She was a worker, comes the valley's echo of her again and again. So much a worker, it may be, that items such as a wrong husband fell away behind the pace of task and chore.

Family, work—and the clinch across both of them, steadfastness. Life was to be lived out as it came. If it came hard, you bowed your neck a bit more and waited. So without thinking it through—not entirely knowing how to, she had set her mind not to be afraid of that spare land, that wan ranch life. In this kind of determination, she was not like many of the valley women, or most of the men either. Down through the valley's history, such settlers had expected something of their work, and sooner or later uprooted themselves if it didn't come. Bessie just chored on. In her unschooled way, she was more fearless about making a fresh life in Montana than my father's family had been. Those newcomer homesteaders had allied themselves, formed a kind of trestle of relatives and fellow Scots into the Basin. Compared with them, Bessie was as alone as a tumbleweed. Indeed, her stories of life at Moss Agate and any number of other hardscrabble spots in the valley most often began with the aloneness: The one time, I was alone by myself on the place—the kids' dad was off again somewhere—and it rained and it rained until the creek started to come up around the cattle in the corral. It kept coming and kept coming until I had to saddle our old roany horse and ride through it to let those cows out. The water was up over the
stirrups and of course that old roany made it his habit to stop dead whenever you tried to hurry him. But I got him through the water and tied one end of the rope to the pole gate and the other end to the saddle horn, and the cows could follow me out then. A person can do a lot of things like that when you're in a corner.

But another corner was where Tom loomed in his private furies, and if steadfastness held her into the marriage and the ranch life, it did not overcome the pains of them. Gone to town for groceries, Tom might not return for days. When he did come back from such sprees, he came rasping at the way Bessie had done the ranch chores or was raising the children. Gosh sakes, times you wouldn't know he was a man you'd ever met. Ornery old thing him, anyhow. She fought back at him with silence, and she could be as grimly silent as oblivion.

Then the rancher who owned Moss Agate died, and passed from the valley with a storied funeral where the reek of whiskey oozed through the flower smells, and the drunken pallbearers nearly dropped the coffin at the graveside. Whiskey had poisoned Bessie's life at Moss Agate, and now whiskey closed it. She and Tom and the four children moved to another ranch. That job lasted no time, and soon they were in the tiny rail-line town of Ringling, in a ragtag house which at least put shelter atop their heads. Sometime then, Tom left Bessie alone again with the children, this time for several days without food or money, and at last she broke the marriage.
She never bothered with a divorce. Going to law for something which she had ended in her own mind did not seem needed. But Tom had passed from the family as surely as if he had been tumbled into the grave with the whiskeyfied rancher.

That life done, Bessie was soon adrift. There was no income, and the last of the children were heading off on their own. In the Shields River valley, near the Crazy Mountains where she had started in Montana twenty-five years before, she found a job as cook for an elderly farmer named Magnusson. He was prosperous but lonely, a widower, feeling old and trying to dilute his days with drink. When Bessie came, the drinking and the self-pity tapered away. He came to rely on her, and they became a familiar pair in the Shields River country, he driving her in his pickup to a meeting of her women's club or off to the town of Wilsall for the week's groceries, she ruling in his kitchen and handling the farmyard chores for him. Surely the sight of them set tongues clanging—it took less than that—but they confounded the gossips considerably. No one ever managed to hear them call each other anything but Mr. Magnusson and Mrs. Ringer or to see them more than constantly paired maintaining an austere all but impossible it was hard to read anything further into. Apparently the suspicion fairly quickly fast offset at last was given up, because Bessie became friends with some of the sternest neighboring wives, a well-regarded member of the Shields River community. Which left just one person
on a moral high-horse against her. My father.

The resentment between Dad and my grandmother must have circled in darkly from the past, all the way from his earliest courting of my mother. Lessons of lineage were not something Bessie ordinarily gave much thought to. But as she watched this only daughter, the first child and the favored, being wooed by a showy young cowboy, surely her own too-young marriage to Tom Ringer came to mind, and probably too her mother's too-young marriage to the stern silent John Glun.

What was said there in the years of my father's courtship as Bessie tried to stave off the past's rhythm, I have never heard hinted. But the broad line of time tells much. It was only a few months before my mother's twenty-first birthday, when by law she would have been free of family consent, that she and my father were married, after six entire years of courtship.

From all that I can deduce, there was no open rift while my mother remained alive. My grandmother's sense of family likely stormed over past differences. In the marriage summer when my mother and father were herding sheep on Grass Mountain, she would get on a saddlehorse at Ringling, ride half a day north across the sage prairie, and somehow search them out along the mountain slope. After overnight, she would saddle and ride off again to appear again in a few weeks as if having strolled across the street. If Dad was my mother's choice in life, so
be it for Bessie. He had become Family, and she would become civil. And when I was born, her first grandchild and the sole one for a space of years, the visiting became heartier yet. Oh, I used to come and stay with you while your folks was to a dance in Sixteen or Ringling. They had themselves a time there, and we had ourselves one to home, we did.

But after my mother's death, something quickly hung in the air between my father and my grandmother, like the first blazing word of a secret and no more. She made a few uneasy visits to us at our first ranch in the valley. But she and Ruth were almost at sight, abruptly were visited by enemies at once, and when Dad married Ruth, we suddenly saw

my grandmother no more. Instead, a reversal of sorts began, as if something were being acted out before angled sets of mirrors: Dad now encouraged me to go across town after school to visit my grandfather, Tom Ringer.

And my father, there was charity as well as defiance in this turnabout notion of his. At the time I was Tom Ringer's only grandchild, and dour as his life may have been, he showed an old man's gruff affection for me. He lived then in a small cabin across the street from the sulphur slough, and made his slow rounds uptown each day. I remember he was quite worried about you, my first-grade teacher would recall to me many years later, in those months just after you had lost your mother. Whenever I'd meet him on the street, he'd inquire about how you were getting along. I think I did all too little to return his interest. He was by then into his seventies, a bent and gray-faced man with a colossal blade of nose,

living lonely in a musty cabin, and I was not entirely sure where his life cornered onto mine. Grandparents seemed in general seemed a difficult proposition, those on Dad's side of the family, who sounded wondrously interesting in their Scottishness, long since were gone from the world, and here on my mother's side were this warring grandmother and this weary wrath of a grandfather. The only clear fact in it all seemed to be something Dad said: It's hell on old Tom, left alone with himself.

Beyond that visiting maneuver, Dad began to try to talk me--and himself--into forgetting Bessie Ringer. And at the same time, I suppose, to chant himself into a rightness about what he was doing, for along with all else borne in
back home would decently have done, and send them in out of
guidance; "be good care of her," was her charge. Yet,
counter for the next kitchen chore. She was truly corded
to us now, and the fact came as a triumph and a wonder.

And somehow, a concern.

Doig/
him since my mother's death, he had been living with twin fears. The first, that he would lose me, somehow be unable to keep me with him and raise me amid his zigzagging ranch life. Second and worse, that if he was forced to give me up, it would have to be to the mother-in-law he had been at spearpoint with so much of the past.

It must have represented the last loss possible to him; that his one son would be made a stranger to him. He tried to twine his other bereavement into that one, as if he could knot together the two a talisman of some sort:

much of the past. Your mother would of wanted me to raise you instead of your Grandma doing it, she said...she said just as much. She talked about it sometimes, after she'd had one of her bad spells. We always knew she might go during one of those spells—Christamighty, how she suffered with those.

Times I would drive her to the hospital in Townsend thinking...
way to the precinct station, the Doig brothers caught the next train home.

Before long, Dad and his friend Clifford Shearer were talking each other into heading west for the coast. What they were going to do there, they had no idea at all, but probably it would be more promising than home.

The night before they left, the Basin people threw a farewell dance at the Sixteen schoolhouse. Women were bawling and carrying on, Dad remembered, you'd thought the world was coming to an end. It was starting to. The Basin could never be the same when its youngsters began to go.

Out in the world as job seekers, Dad and Clifford fizzed with more imagination than their first boss allowed for. They had stopped in Washington's Yakima Valley long enough to try the apple harvest. The idea, they were told the first morning, was to pluck each piece of fruit with care—now, you young fellers, give it this little twist so the stem don't come off, see?—so it would go into the box unblemished for the market. Before noon, they were fired for shaking apples down into their boxes by the whole battered treeload. They headed west some more through the state of Washington. The Pacific Ocean stopped them at Aberdeen, where they hired on as pilers in a lumber yard.

When the first rain of the Aberdeen winter whipped in, the pair of them slopped through their shift wondering to one another how soon the yard boss would take pity, as any rancher
every breath was gonna be her last. She went through hell on this earth, your mother. And she never would want me to give you up, I'm here to tell you. Silence from him, then the next veer from fear to spite: Hell, we'll get by somehow, son. We don't need that old woman running our lives. Look at her there, living with old Magnusson that way and never marrying him. She needs to run her own life more pert, I'd say.

Then this, the rest of the secret told: She'd take you from me in a minute if she could. But there's no way on this green earth I'm gonna let her.

But there was a way, and it came with a slow fierce sear inside him during our summer of 1950 at the cattle camp along Sixteenmile Creek. Dad began to suspect that he might be dying. The ulcer which had embered in him for the past few years now glowed itself into a steady burn. It became a rare day when he didn't throw up at least one meal. He lost weight, his nerves jumped. Everything the doctors prescribed seemed to make the stomach worse, and their obvious bafflement gave off the fear that this was more than an ulcer on a rampage.

For the first time, mortality was crowding Charlie Doig slowly enough that he could think it through, and across that burning summer it brought him to the greatest change of mind he could make. He needed someone in readiness to step into his place in my life, and the readiest person on the face of the planet was the one who had loomed in his dark musing all this while.

Dad had everything to gulp back, then, when he set out to make truce with this phantom grandmother of mine. I can hear, as if in a single clear echo, the pivoting of our lives right there: Dad beginning his desperate phone call in the lobby of the Sherman Hotel, spelling out her name in an embarrassed
But he had come to the Dogie just when the owners were signing into a partnership with a sheep rancher from near Sixteenmile Creek. The "Jasper" at the front of his name long since crimped down to "Jap" by someone's hurried tongue, Jap Stewart had arrived out of Missouri some twenty years before, leaving behind the sight in one eye due to a knife fight in a St. Joe saloon but bringing just the kind of anything that didn't work. This included most of the Dogie's crew.
half-shout to the operator, staring miserably at the cars nosing off around the prow of the hotel as the long-distance line hummed and howled in his ear. Then: \(\text{Ah.} \quad \text{Hullo, Bessie? This is Charlie. Charlie, Charlie Doig. No, Ivan's fine, fine, he's right here.} \quad \text{Ah.} \quad \text{Say, would ye gonna be home on Sunday? We could, ah, come over maybe and see ye. All right. All right, then. G'bye.}\)

The Magnusson ranch was in the county south of us, in what we called the Norskie country—a coverlet of farmed slopes and creek bottoms coming down along the watershed of the Shields River from the icy snaggled peaks of the Crazy Mountains. It was better farming country than our valley—lower, milder—and the Norwegians were exactly the thrifty and stubborn people to make it pay. After her years at the sage flats of Moss Agate, my grandmother's job at Magnusson's must have seemed almost silken. As we drove to his ranch, the furrowed fields were ruled straight and brown on one side of the road, the green flow of hayfields curving with the creek on the other.

Magnusson's house, brown as the plowed earth, came out like a cliff and a castle from the slope which led down into the creek's slim valley. The bottom floor of the house, the cliff-like part, seemed to be a concrete garage, or perhaps just a great cellar; the sharp-roofed living quarters were on the floor above, and a set of stairs was stilted on tall uprights along the outside wall until at last the steps levitated themselves in beneath the mid-air door to the kitchen. As we went up, a man and a woman stepped onto the lofty porch and looked at us with curiosity. Magnusson proved to be a steady-eyed, stocky farmer in his seventies, with white eyebrows and a mustache stained considerably less than white. His rumbled accent came like a growl against
work over that fence along the creek.  Tony, if you'd . . .

That soft if of his seemed to deal each man into the deciding, and it was a mark of Dad's crews that they generally went out of the bunkhouse to the school section and the creek fence and a dozen other jobs just as if the work had been their own idea all along.

These years when my father began ramrodding crews were the era when the homesteaders' valley was dimming away, and the lustrous wealth of big new ranch owners had begun to show itself. President Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law toyed with a ranch on Battle Creek for a while. A family named Manger began to quilt together vast sprawls of grassland for its sheep. John Ringling put some of his circus fortune into buying 75,000 acres of range, erected a mammoth dairy barn near the White Sulphur stockyards, and financed the twenty-mile railroad which
Dad's burr, but he said we were welcome in his house always, then withdrew to the front room with his newspaper from Norway. That left us with my grandmother, whom I barely remembered from four or so years before. She gave Dad a thin *Hello*, beamed down at me and said, *Where's a kiss for your gramma?* I pecked her cheek and husked a *Hello* as close as I could to the tone she had given Dad.

The three of us bunched ourselves at the table in the vast kitchen, which was where serious visiting was done in that country. As she and I munched our way through a plate of cookies she brought out, Dad lit cigarettes nervously and between puffs chewed away at the inside of his cheek. In a fashion, he was courting this wary woman much as he had courted her daughter twenty years earlier, but with grimness instead of love. What was unspoken but being said more plainly than anything in the careful chatter was this: *We need you. I may die soon. Ivan must have someone to raise him.*

How much the old rift between them was mended that day, I do not know. I was too young to read the presence of the past, although I could sense it was somehow there in the kitchen with us. But rilesome as both of these figures could be about whatever happened in some yesterday, that first visit surely undid some of the anger just by not becoming a brawl.

I remember that in the late afternoon I went with her to feed the white geese in the farmyard, and that they hissed and flounced around us until her dog, Shep, came barking, delirious to have an excuse to scatter the bullies. *Shoo 'em,
What one-eyed old Jap Stewart must have seen, watching Dad as he grew up in those ranch jobs which Annie Doig's sons were always pegging away at, was that he would know how to work men. Skill with horses and cattle and sheep were one thing; Dad had those talents, but so did every tenth or twentieth young drifter who came along. The rare thing in the valley was to be able to handle men. Ranch crews
I remember her encouraging with a kind of angry pleasure: Shoo 'em good! Shoo 'em good! I remember her encouraging. Sic 'em out of here! I remember too that by the time Dad and I left, I was calling her Grandma. Dad seemed not to know what to call his own mother-in-law; he had avoided calling her anything at all during our kitchen stay. But from the bottom of the stairs, he finally said up to her: Goodbye, Lady. We'll come again next Sunday.

Almost every weekend after that we would go back to Magnusson's to visit her. The bargain Dad needed was being forged. It would take effect sooner than even he dreamed, because one among us in that odd group was dying, all right, but it was not my father. It was Martin Magnusson.

Just before old Magnusson slumped into the series of hospital stays which saw him decline to death, Dad bluntly asked my grandmother further into his plan. The doctoring in Montana was not helping him; his stomach flamed more and more now, he felt himself growing weaker. He was going to a place in Minnesota called the Mayo Clinic, and he wanted not to go alone, to have me with him--and her. Would she come?

In a week, the three of us stepped up into the eastbound train at Ringling. I remember of the trip only that Dad slept and slept, and that when Grandma drowsed, she sometimes snorted herself awake with a long kkkkhh of a snore, and that I abandoned the pair of them to sit by the hour in the dome car and watch the worldscape of my first train journey. At the destination in Minnesota, Dad hardly had the strength to carry a suitcase into the hotel where we would stay. He checked into the clinic, and immediately the doctors began days of tests on him.

Grandma and I watched
Then came an autumn when Dad and his brother Angus went off to the Chicago stockyards with a cousin’s boxcars of cattle. *For every carload of stock, see, you were entitled to your fare both ways. We were a pair of punk kids, out for a big time.*

On the cattle train with them was a rancher who celebrated such Chicago trips by spending his cattle profits and then papering the city with overdrawn checks. He took the young cowboys in tow, and the three of them sashayed through Chicago.

One morning after several days of high living, they were sprawled in barber chairs for the daily shave which would start them
the people below from our hotel room far above the street, and spent time with Dad at the clinic whenever he was not in tests. On the fourth day we were startled by a telegram for Grandma. Tom Ringer had died. His last torment of my grandmother was that she still felt something for him which made her want to return to Montana for his funeral. Dad agreed there was no choice, although it seemed to me there was all the choice in the world. She and I took the train back to Montana, leaving Dad to the doctors' solemn tests.

After the funeral, I went to Ringling to stay again with Dad's brother Angus and his family, Grandma returned to Magnusson's farm. Several weeks dragged by before Dad followed us home to Montana, and when he came, he was a bony ghost with only a third of a stomach. Severe surgery alone kept him alive, the doctors had told him, and it would not be able to do any work for many months. There the doctors had it backwards. Staying away from work, from knowing what ability was left to him, was what he was not able to do. Within a few weeks, he had hired on at a ranch at the western edge of the valley and there, pale and retching if he ate a spoonful too much, my father began slamming away at the job as he always had. As much against the odds as the first.

And he arranged a second matter, Grandma and I now were to live in Ringling, in the shambled small house where she had managed to put her own children through school and out into the world. From there I would ride the bus to school in White Sulphur
Springs. That part of life changed little. But under a new roof with this new grandmother, almost all else would.

Ringling lay on the land, twenty miles to the south of White Sulphur Springs, as the imprint of what had been a town, like the pale outline on grass after a tent has been taken down. When the roadbed of the Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad was diked through the site early in the century, Ringling built up around the depot: three hotels, several saloons, a lumber yard, stores, a two-story bank, a confectionary, even a newspaper office. When John Ringling's little railroad bumped down the valley from White Sulphur to link onto the Milwaukee and St. Paul main-line, and the rumor followed that the headquarters of the great circus would be established there--surely the century's record for unlikelihood--the village was optimistically renamed Ringling. But before the end of the 1920s, the grandly adopted name was almost all that was left; many of the businesses had burned in a single wild night of flame. It was said, and more or less believed, that a Ku Klux Klan cross had blazed just before the lumber yard caught fire and spewed the embers that took half the town to the ground. A few years later, another fire even less explainable than the first mopped up most of what was left. By the time Grandma and I moved there, Ringling stood as only a spattered circle of houses around several large weedy foundations. The adult population was about 75 persons, almost all of them undreamably old to me, and the livelihoods were a saloon, a gas station, a post office, Mike Ryan's store, the depot, and exactly through the middle of town, the railroad tracks which glinted and fled instantly in both directions.

Mornings, an eastbound passenger train tornadoed through, then came one tearing westward; afternoons, as people said,
him was a handsome giant named Matt Van Patton. The best looking guy I think I ever remember seeing. A sheep shearing sonofagun, too; he went over 200 ewes every day. And a drinking sonofagun. The last time Dad saw him was when the crew finished its season and broke up. Old Matt, he started hittin' the booze, he had a jug somewhere, along the middle of the afternoon. By suppertime he was so drunk he couldn't walk. The crew had a dead-ax wagon to haul its outfit in and he walked in it.
it was the same except opposite. My first days there I wondered about the travelers who could be seen as tiny cutouts against the pullman windows—what they were saying when they looked out at us and our patchy, sprawled town—that-was-less-than-a-town. If they looked out.

Passenger trains whirred in and went off like kings and queens, potent and unfussed, on the dot. But freight trains banged through at all hours, and for a few weeks in autumn, Ringling made its own clamoring rail traffic as box cars of sheep and cattle jerked back and forth from the loading pens at the edge of town. Otherwise, the town did almost nothing but doze, kept sleepily alive by the handful of people who lived there out of habit and the few ranchers who used it as their gas-and-mail point. The single wan tendril to its past was Mike Ryan’s store, which I lost not a moment before visiting.

Mike Ryan was a very ancient man by then, near-blind, looming in his goggling spectacles and flat cap amid a dust-grayed avalanche of hardware, harness, stray dry goods, and stale groceries such as the bakery goods his cats liked to sleep on. The second words Mike spoke to you, after a broguey Hello and learning what it was you wanted, always were: Now it’s here if I can just find it.

And it would be, for Mike Ryan’s had been a perfect store in its time, a vast overstocked bin of merchandise behind its high false-front and under its roof with the yellow airplane signals painted hugely on. But now, as if the years were
caving in on it, the enterprise was becoming more and more muddled, dimmer, mustier. At times Mike himself would no longer see a person come in the door, and you could stand for moments, watched only by his brindle cats, and hear him breathe an old man’s heavy breathing.

Just as Mike Ryan's was the fading memory of a general store and Ringling itself the last scant bones of a town, Grandma's house turned out to be the shell of a place to live in. It counted up, all too rapidly, into a kitchen, living room and bedroom, each as narrow as a pullman car and about a third as long. The rooms had stood empty for more than ten years—empty of people, that is, for the flotsam of Grandma's earlier family leaned and teetered everywhere. Diving into the dusty boxes and dented metal suitcases, I came up with a boomerang sent by the son who had moved to Australia after the war, a lavender-enameded jewelry box which had been my mother's, albums of strange people in stiff clothes. The place was stacked with dead time, and the first few days Grandma could not move in it without tears brimming her eyes. When at last she could, she called me into the bedroom and wordlessly began to dig down through the stacks and piles atop a low reddish wooden chest just larger than a seaman's trunk. As I watched, she propped the lid, looked down into the tumble of old clothes and ancient bedding inside, and snuffled. Then a quick honk into her handkerchief, and she began talking in a tone angrier
than I had yet heard from her: This here was your mother's hope chest. The kids' dad made it back at Moss Agate, when she first started going with Charlie. With your dad, I mean. He worked on this at nights for the longest time. See, he didn't have anything to make it from but some pieces of flooring, but he wanted her to have a hope chest of some kind. He did a good job with it. He could when he wanted to. It's sat here all these years. I want it to be yours now. The back of my throat filled and tightened as she talked. I swallowed, managed to say All right, and walked carefully from the room so as not to plunge from it.

Life with her proved to be full of squalls of emotion of that sort. For one thing, she had a temper fused at least as short as Dad's. But where he would explode into words, she would go silent, lips clamped. If she could be persuaded to say anything, the words were short and snapped, and you discovered you were better off to let her be wordless. I know now that such silences came out of years of having no other defense: of being alone on a remote ranch, nowhere to go, no other person to unbend to, when a stormy husband went into his own black moods. But I did not understand it then, and found myself suddenly in a household which could change as if a cloud had gone across the sun.

The quickest annoyance I could cause was to look at her when she had her false teeth out for brushing, and after a time or two of blundering into that, I would veer off or turn my back if I saw it in prospect. There was even a way she could rile herself: as I had guessed on the train trip to Minnesota, she was a thunderous snorer, and in the middle of the night was apt to wake herself up and mutter angrily about it. But others of the unexpectednesses which kept tumbling out of her were entirely easy-tampered. Among these was the fact of a full-sail version of my childhood I had never heard. When she had visited my father and
with him when he met a man in the street, backed away, and stared the stranger out of sight in wordless hatred. The man had worked at the ranch where my mother died, and a few days after her death had told Dad bluffly to forget her, get on with life as a man ought to. All that time and distance later, Dad still despised him for those clumsy words.
mother so often in the first three or four years of my life, it had been she who spent many of the patient hours to teach me to read, the words fastening in my mind as I sat in her lap and watched her finger move along with her reading. And much else: Oh, how you used to coax me to sing. 'Ah-AH-ah! SING, gramma!' you'd say. So I'd have to hold you in the rocker and sing by the hour. . . 'Poor me,' you'd say when you didn't get your way, and you'd pooch out your lower lip so sad. . . Lands, you used to scare me half to death, the way you ran down that hill at the Stewart Ranch. There was a big tree way up on slope, and you'd take your dog up there and here the both of you would come, straight down. I used to hold my breath. . . And back beyond all that, she had the news of how I'd arrived into the world: You were born in Dr. McKay's hospital in White Sulphur, it's that building just up the hill from--oh, what's the name of that joint? Hmpf. The Stockman, just up the hill from the Stockman. When you were born, you had two great big warts right here in front of your ear, and your right foot splayed off like this, and you had the reddest hair. You were something grand to see, all right . . .

\* At times she talked a small language which must have come from those two islanded times of childhood, her own growing up on the Wisconsin farm and her children's years at Moss Agate. Words jigged and bellied and did strange turns
then: I'll have a sipe more of coffee, but if I eat another
bite, I'll busticate.... Get the swatter and dead that fly
for me, pretty please?...Hmpf, I been settin' so long my
old behinder is stiff...

Anything which lay lengthwise was longways to her; the
stanchions of a milking barn were stanchels, the cows them-
selves were a word of my mother's as a child, merseys.

Her sayings took their own route of
declaring it was time to get a move on: Well, this isn't buying
the baby a shirt nor paying for the one he's got on. Or take
a doubtful chance: Here goes nothin' from nowhere. Or when she
did not understand something I read to her from one of my
books: Like the miser man's well, too deep for me, boy. Or
when she did understand: I see, said the blind man to his
deaf wife. Neighbors were tagged with whatever they deserved:
He's so crooked he couldn't sleep in a roundhouse...That pair
is close as three in a bed with one kicked out... That tribe
must never heard that patch beside patch is neighborly, but

patch upon patch is beggarly.

Each time the prairie wind swirled up her dress, there would be said:
Hmpf! Balloon ascension! At least one meal of the day, she would pause
between forkfuls and pronounce like a happy benediction: I hear some folks
say they get so tired of their own cooking. By gee, I never have. And
whenever something irked her, which was sufficiently often, she had her
own style of not-quite cussing: Gee gosh, god damn, gosh blast it...

And always the stories, such as the one of an early Moss Agate neighbor,
a homesteader,
By late January, the weather was gaining every day. The Basin's haystacks were nearly gone, and the ranch families shipped in tons of slough grass which had been moved from frozen marshes in Minnesota. Fifty-five dollars a ton: the price was higher than they had ever heard of, and there was no choice in the world but to pay it. The wiry bales had to be chopped apart with an axe before they could be pitched to the livestock, and sometimes an entire muskrat house of sticks and mud would fall out of a bale. Down to this brittle feed, the country began to feel winter fastening into the pit of its stomach. Dad helped to load into boxcars a neighbor's sheep so crazy with hunger they gnawed the wool
who had a head huge and twisted as an ogre's. After a lifetime
of despair over his own ugliness, the man began rethinking it all
and soon before he died proudly willed his skull to medical
science. As I shivered a bit at the tale, Grandma chuckled and
said in her declaring style: **Headless man into heaven, think
of that.**

To my surprise, dogs and cats fully counted into her con-
versations. Dad likely had not glanced in a cat's direction since
the last time my mother had scratched Pete Olson's gray ears, and he spoke
to dogs only to send them around livestock. But Grandma loved them all,
especially dogs. There had been one or another of them, generally named
Shep, in her households ever since a huge woolly sheepdog back on her
parents' Wisconsin farm, and the last of that name had moved to Ringling
with us.

A fine white-and-tan with a hint of collie about him,
Shep had gone old and as lazy as my grandmother would allow
anything to be. He panted as he walked and spent most of life
stretched under the kitchen table, where he filled all the
space there was. Several times a day Grandma would shift her
feet as she sat at the table playing solitaire, and there would
be an explosion of pained howling and outraged sympathy: **Well,
you shouldn't be there right under my feet, that's what you get!**

*Serves you right, you aren't hurt, big baby. Come here, let
me pet it, pretty please, that's all right, there you're all
better now...** And wayfaring cats she fed as if they were

Her sure sign of good humor was to break into rough-house play with Shep
or any other available dog, setting off wild barking and leaping which
invariably ended with fresh bleeding scratches on her arms. By then, all
the skin between wrist and elbow carried white nicks of scar, as if she had
been lightly scored with a scalpel time after time. But that annoyed her
came a too-quick trip to the schoolyard and the trudge up a broad flight of stairs to a classroom where I would be cooped for the day with twenty small strangers, not one of whom had ever ridden a sawbuck pack saddle or shot an arrow in the Bridger Mountains. Those early weeks in the first grade, there were only two little bursts of excitement. We went through a drill about how to line up and quick-march out of the old brick building if it caught fire, which gave me hope that maybe it would. And one morning when we were fanned out around the teacher for reading, the blond girl sitting next to me peed her pants and set up a sobbing howl as the rest of us backed off from her puddle and watched to see how school was.

Then coaxing began to crack through to us. Mine came would send him mourning again.

'say, or some gesture I would make in the way my mother had, despairing. I never knew, either, when some sentence I would go through the motions of work, even talk a bit with Cliftord, thousands of torturing minutes it was followed by. He mght sense blasted around in him by that night of death and the sense of his grief. He must have had a kind of battle fatigue, the dark muttering the little curl at the corner, bad stayed in the dusk.
less than the ungrateful bathroom habits Shemp and the others ungratefully put on display in front of her. Their natural post-sniffing and leg-lifting sent her into prompt fury: Shemp! Don't be so sappy! Get away from there, you darned fool! Cats too, aloof wayfarers that they were, did not manage to live up to her standard of expectation. Any that passed by, she fed as if they were famished but naughty orphans, scolding and huffing over them all the while she filled the dish with milk and bread: What do you mean bumming around here? Why don't you stay to home where you've got good grub? I ought to let you go hungry, sappy old thing! Here, eat! The only creatures in her world which got no affection with their scoldings were magpies. She hated their scavenging habits, and when she saw one within range of her voice, she cut loose: GIT! Git yourself out of here, god darned old thing, there's nothing gonna die here for you to peck on! Git! GIT!

We settled in, if living amid such salvoes could be called settling in, by somehow coaxing the tiny Ringling house to stretch and once more make way for people. When the single closet was full, we stashed boxes and suitcases under the bed and davenport as if ballasting the place. All the time we lived there, Grandma grumbled things in and out from under the bed, vowing someday she'd not have to do so. The ironing board went in with a tangle of fishpoles behind a door, my mound of paperback books covered the hopechest at the foot of the one bed. My bed, for I learned at once that living with my grandmother always meant that she claimed the worst accommodations for herself, and the dreariest chores. This
Cottleford’s ranch was a few miles from the county seat of Whitley County. We moved in next with Dad’s oldest friend, Cottleford Shearer, old Mister Jeff. ‘Beats up a horse and make the lady’s fancy shine!’

Cottleford was dying. My ownness was dying.

We were moved in next with Dad’s oldest friend, Cottleford Shearer, just as my mother had. In the evening, I asked my mother what she’d like to do.

By tilting rocks at a tree and making the kachew sound of shied across a familiar pond.

Life is good, life is good. The only crocuses in her work

My poetic soul is alive, alive. The only crocuses in her work

The crocus is alive, alive. The only crocuses in her work

The crocus is alive, alive. The only crocuses in her work

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inside-out chivalry she must have formed in the Moss Agate years, when she found that she minded the drudgeries there less than did her edgy husband or my frail mother or her frisky sons and so took most of them upon herself. Beyond that, there simply was her assumption that if I was to be a special benefit, she would happily pay any price in chores. Dad had been thoroughly right on one main point: My grandmother did want me as a child to raise, the way a clipper captain might have yearned to make one last voyage under clouds of sail. Despite Dad's wariness of it, there had been little chance that she could have arrived in my life without his arranging it. Now that he had done so, I was the bonus child for her penchant about family—by several years the oldest of her grandchildren, and the shadow-son of her lost daughter. Everything in her said to treat me as a gift, and in terms of this new Ringling household it came out as her granting me the bed and the bedroom while she slept on the davenport in the living room, her climbing out first in the chilly mornings to light the kitchen stove with fuel oil and match, her doing every other task the place needed—until blessed common sense edged through and suggested that what might do me more good would be to have duties of my own. How do you feel about that? she offered cautiously. I think it wouldn't hurt you none, do you?

Unarguably it wouldn't, and I began then to take my turn at keeping the woodbox piled with firewood and the ashes emptied from the bottom of the kitchen range. But the main and
everlasting chore was the water bucket, because the house had no well, and a neighborhood pump had gone rusty from years of disuse. The rain barrel at a corner of the house did the job for the laundering clothes and a washtub ad piece for bath for each of us once a week. But every drop of the water for our daily use had to be pumped next door—I paced it at seventy steps in one of my earliest trudges—at the house of Grandma's old friends, the Badgetts. And that perpetual bucketing carried with it something new and rich, for necessity's water was the least of what this ancient pair could add to our Ringling life.

There were enormities about Kate and Walter Badgett which somehow seemed to bolster us simply by so near at hand. These began with size and age, and went on through manner. Side by side, the two of them loomed like barn and silo. Kate was pillowed in fat, so wide that she seemed to wedge apart the arms of the huge easy chair where she spent her days. Atop that crate of a body was an owlish face, and a swift tongue...
a tool mark nicked in when his strong head was carved. A single tiny notch at the bottom of his face, as if it might be the first lightest scratch of all the calamity ahead for him.

But my mother, my mother, here in some summer of early marriage, already seems frail, too slim—a willow out of place there so near timberline. Again, because I know what will come, I believe myself into the notion that I can read it all gathering here. I coax from the photos any detail which seems to tell the sickness eroding in her: the pinch across her slender shoulders, the eyes which are almost too calm and accepting. What can they be saying but death, death soon?

Always a forest at the backs of these familiar photoed strangers, and sunlight spattering down through the pine boughs to their rough shirt fronts. The canvas slopes of their tent are triangled grayly at the back of the day camp. Two black herding dogs, ears up in dog surprise, watch the lens. A pair of saddlehorses gawp in from the grassy fringes of camp as if afraid any attention might go by them. Only one creature in these early pictures does not fit—the pet which is being stroked in my mother's hands. Those first summers of following the sheep, my parents kept with them in their daily sift through the forest a gray and white tomcat they called Pete Olson. Somehow, amid the horses and dogs and sheep, and the coyotes and bobcats which ranged close to camp, Pete Olson rationed his nine lives out in prowl after nightly prowl. Then as camp was
that could operate Walter all day long and still have time to tell what the rest of Ringling was doing. On her desk by the front window which looked across the tracks to the gas station and post office-store, Kate kept her pair of field glasses. Who had come to town, for how long and maybe even what they bought—it all came up the magnifying tunnel of vision to Kate, then went out with new life, as if having added to itself while re-echoing through that bulk of body.

Then in some mid-sentence of hers, Walter would appear from one or another of his chores, in his pauseful way looming tall as a doorway, and nearly as still—a rangy silent sentinel with great hands hung on poles of arms. His face was more an eagle's than any other I have seen on a man: the spare lines of brow and cheek and the chisel of nose, and beneath it all, somehow with the hint of a beak, the mouth which turned down at its corners not from mood but just the decades of pursing around a cusp of chewing tobacco. Walter's eyes were a pale, flat, seen-it-all-before shade of blue.

Once I heard someone tell of seeing him angry, which I never had. He was tending bar for the day at the saloon there in Ringling, and one of Rankin's cowboys came in with a load on. He was helling around up and down the bar, and Walter told him, 'Better settle down a bit.' The Rankin man cussed him and said, 'Who the hell're you, old feller?' Walter came leaning across that bar, those blue eyes snapping sparks. 'I said you'd better settle down, or I'll settle you.' The Rankin man never said another word.
like a chain of people steadying one another across a rope bridge.

Whoever arrived first, his letters talked the next one into coming to file on a homestead, and the one persuaded after that was D.L.'s own brother-in-law. Of course, D.L. was next. By 1890, he had followed on with his wife and two children to work in Helena as a tailor until he could size up the country.
Both coming onto eighty years old, the Badgetts were in the kind of outliving contests which very old couples sometimes seem to have, each aging only against the other instead of against time. Naturally, Kate was going to win, and she did, by nearly a decade. But at this point they both seemed as little changing as glaciers, and Walter in particular had slowed life to the exact amble he wanted. Mid-mornings, he would stroll to his woodpile halfway between his house and ours, and begin chopping with giant strokes: the axe easily high, then down in a slow arc, a whunk! as the wood blasted apart. Walter would straighten, loose a long splatter of tobacco juice, look around town for anything to report to Kate, reach with one hand to set another piece of wood on the chopping block, then whunk! again. Multiplying that woodpile, which would have kept half the county warm for a winter, spent his mornings. After lunch, he could be seen, in his slow angular stroll, headed for the post office to bring Kate the day's letters and any capturable gossip. Even his responses to her could come slow as a measuring now because he had a fitful mild deafness which gave him the excuse to answer an innocent Hnnh? while he mulled the latest of her constant orders.

Their was a household at once curt and courtly. Knock on the door, and Kate's voice boomed a single word like an empress's: COME! I was puzzled that she had the habit of calling other women only by their last names. Grandma always was
Ringer to her. But the brusqueness had an odd gap in it. Over the years Kate had ironed every thinkable vice out of Walter except for his habit of chewing tobacco; for that, he was permitted a coffee can behind the stove to spit in. Yet when she talked to him for any reason besides an order, the tongue that banged bluntly on every other life in town suddenly went soft and crooned, of all words, Hubby.

Walter had drifted north from Texas as a young cowboy, and I would learn from men who had worked with him in the valley that he was a storied man with horse and rope. The stories included the hint that he had departed Texas after a scrape against the law. Here too, Kate matched him: out of her background wafted the whisper that in Prohibition times she had been one of the area's most reliable vendors of bootleg whiskey.

These two serene old outlaws, then, gifted us with pasts of almost burning dazzle. Grandma, after her long life of silent ranch houses, tirelessly listened to Kate's years of accumulated gossip, encouraging the reports every so often with a Land's sake! or Gee gosh! They played canasta together, traded baked goods back and forth like bartering tribes, puzzled out patterns for their crocheting, and, as simply and purely as the word can be used, neighbored.

For me, there were Walter's gently scary tales of cowboysing, parcelled out in his steady flat drawl. Time was,
I was riding for the Higginse, coming back off some pasture up under the Castles. . . Walter's hand as big as my face begins rubbing his high cheekbones as if sharpening them even more. I just no more got out here to those shanties at Old Dorsey than a spring blizzard come up. The hand descends for the spit can, a long brown Pttt! I was riding a chestnut pony we called Red. He had a coat just about like your hair there, Ivan. I looked down and I couldn't tell what color he was the snow was sticking to us so. The voice steady as the sage horizon, soft as spring wind. I got us in the old store building there at Dorsey. Red didn't like going through that doorway, but I made him. All the windows were out and the wind whooping in, but it was better than outside. Another pttt, the hand rasping the cheekbone again. It was close midnight before it let up and we finally got to the ranch. I went in the bunkhouse and the foreman asked me, Where you been, Walt? Well, I said, I was just out checking on the weather . . .

When Grandma and Kate went to White Sulphur every so often to shop together, I would walk down to eat supper with Walter. The meal was forever the same: fried mush with dark corn syrup, and bread which Walter first toasted and then dried in the oven. When we bit, it shattered and crashed in our mouths, and the more we ate, the fuller our plates grew with the shrapnel of crumbs. After the last roaring bite, Walter would sit back tall as two of me and ask down: Well, reckon we can make it through to breakfast now?
In all their ways, then, the Badgetts put forth a steadiness, a day-upon-day carol out of the valley's past, and for all I knew, out of the past of all the world. Up the slope from our house, the other regular chimes in our Ringling life spoke weightier accents, graver outlooks. Mr. and Mrs. Brekke both had been born in Norway, and both came young to the new life in America: they met and married, found a small ranch beyond Ringling where they endured through to prosperity, and now, their family long grown, the pair of them lived at the top of the tiny town like gentlefolk slightly surprised at their new courtliness.

Each early afternoon, Mr. Brekke's serious singsong--**HEL-lo**--would sound on our porch, and he would hand in the mail he had brought from the post office, already backing away with a gentle smile from our thanks and invitations to come in for a moment. Mrs. Brekke did come, at least once a day either to our house or to the Badgetts', to hear the doings of the town with a steadily astonished Ohh, Mrv! Leaving, she always turned and urged: **Why don't you come up sometimes for ice cream and cake?**

The Brekkes owned the one house in all of Ringling that looked as if it truly had been built to live in rather than just to hold boards up off the ground. A white-fenced yard ruled neatly around it, framing a few small tidy trees--the only ones in town--and a many-windowed sun porch which
opened the entire front of the house. The first owners were a husband and wife who had been the local schoolteachers, a couple of storied learning, and their books and some decades of magazines came to the Brekkes with the house. These I mined weekend after weekend, carrying home a dozen or more copies of National Geographic and Life and Collier's and Saturday Evening Post at a time, reading them lying on my bed with the hot bedlamp at my ear. Mr. and Mrs. Brekke admired education almost as if it were a magic potion.

When their own children were growing up and one or another would protest not knowing the answer to something, Mary Brekke had a single iron reply: Well, you better learn! Now they encouraged me into each new printed trove as soon as I had finished the last one—Done with that batch? Mr. Brekke would cry: Come in for some more! And Mrs. Brekke would cry after: Then sit a minute for some ice cream and cake, can't you?

The Brekke household's secondhand magazines and books became a second school for me, more imagination lit from it than from the one I rode the bus to in White Sulphur Springs each weekday. I read straight through whatever shone darkly on the snowfield pages, a visit to Scintillating Siam leaping on into the swashbuckling of Horatio Hornblower, which likely took place back-to-back with a Clarence Budington Kelland shoot-out in the Arizona Territory. I read, that is, as someone who had never seen a movie before might watch the newsreel and then the cartoon and then the feature film without ever knowing to separate them in his mind, simply having been taken with the flow of flashed images.
my eyes and imagination. He grew up small, temper fused as short as he was, but with estimates of himself considerably more generous than that; maybe because I held in all my temper and dreams, I filled out like a prize calf, bigger and solider and more red-haired every time anyone glanced in my direction.

To me now, looking at my father's growing up is like the first glimpse ever into a stone-rippled reflection in a pond, and wondering how it can be that the lil starvation weather with pitchforks, to the cattle and horses as mottled man and boys tough as bay upon day, hay stakes shagged out all across the basin of bawling livestock, the wind twirled a heavy web of snow, sagbrush vandalized under ditlits, and up around the bobles mountains around them went white as lobelias, the tops of Doig inherited a few thousand dollars from a relative in and 40 head of horses. Livestock prices were firm, amite and scrumpting together had diminished a herd of 200 fat cattle. By the autumn of 1919, all their cowboy jobs and shepherding which at last was beginning to pull itself up into a ranch, their wages had had to be the drop under the family homestead, started at just as soon as he was old enough. For years, back to the herd work which each of the young Doig brothers That first stage on his health behind him, Dad went...
It all began adding up in my mind in ways which astonished Grandma.

Her own information about the world was as spotty as mine was swirly. She had been born when a man named Grover Cleveland was President; had no idea of unusual that she did not know this merely spoke her own way of having been brought up. She was perpetually baffled that there had been two Presidents named Roosevelt; Franklin Delano had served such a span in her adult life that she could easily believe he had been in the job back at the turn of the century as well. The labor leader John L. Lewis and the boxing champion Joe Louis consistently mixed their names for her, and I was not at all surprised when she asked me if the Hemingway who read the news on the radio was the Hemingway whose books showed up now and then in my book from the Brekkes. She seemed entirely pleased with my knack for information, and quickly learned to use it as a kind of utility, asking me to spell out stubborn words when she wrote a letter, to work out the balance in her checkbook, to comparison-shop the Monkey Ward and Sears Roebuck mail-order catalogues for our items of clothing.

But lore ran both ways between us, and generally hers was more useful than mine, because it came straight out of life instead of from printed pages. She recalled for me that a pastime that her sons once set up a lemonade stand and took turns shouting across town the advertising she taught them: Lemonade, lemonade! stirred by an old maid with a spade! I thought it
where the railroad snaked through, was a youngster's worst dream. All day, for one square meal, the privilege of an apple at bedtime, and a few dollars a week which he had to pass along to his mother, Dad did a man's share of ranch work; then mornings and evenings, he slogged through the chores of chicken-feeding and hog-slopping and kindling-splitting which a country child grows up hating.

It got worse. The soldier son was put on a ship to France, and now every day Dad was sent off on the mile and a half trudge down the railroad track to the Sixteen post office, to fetch a newspaper so the fretful parents could read through the list of battle casualties. One footsore trip after another, Dad cussed to the crossties that he hoped to hell the so-and-so would be on the casualty list today so this everlasting walking could stop.

But the soldier son survived, and it was Dad who nearly died in that last year of World War One. It was like him delirious in the ranch houses their fathers had built a mile apart. On the first night of December, Dad's fever broke, Basin homestead.

In several ways, his boyhood would go along opposite routes from the one I would live at his side thirty years
over, but at last decided the business wasn't worth reviving; Ringling's population had plummeted so far that the only buying traffic I could foresee was Walter Badgett and Mr. Brekke. But another idea Grandma recalled had the right feel. The same enterprising sons had sent away for any free mailings they came across in magazines and, since Ringling had no street names, conjured for themselves whatever elaborate addresses they could think of. I got out paper and envelopes and set to work on the most current magazines. Quickly, offers for stamp collecting kits or please for me to get rich selling salve were pouring into the post office in care of I. Clark Doig, 776 Sagebrush Acres or 44 Jackrabbit Boulevard or 801 Gopher Gulch or whatever other elegance I'd been able to dream up. Grandma much admired my gaudy mail; I much admired her for the lode of boy-raising behind it.

That exact lode, I began to find, came ready more and more as adolescence perked in me. Together, she and I pondered the pale frizz of hair appearing on my upper lip. At the precise age when other boys were praying for some hint of whiskers, I badly wanted to be rid of that downy white shadow. Grandma of course had been through it before; she came up with a salve called a depilatory which erased the fuzz, right enough, and felt as if my lip were scorched away with it. Impressed with her results, I asked if she knew anything to be done about my hair, which had a stubborn tendency to divide itself floppily on the exact top of my head, as if I had been bashed there with a cleaver. At once she dug out one of her discarded nylon stockings and snipped and sewed it into a snug skullcap.

We'll damp your hair down before you go to bed and you sleep with this over it, and we'll see how that does. How it did was that within weeks her remedial yarmulka tamed the thatch into the pompadour I had worn out years of combs trying to achieve.
Peter Doig stepped outside the log house. He had been spending time on errands—to the county fair the day before, where he had won prizes for his lambs and rewarded himself with a fine thorough drunk, this morning to his nearest neighbor's house on some small matter—and the ranch chores were piling up. He strode down the path to the garden to begin digging the potato crop. Going through the gate, he clutched at his heart, fell sideways, and died. He was four months short of his 37th birthday.
She was as hardy with my other disquiets, such as the passion for baseball which had been brewing in me. The onset of this likely had come from Dad, who in his try-anything youth had played catcher for the Sixteen community team. Did I tell ye the time we had a big Fourth of July game goin' while Jack Dempsey was fightin' Gibbons up in Shelby? Nineteen twenty-three that would have been. We were havin' a helluva game down there by Sixteen Creek, but somebody'd run down from the telegraph office at the end of every round and tell us what was happenin' with the fight, so it took us half the afternoon to play an inning or two... At World Series time in 1916, Dad had got tired of listening to his saloon chums mutter about the invincibility of the great Boston Red Sox team and uncharacteristically began betting them that it wasn't so. He quickly had bets up and running in every bar in town, and they added up to a couple of hundred dollars when the St. Louis Cardinals won for him. Whether it was that windfall or some other encouragement— it may simply have been that Ringling was a perfect place to tinker at imagination, because so little else about the town was in working order any more—I had begun to daydream of myself as a shortstop or a pitcher, or maybe both, strolling across the mound every fourth day or so to fire fastballs. Now, all of a sudden, I had a teammate. Grandma tirelessly would toss a rubber ball for me to bat back and forth across Ringling's emptinesses. Our audience was Walter Badgett, launching his contemplative splatters of tobacco juice as he glanced over from his wood-chopping. Once in a while the ball would bounce toward Walter, and he would pick it up and fling it back in a sweeping stiffarmed motion, like a weathered old catapult still in working order. Grandma and I went on with this even if it rained, playing catch inside the house by bouncing the ball between us the scant twenty feet from the kitchen door to my bedroom.
and sheep in their gray thousands were the wool-and-meat machines which had made fortunes for the lairds of the Scotland he had come from. What was more, this high Montana grassland rimming the Big Belts had much of the look of the home country, and had drawn enough Scots onto ranches and homesteads that they counted up into something like a colony. The burr of their talk could be heard wherever the gray tides of sheep were flowing out onto the grass. Between the promise of those grazing herds and that talk comfortable to the ear, it was a place for staying. Beyond the facts that he had countrymen and relatives in

...
it comes as a constant surprise to me to realize that even here, where she first came into my life, my grandmother already was nearly sixty years old. Everything I can remember of this time has the tint of ageless energy. All other entertainment failing, she was even willing to wrestle, and we would tussle stiff-armed against one another until we both giggled to a halt and she panted herself down into a chair saying Whoof! Nosir, you're just too tough for your old gramma, I can't keep up with a wildcat like you. And in half a minute, she would be up and in the kitchen, into the making of the next batch of bread or cinnamon rolls or butter cookies.

But one affliction of that growing time had not even she had come up against before. A bulge the size of a robin's egg appeared on my right leg, just below the kneecap. It was tender as a burn, and after some weeks of wincing almost to tears whenever the knee came against anything, I at last showed her the bulge. She scowled. Hmpf! We'll better get that looked at when your dad comes.

The doctor in Livingston sat me on the end of a metal table, pressed the bump and watched me lift in pain. X-rays showed what he already knew: the knob of the long bone in my leg had cracked away, a hairline crevice now daggering through. The danger was, he told us, that this bone cap could be lifted away by the pull of the large muscle across the kneecap--like the tugging power of a rope working across a pulley. To prevent that, I would have to keep the leg straight; have to bandage the knee constantly, keep pressure wrapped down onto the bone knob. If I did not, there was a chance the leg would wither.

Medical science has changed its mind about that, and considers now that my fiery knee--the textbook term for the ailment
later, and which I would do, a generation after that, as his son's son—working in the lambing sheds, herding, wrangling in the shearing pens.

There can't have been much money in the ranch jobs which drew my father's father in those first years. But there would have been all the chance in the world to learn about sheep—
is Schlotter's Disease--was not permanently afflicting and in time would have calcified its own fracture line. But we walked from the doctor's office then with only the understanding that I must drag my right leg stiff for a few years if I were not to drag it all my life.

I was miffed that Grandma could be so matter-of-fact about all this—Wrap it snuglike and do what the doctor said and you'll get like new again—and kept me at the chores we had agreed on, the water bucket sloshing maliciously now as I swung my leg along. The first several times, I made a stoic show of circling the yards of elastic bandage around my knee and into a tight crisscross over the bone knob. And then it became simply a groove of habit, and I became interested in how much I could ask of the mummied leg: I still could run, if in an odd stilty style; could bat the ball thrown by Grandma, could wrestle her, could get on almost as before. My laming, it turned out, had happened in the best possible company—that which shrugged it off and silently told me I had better do the same.

Grandma and I went into our first winter together. A small window faced west just above the head of my bed. Mornings, as the first sounds of day scuffed outside, I had been able to sleepily lift myself on an elbow and see which of the town's cows or horses or sheep were munching past. Now this window also told the weather, even without my looking all the way out; mewls of wind sneaked under the sash, and on blizzard mornings
the sill would have its own miniature snowscape, tiny sifts white as spilled sugar. We learned at once that on blowy days our house leaked wind everywhere, like a weary little cow jetting water into itself the instant it touched the surface of the sea. In desperation, hardly knowing where to plug first, we would stuff a rag rug along the crack under the front door, pull the blinds down over the whistling windows, desperately fire up both the big square range in the kitchen and the little round stove in the living room, and hope for the storm to ease away promptly.

Shivery and caging as such blizzard weather was, Ringling looked its best in a storm. The bald gaps between houses became less stark with windrows of snow coned between them. The very whiteness of a snowstorm came as a relief, a bright sudden paint over the worn town. Space danced itself along the wind into new distances. If we could not see the depot, a hundred fifty yards down the slope, the storm was a genuine shrouding blizzard, and we went around telling one another what a very devil of a bluster this was. Mr. Brekke looked like a general in winter camouflage when he handed our mail through the doorway now. Kate's binoculars could not cut the feathery swirl and find the news for the usual courier's gait of her tongue, so Grandma went over to play cards with her by the hour to compensate. Walter's woodpile heaped under the whiteness like a buried haystack. The trip to the Badger's peak for water became a feat of walking with chin tucked into your coat and the filled water bucket tugging you off-balance as you broke through the drifts. Another trip had its hazards as well: Grandma and I joked about how far the outhouse seemed to have wandered out onto the prairie since the blizzard whirled in. The only thing in the neighborhood which still seemed to be in place was Shap, and he was more firmly planted than ever. Throughout such weather, he could not be budged from under the kitchen table, and so was stepped on by Grandma ten times a day instead of his usual half dozen, his injured howl a mate-cry out into keening of the blizzard.

When the snowfall and wind at last stopped, the world's one noise would be the scrunching sound of boots on silk-dry snow. In the fresh calm, smoke climbed straight up from chimneys, until it appeared as if the fat gray ribbons were dangling all the town's houses down into a bowl of snow. The comforted silence would last until the first pickup truck began the fast ratatatat of its chained tires. Throughout such weather,
the bullseye ripped open with a hard snapping sound.

Of my mother's death, whatever I try, I can call back almost nothing. The album photos have printed into me that she was fine-boned, hardly more than tiny, with a roundish face where my own is quickly read. From stories in my father's voice, I know everything about the doom which had been inside her since she was born, the asthma pinching on her breath.

But those are rememberings second-hand. What I call back on my own is just this: my father touching me awake in lantern glow, his shadow thrown far up onto the wall, to say she is dead, your mother is dead, sobbing as the words choked him.
and in this snow-scarfed weather as all other, once a week Dad would appear out of the night. The job he had taken after his operation was at the Camas ranch, fifty miles from us on the far side of White Sulphur Springs. He intended to bide through there until summer, when he would have the contract to harvest the ranch's big hay crop. But he had come up with an idea further north the Camas might be a place for Grandma and me as well.

I would wake at once those nights he arrived, and come intent as a hiding fox. The open doorways leading from the kitchen to the living room and on into my bedroom were aligned, and a panel of light came thrusting through them all onto the foot of my bed, as if a square flame from the charged talked beginning across the kitchen table. The ritual I knew by heart. Dad would ask if there might be a can of beer in the house, just anything for a sip. This was high risk, a step out onto the swaying edge of Grandma's temper, but he always did it, as if answering some challenge. If Grandma pulled her mouth tight and her long dipping No-o came out, he was in fast trouble, no matter that he had fought blizzard roads across the night to spend time with her. But if not, if the moment came mellow enough in her, she would
over, but couldn't see myself in commerce; the cost to privacy would be too high. But another idea she remembered had the right feel. The same enterprising sons had sent away for free mailing they came across in magazines and, since Ringling had no street names, awarded themselves whatever elaborate addresses they could think of. I got out paper and envelopes and gave it a try. Soon offers for stamp collecting kits or pleas for me to get rich selling salve were pouring into the post office in care of I. Clark Doig, Sagebrush Avenue or Jackrabbit Boulevard or Gopher Gulch or whatever other elegance I'd been
get out the beer for him and he would persuade her to take a tiny glass of it herself, the only alcohol she would touch. I would let my breath out and curl closer toward the portal of light to hear what would come next.

That old heifer of a cook, by God I can't see why McGrath keeps her on. The meal she put on the table this noon I wouldn't make this dog here eat. Liver fried until you could use it for shoeleather, and a little dab of boiled spuds, and some store bread, and that was all. You can't keep a crew on grub like that. Oh, the men aren't going to stand for it much more, they'll be asking for their checks. And Mrs. McGrath just sits there and lets her get by with it. McGrath is no better, he ought to know that a crew is only as content as its cooking. Funny damn way to run a ranch, or I'll put in with you...

The notion sheened a bit more each time out of his talk. If the cook at the Camas were to be let go, if the job could be Grandma's...There's a helluva big house there, plenty of room in the upstairs for the three of us. Ivan would have to stay some place in White Sulphur for school a bit of the year, but weekends and the summer we'd be all together...

A beer bottle is set on the table, a small glass follows. What would you think of the idea, Lady? And Grandma, who has been offering only hmpfs until now: I don't just know. Waiting. I suppose it would be good there.
Waiting. For darn sure we could use the wages, and I'm plumb able to work.

Invisible in my half-dark it is one of the mysteries of these times that no one ever caught on that I was a light sleeper and would hear anything said at any hour in that small house—I would listen to Dad once more ease out of his night of trying to talk the future around to his own route. Well, we'll just have to watch our chance. I'll put it to McGrath in a minute if that cook is let go. And you can see then what you think...The echo from Grandma: Yes, we can see then...His good night, hers. Then my father's body at bed edge. Ivan. Ivan! Move across a bit, son, I'm home. I sigh sleep up at him, and heavily shift across the bed, away from the eyelet of light.

Winter at last brawled itself out, and spring basted Ringling in mud for awhile. Near the start of summer, Dad brought about his notion. Grandma was offered the job as cook at the Camas ranch. Golly gee, I don't suppose it ought to be turned down, only I hate to break up housekeeping here again...and break it up we did, closing the house in Ringling, more boxes than ever stacked into it, driving with Dad in the pickup to the place where the three of us could be together, or at least less separate.

The ranch buildings stood out from behind the line of cottonwoods on the west bank of Camas Creek, just at the base
and filed papers for the 160-acre site—which qualified best under a law for the taking up of "desert land." Over the next dozen years, they managed to make a start in the sheep business and to add six more children to the family.

Then, on a September day in 1910, a little past noon,
of the ridges stairstepping up into the Big Belts. Nothing of the ranch seemed ever to have been thought into any order, the bunkhouse happening first along the road, its paint long vanished into a gray fleck—scurf, next to it a small log shed with the wood dark and time-stained and the chinking bright between the long roundnesses. Next squatted a blacksmith shop, a lower log shed which seemed to have pilfered out at nights and brought home to itself countless scraps of iron, trinkets of harness, tosses of wire. Then began an arc of a crew of battered machinery, auto carcasses and skewed reaper reels and generations of hay rakes and mowing machines.

Out of the clutter stood a high square house, looming up from the shaley roadway, backdropped by a yellow shale hillside, like a giant crate absent-mindedly put down there. So overbig was this building that it could only be occupied, like a hotel, rather than lived in. The McGraths, even though one reach of room along almost the entire back of the house held only the long table where everyone on the ranch ate, had barely managed to habitate the first floor, and a central stairwell remorselessly marched on to another warren of rooms upstairs. Dad and I shared a corner bedroom up there, Grandma was given one across the stairwell, and the rest of the rooms either yawned empty or were crammed with stray boxes.

The Camas house was high-ceiled and cold. Even on summer nights, the wind off the Big Belts slapped our corner
room. It was chilly quarters in more ways than that, only a few clothes hung starkly in the closet, our underwear and socks in a dresser drawer, all else stashed in the house at Ringling. We felt encamped rather than settled--Dad was still sizing up McGrath, deciding how far to cast us in with him--and the flow of life through the house made it more so. Daylong there was a kind of restless tribal coming and going, the crew men trooping in for breakfast, the chore boy hauling in pails of milk and buckets of eggs, me wandering in and out eleven dozen times a morning, McGrath and Dad coming in for a cup of coffee, the men trooping in for lunch, Grandma back and forth to the garden, McGrath arriving with a hungover sheepherder he was taking to a sheep camp, me wandering again, Mrs. McGrath off to give McGrath some message she had forgotten at lunch, the choreboy bucketing in more milk, more eggs, the men trooping in for supper...People coming and going around here like chickens with their heads chopped off, Grandma sometimes muttered, even as she herself went, apron flapping, down the storebin stairs for the twentieth time.

A different disorder went on during meals, when a dozen or twenty of us--it was one of Grandma's instant grumbles that she never knew what the total was going to be--might be lined along the span of oilclothed table. McGrath had a small, stinging sense of humor, like a popper on the end of his whiplike temper. His one favorite story, guffawed mealtime
after mealtime, was of the man he had seen fork in a mouthful of overhot potatoes, spit them into his hand, and hurl them back to his plate with the shriek: Now blaze, damn you, blaze! His other notion of fun was to single out one of the crew and fire questions about the day's work, delaying the man in his eating until everyone else had finished. Then McGrath would rear out of his chair and bray, Well, let's go back to work. Andy, from the looks of your plate you must not've been hungry.

Somehow McGrath's swagger had attracted a demure wife, half his size and a fraction his conceit. They whiffed past each other in life, McGrath in his steady gale of bluster and Mrs. McGrath eddying and zephyrlike. Her one mistake, which she made every week or so, was to try to edify the table talk above sheep ailments and butts of hay. Once she announced out of nowhere that she had just read in a magazine that every one of the sons of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was of strapping build, over six feet. McGrath looked at her, not unkindly but puzzled, and said: What in the name of Bejesus H. Christ does that have to do with anything?

What anything had to do with anything on the Camas often was not clear, beginning with McGrath himself. With his cask of chest, the even grander gut beneath, and a great boxy head jowled like a bulldog's, he always looked roundly out of place on foot. Saddle years had bowed his legs wide, and he toed
along in cowboy boots as if hating each touch of the ground. But on horseback, the legs pegged down into the stirrups as if into a socket, his swell of chest looked right, the ugly head somehow went against the sky like the profile of a nested eagle. McGrath could flip a lasso onto anything his horse could catch up with, and whooped his own cheers when he did. Within weeks after the three of us at last were living at the Camas, one of McGrath's new sheepherders who hadn't sufficiently dried from a spell of boozing went out of his head and ran off naked into the hills. McGrath grabbed his lariat from the pickup, heaved onto the herder's surprised nag, and jogged away in pursuit. Dabbed it on him first throw, too, he brayed to us at the next mealtime. Had him snubbed down for the doc in no time. Why this bred-in-the-bone ropehand had turned to sheep ranching, no one knew—although some made the guess that having been discovered searing his own brand on another party's cattle had something to do with it. On whatever wind of chance, McGrath had landed at the Camas and leased six thousand fat ewes to put on its grass.

He's quite the McGrath, Grandma said soon after we arrived, and did not mean it in admiration. From Dad's stories, it came as no surprise to see that McGrath ran the ranch as if showing the world a trick from under his hat. Decisions were all jangle and swash: at morning, everyone might be flung into fence mending as if every post on the
ranch were going to crash over within a minute; by lunch, McGrath would have the entire crew ricocheting to some for-gotten corner of the range to shove sheep onto fresh pasture. It was noticeable that McGrath had the clever bully's instinct about who to leave out of his loosely flung orders. Instead of his bluster, Dad and Grandma were favored with controlled grumbles of suggestion. Grandma of course met him in kind, but Dad seemed more bemused.

McGrath had quirks further. He let what looked like a rogue's gallery of the dog world roam the ranch—half a dozen mutts and slinkers whose one common characteristic was that they were almost useless around sheep. Shep had not survived his winter, the life gone from him one night as he lay in his peace beneath the kitchen table in Ringling; even Grandma admitted that it was fortunate he was not on hand to contend with this bullying pack. McGrath's philosophy about his crew seemed the same as his notion about dogs. He hired some of the most hopeless of men, on the calculation that he could get by with paltry wages and yet bulldog them into doing the needed work. One of these apparitions was the herder McGrath had had to rope when the man pranced off into the trees naked and delirious. More baffling yet, McGrath one day arrived from town with another herder who was lurching out of several weeks of cheap wine. When he had sobered enough to wobble to the supper table, it began to become clear that our newcomer had barely enough English to pronounce that he was from Finland, all else came out in some beyond-Helsinki gabble as if he were chewing glass. Can't savvy what the hell his name is, McGrath said between the splutters. We'll just call him Finnigan.

Two of the crew had been with McGrath for years, beating along behind him through southern Montana from one leased ranch to the next. They had done so for so long that their names were hardly spoken separate on the Camas, simply splined into Mickey-and-Rudy as if they were twins. They were anything but. Mickey had a froggy face and build, one cheek forever wadd
It starts, early in the mountain summer, at a cabin cut up in the Bridger Range of Montana's southwestern corner. Alone on a high timbered shelf, we eased through May and the first twenty-six days of June secure as hawks with wind under our wings. Once a week, the camptender from the home ranch would climb the trail to us. The blaze-faced sorrel he rode and the packhorse haltered behind would plod up out of the shadows which pooled in the valley under our jackpine slopes, until at last the rider would step down from his stirrups into the cabin clearing and unknot from
with tobacco and lifting his vast mouth into a disgusted smirk, his wide low shoulders always half-hunched as if warding off the next bluster from McGrath. No one could quite decipher why Mickey stayed on and on with McGrath, but it must have fed a habit of disgracing himself. By every instinct in him, Mickey was a bunkhouse lawyer, grouser, something just short of a saboteur. He could go about his work for McGrath, as much of it as he did, in a slow huff and You could see his lips moving as he practiced his outrage. speechify inside himself about the misery of it all. McGrath, for his part, cussed Mickey elaborately at least once a week, with practice nips in between, and put him on the dreariest jobs that came up. Hornlocked together, they showed never a sign of value for one another, and every sign of going on with their blood feud until apoplexy truced it for one or the other of them.

But Rudy, the other longtime hand, would listen sharply to McGrath’s orders, say in great agreement Right you are, Mac--then with perfect deftness go off and do whatever task he thought needed doing. As he marched off in his own directions, often with an irrigating shovel rifled on his shoulder, Rudy looked like a frontier trooper strayed from a Remington sketch: rod-straight backbone, all his striding motion from the waist down, noble white hair and a trimmed white mustache. And strange skills kept appearing from him. He could play the violin, and carve surprises from wood, and had
built a tiny model cannon which could blast a ball bearing through a one-inch board. But the great startlement of this parade-ground knight was his eternal spitting of snuff juice. It squirted from him in abrupt brown blurs, punctuating his sentences, announcing a thought to come. Rudy was the one man on the ranch never beset by mosquitoes, and always claimed it was the snoose juice percolating through his bloodstream which kept them off.

When Dad hired on at the Camas, it had been with the contract that when summer came he would thread through the disorder of the place and get the ranch's rich hay crop harvested. Somehow a crew had to be held together through the months of mowing and raking and bucking and stacking of some 150 butts of hay, some 1400 tons of it when at last all the fields had been sickled and combed clean—and Dad's reputation in the valley said he was a man to do it.

The first move he made was to turn down McGrath's offer to include Mickey-and-Rudy in the haying crew: I'll have my own men, and I'll particularly not have that pair. He next left word with the bartenders at the Stockman and the Pioneer. Out of their Saturday night throngs they sized men for him, he winnowed the candidates, and came back to the Camas one June evening with a complete haying crew of nine men.

By summer's end, nearly three months of tricky rain-delayed hay harvest behind him, he still had the same nine in the crew, man after man among them asking to come back for the
season again next year. It was a matchless job of foremanning even for Dad, who perhaps had needed to prove skill to himself after his desperate time of sickness. Whatever accounted for the silken summer of haying, McGrath put it against his own slapbang style of crew being hired and more promptly fired, and made Dad an offer to stay on at the Camas as--what? Not foreman, exactly, because McGrath wanted to be able to catapult Mickey-and-Rudy and a few other hands around the ranch as he pleased. Not entirely the sheep boss either, although taking on a share of the camptending would be part of the job. Dad was to be oh, hell, just generally in charge, Charlie, you know what's to be done on this spread. The lambing shed and the haying season would be his to oversee, the hay once again on a valuable contract of dollars-per-ton; beyond that, he would have direction of any of the crew not being reined around at the moment by McGrath himself.

The fuzzy line of authority--entirely typical of McGrath--was a bothering notion, but the offered wage was good, particularly with the haying contract added; also, Grandma would be kept on as cook the year-round. Well, it's something to try, Dad offered, and Grandma agreed. With what was beginning to seem our tendency for slightly askew arrangements, we stayed on at the big house on the Camas.

In those earliest months at the ranch, my grandmother and my father gingerly had begun to put together something like a family life for us. The two of them being who they were, that life of course came at the price of hard work and
on a new round of carousing. The policeman on the beat—a
helluva big old harness bull—paused outside the window at the
sight of three pairs of cowboy boots poking out from under the
barber cloths. He sauntered in, lifted the hot towel off the
rancher's face, and said: Hello, White Sulphur Springs.
When you get that shave, I want you. Their financier on his
had to pant as best it could to keep up. The one time of truce I could always count on was summer dusk. After her dawn-to-supper day of cooking and house chores and his as-long day of haying and handling the crew, Grandma would go with Dad to the hayfield and help him repair machinery for the morning—shave a drawknife along fresh pine poles to make teeth for the huckrake, plop beside the stacker arm to grip a wrench onto a bolt head for him, anything that needed doing on the downed equipment, all of it done with a certain declared calm between them.

Yet those level evenings hardly ever held the pleasure for me they ought to have, because Dad's style of mechanicking meanwhile would have started me gritting my teeth. He saw me, fair is fair, as his logical fetcher of tools during that repair work; my ailing knee excused me from all other work during the haying. What he did not see was that his notion of fetching had exactly the jittery, hoppity-skippety rhythm, or lack of it, which I rapidly was learning to dislike about ranch life. If I was sent to the pickup to dig out a boxhead wrench for him, the next moment I would be sent again to pick up the chisel which lay beside the wrench. Nor was there any outguessing him—always some further gizmo to send me trudging again, or worse, dogtrotting all the way to the blacksmith shop.

Six evenings might pass, then, with the pair of them gentled and me muttering behind my teeth, and on the seventh,
the regular trip to White Sulphur Springs for groceries, and into trouble.

This, as acute as if it is happening again now: this father of mine has parked the pickup in front of the grocery store and says, oh so much too offhandedly, Well, ye don't need me to get the groceries, do ye? I'll step over to the Stockman for a minute. At best, this grandmother of mine pushes out a level Well, all right then, as if being reasonable might just fetch him back that much sooner. At worst, comes that flat snapped I suppose, which in truth means Yes and you're going to overstay and I'm going to take you to war about it.

All during the grocery shopping, I half-hold my breath wondering if he will be back at the pickup by the time we get there. Every once in awhile, surprise to us all, he is there, and the mood leaps up, the drive back to the Camas is full of chatter. Most often, he is missing. I look desperately toward the Stockman, hoping I can say in triumph, Here he comes now! That hope snuffed, I go on to the next one as we climb into the pickup: maybe he will arrive before Grandma begins to mutter--no, too late, Darn his hide anyway, she steams, why doesn't he come?

By every evidence in my memory, and in the words of everyone I have found who knew him well, my father should not be called an unfeeling man. He tended opposite, fretful about
a calamity on anyone he knew, trailing generosities I still
happen onto in his wake: **Knewed your daddy when I landed into**
this country in thirty-six, at shearing time at the Dogie.
He staked me for my bedroll, I was so dead busted. **Didn't have**
to do it neither, but he done... But with those waitings, he
inflicted a pain as sharp on my grandmother's mind as any
that can be conjured, she had had one relentless stint of
waiting around in life for the saloons to let a man go, and she
seethed at the idea of another, even if it amounted only to
minutes of casual beer.

To Dad, that is exactly what it did amount to. The
saloons and the men ranged on their barstools had been a
heartbeat of him, and of the valley, all his grown life. A
beer or two was simply a chaser for the mellow conversation.
My own feelings were hopelessly mixed, tiered. I wanted
Grandma not to be angry, even as I was more than half-angry
at Dad myself. I thought up excuses for him: Why shouldn't he
have a breather to himself, see his friends? **The world isn't**
gonna end over a few minutes of that. I switched to the
argument on our side: *The hell, why do we have to stew in this
pickup while he guzzles beer in there?* It was frazzling, a
crisscross of tensions cutting tight inside me. And everything
would become worse, I knew, if Grandma gave her final fidget
and sent me to get him: **Gee gods, see what he's doing in**
there. If he wasn't ready pronto to leave the saloon, then
I had the predicament of trudging back to try to tell her so, or of hanging restlessly at his side until the spirit moved him, both of us now rooted in the Stockman while she simmered across the street.

When he finally came—all of this might have crackled for only twenty minutes or so—he generally would try an offhand Ready to go? She would give it back to him—We been ready for ages—and the silent battle would begin. Halfway to the ranch, one or the other might try to break it. But most often a trip which started in ice ended the same, and I would look aside out the window touching cold on my shoulder, wordlessly crying a kind of prayer that the mood would get no worse, damming in my head the one or the other of these chilly warriors or more often, the both.

Beneath it all was a hard unsaid truth we all knew, the three of us by then had been together long enough, and closely enough, that if my father and my grandmother parted ways, I now could have the choosing of which I would live with—and I would choose at once to go with him again. I felt love for her, she would bring me up more steadily and standardly than he could, in countless ways would make sacrifices in her life for the sake of mine. In justice to us both—perhaps all three of us—she was the one to raise me most lovingly, if choice had to be made. But I would never choose so. By then, I had been shaped on the opposite side of the family from her, the
side which indeed cared less for family than for friends and so suggested that if my father could not be enough family for me, at least he was going to be a friend such as none other in the world. The side, too, which always had half a notion to hie off for opportunity rather than settle for endurance. In outlook and manner—and I suppose in inner murmurations which I could not hear until now—I had become more thoroughly Charlie Doig's son than Bessie Ringer's grandson.

It lay as an iron fact amid us that she knew all this and that a woman who long since had determined she was through putting up with bad bargains in life and longer since had that right, she could only accept in these short-sided terms.

If, that is, she stayed on with Dad and me at all, now that his health had mended once more. It apparently became a guessing game in the valley whether she would. A town voice has reported: There was some that said they didn't see how she could take over the daughter's husband, and the child too. But I said there was love there, that was the way of it. It wasn't quite the way of it, for there was still was all too little sign of love—or affection or admiration or much of any other warmth—shown between my father and my grandmother. They were, after all, an alliance, corded together only by the bloodline which knotted in me, and perhaps the best that could have been expected of them was the wary civility of allies.

Some of the time, as in the aftermath of those trips to town, it took their best efforts to muster that.
Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out. I only have the rough list of guesses from the long westering course of this country's frontier: poverty's push or the pull of wanderlust, some word of land and chance as heard from those who had gone earlier to America, or as read in the advertisements of booking agents. Perhaps some calamity inside the family itself, the loss of whatever thin livelihoods there had been in laboring on a laird's estate. Or it may truly have been as simple as the family vein of stubborness. Some unordinary outlooks on life seemed to crop out in my grandfather's generation, attitudes which might not have set well with a narrow village way of life. Three Doig brothers and two sisters are known to have gone off from Dundee to risky futures, and at least two of them clearly went about life as if it was some private concoction they had just thought up.
Yet the months added up, and the three of us remained under the same roof. Rather, Dad and Grandma remained under it, and I edged on weekends, for when the school year began again, I once more had to board out in White Sulphur.

If it had occurred to me, over the next span of time I had all the grounds to demand of Dad just how this pieced-together family of ours was making my life any less unsettled. In the several years between my mother's death and Grandma's arrival, I had followed Dad through seven or eight places to live in the year and a half after Grandma and I left Ringling, I ricocheted among half a dozen. Two of Grandma's sons, lived in White Sulphur, and whenever possible I boarded now with one or the other of them, and their families. The sons themselves were in a period of changing jobs, here when I was twelve and thirteen years old, and in fast sequence, I hopscotched after them through households as various as they were numerous. One of the places was a tiny house which had its toilet in the cellar, reached by way of a trapdoor in the middle of the kitchen floor. Another was a looming old box which had seen its last paint a generation before. There even was a stint, apparently in some moment when everyone else was between households, back once more with Nellie and his wife, who didn't have the advantage of being relatives but at least stayed put.

The pattern to all this was jagged but constant: I sleep on a couch in the living-room of the moment, spend my day at school, roam town afterward as much as I wanted, come back whichever house it happened to be— I once had a memory slip and returned to the one with the cellar toilet instead of the looming one across town— lose myself in a book or magazine until bedtime, dig the next morning's change of clothes from my suitcase behind the couch, and settle in for the night again. I found that everyone
most plentiful things around them still were sagebrush and wind.

By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had come down into a single word. Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices I remember us boys as kids playing with one of the poles of some pines and hearing the sound of falling timber. I didn't see much of Oregon, but I'd heard stories of what it was like, and I knew my parents and I had come down from it.

Around Helena were flushing gold out of every gravel gulch. With the Indians vanished and bonanza gold drawing in the town buildings, how could this neighboring valley miss out on prosperity? No, unbridle imagination just for a moment, and it couldn't help but show. In all those prewar years those firstcomers might have picked clues even from the pretty uplands that here was a peculiar run of country, and maybe treacherous. Hints begin along the eastern skyline. There the Castle Mountains poke tall thin turrets of stone out of black-green forest. From below in the valley, the spires look as if they had been engineered up from the forest floor whenever someone took the notion, an entire mountain range of castles—builders' whims, until the fancy stone fingers wore too thin from the country road. The track, worn bald by iron wagonwheels and later by the hard tires of Model T's, scuffs along shale bluffs and through sagebrush flats and across willow-choked creeks until at last it sidles around a hogback ridge. On the broad grassy slope opposite this ridge, my father was born and
treated me fondly if a bit absent-mindedly—as I had noticed at Jordans' during Dad and Ruth's winter of reconciliation, the boarding child is something like a stranded visitor that people get accustomed to half-seeing at the edges of their vision—and no one, least of all me, seemed to think there was much unusual about my alighting here and there casually as a roosting pullet. Perhaps the unsettledness worked at me more than I knew. For on weekends and in the summer I found myself islands of calm even amid the eddying energies of the Cames ranch. It helped that this house too held shelves of books, as the Brekkes' had. Mrs. McGrath had learned that reading kept her aside from her husband's swoosh through the house place. But when I borrowed from the shelves I found scenes never dreamed of in the Brekke books: They killed him in Spangle Valley. They waited hidden among the rocks of Buffaloback Mountain and when he rode below they shot him out of the saddle...She was right down there at my feet, her eyes shining, her breasts trembling, drawn up in tight points, and pointing right up at me. She was down there, and the breath was roaring in the back of my throat...

When I had enough of printed roarings for the moment, the ranch could give me a silent place as well. For by
else. A hot mineral pool erupting at the north end of the valley gave the name to the county seat which built up around the steaming boil, White Sulphur Springs.

But whatever the quirks to be discovered in a careful look around, the valley and its walls of high country fitted the one firm notion the settlers held: empty country to fill up. Nor could the eye alone furnish what was most vital to know about the tides of livestock which soon were in seasonal flow between the valley and those curious mountains. The grazing herds of cattle and bands of sheep were not simply on the move into the mountains or back to the lowlands. They were traveling between high country and higher, and in that area of Montana, the weather is uglier and more dangerous the farther up you go. The very floor of the Smith River Valley rests one full mile above sea level. The foothills homesteads were hundreds of feet above that. The cold, storm-making mountains climbed thousands of feet more into the clouds bellying over the Continental Divide. Whatever the prospects might seem in a dreamy look around, the settlers were trying a slab of lofty country which often would be too cold and dry for their crops, too open to a killing winter for their cattle and sheep.

It might take a bad winter or a late spring to show this unseeable fact, and the valley people did their best to live with it. But over time, the altitude and climate added up pitilessly, and even after a generation or so of trying the valley, a settling family might take account and find that the
greatest luck a gray ship, high-hulled and pinging with 
emptiness, rode at the far end of the ranch buildings. 
A ship, at least, to my imaginings. In the years when the 
machine chomped broadly through grainfields, it was called 
a combine.

Now it stood, in its tons of dulling metal and clusters 
of idle gearwheels, for me to climb into, all through: on 
careful hands and with my bandaged knee tensed behind me, 
over the floorful of threshing blades, past gearings fat 
with ancient grease which, when I touched through its crust, 
still came away slick in my hand; through rods of sunlight 
which drilled in around the gear housings and shaft ports; 
at last to the dark maw which fell away in shelves of teeth 
and gratings to the nose of the machine. The toes of my 
shoes clouted on sheet metal as I dodged under sets of spiky 
metal fingers and over driveshafts. When I stopped, the only 
sound was the ringing echo of my own listening. It was as if 
the old combine, the noisiest machine in the world in full 
shuddering gulp across a wheatfield, had gone quieter than 
anything else when it at last quit work.

Even the day's heat changed within its metal tunnels, 
flattened and spread into a cooking sensation which came from 
everywhere at once. I made a game of seeing how hot I could 
stand it in the dim shaft. When the searing metal was too 
much for me, I would climb, up and out, through a deft sliding 
panel in the machine's top and into the hopper which hung
high over the side. This was the lookout spot, with baffling slippery angle which made me lodge my body across them and feel the tautness of watching, eyeing the ranch.

My mood then was to see everything as the edges of tomorrows, as if time were waiting in coiled shimmers behind the outlines of whatever my watching met. The gasoline tank for the ranch machinery, with its round red face of metal which rang a deep blung when I hit a ball against it; that would be the vast green left field fence of Fenway Park if I grew up to be a baseball player. The meadows of wild hay splotched richly along Camas slopes Creek, and the climbing of grass: if I became a ranchman as Dad was, there would be such land mile upon mile. Grandma, on the way in from the garden with her apron held full of vegetables: she would magically become less sharp-edged and hard-mouthed, a Lady as steady in temper as in her fondnesses. Dad, arrived from the hayfield in the pickup and then into his hurrying stride to find some repairing piece of metal from the rusty mass around the blacksmith shop: the future magic would settle him into his best work, turn him from any provoking of Grandma, the clasped knee which began to twinge under me now: it would heal at once, and as quickly bear me out of growing up, into these glimpsed tomorrows.
But he had come to the Dogie just when the owners were signing into a partnership with a sheep rancher from near Sixteenmile Creek. The "Jasper" at the front of his name long since crimped down to "Jap" by someone's hurried tongue, Jap Stewart had arrived out of Missouri some twenty years before, leaving behind the sight in one eye due to a knife fight in a St. Joe saloon but bringing just the kind of elbowing ambition to make a success in the wide-open benchlands he found several miles east of the Basin. Drinker, scrapper, sharp dealer and all the rest, Jap also was a ranchman to the bone, and he prospered in the Sixteen country as no one before or since. Now he was quilting c.to the Dogie holdings his own nine thousand head of sheep and the pasture for every last woolly one of them. He also moved in to kick loose anything that didn't work. This included most of the Dogie's crew.

Jap began by giving them a Missouri growling at--most of you sonsabitches've worked here so goddamn long all you know any more is how to hide out in the goddamn brush--and ended up sacking every man on the ranch except Dad and a handful of others. While Jap's new men streamed in past the old crew on the road to town, Dad, at the age of 21, was made sheep boss, in charge of the Dogie's bands grazing across two wide ends of the county. In another six months, he was foreman of the entire ranch.
What I found in the machine's silences, Dad perhaps found
in the busyness of the ranch's chief chore—the raising of
sheep. The Camas and its seasons were occupied by the gray
thousands of them as if they were some daft breed of cynics,
helpless and demanding, their long clown faces staring out
in sad alarm from ruffs of wool. The bands summered in the
mountains, plump targets for coyotes and bears and snagging
branches; spent autumn in mown hayfields where they could do
their best to topple into irrigation ditches or Camas Creek
itself; wintered near the ranch buildings where in the nightly
shed or corral they could try to huddle themselves into injury
or suffocation. But it was the first fade of winter when the
six thousand ewes drew the entire attention of Dad and everyone
else on the ranch: springtime, and lambing time.
Lambing at the Camas was one long steady emergency, like
a war alert which never quite ignites into battle but keeps
on demanding scurry and more scurry. No ritual more frantic
exists anywhere in the rearing of animals, and McGrath hounded
everyone around in their jobs to make it all the more skittish.
The season would begin reasonably enough: in middle March,
a lamb or two, tiny yellow sprawls of life, would appear
suddenly amid the several thousand ewes. Dad, as day man,
My father looks stronger than I ever knew him, and even more handsome, the straight broad lines of his face framed cleanly around the dimple-scar in the center of his chin. His stockman's hat has been crimped carefully, sits on his head at a perfect angle. His shoulders line out level and very wide for a man five and a half feet tall, but this strength at the top of him trims away to a lower body slender as a boy's. I remember that he was so slim down the waist and hips that the seat of his pants always bagged in, and the tongue of his belt had to flap far past the buckle. That dot of scar is the one flaw he shows, like
would have had a helper or two readying the long low lambing
shed on a knoll above Camas Creek. Inside it now stretched
rows of boarded pens about four feet square, just large
enough to hold a ewe and her lamb. Since the pens were so
like small cross-barred jail cells, they were called jugs,
and once in the jug, the first few lambs and their mothers
were coddled and fussed over like the original customers of
a seaside inn. But one day soon, half a dozen lambs are
born; and the next day forty; then a hundred, at once, one
lamb or another starting its slow glistening dive from the
womb into life wherever you looked now.

Then a sledge with half a dozen of the jug pens atop it
and pulled by a team of horses would begin to shuttle day and
night--the gutwagon, named for the placenta and accompanying
muss from the newly-delivered ewes. Because Mickey was the
worst choice for it and McGrath wanted to miss no chance to
harass him into betterment, he was made the gutwagon driver.
Like a duke dropped barefoot into a manure pile, Mickey would
mince up to a fresh lamb, snatch it up and try half-heartedly
to persuade the mother into one of the gutwagon jugs. When
she wouldn't be lured, he would have to grab her by the wool
and wrestle her in or, worse, try to snare her by the hind
leg with a sheephook and snake her in backwards.

Mickey's dour mauling was only the ewe's first welcome
to maternity. As the gutwagon was unloaded, Dad or one of his
helpers would tip each ewe onto her rump and hold her there while her teats were worked to be sure that milk would flow for the lamb. Then she was strongarmed into one of the jugs, and her lamb put in after. Sheep being sheep, not all ewes had the idea that they were ready to mother their lambs. More than a few saw it all as a bad joke, sniffing the tiny animal as if he were something sour and then, often as not, would butt him flat in the straw and begin walking on him. Damn ye, Dad would erupt, what the hell ye doin' to him? He's yours, old sister, just get used to the idea. Ivan, get in here and hold this goddam pelter while I suckle the lamb.

With the lamb bulging with milk and the ewe more or less bullied toward motherhood, Dad would send me for his paint tray. Then ewe and lamb were each stamped, in blotty digits about three inches high, with a number which showed that they belonged to each other. It also gave them a kind of selfhood, like hospital patients known by the traceries of their charts: That 256 lamb has the drizzles...That ornery damned 890 ewe still won't take her lamb...

The 722 lamb is a goner, I'm gonna have to jacket a fresh one onto that ewe.

Jacketing was a magic I watched with wonder each time, and I have discovered that my father was admired among sheepmen up and down the valley for his skill at it: He was just pretty catty at that, the way he could get that ewe to take on a new
lamb every time. Put simply, jacketing was a ruse played on a ewe whose lamb had died. Another lamb quickly would be singled out, most likely from a set of twins. Sizing up the newcomer, Dad would skin the dead lamb, and into the tiny pelt carefully slit four small leg holes and a head hole. Then the substitute lamb would have the skin fitted onto it like a jacket on a poodle. The next step of disguise was to cut out the dead lamb's liver and smear it over the jacket. In its borrowed and bedaubed skin, the new lamb then was presented to the ewe. She would sniff the baby impostor endlessly, distrustful but pulled by the blood-smell of her own. When in a few days she had made up her dim sheep's mind to accept the lamb, Dad would snip away the jacket and recite his victory: take him like hell, don't ye? See what a helluva dandy lamb I got for ye, old sister? Who says I couldn't jacket day onto night if I wanted to, now I ask ye?

Lambing was the one stint of work on a ranch that I ever liked. There was a constant doing about it, none of the usual jerky pace of idling around one minute and rebuilding the world the next. A couple of times a day, all the ewes had to be fed and watered. I carried pitchforkfuls of hay to put in the little feed rack of each jug, hefted in a bucket of water for the ewe to have a long drink. The tasks were necessary, added up to something. And the lambing shed itself
seemed a rare place in the world--a broad tunnel of a building which smelled of damp manure and iodine and warm wool and alfalfa, a fog of odors. The day man--Dad--ruled unquestioned in this exotic cavern, even McGrath asking his advice about every item of work.

As soon as the lambs were big enough to travel, they and their mothering ewes had to be herded from the shed to the fresh grass of some nearby pasture. Moving the sheep was the one piece of work I could do better than anybody else on the ranch. McGrath moved sheep in a kind of bellowing brawl, setting the dogs on them like cossacks against lame cowards. Dad could do better, but eventually, too would grow testy and begin to overpush the sheep. But I could simply shadow the bunch, sense a bit ahead of their jittery veers, head them off with a roaring Hyaw! or a tossed rock, until they settled into a flow, a constant push and swirl toward where I wanted them to go.

My talent for sheep and interest in them ended with lambing, but the herding season which began with summer swept me in anyway. If the meadows were too wet for haying, Dad would take a turn at camp tending, and we would drive off into the timbered slopes of the Dry Range with boxes of groceries, a full day to be spent chatting with the edgy herdsmen and towing their wagons to fresh pasture. Or I might even go when McGrath himself did the tending, if he managed to find me for it. You be careful riding with him, Grandma inevitably warned, as if I could keep the pickup from careening off a cliff by putting my mind to it. McGrath liked to have me along because I was quick at opening the several fenceline gates on the road into the mountains, and he liked such saving of moments. Also, sonless himself, he seemed interested to
They buried Peter Doig, tailor's helper in Scotland and homesteader in Montana, and rode their long ride home into the hills.

This is as much as can be eked out—landscape, settlers' patterns on it, the family fate within the pattern—about the past my father came out of. I read into it all I can, plot out likelihoods and chase after blood hunches. But still the story draws away from the twinings of map work and bloodlines, and into the boundaries of my father's own body and brain.

Where his outline touched the air, my knowing really begins.

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a tool mark nicked in when his strong head was carved. A single tiny notch at the bottom of his face, as if it might be the first lightest scratch of all the calamity ahead for him.

But my mother: my mother, here in some summer of early marriage, already seems frail, too slim—a willow out of place there so near timberline. Again, because I know what will come,
talk to a boy, although in his heavy way was not always sure how it was done. Did I tell you of once I's workin' down at Greybull in Wyoming and seen a fella walk between a horse's hind legs? 'S a fact. This geezer was a real horse hand, and it was hayin' time and he was a mower man, drivin' a real skittish team, a big roan and a gray. He's the only one in the crew could git a harness on 'em. Rained us out of hayin' a couple a days, and we all went to town and good and howlin' drunk. The boss got us back out to the place, and this geezer is still Christamighty drunk and gits it in his head to show us how tame he's got this ornery roan horse. He had a fancy Stetson on, big wide brim on it out t' here. He tells us he's gonna get down on his knees, and he's gonna walk on his knees between that horse's hind legs with his big hat on. Show us how tame he's got that roan horse, see. So he goes down to the barn, everybody on the place followin' him. He starts going under the horse's tail down on his knees when the horse gives a Christamighty kick, catches that fancy hat and swipes it right off, sailed the damn thing plumb across the barn, see. That horse didn't miss his head a inch. So the guy is surprised as all hell, then he yells: WHOA, YOU BIG SONOFABITCH, WHOA! Then you know, that goddamn horse just stood there and he goes right through his hind legs and out under his belly like he said he was gonna. Been you or me or
anybody else, that horse'd have kicked him into the middle
of next week, wouldn' you think? Hup, another gate for you...

An hour or so of this and we would be at the first of
the sheep camps, McGrath plunging the pickup off into a rough
sweep for the herder and his band. What mood we would find
when the herder at last showed himself, his saddlehorse and
dog eyeing us with twice the interest he was, had always
to be a gamble. In the eighty or so years that Meagher County had been one
of the prime sheep areas of Montana, hundreds of shepherders had walked
its slopes of pasture, and they added up to something like a race of hermit
gypsies. Countless of them went through life trapped in their homeland
language; it was a historic joke that the eastern end of the county originally
had been populated entirely by Norwegian herdsmen who knew but two words of
English: Martin Grande, the name of their employer. Fairly or not, the
numbers of Romanians who arrived as herdsmen had a particular reputation
for shunning any language but their own. Their chosen pair of words was
simply no savvy. There was the exasperated report of an early forest ranger
who came upon a Romanian herder placidly spreading his sheep across an
allotment of cattle range: All I could get out of him was 'No savvy' until
I applied a shot-loaded quirt...it was surprising how quickly the incident
got to all the Romanians in that district. McGrath had neither Norwegians
nor Romanians on his slopes just then, but he did have the baffling Finnigan.

McGrath blared and

chortled at him. Finnigan could only shake his head slowly as
an ox and clack some Nordic mystery back at him. Karl the
Swede was another uncertain talker, his shy throaty sentences
so low they seemed to come out of his shirt collar instead of
his mouth.
the packsaddle the provision sacks, faded white as tiny clouds, which bulged with our groceries and mail. Minutes later the camptender would be resaddled and riding from sight. For the next seven mornings again, until his hat and shoulders began to show over the trail crest another time, only the three of us would be there in the clean blue weather of the summer mountain.

Three of us, and the sheep scattered down a meadow slope like a slow, slow avalanche of fleeces. Before I was born, my mother and father had lived other summers this way, herding the sheep through the long still days until the lambs had fattened for shipping. They carried a box-camera those earlier summers, and I have the few album pages they put together of their campsites along the meadows and ridgelines.

Here memory always sidesteps in surprise, because off the stiff black pages, two young strangers grin out into my eyes.

My father looks stronger than I ever knew him, and even more handsome, the straight broad lines of his face framed cleanly around the dimple-scar in the center of his chin. His stockman's hat has been crimped carefully, sits on his head at a perfect angle. His shoulders line out level and very wide for a man five
Other herders had the language but not the inclination to do much with it. I remember hated even to say Hello when we arrived at his camp; he would stand half-sideways with his eyes darting to the timber until gradually he would face around and at last begin to make sentences. Others were trapped.

All in all, stepping out of the pickup at a herder's camp had some of the touchiness of coming ashore on a self-exile's island. I can think of only one of McGrath's entirely lonesome herders who seemed to thrive on the life—Louie, a tall soldierly man with a German accent. He owned a pair of tiny binoculars which snapped open like a case for eyeglasses, and spent his time peering for wildlife on the mountain slopes. Yesterday a black bear came up over there. I watched at him all morning. But the others had the common herder's affliction, the mind sprung by the weight of the silences against it. One I remember hated to say even Hello.
Deathday

Soon before daybreak on my sixth birthday, my mother's breathing wheezed more raggedly than ever, then quieted. And then stopped.

Memory begins to bunch itself there. All the time since, I have reached back along my father's retellings and into the oldest shadows within me to feel for this first remembered edge of life.

It starts, early in the mountain summer, at a cabin far up in the Bridger Range of Montana's southwesterly corner. Alone on a high timbered shelf, we eased through May and the first twenty-six days of June secure as hawks with wind under our wings. Once a week, the camp tender from the home ranch would climb the trail to us. The blaze-faced sorrel he rode and the packhorse haltered behind would plod up out of the shadows which pooled in the valley under our jackpine slopes, until at last the rider would step down from his stirrups into the cabin clearing and unknot from
However slowly, and if it could be pried out at all, there generally would be news to be heard from the sheep herder:

- A coyote seen on a hillside, a ewe gone lame or ripped by a snag, a porcupine tree'd by his dogs as they suicidally tried to get their faces full of quills. Dad would smoke and chat until the herder began talking, then only nod and ask enough to keep the flow coming. McGrath's style was to blurt at the man until he set off on some startled telling or another, the two of them building to full exasperation. Then abruptly, an instant before the herder was ready to fling his job in McGrath's face, we would wheel away to move the sheep wagon to a new pasture site.

The sheepwagon could be seen to be a child of the prairie schooner. With its rounded canvas top and high spoked wheels, a first glance easily found it back amid the beadlike file of white-topped wagons westering through our history. But a sheep wagon always existed alone, remote as a drifting brig on the grass ocean. It was built for one man to hide through the narrow months in, and that single life only; in the mountain dawn or dusk, yellowed light from the kerosene lamp at a herder's wagon showed like one frail star fallen into the timber. Inside the wagon with Dad or McGrath, it felt to me as if space, the very air, had changed, somehow tidied and tamped itself. I wanted to live in one, so much more interesting were they than the blank room back at the Camas. Nowhere else had the sense of shrinkage as if a house had pulled in and pulled in until it came down just above your head and out past your fingertips. Storage bins doubled as places to sit, the table hinged daintily down from a wall when wanted, every built-in cabinet had a tiny firm clasp snuggling its door. The bunk bed
Only one creature in these early pictures does not fit—the pet which is being stroked in my mother's hands. Those first seasons of following the sheep, my parents kept with them in their daily sift through the forest a gray and white tomcat they called Pete Olson. Somehow, amid the horses and dogs and sheep, and the coyotes and bobcats which ranged close to camp, Pete Olson rationed out his nine lives in nightly prowls of the mountain. Then as camp moved each morning, he would be cradled like a prince between somebody's lap and the saddle pommel as the horses shouldered through the timber.

But in this season on the final mountain, the surprising drifter ducking through waves of pine branches on the back of a and a half feet tall, but this strength at the top of him trims away to a lower body slender as a boy's. I remember that he was so slim down the waist and hips that the seat of his pants always bagged in, and the tongue of his belt had to flap far past the buckle. That dot of scar is the one flaw he shows, like
fit across the inmost end of the wagon as properly as a blade snicked into a jackknife. At the opposite end on a platform all its own sat the small square stove, usually with a pan of mulligan stew or a pot of sour tarry coffee waiting to be fired up more time. Finally, to let the herder glance out more easily to the sheep, the wagon had a Dutch door; with its bottom half closed, I could teeter out on it and feel as if far up on a lookout across this high pasture of summer.

In place, the wagon is a kind of ship's cabin for the herder, tidy, buttoned, comely. But during the move to the next site, it becomes only a floating bin. Everything loose must be packed away in the wagon's nooks, then onto the floor is piled whatever firewood the herder has chopped, his fuel oil can and likely a creamery can full of drinking water, his wash basin, the battered metal dish his dog ate out of, the gunny-sacked ration of oats for his horse, white sacks of salt for the sheep, and last of all, the small front steps for the doorway. Because a sheepwagon sits so high on its running gear—the floor nearly chest high to a man on the ground—it tows across rough country with a staggering topheavy gait. A successful move of a sheepwagon is one that doesn't topple the chimney pipe and leave it to be searched out a few miles of roadside brush. At the new site, there is leveling to be done. A cup of water is put on the table to see how the wagon tilts, then small holes are dug for the wheels to drop in, or a stout stick is shouldered under a corner of the wagon box to lift it into steadiness for another week.

Such, at least, was how a sheepwagon was properly moved. McGrath in his headlong way was apt to tow it as if dragging a stump. More often than not, he would forget to fasten the
But my mother: my mother, here in some summer of early marriage, already seems frail, too slim—too light a being to last there so near timberline. Again, because I know what will come, I believe myself into the notion that I can read it all gathering on the album's black paper. I coax from the photos any detail which seems to tell the sickness eroding in her; the pinch across her slender shoulders, the eyes which are almost too calm and accepting. I print into myself from each album pose how fine-boned she was, hardly more than tiny, with a roundish, slightly wondering face where most of my own is quickly read. From stories in my father's voice. I know everything too about
cabinet doors, and a flour can would fly out and explode
snowily over everything, pots and pans then avalanching out
of the oven and likely a can of lard or jar of jam leaping
in after.

Credit him, McGrath always seemed genuinely surprised
to fling back the door and find the gooey wreckage. For a
minute or so he would dab at it doubtfully, firing pots
and pans back into the oven and kicking flour out the door in
tiny puffs, then would snort The hell with it, a shepherder's
got more time than I do, and off we would buck to the next
sheepwagon move.

We spent more than two years on the Camas, the seasons
milling into one another like the fitful sheep themselves.
Dad and Grandma steadied the ranch with their work, but had
less luck with each other. Ours was a brinck of a family,
the two of them at sudden edge with each other, then calming
again. When Dad and Grandma came to take me to the Camas for the weekends
with them, usually the mood seemed to me as shanky as among McGrath's wild
shepherders. But as the

third winter of this was about to begin, something vaster to
judge came along. McGrath had made a proposition. He was
giving up the Camas, and instead had leased a small ranch two
called the Smith River Valley. If the Earliest of them wagoned in on a day when the warm sage smell met the nose and the clear air lensed close the details of peaks two days' ride from there, what a glimpse into glory it must have seemed. A new county bigger than some of the eastern states, vacant for the taking. The home valley of it all lay flat and calm in every direction like a gray inland sea, held by buttes and long ridges at the northern and southern ends, and east and west by mountain ranges. The Blackfoot tribes who had hunted the land by then were pulling north, in a last ragged retreat to the plains beyond the Missouri River. On the opposite slopes of the Big Belts, placer camps
hundred miles to the north. He would put two thousand ewes on the place: would Dad run the sheep for half the profit?

None of us had been to that region of Montana, and naturally McGrath's prospects were as unpredictable as the country. But Dad was for going. He took me aside and talked out his reasoning: Ivan, I think I'll take on those two bands of sheep for McGrath. He's a bearcat to work for, but the son-of-a-buck knows livestock and he knows how to turn money....I think it's a chance to take, going up north. But I don't know now, how do you feel about changing schools?

Eight weeks earlier I had started high school with the classmates I had known since we had come away from the mountains after my mother's death. The school, the town, the valley made all the lifestream I knew anything about. Yet when I put all this against Dad's words and the musing look on his face, the sum did not add up to as much as I expected. It may have been that I was more weary than I knew of the suitcase life of boarding in White Sulphur, or that I was just now coming across a portion of restlessness inherited from Dad. Whatever was behind it, I swallowed and gave my father the answer he wanted, and apparently the one

I secretly did too: I feel okay about that.

Grandma. She had lived in the valley for forty years now, nearly all her adult life. Her friends, her sons, her patterns of existence were there. The alliance between Dad and her had tenuous problems which showed no signs of easing. Whatever the ties of affection between her and me, I couldn't believe she would be talked into this total uprooting toward the north. We'll just have to see about her, Dad said. He rehearsed to me a dozen arguments he would put to her, and when the moment came simply fired out: This damn valley has never got us much of anywhere, Lady. All either of us has to show for our lives here is a helluva pile of hard work. I say we ought to try out new country. She was silent a long while—but a thinking silence, not a perturbed one.

At last: All right then. When can we be gone and get it over and done with?

The two of us watched, struck silent, as she honked into a handkerchief and then clouted pots and pans onto the
of the range--eminenced on maps as Mt. Edith, but always simply Old Baldy to those of us who had to live with it--thrusts up a bare summit with a giant crater gouged in its side. Even in hottest summer, snow lies in the crater like a patch centered on a gaping wound. Always, then, there is this reminder that before the time of men, unthinkable forces broke apart the face of the bluest landscape, as much of the bluest landscape was made by the hands of men. The ranch never could amount to much--too little water, too many scabbed hillsides of gray rock--but it might carry a hundred or so head of cattle if a man knew what he was doing. Better, Clifford knew, the work demanding to be done there would elbow the grief out of Dad's days.

Somewhere in himself my father steadied enough to decide. He shook hands on the deal for the ranch. For the third time in a dozen weeks, the pair of us bounced across the Smith River Valley.

On the blustery near-winter day when sale finished...
She was truly corded to us now, and the fact came with a sense of wonder and relief—and somehow among them, a nudge of concern.

The teachers' room was a Jell-O to me. And by Jell-O,

I could think.

A somberly hard enough to make even the sixth-grade boys laugh.

Whatever was in sight for the snow storm came as my head began to choose us Jell-O.

The school yard was Jell-O. Into a classroom was carried. She was a small, Jell-O-like woman who somehow managed her bottom protruding

minds of spare speakers. For me, the Jell-O of books of study of spare speakers. For me, the Jell-O of mind. "As many words on paper as I could take to

my eye as sound into the teacher, and all at first telling me to keep my eye on the Jell-O, as many words on paper as I could take to

the new Jell-Oness.

We the same time. Clifford was peering into a Jell-O our

of the Jell-O. The two of them had been friends since before

of the Jell-O. Clifford had come out of a home where family was book as the bride.

climbers crowding in on their balcony. He had never climbed

from where they stood to the snow and of the valley, and somehow

from where I stood peering over the roof and across.

New York started to make the snow look lovely.
lunchbox to school as I did. We had to congregate to see which sandwiches or cookies could be swapped, and whether anybody had been lucky enough to get chocolate milk in his thermos instead of white. And when the first snow came, all the rocks I had thrown at trees in the pretend games paid off. I could chunk a snowball hard enough to make even the sixth-grade boys flinch. Whoever chose up sides for the snow fort game we played began to choose me first.

The schoolyard no longer was a jail to me. And by luck, the teacher in that coop of a classroom was crafty. She was a small, doll-like woman who somehow could push twenty beginning minds at their separate speeds. For me, she got out books of her own, put me to helping others with their reading—anything to keep my eyes down into the pages, and all of it telling me that here, in as many words on paper as I could take in, stretched my new aloneness.

At the same time, Clifford was beginning to nudge Dad out of his sour haze. The two of them had been friends since before they could remember, left home together as teenagers to go off to a lumber town away out on the coast, knew and liked each other in the easy way that happens only a time or two during life. Clifford had come out of a homestead family as poor as the shale slopes crowding in on their shanty. He had never flinched from anything for very long ever since. Now he heard of a small ranch for rent at the south end of the valley, and somehow drew Dad into saying he would look it over.
One shard of time repeats itself like the snow-helmets of mountains across each season of my memory. An edged piece of the day, that is, in the strictest sense—the sun-point called noon. It seems curious now that this one daily interval counted for so much. Daybreak did not, nor dusk; days arrived and went with an unnoticed ease. But noon climbed up like a crier to a tower, and my father reckoned his life, and those of his ranch crews, and mine at his side, by its powers. After noon we'll go and... Let's get this done by noon... Better noon up and get some grub, don't ye think? And my grandmother, noon meaning to her the vast mid-day meal—we called it dinner, in full honor—to be arrayed along the sweep of table for a lambing crew or a shearing crew or a haying crew or whatever other kinds of crew there were in the world: Ivan, pretty please, yammer the bell to call those good-for-nothin's in here. Noon it was, too, when Taylor Gordon might be met on the street in White Sulphur, on the way to his cabin for his own dreaming meal and turning back at you to leave one last New York story or particle of philosophy: You know, I've found in life that I'd rather make a fast dime than a slow buck. Or when Harold Chadwick, straddled onto a counter stool in the Dupuyer cafe, might be coaxed to tell of hunting elk, when he was my age, with the ancient Metis mountain man Toussaint Salois: He had his big old buffalo coat and could set by the campfire just as comfortable—the rest of us 'd be freezin' to death. Even my mother, the one voice unknown from any of these years, can be almost-heard in some noontime, talking as she would have with my father as their days' harvest of grouse sizzle on the campfire of their herding site.
It is a picture which has caught, in this middle of a moment, how young they were, and how good at what they could do, and how ready they were to prove it. All this which paraded through those few quick days of celebration told my mother what she wanted to know about Charlie Doig. There is another photo taken soon afterward, in which my father grins cockily, hands palmed into hip pockets, dressy new chaps sweeping back from his legs as if he were flying. On this one is written: My

That $25.00 Lamb has the dirizibles...That ornerly damned 890 ewe.

Like hospital patients known by the traces of their charts, belonged to each other. It also gave them a kind of selfhood, three inches high, with a number which showed that they were and lamb were each stamped in pretty digits about bulleted toward motherhood. Dad would send me for his pat tryp with the lamb bulging with milk and the ewe more or less

would have had a helper or two readying the long low lambing shed on a knoll above Camas Creek. Inside it now stretched rows of boarded pens about four feet square, just large enough to hold a ewe and her lamb. Since the pens were so like small cross-barred jail cells, they were called jugs, and once in the jug, the first few lambs and their mothers were coddled and fussed over like the original customers of a seaside inn. But one day soon, half a dozen lambs are

From then, their story tells itself in a rush, just as Berneta Doig's life was hurrying to an end. Their first summers
For so potent a piece of time, noon was not exact at all. It never meant to us high twelve o'clock, any more than to the early English countryfolk who accounted their noon at three p.m., the ninth hour after sunrise. Noon meant instead the controlled curve of the day from morning into afternoon, where the beginning of labor crossed into the lessening of labor. A gradual but distinct point, that is to say, which the sundial still could have expressed better than the clock. There would have been the advantage, too, that the blankness of the sundial on an overcast day would have said more truthfully how vague time became when clouds curdled grayly over the valley and all work of the ranch was drenched out. Once or twice I can remember a two-day rain, which was all the rain we could imagine, and the loss of two working-noons in a row was befuddling, ominous, a dank eclipse. More than enough testimony, each time, that the sun's topmost moments of arch stood as a necessity in our world of ranchcraft.

Noon did a second and special service for me, more potent in its way even than the majestic division of time. It tinctured all that I saw after it. Beyond that equator of the day, the land itself began to change for me. Some of the pitiless mid-day wash of light began to be drawn out of it, could be seen fleeing in the ghost-dance of heat up from the mown fields. Past noon, as a pair of hours and then another and another were added, there came a honeyed light, richer, more golden. I stand yet on the lion-back ridge above the Two Medicine Gorge, or in the shade of an alfalfa stack at the Gates ranch, or on the back of a tractor amid the flung horizon of plains beyond the
anybody else, that horse'd have kicked him into the middle of next week, wouldn' you think? Hup, another gate for you...

An hour or so of this and we would be at the first of the sheep camps, McGrath plunging the pickup off into a rough sweep for the herder and his band. What mood we would find when the herder at last showed himself, his saddlehorse and dog eyeing us with twice the interest he was, had always to be a gamble. In the eighty or so years that Meagher County had been one of the prime sheep areas of Montana, hundreds of shepherders had worked its slopes of pasture, and they added up to something like a race of hermit gypsies. Countless of them went through life trapped in their homeland language; it was a historic joke that the eastern end of the county originally had been populated entirely by Norwegian herders who knew but two words of English: Martin Granic, the name of their employer. Fairly or not, the numbers of Romanians who arrived as herders had a particular reputation for shunning any language but their own. Their chosen pair of words was simply no savvy. There is the exasperated report of an early forest ranger who came upon a Romanian herder placidly spreading his sheep across an allotment of cattle range: All I could get out of him was 'No savvy' until I applied a shot-loaded quirt...it was surprising how quickly the incident got to all the Romanians in that district. McGrath had neither Norwegians nor Romanians on his slopes just then, but he did have the baffling Finnigan.

While McGrath blared and chortled at him, Finnigan could only shake his head slowly as an ox and clack some Nordic mystery back at him. Karl the Swede was another uncertain talker, his shy throaty sentences so low they seemed to come out of his shirt collar instead of his mouth.
Milk River, and always, to the west, the noon-loosed tint is doing its magic.

As a boy, I prized the trick—having unearthed it in one book or another—of estimating the remainder of daylight by stacking my hands, held carefully vertical as tiny walls and at reading-distance from my eyes, between the line of horizon and the sun: each finger equaling ten minutes of daylight, a hand and two fingers signaling a full hour yet before sunset. Taking such sightings of time, I watched the backdrop of earth make its changes. Mountains always grew in dignity as the sun approached them, drew up their profiles more boldly, loftier than an instant before. The nap of sage or the chamois expenses of bunchgrass doubled in distinctness of tone.

And the hills, for there were always hills, offered above the prairie as if they were the earth's roofbeams and parapets, and always to the west of where we lived along the inclining mid-section of Montana: once noon had begun its drop of day across them, the hills ran their sheltering lines ever longer and bolder and nearer.

It comes to me—a childhood fascination mislaid in memory—that my father was colorblind. I prodded him on that when I was a boy, trying to find out if he saw everything in gray—I imagined a perpetual black-and-white movie flashing before his eyes—or in tan or the yellow of old newspapers or exactly what. Not having the standards of hue, of course he could not tell me what colorations did enter his eyes: Skavinsky, we'd have to get in here and have a look for yourself to savvy it. I am left to wonder, now that is beyond determining, whether he saw the day's shadings west of noon in any way as I did.
however slowly, and if it could be pried out at all, there generally would be news to be heard from the shepherd:

a herder — a coyote seen on a hillside, a ewe gone lame or ripped by a snag, a porcupine treed by his dogs as they suicidally tried to get their faces full of quills. Dad, if it was his turn at camp tending, would smoke and chat until the herder began talking, then only nod and ask enough to keep the flow coming. McGrath's style was to blurt at the man until he set off on some startled telling or another, the two of them building toward full exasperation. Then abruptly, an instant before the

on the grass ocean. It was built for one man to ride through

a sheepwagon always exerted alone, remote as a drifting dolly of white-topped wagons westering through our history. But

wheels, a first glance easily found it back and the beadlike
NORTH

As the Irish fellow says, this place must be the back of the neck of the world. For once, my father's damnation of a ranch was underdone: he could have peppered in a few dozen of the Irish fellow's forlornest cusswords in justice to this one.

We had come the hours of distance from the Smith River Valley and now were driving onto the ranch during the night, and as Dad puzzled through the darkness along fainter and fainter scrubs of prairie road, our three styles of apprehension began to shroud in on us. Before we were halfway, Grandma demanded: Gee gollies, aren't we never gonna get there? Dad notched his chin ahead another full inch and choked the steering wheel as if it had betrayed him. I tried to stare shapes out of the blackness, but could find only an occasional jack-rabbit racing in the net-edge of our headlights. At last, Dad gave a start, began to brake the car down a sudden careen of slope, and the headlights fingered onto a squat white building. By gee, at last. That was Grandma; not a word out of Dad. Where is the place, down in a hole like this? More silence from him. As we stumbled from the car toward the house of the Jensen ranch, the white walls too seemed to hold back from us in the dark, ghostly and telling nothing of themselves.

Daylight did all the telling we wanted. Testing doors, we found ourselves locked off from all but the back three
For years, North Beach Telephone Hill are able to use and en-

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 Francisco's North Beach-Telsonulr Hill are able to use en-

he total U.S. population in 1999,
rooms of the house—a small bedroom for Grandma, one hardly larger for Dad and me, and a high-ceilinged cavern of a kitchen. McGrath's doings, I'll warrant you, Grandma announced rightly: in haggling for the lease, he had euchred himself a bargaining point of some sort with the ranch-owning family by allowing them to store their belongings in the front portion of the house. From a keyhole I reported up to Dad and Grandma that furniture and boxes were piled head high in a broad, bewindowed living room, with other rooms opening off as well. Plainly, the divvy of the house had dealt the larger half here to dust and silence.

In alarm, we studied the ungainly little set of rooms left to us, and the single narrow envelope of view out the kitchen windows—to a dilapidating bunkhouse, the outhouse, and a bit of brown treeless ramp of slope sheering up to the benchland. Even Grandma couldn't come up with words for the situation, although the line of her jaw said she was working on it.

She and I went out to peer in the windows of the denied rooms, as if we needed to confirm McGrath's treachery. I glanced around toward the silver-boarded sheepshed which squatted hugely across the yard from us. At least, I tried in what I thought was entirely grown-up sarcasm, old McGrath got us a scad of room for the sheep. But Grandma's attention had hit on the bleak bench of land rimming above us to the south, where the road curled in. She turned, and the same bench rimmed over us in the west. Another turn, and an identical flat lid of horizon to the north. She rotated to the last chance, the east, and was met with rimming benchland again, like the fourth lip of a vast square pit.
in the valley for several decades, and the valley people talked casually about the Ringling family, as if they were neighbors who had happened to come into a bit more flash and fortune than anyone else.

But one name was beginning to be spoken most often in the valley: Rankin. Wellington D. Rankin was a lawyer in Helena, a courtroom wonder with flowing silver hair and an Old Testament voice. When he began buying ranch after ranch in the hills hemming the Big Belts, a flinty new style came into the valley.

Rankin bought cattle by the thousands—his herd eventually was said to be ten thousand head—and then skimped on every possible expense. His cowboys were shabby stick figures on horseback. The perpetual rumor was that most of them were out on parole or work release arranged by Rankin. The Rankin cattle were more forlorn even than the cowboys, skinny creatures with the big Double O Bar brand across their ribs like craters where all the heft had seeped from them. Rankin's wolfish cows roamed everywhere; another of the rumors about the man was that he was responsible for Montana's lack of a law to require fencing along the highways. However it had come to be, the legislative gap threw the valley wide open to Rankin's herds, and they grazed along the highway and regularly were hit by cars cresting a dip in the road at night.

As these big ranches took more and more of the county,