was ensconced in the cocktail lounge of the swanky Baxter Hotel, the absolute last place to look, pickling himself with mixed drinks called Brown Bombers.

"Got your compensation fixed up, it looks like," my father begins with mere sarcasm, then he really lights into him. Takes the hide off him for breaking his word about meeting us on time, for going off on a bender, for general misbehavior while a woman has to handle his sheep for him. Yet not quite firing him. We still desperately need a herder, even one of this candlepower, until shearing.

Without a word, Prince Al follows us out and folds himself into the car.

—————
The route from the Maudlow road up to the cabin was beginning to take on familiar features, like a caravan run. The creek dodged through the thick brush, every ripple purring in hiding. Yellow shaley rock cliffed out wherever the gulch broke at a bend. Ahead, overhead, Hatfield Mountain topping out in its thatches of timber. At the halfway point, the sudden stand of low-branched cottonwoods to watch out for or they would slap you half off your horse.

I nod along in the dreamslow rhythm of the ride, perched, lulled, being carried by event. But go to my father and he is remaking the day, casting away the delay and lateness, churning worry into reassurance: if it would only stay churned. Holy-J.-Christ, his mood runs, how-can-ye-ever-figure-it-all? Prince Al possibly would've behaved himself, not gone off and got plastered, if Berneta had been the one to take him to town. Yet, couldn't really blame her for not wanting to fight the Maudlow road; lucky enough that my father didn't get us stuck himself, in those mudholes that would swallow a person's shadow. Besides, maybe Prince Al would've

fallen off the wagon even if a dozen Bernetas had taken him to town, maybe he was just that kind. But oh damn the weather that we were always having to try to sneak past, outguess, make muddy choices. If it'll ~~just~~^{only} let us settle in; the Rung place is restful when it's not a day of commotion like this. The sheep deal will pay off in just a couple more weeks, at shearing. Then there'll be the lamb money this fall, and even a bit of profit at selling the ewes too; money enough to set us up for a good long time. We can see if Berneta will try Arizona again, that country around Prescott. Or if she can get by in Montana as well as she has this spring, maybe that's as much as can be asked. Ivan in school this fall, we'll need to place ourselves and we will.

Not far now to the cabin. Damn-it-all-to-hell-anyway, how late in the day it's gotten to be. But her stint with the sheep ought to have gone well, browsing them a little way up the mountain like he had laid out for her. And the weather hadn't been terrible, which qualified it as good. And she is veteran at all this, after all. Knows the country, Berneta does. Knows herself, better even than he's ever managed to. What was it she'd said? "Don't worry none, I'm not about to walk myself to--"

—————
 Dearth of activity at the meadow, the cabin, as we file up out of the tangly gulch.

It is nearing dark. The sheep are bedded at the upper end of

the meadow, where my father had conveniently sited the herder's tepee that morning. Prince Al, sobering up grumpy, heads his horse toward the tepee.

Duffy, still saddled, is grazing in the high grass alongside the barn. Berneta is nowhere in sight.

My father stands in his stirrups, suddenly tiptoe with the strain of trying to see behind the cabin windows slurred with dusk. "Berneta, we're home," he shouts almost as if it were a question.

The cabin.

The barn.

The bedded sheep.

Nothing answers him except echo.

—————

Then in the frame of the cabin doorway, just distinct. Wiping her hands with a sack towel, she calls out:

"Back the same day, are you."

The sheepdogs appear, one on either side of her, yawning from their cozy cabin stay.

Burden of worry off him now, my father clucks his horse into faster

pace across the meadow. I bounce on the back of Star, trying to keep up.

They've all kissed and gone on to generalities about the day by the time

I slide down from my horse. My mother hugs me and calls me her Bozeman

Ivan, laughs that Dad and I don't seem to be cut out for town barbering,

we've come home looking like a couple of scared preachers.

My father does a necessary asking. "How'd ye do with the sheep?"

Her day on the mountain revolves again. The sheep when they were pigheaded, the sheep when they were perfect. Varieties of weather.

Taste of the sandwich lunch, sound of the grouse. Exasperation, exaltation, sufficiency of each. Common day in the week of life.

She sums it as she will for Wally, in transoceanic ink, in the morning:

I got along okay.

The mail and groceries have to wait. First out of the pack are the conspiratorial boxes for her. This, my father the cowboy suitor could perform blind. "We happened to bring ye a couple little somethings, dear," he pronounces and flourishes the first box to her, then with a grin hands me the other one to hand to her.

"What have you two been up to?" She gazes, as captured with surprise as we could wish, back and forth at my identically grinning father and me.

"Try 'em on," my father says with acey-deucey confidence.

Publicly done, as everything is in the single ^{room}~~chamber~~ of the cabin.

She slips the first item on, exclaims to us about the perfect fit, which of course we knew. She peeks in the second box.

Lifts out the other half of the outfit with an "Oh, I ought to send you two to town all the time." Puts it on by ducking down to adjust it just-so in Dad's shaving mirror.

Turns to us, rigged out new from head to toe.

Charlie and Ivan brought me the nicest pair of brown boots and a

big hat.

So I am a combination cowgirl sheepherder now.

—————

Away to the Ault flowed that third June letter of hers, full of her herding triumph and the summer to be ridden into with newly given garb. Somewhere it crossed mailpaths with the only letter from Wally that has come to light.

All his others, nearly a steady year's worth from such war addresses as Pearl Harbor and Eniwetok and Leyte and Okinawa ~~and Tokyo Bay~~, went the way of discard and loss. But this single one hid in plain sight, in print.

Proudly sent to the editor of the White Sulphur Springs weekly newspaper by my grandmother, it appears in full on the front page of July 4, 1945.

Now don't think that this is all that could be said, Wally tags on an immediate warning. It is what they will let past the censors.

. . . Many exciting encounters. . . helping to make history each day. . .
bringing the end of the war nearer. . . Greatly beyond the dehydrated handout
 to send to the folks at home, the Ault was wending its own route through the last of the Pacific war. The ship is in Samuel Eliot Morison's naval history of World War Two, a photograph of the destroyer taking on fuel in heavy seas, white water smashing over its every deck. The Ault and Wally ultimately would make it into Tokyo Bay for the ceremony of surrender by Japan. A night soon after, something Wally and the other young sailors had never seen: their ship's running lights. (Logbook of the Ault: By order of Commander Task Group, all ships turned on navigational lights for the first time since December 7, 1941.) Three hundred forty-five men cocooned in a skinny vessel three hundred sixty-five feet long, the Ault crew survived to do its own telling of the war.

Don't think that this is all that could be said. What was slighted

worst of all in the officially prepared letter home for Wally and the other Ault men was the actual business of war, taking toll. Nowhere the sense that this promised to be the to-the-death summer when an American bomber sent down a new manner of bomb which torched the city of Hiroshima in white-hot radiation, and then repeated on the city of Nagasaki. Deliberate amnesia of hurt and death is the order of the day. The Ault's sailors had watched planes burst into fireballs over them, had plucked survivors and bodies from the ocean when the carriers Wasp and Franklin and Hancock and Bunker Hill were aflame, had felt the close pass of kamikaze attacks, had fed ammunition into hypnotic gunchambers through eighty straight days of Okinawa combat. But the warworld of Wally's ship is rounded off to: We have our less happy times...

Only the letter's closing lines seem not canned, start to sound like true Wally again.)

The Wally who can't bring himself to stay listless even in censored circumstances. Some of it is not as bad as it sounds, the feel of his war comes out on paper, Some of it was worse. He leaves off in a dreamtime of his own, sailor Montanan trying to deploy himself into a future. This is just about our last operation....Maybe next spring we will get to see

each other again.

In the column exactly beside Wally's letter was printed my mother's obituary.

Word came aboard the Ault in the worst possible way, in a p.s.

miserably penciled onto one of my grandmother's weekly letters to Wally.

Dearest Wallace, some awful sad news to tell you since I wrote your letter.

Berneta passed away last nite. That's all the word I've gotten so far.

I don't know where they're at or where she died at.

She didn't suffer any at the last, Wally--the pencilscript now my father's shaken hand in an ensuing letter--for which I am thankful.

She was feeling extra good all evening and we talked until eleven that

night. She passed away at 2:30 A.M. on the 27th of June, Ivan's birthday.

I didn't even have time to awaken Ivan, she went so fast.

Swift, then, the attack by which she died. Not the customary siege of short breath, the jolting coughs and lung convulsions, the air-short fatigue, that she had ridden out so many times before. Not the open mayhem of asthma. Instead on her death certificate, immediate cause is given as an overstretching of the cardiac muscle--which was to say, a heart

condition. Nowhere ever written, then or since, was the simultaneous fact of earth: the acrobat heights of Montana earth that kept her so alive, until they killed her.

#

Nobody got over her. Doig or Ringer, those around me in my growing up stayed hit, pierced, by my mother's death in the mountain cabin.

My father was wrenched back and forth by how ^{welcome} ~~and~~ the return to Montana had been for Berneta, and how ^{treacherously} ~~without warning~~ it struck her down; how risky the one last mountain summer turned out to be, how unsaveable his wife's health ultimately was.

To my grandmother, her suspicion of "out there" was horridly proven, Berneta taken from her in some remote visitless place. Having had to toughen herself against so much, Bessie Ringer now faced what would never go away, death of a daughter.

For Wally, the reaction was a lifelong clutch at his sister's last letters, the keeping of news which shot in just when it had become clear that he himself would survive the war.

Always after, for all of them, it was not simply that Berneta had died young. There was always the echo-plus of "out there in the Sixteen

country," "up there on the mountain," "on Ivan's sixth birthday." A private family dialect of magnitude and conjunction and consequence. The Sixteen country held that magnified proportion for my mother; her manner of death held it for those who most loved her.

On through that summer of 1945, the last of the letters in Wally's packet were written and sent out in ^{misery}~~grief~~ and confusion, several by my grandmother and a pair by my father. ^A Brittle and cracking a bit more each time I unfold them, they still manage to stab. So blue, my grandmother lets down onto the page, seems all I do is cry & cry some more. My father tries to convey the ^{deadweight}~~ghastly drag~~ of time on him now. No one can understand it that hasn't been through it. The days are weeks and the weeks are months for me. Then, sad dream going into nightmare, their lines turn and spit sour toward each other.

I haven't seen your mother for a long time, Wally.

Wallace dearest, I haven't seen Charlie or Ivan since we laid Berneta
away.

She never comes around to see Ivan.

I've got no way to go see them. Then I haven't the heart to go where

Charlie is anyway.

#

She could have come nearer giving Ivan mother love than any other

person in the world.

#

Got a letter from Charlie yesterday in answer to the one I wrote

and asked him if I could help them in any way. But he gave me to understand

that I wasn't fit to help take care of Ivan. The only way he can think

of me is with pity and regret.

#

I feel bad to think she and I can't get along.

#

He knows he can hurt me through Ivan.

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I shall try so hard to bring Ivan up to be the kind of son his

mother would wish.

#

I'll write Ivan but I'll not write him.

#

It took my father and my grandmother five more years to quit their
grievous scrap, but that was a lot better than never.

In the last twist of all, they turned together to raise me. When my father faced himself in the glass door of a phone booth in White Sulphur Springs a night in 1950 and went through with the long-distance call to the Norskie country, he closed down the war that had begun over Berneta and continued over Berneta's child. As my grandmother managed to swallow away as much grudge as she heard being swallowed at the other end of the line, she volunteered herself yet another time into a shortsided situation, never to be a wife nor even a lover, not the mother of me yet something beyond parent. From then on, the cook during haying or calving or lambing at the ranches where my father worked was Bessie instead of Berneta, the couple who would throw themselves and their muscles into sheep deals were Charlie and his mother-in-law instead of his young wife. I grew up amid their storms, for neither of these two was ever going to know the meaning of pallid. But as their truce swung and swayed and held, my growing-up felt not motherless but tribal, keenly dimensional, full of alliances untranslatable but ultimately gallant (no, she's not my mother, she's...no, he's my father, not my grand-) and loyalties deep as they were complex. So many chambers, of those two and of myself, I otherwise would

have never known.

In the eventual, when I had grown and gone, my grandmother and father stayed together to see each other on through life. April 6, 1971: his time came first, from emphysema which was the cruel lung reprise of my mother's fate. October 24, 1974: my grandmother remained sturdy to her final instant--one mercy at last on these people, her death moment occurred in the middle of a chuckle as she joked with a friend driving her to a card party at the Senior Citizens Club.

Their twenty-one years together, a surprising second life for each, I've long known I was the beneficiary of. The letters teach me new, though, how desperately far they had to cross from that summer of grief. Theirs was maybe the most durable dreaming of all, that not-easy pair; my father and my grandmother, and their boundaryless memory of my mother.

———
 And I see at last, past the curtain of time which fell prematurely between us, that I am another one for whom my mother's existence did not end when her life happened to. ⁴ Summoning myself--summing myself--is no less complicated, past fifty, than it was in the young-eyed blur at those howling Montana gravesides. Doig, Ivan, writer: independent as a

mule, bleeder for the West's lost chances, exile in the Montana diaspora
from the land, second-generation practical thrower of flings, emotionally
skittish of opening himself up like a suitcase, delver into details to the
point of pedantry, dreamweaver on a professional basis--some of me is
 indisputably my father and my grandmother, and some I picked up along the
 way. But another main side of myself I recognize with wonder in the
 reflection of my mother's letters. It turns out that the chosen world
 where I strive to live full slam--earth of alphabet, the Twenty-Six country--
 had this earlier family inhabitant who wordworked, played ^{seriously} at phrase, cast
 a sly eye at the human ~~parade~~ ^{herd}; said onto paper her loves and her fears
 and her endurance in between; most of all, from somewhere drew up out of
 herself the half hunch, half habit--the have-to--of eternally keeping score
 on life, trying to coax out its patterns in regular report, making her words
 persevere for her. Berneta Augusta Maggie Ringer Doig, as distinct as
 the clashes of her name. [#] Ivan is fine, growing like a weed, her pen
 closes off its last letter ever, June 19, 1945. You don't need to worry
about him forgetting you, he remembers his Uncle Wally and knows what ship
you are on. He'll probably have a million questions to ask when you get back.

A million minus one, now. The lettered answer of origins, of who
first began on our family oceans of asking. As I put words to pages,
I voyage on her ink.

