

postmark:

Maudlow

May ¹⁴ 1945

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. The huge bladed truck here at the rumbling start of the plowing run 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 now, guest passenger for this dusk run before Christmas supper, perches my father. (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 brothere-in-law chronically are, the two of them get along best when they're out together like this. They still are pleased with themselves and each other from their hunting season that autumn, when on the ultimate day, 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, bagging three big bulls. Dad's aging little Jeep was their hunting vehicle.

Somehow they crammed the most massive elk behind the seats, antlers out the tailgate like giant furniture 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. My uncle took over behind the steering wheel (I can see

surprised

him grin a little at the windshielddful of elk carcass, hear him give out with another of those pronouncements you could always count on:

"The main thing is, not to get excited") and crept the Jeep into motion, groaning the load of wild meat down the mountainside in low gear.

My father that autumn was sixty-one years old, 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 mutual with them too, Wally's recreational horizon every working day on this 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. Time upon time the canyon had been my father's gauntlet to drive during the years of hospital dashes to Townsend with my mother. To look at, Deep Creek is a beauty. Summoned by the Missouri River in the Broadwater valley ahead, the clear creek tumbles along within touch of the road, bumping past rockfaced cliffs,

drawing the canyon walls of forest picturesquely down to its banks;

but as a driver you are inside a snake. 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 then to the young Pacific version

of Wally. The gas line on the car was plugged & we'd go about a mile,

then get out & blow the thing out with the tire pump, all this to be

imagined in blackest night with other cars hurtling around Deep Creek's

treacherous 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 the canyon blindfolded. Not only is he happy to see Deep

Creek mastered, he gets a greater charge yet out of Wally's latest stunt

with the plow. The highway safety engineers have busily installed reflector

posts on the shoulders of the road all through the canyon. These of

course stand in the way when the canyon plow goes to shove snow off the

road, and Wally 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 Wally gears down the 000 horsepower and 0 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, lambling for Frank Morgan. Our chosen land this time was that eye-taking rough horizon where the Big Belt Mountains and the Bridger Mountains come up against each other.

buildings
The Morgan ranch ~~itself~~ 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 just 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.

Horace

Elderly Frank Morgan and his son are wonders to work for, ranch bosses who pitch in at ^{all tasks} ~~any task~~ 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 rifleshots 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 more remote and it would have been Tibetan, any tinier and it would have been nonexistent. 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. Here around the corner from the Bridger Mountains, the country went wild in a hurry. A twenty-nine-mile dirt road kinked its way up canyons and across creeks and around obscure mountains and buttes

to eventually reach Ringling. Sixteen Creek scampered through the confused geography from almost every direction, south fork, middle fork, and then the main stream twisting down from the Wall Mountain country. 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. CRACKuunnnggg, the thunder-and-echo.

"Rain some more, why don't ye," my father challenges 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 sits behind the steering wheel, wearing the look that says

she and mud do not get along. I am out of the car clopping 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 people for fifteen miles in any 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 140 pounds will add traction. "Just give it the littlest bit of gas--"

"I know."

"--until it gets going--"

"Charlie, I know."

"--and then gun it."

While my father bounces 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 looks 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 we don't need them across the shaley ground to the old Winter place; the Maudlow road has the monopoly on mud.

At the Winter buildings we scavenge fast, plucking boards from the
[falling-down] sheepshed and anywhere else we can find ~~them~~ loose ones. ^{sapping} 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 up 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 vigorously pump the jack handle, whup-down whup-down whup-down. During these exertions my mother stands and watches him as if trying to come up with 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} ~~ratches~~ 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 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 a couple of 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, we hastily lay twin 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 dictates, 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 somewhere not very far,

and here we are in the insulating rubber-tired Ford; grounded, in numerous meanings of the word.

Again there is a general 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~~ ^{hat} is damp from the rain 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
strenuous
the 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.

"Berneta, we need to get those damn horses."

"This isn't getting us them."

My father 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 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."

The sheep deal. It has been in the air all the way back to Wickenburg,
maybe even Phoenix. The other side of the Arizona mirror: one more mountain

summer in Montana, a last high season of sheep while they were drawing fancy prices. In a band of sheep--a thousand ewes, their thousand or so lambs, and their wool--you were looking at a worth of maybe ten thousand dollars, and those were dollars of 1945. Wages would never add up that fast, even if they could be found and hung 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 place by themselves once lambing was over, and she realized 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. Walter Donahoe wants us to put up the hay on the Loophole ranch again this summer but don't know whether we will be able to take that on or not. Would like to. I'd like to make money enough to settle down, some place of our own this fall. I'm getting tired of moving around, and with Ivan starting to school we are going to have to stay in one place. She was ready to listen when my father began to talk sheep. Looks like we should be able to make quite a little money at it.

"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 agreement to the sheep deal, to the summer of calculated risk we are
trying to get to. "Give you a chance to take life a bit 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.

"See there, the rain's letting up," he 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. Then
Bob Campbell happened along on a saddle horse--routine miracle; another
one of Dad's army of relatives riding the Big Belt coulees--and gave us
a pull, and we finally did get out.

Bob Campbell tells us what we already know, that any passing shadow
of a cloud is enough to turn the Maudlow country into a quagmire. Then
cheerily,
he wishes us luck and resumes his riding. Which again leaves the three

of us, there on this route where my parents are trying to taste the
risk for each other.

postmark:

White Sulphur Springs

April 16, 1945

Dear Wally--

Winona and I spent Saturday making formals and catching mice.

I can hear that day of mice and thread.

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

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

"What the hey, we'll ruffle a bunch up and see," pronounces Winona.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We tried a cat, did I tell you?" An old marmalade stray one, half ^{nonetheless} its tail gone, who my mother cooed kitten-katten to. "He only lasted two days. Charlie claims the mice ran the cat out of town." Both women laugh and laugh, until I hear my mother putting on overshoes to take

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

Busy busy busy, Winona's Singer goes again. I laze in my own territory, the triangle cave of couchback and room corner it angles across. My books, my trucks, my tubby Ault, all are cached in here with me out of the prevailing weather. The wind steadily tries to pry out the nearest windowpane. Seems as though it blows & storms all the time, my mother has reported this polar Montana spring to Wally, we're having our March weather in April. We are having gabstorms and earquakes, if

I know anything about it. Since Thursday I've nearly listened myself
inside out. This is a job with work to it, ^{this} spying on history. Who can
tell what will distill next out of the actual air, after Thursday afternoon
when my mother had her programs on, Ma Perkins or some such, I wasn't
much listening until the news voice cut in: "We interrupt this program
to bring you a special bulletin..."

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

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

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

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

Everything rattles on in the kitchen now, full days later; the
dressmaking, the chitchat, their medical opinions on my father who,

sore side and all, went winging out of the house every day to put in ten hours in a lambing shed (He really shouldn't be working but then you know Charlie), rosters of who's home on leave from the war and apt to be met up with at the prom (the White Sulphur Springs high school spring formal amounts to a community dance, as any dance in that lonely Big Belt-edged country tends to), denunciations of this wintry spring, you name it and the smart cookies in the kitchen will do you a two-woman chorus of it. This peppy visit from Winona

amounts to a special bulletin itself. Cute yet industrious, Winona looks like a half-pint version of Rosie the Riveter except that, slang and gravelly in-this-for-the-duration voice and all, she is a schoolteacher. Winona I suppose I am a bit shy of, her firecracker energy, her sassy eyes. Kiddo, she calls me. But really, kiddo is a hundred times better than the excruciating Pinky which some of White Sulphur's downtown denizens call me because of my red mop of hair, and in the right tone of voice I think it is also an improvement over Ivan.

Now Winona is off on hats. She's seen a zippy spring number in the Monkey Ward catalogue she is sure she could make for my mother. Living

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

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

They were "going together," fine fudge of a phrase, ^{Did it} ~~which could~~ mean either that the couple was merely fooling around with one another while the good time lasted or drawing together into inevitable matrimony.

want to get out of practice. Quick as she scoots back from the garbage barrel the conversation again becomes fabric and color and whether to veil or not, yet how much more than hat chat is going on.

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

"Going together" was the term for it in those days, fine fudge of a phrase which could mean either that the couple was drawing together into inevitable matrimony or merely sashaying along with one another while the good time lasted. ^{improve} Apply it across ^{years} time and space, though, ^{in Navy since 1943} Wally on the Ault for the past year and Winona in the teacherage at Ringling, and a sag sets in. Her V-mail to him has been bright and kidding, but as there's only so much of yourself you can provide, she points out, in 25 words or so.

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

Quite the picture of a strapping young beau, the pre-war Wally was: abundant black teenage hair, that ever likeable face, muscular frame. Decades later, when he had become royally bellied, amid one of our trout excursions I came up on him dabbling over his tackle box as he sweetly crooned, "I just want a Paper Doll, to call my own...but those flirty-flirty guys with their flirty-flirty eyes..."

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

...but I can't see where that should make much difference. It

hasn't in my marriage, I know, and there are more years difference

between us than there are you two kids.

we have never tabulated (as a family)

more to come, expanding this graf:

↘ My mother is Winona's close chum, but she is also Wally's older-sister-being-asked-for-advice. She tries to trouper for them both. Nonie has a good education, is a good cook, a fair housekeeper, and--high opinion no problem at least on these two scores--a real seamstress as well as a good sport.

leading somehow into this sentence, which I think was the only underlining she ever did in any of her letters:

If a couple loves one another enough they can overcome most anything that happens to come along.

and finally, briefly, leading out into her less than conclusive conclusion atop the next page--

at time
she has
underlined -
1st underlining

So if you think you two can make a go of life together,

I'm certainly for you.

#

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

Nonetheless I have been coffeed, fed, welcomed in out of a past--half a Montana away--where so much happened and just as much didn't. Whichever of them first tapered the enthusiasm for going-together-by-V-mail, Wally and Winona were over with before World War Two was. Not long after, she traded in schoolteaching for a return to this--a remote, almost reckless reach of land which was her parents', homesteaded by them, clung to somehow through the Depression, through any number of years

to
come
home
TT

even more arid than usual in this dry heart of the state. Winona has been married, "since coming home," to a wiry ranchman who patiently installed twelve miles of pipe to get reliable water to their cattle. Evidently a matched set in all ways, Winona and her husband both are pared down to life in this short-grass country, not a gram of excess on them or their ground. I figured I had seen every kind of Montana endurance, but the ranching done here by this weatherstropped pair, now into their seventies, is very nearly Australian-outback in its austerity, a scant ¹⁴⁰ twelve dozen head of cattle specked across twenty entire miles of rangeland. "It's all like this," Winona's husband gives up-and-down motions of his hand to show how their land stands on end in a welter of abrupt buttes and clay cliffs. Their mobile home he catskinned in by tractor, no trailer-truck able to fit around the hairpin curves of the road into here.

From here Ringling seems as distant as Agincourt, but Wally even yet is a chancy topic for Winona. After the war, which is to say after they had gone separate paths to the altar, she met up with him just once, at a rodeo. Neither of them, she tells me carefully, had much to say to

?

Winona remembers me not as clinically bashful (around her): quote from
tape, my mother's surprise at how I took to her.

each other. Bare word did reach her of his death; but until now she has not heard of his second and third marriages, two wives out of three at his funeral. *After a long*

dry as dust:
After a long moment she says drily, "Nice to be so loved."

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

"You knew a lot of things. I remember you going through your books,

3
(a-telling me all the things in them."

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

the smoke as general, a haze from far-off forest fires.

Unincinerated one more time, the ranch couple take it for granted that I'll come back inside for further gab and caffeine, although I deliberately tag behind to keep peering around at this enterprise of theirs.

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

improve

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

budget

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

"All of \$4.63."

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

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

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

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

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

Already I am out of my couch cave, scrambling in from the living room. At the cupboard Winona is on tiptoe beside my mother peering in at their catch. I hop up on a chair to see. Two dead mice in the same trap, clamped permanently side by side in their race for the bait of cheese.

neck to neck

lilac
cloud of
chiffon

more?

"Charlie will never believe us about this."

"We'll just save it and show him."

Winona and my mother ruthlessly giggle.

Then
'drop' away it is
for proof.

—

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

"At least I got letters from you, dear. I haven't heard from Paul
or Wallace in ages."

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

My mother has been shrewd enough to bring me along handy at her side
on this diplomatic mission to her own mother. This is not as supple a scene
for her as exterminating with Winona. Our first after-Arizona visit to
Grandma carries complications that go back to the Moss Agate years,
where this grayheaded much-done-to woman provided my mother with that
peculiar girlhood, coddled and threadbare, and now there's more to come
which my mother dreads to have to tell. One thing about it, the terms here

are clear. My grandmother never takes long to sort out to you what's on her mind. So far, she deems our visit tardy (we have been back from Arizona whole weeks) and assigns the logical reason (my father). She is also snorty that this call of ours on her will be so short (overnight). Her points made, she proceeds to flood us in cinnamon rolls, oatmeal cookies, and all other indulgences.

Between pastry feasts we each ~~tell~~^{furnish} Grandma our versions of Arizona.

Mine is heavier on cactus than my mother's. Both women are tanking up on coffee, and I am intrigued that even more than my father cuts his cup of the stuff with canned milk, Grandma drowns hers with cold water dippered from the sink bucket. I negotiate for a sip--a sipe, Grandma's way of saying it--just to confirm that coffee in this diluted fashion is as awful as it figures to be. It is.

Maybe watered coffee sums up my grandmother's lot in life. To the end of their separate existences, my grandparents were people of a caste--Tom Ringer choring on ranches, Bessie Ringer cooking on ranches. Time and again, together and apart, they perpetually shifted views of mid-Montana's mountain horizon but could never rise. Now that she had left him,

she has taken shelter here in another lopsided situation, as cook for a Norwegian widower. Living like monk and nun as far as anybody can tell, the pair of them operate the old Norskie's tidy little outfit, part farm and part ranch, here under the long slopes on the west side of the Crazy Mountains. I would bet hard money that the old Norskie never saw fit to break his creamy silence and say so, but the place couldn't have been run without my grandmother: she even did the plowing, with a team of horses. My father or any other veteran ranchman would have shouldered labor like this only "on shares," a cut of each year's profit. For doing much the same work, and the cooking and housekeeping besides, my grandmother eked out a monthly wage and beyond that, she literally had nothing. (What we call benefits were nowhere in the picture; even Social Security then was regarded as too great a paperwork burden on owners of farms and ranches, and "agricultural workers" such as my grandmother were excluded from Social Security coverage.) Rather, she had what she was. With an education that petered out at the end of the third grade, Bessie Ringer couldn't much more than multiply 1 x 1 for you, but anything you could hum she could sit down to a piano and faithfully play. [Back there] in the bent-milkpail life at

Moss Agate, she somewhere had found time to pull on boxing gloves when her sons wanted some sparring. And to pamper an asthmatic daughter. Her arms and hands were scarred from every kind of barbwire work, yet there she sat hooking away at the most intricate of crochetwork. She was rilesome and quick to judge and long to hold a grudge. And in the time to come, I learned to love her for even the magnificence of her shortcomings.

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

Dreadfully, we have. He is living in one room of a shanty, the rest of which is used as a chicken house. The alfalfa chaff scratched up by the baby chicks got him down, my mother has passed the word to Wally; one of those short-winded spells...a bad one. Gnarled and bent as a Knockadoon walking stick, my grandfather; my grandmother, on the other hand, so sturdy she could carry the rest of us over the Crazy Mountains on her back. My mother, the product of the extremes, tries to give an unflavored report.

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

By now I pretty well know where Grandma is going with this, and out I zoom to explore the Norskie country. As ever, Grandma has a panting overfed dog around like an old lodger. Diversion, do I want? Shep wheezily proposes we go helling off together in every direction at once. Shep aside, though, this ranch is a kempt disappointment.

No suicide slope for me to plunge down as in my Stewart ranch daredevil days. Next I search in vain for the shop, as a blacksmithery is called on a ranch, but none to be found here; no rusty nests of iron, no forge with a farwheel to turn faster and faster into a straining whine. Nor is there even a bunkhouse, let alone a mussy crew of ranch hands; the widower's son from up the creek and the widower (and Grandma) handle the calving by themselves. What, earth that will support you without a battalion of crew to wring results out of it? These Norskies are on to something.

Goofy with the thrill of having somebody to romp with, Shep keeps giving me baths with his old tongue. Dog slobber is limited fun. I evacuate from the yard to the kitchen congress again.

At last my mother and her mother have got going on the populace beyond the family. Other people's doings, blessed relief. I nibble the one-more-cookie-but-that's all which is decreed to me while news of this one and that is remorselessly swapped. So-and-so is just as much a scatterbrain as ever and of course thinks she was terribly abused in the service. Had to work a little, something she isn't used to. Thus and such are going to have an increase in the family. Have to feel sorry for the kid with them as parents.

Never more than a sentence away in any of their gossip is the war. The war has consumed Montana. Not in the roaring geared-up military factory fashion of Arizona, but in a kind of mortal evaporation. Young men, and no few women, have been gone for years and in their place the ghostly clink of dogtags from the charnel corners of the world; striplings who have eaten plateloads at the table of my grandmother and square-danced with my mother and pranced me on a knee are wasting away in prisoner-of-

war camps in Germany, have perished in the Bataan death march, been wounded at Palau, fought in the Aleutians and the Marianas and Normandy.

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

She is mighty right to do so, for the Ault and Wally just then are steaming into the battle of 00.

[Log of the Ault, May 11:

1010 Sighted enemy plane (Zeke) which came out of low cloud astern and dived into the after flight deck of USS BUNKER HILL. Observed another enemy plane to come from astern. Opened fire. Plane crashed into BUNKER HILL flight deck amidships. Maneuvering at emergency turns and speeds. BUNKER HILL was burning furiously. 1023 Observed two enemy planes shot down in dog fight. A third began a run in towards formation at low altitude with a friendly fighter on his tail. Opened fire with all guns as plane passed starboard quarter..... Plane attempted to make suicide dive on this vessel and was shot down by this ship, falling close aboard the port quarter.]

And just days ago, the war ate down into my own age bracket. It had

happened a block or so away from us in White Sulphur, during a collection drive of waste paper for the war effort. Schoolchildren darting from house to house, bringing the scrap to the truck, hopping onto the truckbed to ride to the next houses, the truck driver thinking everyone was aboard and starting ahead: crushing under the rear wheels his own seven-year-old son.

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

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

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

Grandma manages not to say anything to that, but her silence about my father is as starchy as her apron. I did not know so until the letters, but the huff between my father and my grandmother already was beyond simmer.

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

All said and done, although for a clanging eon yet it wouldn't be, *family* the contest of spite between these two was about treatment of my mother. Nothing to do with medical terms, nor in any emotional or physical sense; one thing neither my father nor my grandmother could ever accuse each other of was lack of pure devotion to the girl and woman Berneta. Call it the dosage of risk. My grandmother desperately wished that my parents would simply choose someplace--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 whatever might help

my mother. He saw permanent wagework as more of the mire of Moss Agate,
and surely-to-Jesus-H.-Christ that can't be the best anybody can do,
can it?

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 hate to think of you out there!" *drawl*

"We don't know for 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
going on around me just now. My mother is 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 oldest warning:

"You be careful, 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,

farthest
then that vastest leap of care, my father's uprooting of us to Arizona,
would have done it. What Berneta Ringer, now Berneta Doig, had grasped
out of the discard of her Moss Agate girlhood was 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. If ^{this} that was reckless,
^{this} that was what she still wanted to be.

"Careful as I can be, Mama," 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. My mother suddenly 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."