the morning saunter of the campus pleased us all, brought us proudly together in the accomplishment of having laddered me to such a place. We went next to our hotel in downtown Chicago, and in the snapping cold of the sunlit afternoon, a moment when I thought the city looked its ponderous best, I suggested we walk around the nearby blocks which offered the surrounding exotic bulk of the store windows of Michigan Avenue, the Art Institute, the skyline above the street-canyons.

Grandma eyed everything with her mixture of suspicion and sharp interest, asking me explanations to why the sidewalks were so wide and the people so fast-paced. But Dad: I remember looking across at him in surprise, as if finding a stranger with us, when he suddenly said he had had enough, he felt short of breath. On the way back to the hotel he had to stand and breathe deep time after time, the three of us a knot of concern in the grain of sidewalk traffic. Once he said, worry thick in his voice: How long is this damned block? But inside the warmth of the hotel, as I was set to call for a doctor, Dad’s chest eased at once, he became himself and made a joke about Chicago being too cold for a sane man to walk around in anyway. And like him, not knowing what more to find in it—often enough through his life he had felt mild damp-weather discomforts in his lungs from the breakage of those horseback accidents and from his decades of heavy smoking—I wrote off the moment to the stabbing chill of the winter lakesfront.
horse the sawbuck packsaddle I insisted on riding, a rigging
of crosspieces shaped like a small sawhorse and just as rasp-hard
to sit in for half a day at a time. Whatever my five-year-old
reasons, I wanted no stirrups or snug curves of leather, but
I would straddle that packsaddle as if born into it.

Except for this one borrowed dab of memory, I can see myself
that summer only in specks of color and mood. Hair a dark rusty
red, and the freckly pale skin to go with it. Lake-blue eyes
which drank up printed words; days ahead I would begin to think
of the comic books which would come in a tight-rolled bundle with
the mail the camptender brought up the mountain. A dreamy mind
Then late in the next spring, weeks before I was to step into
the editing job at The Rotarian, a bulletin from Grandma:

Dearest Ivan. Well dear one I have to write you that
Dad isn't none too good. He is in the hospital in Gt. Falls
they told him he has to quit smoking or else. I am here
with him but he's so awful weak and coughing so...

Phone calls told me that he was not in danger at the
moment. The hospitalization indeed was to begin easing him
away from cigarettes and out of the coughing spells that were
becoming chronic. When I hurried to Montana between the
end of my old job and the beginning of the new, he told me
the rest himself. Once out of the hospital and at home in
Ringling, he had laid one fresh pack of cigarettes on the
end table beside his easy chair. When he could no longer
stand it, he smoked a cigarette. Some days only one, other
days two, but never more than three. When the pack had
emptied itself, he took that as the moment when he had
finished with cigarettes for all time.

Hardest damn thing I ever did, ye know that? But I did 'er.

Dad's nerves jumped worse than ever which was saying
much, and he looked like a thinner replica of himself, but
his appetite was gaining and he felt he soon could be doing
some part-time work. Well, don't rush things, I said,
uneasy with myself for feeling there was more that ought
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

delivering off

and I still can’t explain to you as to why my mind kept on drifting me back to the paper target which my father backed to the gate of our farm and there it still stands. I closed up until the sharp sound of hubbub more than once made only initial sound from the paper. I let it be the constant, and
to be said. Yet the doctors were finding nothing alarming, Dad seemed merely—if that word was right for any trouble beneath the breastbone—a man who had got in the habit of oversmoking and needed to be weaned from its eventual dangers.

This quick braid of times together, then, before it came clear that my father was in serious illness. I finger apart their pattern here because these are the moment-strands each of us will think of afterward and wonder, Did I miss there some hint, some flicker of doubt or pain or incredulity, which told what was to come? And the greater wondering beyond that: If not, how can that skein of no harm and the skein which followed it be portions of the same life?

For now calamity began to make itself known as rapidly as a man who lived on his feet, if it had been invented entirely for Dad. He was finding himself shorter and shorter of breath after each briefest stint of walking.

At first the doctors he saw suggested that he might have a kind of asthma. There was all the grief on earth in that verdict, with its echoes of my mother's agony. Yet he showed none of the wheezing attacks which so devastated her—his lung difficulty nagged less violently but more steadily—and the diagnosis shifted. It was sometime late in 1966, the year Carol and I had arced our lives to the Pacific Northwest, that a word neither he nor I had heard before was uttered to my father: emphysema.
and 40 head of horses. Livestock prices were firm, Annie Doig inherited a few thousand dollars from a relative in Scotland, the world war had not clawed into her family. Luck could hardly wait to follow on luck. Then, weeks ahead of the calendar, winter set in.

It became the winter which the Basin people afterward

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.
In my mechanical way, I read all I could find about the affliction, and each word more brought its own gloom. Emphysema, it seemed, could become a torture of the body beyond even my mother's suffering or the holocaust of cancer itself. As the honeycomb of air sacs in the lungs was destroyed by it, breathing would become forever more labored, a constant struggle against a sensation of suffocating. The act of breath would deliver less and less oxygen to the bloodstream, overload the heart into harsher and harsher pumping. Until the recent past, emphysema usually had been confused with asthma or bronchitis, and it had the worst of those ailments—an increasing wheeze, congestion—as well as its own cycle of deterioration in the deeps of heart and lung.

Somehow through the null medical words—generalized overdistension, difficulty of exhalation, excess mucus—I came to picture the disaster happening in my father's lungs as a pattern like the splotched burning of a sagebrush fire. Perhaps it was the years of blue haze drifting up from his cigarettes that made me think so of smolder and slow flame-lick; for whatever reason, the image came to me of the black turf such a fire spreads in its slow searing fan across the land, and the thought too that there would be no grass-bright greening in this fire's wake as time passed. Only char and more char.
The ranch buildings stood out from behind the line of cottonwoods on the west bank of Camas Creek, just at the base
And the role those words and that image spoke for me:

For the dozen years since I had faced away from a storm-blasted band of sheep on the Blackfoot Reservation, this father of mine and this grandmother of mine unvoicingly had shown me that they assumed I knew what I was doing in life—which was a tremendous assumption. Then, by the books and schooling I piled up, I was granted to be the authority on the world outside Montana. If I happened to be on the scene when Grandma was writing one of her letters to her son in Australia, she still would ask me, as she had when I was eleven, how to spell some Down Under mystery such as kangaroo; if I had told her q-y-n-g-u-r-r-u, she would have thought it odd of the Aussies but certified correct because I had said it. When I wrote an article about rodeo and put in a few lines about Dad's own bronco-stomping days, he passed the marvel around to friends until the magazine wore out: That kid of mine can write, if I do say so myself, unarguably saying so. Beyond that, there was my becalmed temperament, amid the pair of theirs which swayed and whirled. It all said that now I must truly become the authority in the family, this time on a matter beyond all of us. Here was the turn of time, sooner by a decade than I ever could have imagined, when I must become father to my own father, and I feared the matter, and wrestled it, and began to do it.

I sent along to Montana the lewkelest words I could draw from what the medical journals and texts said of emphysema, and the two conclusions which I said demainld doing:

winnow until we had the most expert diagnosis and advice we could find about this mystery licking its way inside Dad, and move him from the blizzardy isolation of Ringling nearer
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, 

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
to medical care. The second of these, Dad took on as if snapped from a trance. Almost overnight he found and bought a small frame house in White Sulphur. Ungrand as it was, and carrying a sheaf of deeds which showed that it had been a quick way-station for a procession of souls who couldn't afford better at the moment, the house improved on the Ringling shanty in size and warmth and all else. Grandma was uneasy about the move: Don't we get by good gosh, at our age, buyin' another house and all... enough as we are? I was the one to woo her from that. Carol said once: If you told her you were going to run an opium den, she would come around onto the side of opium dens. 

As promptly as I had her persuaded out of Ringling, she flung into tidying and flower-bedding the new site; a month after they moved in, it looked as if the pair of them had lived there forever from time out of mind.

Yet one of them was not going to live any time at all unless care for emphysema could be found, and the next piece of persuasion was to keep Dad from throwing himself under surgical knives. The operation he had heard of was claimed to lift the sensation of heavy breathing; already the pushing effort needed to make his lungs work was dismaying him. I'm not sure I've got anything to lose by trying that out, Ivan. By phone and letter, I found doctor after guardedly, carefully, doctor against the surgery. In my mechanical way, I brought Dad around from the idea of the operation and to agreeing
that he would come to Seattle to be examined at a clinic as quickly as I could arrange it. In his mind, I believe, glinted the hope that he could somehow be rescued into wholeness again as he had been on the operating table at the Mayo Clinic sixteen years before. In mind was simply the vague medical prayer that the emphysema could be slowed, eased; I wanted him not to be savaged into the worst of what emphysema could inflict.

He was scheduled for several days of tests at the clinic. The first morning, I noticed Grandma putting on her best shoes and said, without thinking: I can stay with him down there, it'll be a long day. The iron tone I had heard so many times: I might just as well be there as setting around here like a bump on a log.

Each day and all day, the pair of us lobby-sat. I thumbed magazines, and tried without showing it to watch her beside me. She kept her eyes on the waiting patients, studying the ones who could hardly puff their way across the room to the reception desk, who sat hunched with their chests swelling in and out for each windy breath, who toddled into the waiting elevator with a nurse balancing them at an elbow. When Dad appeared, there was the relief, a quick lifting in the both of us, of seeing that he was so much sturdier than the others, his ranchman's stride almost too bold among the gaspy shuffles. And again we would set off
with him, up or down the identical floors of the clinic to the next probing test. Often he would come back to the reception area in surprise: That wasn't so bad, they just had me lay down under some machine. Coulda had a nap except it was so damn cold. But other times, he arrived pale and grim. They gave me one of those damn barium deals, and I heaved it right back up. Grandma would give her resentful Hmpf! against the clinic's dosing such torment into anyone, and I would try to talk him calm, keep him seated with us until the whiteness went from that handsome uneasy face. Then the three of us would move through the clinic once more, like a search party off to the next lair of apparatus for Dad to patrol into for us.

Eventually the tests were finished and adjudged. Dad and I waited in the doctor's office; this day Grandma had not wanted to come, had said I should be alone with him. The slim room was as neutral and toneless as if we were the first visitors ever to have been sent into it, like newcomers into a vacuum chamber. But outside the one thin window and below the clinic's roothold on its hill, the towers of the city marched to the dockside, and then the blue of Puget Sound pooled, rimming far off at a shore of timber and glacier-whetted peaks. My father, my one closest pulse back into time, sat looking at the towers and the blue and the stabbing mountains. Finally he said, in the worrying burr
I had heard fret over vanished sheep and surprise blizzards and much else: I'm just afraid of what he's gonna say, Ivan.

But the doctor spoke some surprise, more texture of his words hope in them at least than I had been able to allow myself.

Of course——

Yes, the harshest first——the diagnosis was confirmed as emphysema. Yes, Dad's life would be more labored. Several times a day he would have to breathe deep into his lungs a medicine misted out of a machine. He would have to walk only in short stints, learn to pace himself. The doctor paused, went on: if possible, Dad should move to a lower altitude—sea-level would be best, and as dry as possible. Dad: No, it isn't possible. I'm too far along in life for that. The doctor nodded as if he had known what that answer would be, went on with his medical judgments.

Dad's heart as yet showed little damage, not yet the expected overwork caused by emphysematous lungs; it pounded in him as strongly as that of a man half his age. His lung capacity still was considerable. His general health was remarkable for a person who had gone through his batterings.

Grandma demanded the news as quickly as we arrived home. I watched Dad to see how he would deliver it, how drastically the prospect of a hobbled life was going to veer him. He gave his cocked grin. This doctor now, I don't know about him. If I was in as good a shape as he says I am, I wouldn't be sick atall.

But when the two of them returned to Montana, his lungs soon enough gave trouble. He did learn to struggle with the emphysema, walk a line between too much activity and incapacity.

But emphysema brought an ally, bronchial infection which hit Dad again and again in the chill of the valley's autumn and
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, eying the 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 gypsies, 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...
winter. Now there were hospital stays time upon time the 45-mile trip out of the valley and across the Big Belts to the hospital in Townsend.

A pattern began, like codes spoken by a people in war. Dad would suffer a new infection in his lungs. By telephone I would try to gauge how severe it was. If Grandma guardedly said, He's just none too good, in all likelihood he was ill enough to be hospitalized again. I would say You'd better let me talk to him, now hating the long moments it took for him to creep to the phone. Hullo, son, how are you? How am I. Leave that unanswerable, begin my questions, calming, gentle. God, Ivan, I don't know what I better do. Now persuade him around to going to the hospital, tell him I will get free for a week to help out when he comes home. At last. All right, son, whatever you say. Whatever I say. I could say all in the world except the magic we needed: that if he did this certain thing, his lungs would heal, he would not gasp for every atom of air. He would not die this most grudging of deaths.

Yet it was not a time of steady gloom. I think that is the true grief of it—that the four of us could glimpse the richness of life available if the haunting gape in Dad's lungs did not return again and again. The one pastime without exertion left to Dad was trout fishing, and the valley, in its style of either withholding ruthlessly or proffering something
something magic, provided him with a friend who would wet lines with him from daybreak to midnight if he wanted. A railroad worker retired from tending the tracks which coiled between Ringling and Sixteen, Leo was a thick slab of a man whom it was uproarious to think of in the nickname of that job, a gandy dancer. Something—rumor said it had been a gassing on a World War One battlefield, although I counted years and couldn't find him old enough—had erased every hair on his head, including eyebrows. Out of that blank ball of head came a high crackling voice and an Oklahoma accent; when he and Dad were out on a creek or lake, the vicinity jangled with Leo's sentences, as if broadcasts were shrilling in from some rim of space. For his part, Dad accepted with wryness his reliance on Leo—I'm wind-broke as an old nag, but that is Oklahoma gets me to wherever there's a fish, don't think he doesn't. Once Carol and I went with them pair of them to a favored lake, and as we hiked the hilltops circling their fishing water, Leo's voice racketed along with us as if he were at our elbows instead of half a mile below, Dad's murmurm came in like a far purl of water. I hold that exact scene like a photo, Dad and his bear of a friend in the yellow rubber raft at the lake's center, a cone of color in the dusky retina of water, while Carol and I listen to the steady crackle of talk and grin down over the tassell-tops of sage.
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 gears, for me to climb into, all through, on 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 cow colonists and essential labor force would slide out bed, the side sold to
In that first year or two of affliction, there were times even apart from his fishing outings with Leo when Dad could find periods of almost-unforced breathing. Seated in his big living-room chair in the White Sulphur house, his flat back and level shoulders square against the fabric, he could recline and talk with only a hinting rise-and-fall of his chest, as if he had just rapidly walked a block or so. I'll tell ye a time, he might begin then if the nudge of encouragement came from me, or more likely from Carol's presence, for he found this new daughter-in-law a dazzling bonus to the family: I was ridin' out here for the Dogie, and I happened to look up into a little park there in the Castles and saw a bunch of elk going across. I counted five of them. As the Dutch fellow says, as many as the thumbs on the end of mine hand. So I thought, well, this ridin' can go to hell for a little while, I'll just see about those elk... Dad no longer could work at all, except to do the smallest repairs around the house, but the loss of that fifty-year habit of effort dismayed him less than I had thought it would. He spent time reading, watching Grandma as she fussed at flowerbeds until she had a moat of color around almost all the house, somehow made himself fit so mild a routine of life. But in other ways, surprising disquiets might break from him now. Never a very political man and hardly a sympathizer with the strange long-haired counterculture which had begun to prance before him on the living-room television set, Dad was furious and bitter to see the clubbings at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago: Godamighty, I thought this was a country where the police weren't supposed to beat up on people. The
At school, she would appear in dark plain dresses so alike that it could hardly be traced when she changed one for another; bunned her hair into a great black burl at the back of her neck; clipped it rapidly in severe shoes. She was buxom, like Grandma with a half more plumped on all around; her mounting in front and behind was very nearly more than the lackadaisical dresses wanted to contain. Leaning forward from the waist as she hurried about, she flew among us like a schooner's figurehead prowling over a lazy sea. I would find that as she did the swash and gurl from this and that were going to spin me as nothing else ever had.

The mind of Mrs. Tideman was somewhat like that jostling garden of hers—sprigged here with the Greek mythology she knew so well that she recited it to her children instead of fairy tales, sprouting somewhere blood-red else with bouquets from Shakespeare, twining now into the tale of having seen the cowboy artist Charlie Russell when she attended the university in Missoula; In the midst of a sorority tea someone deposited him with you understand, us—dozens of fluffy girls, and he had been drinking for the ordeal—and then the utmost indignity, they took his hat from him and he had nothing to do with his hands, and sat helpless, imprisoned... The foliage of her learning ran everywhere through the school; she taught all the English courses, first- and second-year Latin, occasionally a course in Spanish, directed the plays, oversaw the yearbook and newspaper, and oversaw the library. It could not be imagined where she might be except in the midst of all this. She had taken leave for enough years to have four sons, and afterward decided the absence had been a mistake. Chinese Russian peasant women did it properly, she reasoned, giving birth to their babies in the fields and going right on with their toil.
war in Vietnam worked confusions on him: he wanted not to see his country lose a war, and yet What the hell is it we want over there anyway? It was as if with sickness fastened into his own chest, he saw any sickness of the nation all the more sharply.

Time was carving fast at the one in that Montana household, and hardly at all on the other. In her oaken way, Grandma went on now as if age didn't apply to her. At the start of the summer of Grandma's 1968, when Carol and I had come to White Sulphur for her 75th birthday, Dad declared: If I ever reach 75, she'll still be up and pushing me around in a wheelchair. Even now, she was bolstering his life in dozens of ways, tending, nursing, scolding, puzzled by whatever had taloned into Dad's lungs but automatically ready to do all that his situation demanded. And almost as if she had the impulse to push back against the grayness settling over Dad's life, she now began to turn out vivid quilting. Through her years of crocheting, Dad and I had loyal made encouraging and admiring noises, and I often marveled that she could follow the tiniest intricacies of pattern. But I had never truly cared for the frilly doilies and intricate tablecloths that flew from her needle, regarding them as something like her everlasting games of solitaire, played in thread. But the quilting flamed away any notions of that sort. What Grandma turned out now, in the living-room as Dad watched from his haven of chair, danced with brilliant colors--snipped-and-sewn diamonds of ragwork marching and playing and jostling like a meld of rainbows, or some respondent field of tiny flags from all the universe. To come out of our ungainly family, this was an absolute eruption of bright art, and I blinked in wonder at
earliest watching from this astral woman.
That it turned out, was to see whether I was a thief.

A few times a year, a school-wide set of vocabulary tests was given, every student then ranked against national statistics. The test days fell just after I enrolled at Valley. When the first of the tests was scored, no one among the seniors, juniors or sophomores achieved above an 50. One of my classmates soared to a 60, far the national percentiles. My paper came out to +75. Before I had time to get the grin off my face, Mrs. Tidyman had asked me into the library, locked the door, and with as much tact as she could muster—somewhere close to none—wondered abruptly how I accounted for my painless ease with her English assignments, and, more particularly, whether I had come across the answer sheet before the national test. Whatever denial I stammered to her, she had a better one in the making. All right. There are three more tests in the next three days, and I have the answer sheets secure. We'll just see how you score on them. Three times more I gapped everyone else in the school and overshot all percentiles. Again she hauled me to

the library, clicked the lock, eyed me mercilessly. You know, you really ought to take my Latin class next year. It will be an advantage for you in the use of English. And you should write for the school paper, there's good practice. And I want to know what you read. I have a houseful of books if you can't find enough here....
this gray-haired woman I thought I knew so entirely. For her part,
Grandma simply produced each quilt, demanded **now then, isn't that**
pretty? and gave it to Carol and me or someone in her sons' families.
When we all had quilts galore, she began selling them, and there are
valley households now with six or eight blazing in their rooms.

And across seven hundred miles, in Seattle Carol and I settled
to our own changed life. Carol rapidly had maneuvered from one job
to the next, and always up; within a year after our arrival, she had
a professorship, teaching journalism at a community college. I was
making my expedition through three solid years of reading and seminar
work to the professorship of my own—one step at a time, a step to the next, the
only way I have ever known to get a thing done. Along with that
trudged the decisions needed for Dad. The dying of a parent is a
time without answers, only anguished guesses, and I wished that I
were an older, and wiser guesser, able to come onto some angle of
insight which would declare: Here, this is to be done. I wished
a thousand useless longings, and amid them made whatever small
tactics I could reason out. The main guidance I set in myself was that
Dad should not be written off, nor allowed to write himself off, as
an invalid. It may even be that in following this notion during his
first few years of the emphysema, not enough allowances were
made for his illness. But he was surrounded in the family
by three of the world's dogged souls, and he himself had
outlasted through past health woes. Deeper than that lay
the notion, also endlessly mulled, that it would be preferable
for him to pace out an active but shorter life rather than an inert
lingering. We could not talk about this in so many words—a failing in
our family perhaps, yet none of us ever had seen much reason to say
aloud what made itself plainly known—but my father had said as much
with his life.
I gulped the relief of being out from under Mrs. Tidyman's suspicion, and sat back to see what the gale of her approval would bring. In the classroom, each hour with her began like a conjuring, or a parody of one. She would seat herself on a high stool behind a thin-legged lectern; from Montana was killed. Then that no one from this country. Then that no one at all would have been killed—oh, people, the casual lightning on it which come down on us... In Latin class, she could not have us read in Caesar's Commentaries without declaiming on Caesar the man; could not declaim on Caesar without sketching Roman society.
Occasionally my estimates of how much he could be encouraged to do would overrun his capacities. During one of their visits to Seattle, Dad and Grandma were taken by us across Puget Sound on a fine afternoon to a play given in an outdoor theater. I had known that the theater seats were spaced down a hillside; what I did not know was that there was a descent of several hundred yards before the topmost of the seating. Grandma was alarmed, and nervous during the play. I had said, We'll get him out of here somehow, don't worry about it. Although Dad had continually said he was sure he could make the slope by taking it slow, he must have been edgy about it. Starting up, he at once went breathless. Carol and I looked at one another: he was going to have to be carried out. I went to the stage, borrowed a straight-backed chair from the set. Seating him in it, Carol and I lifted the chair between us and started up the trail. It made an awkward and severe load, which we denied over and over, and in our gritting paired exertion we took him out of there like a potentate. At the top, he could walk perfectly well on level ground. In double relief, I panted: Told you we'd get you out somehow. And the episode did prove that, if shakily.

And one thing more was proved: that when it was needed, we could draw together the strongest of family thaws. The main decision, as so many others by then, was mine, and I did it reluctantly, believing so entirely in the independence of lives. But there was the greater belief that my father must
one store, three gas stations, three saloons,

hundred feet of sidewalk, a few dozen houses, a couple of barns,

several overtopping groves of cottonwoods, long winters, pushing winds,

a hundred people, and a highway trenching it into halves.
be helped in whatever possible to live, and so in the autumn of 1968
I arranged that Dad and Grandma would come to Seattle to stay with
Carol and me until the following spring.

Neither of them wanted the move. It would uproot them from everything familiar. Yet they saw that it was
as I said: Dad could not undergo another winter of chest
infection. The Coastal climate was the only safety against
that. Reluctantly but on my word, they came.

When they had unpacked, I suddenly asked: What did you
do with Spot? Leave him with somebody? Grandma answered
No. There was nobody right to take care of him and we
knew we couldn't bring him with, so I...we had him done
away with. The day before they left, she had asked Dad,
Spot's lifetime foe and idol, to take the dog to the
veterinarian. I'd rather have gone through a beating, my
father said now in my living room, but he had done the task,
petted the bold head as the needle's sleep crept through the
dog, buried him carefully on a ridge above the valley. I
turned and walked to the bathroom, locked the door, turned a
faucet full on, and wept. For a jaunty white-and-brown dog, for my
beset family which could not be spared even this loss—for being able
to meet grief only in my own company this way.

I think now that Dad and Grandma settled into our expanded
household with less tension than I did. Not that there wasn't much
for them to wonder at in this strange new locale. Day and night, ambulances
would howl along a street below us on their way to the hospital
which treated burn cases. Carol
Mrs. Tidyman was one education mil new to hand. Another introduced itself at the Jensen ranch on a weekend soon after we had moved in. Two plump men presented themselves at the door and asked pleas, to see the gentleman of the ranch. Both were bearded, both wore black outer clothing over a brilliant red shirts, and both stared as blinklessly as a pair of holidaying parsons who had come upon naked natives. Grandma shoed them off toward the sheepshed rammed the door shut and
to find Dad, snicked a table knife into the door jamb. When Dad came in for coffee, the pair clomped at his heels. These fellows are Hoots, he grinned. They're our neighbors.
and I had stopped hearing the banshee sound of them after our first few weeks in the house. Grandma heard every one, hmpfing each time to think of yet another disaster in this severe city-world. Nor did she ever accustom herself to the telephone's blat from the kitchen; each time it jangled, she started in surprise, which in turn twitched Dad's nerves. From him: What are ye jumping about? From her: Gee gosh, I can't help it, and what're you jumping about yourself? The telephone skirmish was daily, but betweentimes the spir of them passed the house more smoothly than could have been foreseen. Much of the morning they sat at the table, Grandma playing her offhand solitaire, Dad pointing wordlessly whenever she overlooked a card to play, the both of them glancing every few moments out of the window to the city and its tributaries of traffic. A crew came to work on the railroad tracks nearby, and Dad studied them by the hour. He noticed that the heftiest of the workers arrived and went with great irregularity, and began a game of fore-manning him from the living-room. I would arrive home from the university for lunch and he told: My man was ten minutes late again this morning. I'm gonna have to jack him up about this bein' late all the time and all the time. The next noon, He's gettin' better, my man is. Only about five minutes late this morning. I'll get a full day of work out of him yet one of these times.
Dad

He had a grimmer game for himself each late afternoon. The doctor had ordered him to walk as far as he could every day. At first, he would come back from fifty yards down the street, desperate, out of breath: Godamighty, I can't walk any more than a baby. But the next day, he would try again. Grandma never went with him on these efforts, did not offer to go, was not invited. They both accepted that he was going to have to battle for breath by himself.

At last, an afternoon when I was on my way home from the university library and met him several blocks from the house and at the base of the slope which skirted away below our neighborhood. As I came up to him, he was panting but able to say: I told myself I'd work up to walking this far, and I've done 'er. I tried to find my words for acclaim: Hell, then you're just a lot stronger than you were. The doc will be tickled with you. But he shook his head, as if he could not afford to admit triumph. I know I can't do much. This is a helluva way to have to live, creeping along weak as a kitten. I had no words at all for that, and we started for home, silently paired in his trudge.

To describe that half-year of the four of us under a single roof does not go far toward an understanding of it. I am unsure there is an understanding, only reactions, reflexes. The time flowed well enough, yet none of us picked her way through the wanted to repeat it, nor did we. Carol perhaps minded the
situation the least of us all, turning the snappishness between Dad and Grandma with amusement, granting Grandma the share of chores she sought, even confounding one of Grandma's stone-cut sayings: No kitchen is big enough for two women at once. More than any of the rest of us, perhaps, Carol simply remained herself. Grandma, I think, felt entirely unrooted. She missed family and friends, missed the gossip and life-pattern of the valley, missed a house of her own, missed everything there was to miss of sixty years spent in Montana. Dad seemed tugged between his past and the life I was trying to make for myself. He met our citified friends more easily, followed my university work more interestingly. Yet he did not manage to feel at home either, uneasy with the torrents of people he saw rivering along streets and sidewalks, the lockstep of houses thousand upon thousand, any of the dimensions of the city.

For my part, I felt again the crowdedness I had tried to pull myself away from—from a too-small prairie sheepwagon, from the half-house in Ringling, from so many unprivate places, so much of those Montana years. Relationships between me and both Dad and Grandma were richer and fuller than I had expected—they always were—yet I still fiercely wanted what I so long had wanted, a space all my own in life.

With spring came the declaration from Dad and Grandma that they were ready to return to Montana. I agreed. The winter had worked out to plan: Dad had escaped all chest infection, he was much stronger than when he had come, he seemed better able to cope with the emphysema. I made the trip to Montana with them, doing all the driving to keep Dad's nerves untormented.
Beyond the second ridgeline to the south of us, we discovered, there was a ranch colony of a hundred such Hutterites, a shy tranced people who gabbled among themselves in a German dialect and lived barracks-style according to their signals from God. Heaven told them what we had never heard of, such as that when one of their men married he had to grow whiskers along his jawline to make a face-circle which represented a wedding ring, or that their women were proper only when swathed in long skirts, aprons and kerchiefs, like walking mounds of fresh laundry. When we visited the colony to buy eggs or vegetables—
In a matter of weeks, his propped-up health fell apart. The chest infection hit, there was hospitalization. But worse, day-by-day signs of failure began to show. He began now to fall deep asleep any time of the day, for alarming lengths of time, then be unable to close his eyes at night. Grandma saw this in astonishment, then fury: No wonder you can't sleep at night, sleeping all day long too. Gee gods. Get up and around and you'd get over that sleepyheadedness. His usual answer was to sit forward some minutes with his head in his hands, despairing, then to fall back again as if exhausted. I checked with his doctor at the clinic, and was provided the unbrambled version of Grandma's viewpoint: Dad was in carbon dioxide narcosis, caused by his lungs' failure to rid themselves of their after-breath wastes. The carbon dioxide residue worked like a slowing drug in his bloodstream. The remedy was for him to get up, walk, ride an exercise bicycle, anything to get the deadening build-up pumped from him—exertion demanded exactly when he felt least able to make any.

This period of narcosis, with an asleep hour upon hour and his skin color with a dangerous hint of bluing in it, like some dark seepage beneath ice, was the most terrifying yet. It seemed very much like death practicing fast on him. We were in a time of erosion—of the deadly gullying in my father's lungs, of my grandmother's failing chance to
set of rooms with gleaming floors and stern furniture, the small children waddled about like fat dolls in museum costumes, but the young men were hived off by themselves, four to a room, from their early teens until they married. The young women, rose-cheeked mysteries inside their hoods and curtains of ginghamware, stayed within the family until that marrying could happen.

All the colony ate in a single great dining hall, the men and boys first and the women and children after they had reached their superiors' strade.
bolster his life, of my ability to find medical help which would make much difference now. My father day upon day lay back in his big chair in the living-room in White Sulphur and gilled in air, as if out of breath from the long stopless run through life. But that it was not stopless, each of us knew we could read that in the bulk of the oxygen tanks which came oftener and oftener to his bedside now.

I can chart my father's last years by the medical apparatus that attached itself to his life. The first, the machine that blew a fog of medication into his lungs, sat at his bedside with some innocence. Gray and not much larger than a typewriter, the device awaited him several times a day, took in his puffs of exertion and traded out its mysterious mist, sent him away breathing less hard. But next to come were the oxygen tanks, and their quickening march to his bedside were the tempo of doom for him. He began sparingly, a minute or so of relief at a time into his lungs a few times a day. But across the months, the oxygen imbibing became oftener, longer. Grandma was at her most baffled and furious with this terrifying new addiction: Charlie, the more of that you use, the more you just want to use! He gave her a weary fury back: I can't help using it, I've-got-to-breathe. And in the next minute she would have gone to the kitchen to bring him a cup of coffee and he would have thanked her softly, and the two-sided helplessness would have passed for the moment. The one winner was the oxygen, which the next day would tether him a few moments longer.
And Tom: Tommy Chad, as the townspeople sometimes lilted about this boy-man. His mother's thick-set look had rebuilt itself on Tom: and slender shoulders and solid beams of arms, his neck a collar of heft, blocky power everywhere you looked on him. But you looked first at his engaging eyes, bright under their dark thatches of brow as mountain ponds beneath a ridge of velvet and his wide, wide mouth that knew the advantages of pause. And people, when everyone else was between house and pantry, would sit and listen to his stories. And when everyone else was between house and pantry, and when you have no more fare, I have none more, and no more fare, then you may have none more. And when you have no more fare, I have none more, then you may have none more. The one and only, the holy, the holy, the holy, the holy.
At last came the time when he slumped in the chair with the oxygen tether forever in his nose, slept with it. All had been reversed: from the outset when he was bolstered by a few minutes of oxygen each day, now there were only a handful of moments when he could bear to be without it. Everything now had thinned to the whiffs holding him in life, like a breeze scudding a dried leaf above the ground. He was everlastingly weak now, could scarcely have put breath on a mirror without the pure oxygen from the metal bottle. No longer could he make the recuperative trip to Seattle; the doctor said there was medical risk, and Dad felt the greater risk in himself, could not bring himself to such a move.

On one of my Montana trips, back again in the house in White Sulphur after the bleak task of having delivered Dad into another hospital stay, Grandma said out of the blue: Dad asked me never to let you put him in a rest home.

I said nothing for a long minute, which of course said that I had thought of it. What reply I eventually made to her I no longer know, but it was not definite enough for either of us. That was the problem—to be definite in the unclearest of moments. Here was fact: my father was hopelessly afflicted, every breath a fresh agony. Here was proposition: warehouse him as the less-than-alive presence proposition: warehouse him as the living corpse he was becoming. But then here was judgment: whose benefit would it be for? Not Grandma's. Not his own. Mine.
In the end, I turned decision back on itself. Not to choose the one crevice-crossing was to choose the other. I stayed by a conviction that had been forming silently in me—that the best that could be done in this desolate situation was to help this beset pair, Dad and Grandma, endure through it together in their own home.

Across twenty years, I had watched the two of them wear grooves into each other until at last the fit of their lives became a mutual comfort, a necessity bridged between the both of them. Their time together had passed through armistice into alliance and on to acceptance, then to affection, and at last had become one of the kinds of love. I saw that now, even as I had missed seeing the early signs of the procession. Now my father leaned his very life on my grandmother, on her care of him. When his life toppled away, as it must soon, a presence would go out of my grandmother’s existence like something lacking in the air of her own breathing. This told me all the more that as long as he yet lived, as long as Grandma had the health and in some ways verve to care for him at home, she should. She was the oddest possible angel of mercy, put together as she was of a fast temper and oblique notions of illness and its consequences; yet she still was sturdy, still had to keep herself busy every moment that she was not asleep. And there was that fiercest of all her capacities, her ability to prop other lives with her own. I lacked her knack for such entire sacrifice, her habit of putting all else before her own needs. The most I could do for my father was to warehouse him in my own house, assuming he could be gotten there, or within other walls. Grandma, if I allowed her, could do very much more. What
the Sheep Boss and a crony or two continued to come by and confide
to him their worries about the younger Hoots, tender rabbits for the
snares spoiled by the modern world. Television was the newest and seemed
the most treacherous. Harold Chadwick had sent off for a mail order
course, scratched his chin briefly over the ream of diagrams, then wired
up a picture tube which now flickered and snapped in the Dupuyer service
station day and night. The elders recognized how spellbinding the fuzzed
universe in the tube could be—Hoot youngsters were flocking in to gawk
by the hour—but were stymied about how to battle it. Still, one thing
to be done was to stay unsurprised about the world's gray magic, and
the Sheep Boss, showing how aweless he could be, began to tell Dad about
his wife's fright when she glimpsed Dupuyer's startling television set.
Ho, she t'ot the world was going straight to—here he noticed Grandma
as usual listening sharply, and could not bring himself to say to Hell
in her presence. Vas...vas going down! Going down! he finished
desperately, pushing his palms toward the brimfire below. Grandma
eyed him with new suspicion of Hoot backwardness. She took a look at
a television and thought she was FALLING? Hmpf.

The Hutterites gave Grandma something to mutter about, and
she shortly solved some of the ranch's yawning emptiness for herself.
McGrath had left us with a bonus of a few of his everlasting dog pack.
Behind the bunkhouse door one evening, a small several-colored bitch
apologetically gave birth. The pups were only
that tokened to me was that as long as Dad could remain in known
surroundings—in the valley, in the house he had chosen and bought,
with this woman he had come to deep alliance with—for whatever little
was left of his life, he should.

There were other unheard-of impossible equations to this time.

For one, Dad had become both thinner and larger—face and
hands going gaunt, but the exertions of his lungs building
his chest out to a broad shell, an encasement as if heft
from everywhere else in his body had been summoned there.
The great chest of course was a cruel fake; the muscles
which had stretched out and out to squeeze air into the
failing lungs still were unable to pull in the torrent of
air needed, and the more barrel-like Dad became, the more
grudgingly breath dragged in and out of him.
Dad, with his penchant for hard clean-edged work, liked the Hutterite Hoots at once. Every so often some chore would take him to the Hoot hall. Well, Chollie! What's your business?—and one of the kerchiefed women brought him slices of bread or cake flat on the palm of her hand. There also might be a snifter of the fine manly sweet rhubarb wine produced by the colony, and many grumbles with the Sheep Boss about the price of lambs and the prospects of grass. Grandma was less enchanted with the Hoots—the men ran the colony too high-handedly.

They parade around over there like they somebody—but eventually she too decided they were satisfactory neighbors.

Certainly they were hard-working, and that nearly canceled out their quirks about soldiering and family line.

On the other hand, she made a perplexity for the Hoot men when they came to visit Dad, with her refusal to withdraw and leave the conversation to the males. Her verdicts on the world were beyond their ken—Ach, vell, perhaps, Mizzius Ringer, perhaps, but yet—and our rank family household must have been as mysterious to the Hutterites as their ordered family regiments were to us. Yet Dad evidently was a sensible enough soul on any topic besides women, and the nearest neighbor besides, so
For another, my father has in the moments of my days steadily now, even as he dwindled from me. All of his way of life that I had sought escape from—the grindstone routine of ranching, the existence at the mercy of mauling weather, the endless starting-over from one calamity or another—had been passing with him, and while I still wanted my distance from such a gauntlet, I found that I did not know of it to vanish. The perseverance to have lasted nearly seventy years amid such cold prospects was what heritage Dad had for me; I had begun to see that it counted for much. Through all this ran the zipperlike whisper of history as well as Dad's timespan, and even the late portion of it when I was growing up at his side, quickly was being peeled away by change. To my constant surprise, in our years in the north and the time I was away at college White Sulphur had swapped itself from being a livestock town to a logging town. Each time I drove in now across the long deck of the valley, the blue plume of smoke from the sawmill's scrap burners at the edge of town startled me, made me wonder for an instant whose house might have caught fire. Out from town, along the forks of the Smith River and beneath the flanks of the Castles and Big Belts, the ranches were being reached no more by the continental metamorphosis from agriculture to agribusiness. No longer were there the summer's haying crews. Dad had foremanned so many times, only a few men on galloping machines. Nor were there any longer there no longer were the dozens of shepherders, nor the roving shearing crews, because there no longer were sheep; we are a people swathed in synthetics now. Even the sage, the very coloration of that so-high prairie country, was beginning to be erased under potent new plows and tractors and farming theories, the topsoil which had defeated the homesteaders now laid back like a pelt being skinned off. And beyond even that, the large valley ranches, which to my mind had croupiered
less furious than Grandma, who scorched him up, down and crosswise for not having sprayed the sheep for ticks. Dad let it go on for a while—it was not often a person got to see McGrath take a hiding—and at last broke in: All right, all right, this isn’t helping a thing. Let’s get matters going again. First thing, Mac, will you watch the sheep for a couple hours while we go into town for grub? Lady’s gonna have to do a double shopping. McGrath was no way to feel, and Grandma and I...

Which was explainable enough: anyone who was industrious was out of sight somewhere earning a living, and to judge a people entirely by their street scenes was as blinkered as walking into the Saturday night saloon crowds in White Sulphur Springs or Dupuyer and declaring that a person in the county could be capable of drawing a sober breath. Yet we did judge that way, and hard.

When we came across an Indian rancher at the eastern boundary of our lease land who was very diligent and prosperous, Dad said: Well, they can do some work if they want to, I guess. But most of them ought to sign on for lessons from the Hoots.

Since the Blackfeet never appeared on their own landscape, we took advantage of the emptiness to become steady poachers, letting the pothole lakes feed us. Ducks and geese dabbled in them all summer long, and the .22 made a soft, quickly-gone whining which couldn’t be heard beyond the ridges. Dad and I had sharpshooting contests, trying to nick off the duck’s heads without touching the body meat. Spot, forever ready for trouble or help, instantly learned to retrieve; Grandma whooped orders and scoldings at him until he would deposit the birds to her gently as a bouquet.

All this, I can only think, came from the boredom and sameness of that prairie life. To be doing a thing out of the ordinary, we might
an area which could have sustained many medium-sized ranches into
a single fistful of huge holdings, were beginning to notice
a bigness beyond their own: corporate America. Ye know who owns the
Dogie now? Dad demanded indignantly when I arrived on one of my visits:
A-goddamn-Kansas-City-paper-box-company.

Such matters began to align, in these first few years of the
struggle with Dad's affliction, into the last and most unexpected
of equations: I was discovering myself to be more my father's son,
and my grandmother's grandson, than I had ever known. Exactly at
the point of my life when I had meant to turn myself to teaching,
routinely veering to the assurances of scholarliness, I found myself turning inward
instead. The university life was setting off in me the disquiet
which had sent my father stomping time and again from the big ranches
of the valley. I recognized in myself that like him, I never was
going to be comfortable about soldiering for the large
takeover enterprises of the world, and that unlike him, I had the cache of
provide education to have some choice in the matter. I was finding, too,
that more of Grandma's fierceness of family was in me than was
expected. The nation was in wars I despised and feared—in Asian
rice paddies, in its own streets—but the obliteration raging against
my own father was much the more vital to me, much the more compelling
battle.

As my decisions do, the one now of how to direct my own life
came slowly, doggedly. I kept on through the seminars and exams,
claimed the degree at the last dusty furrow of it all; but then I
abandoned the offer of a job at one of the country's largest universities.
We settled into our slow summer, the trailer house towed back and forth along the ridge summit each week or so like a silver turtle creeping the horizon line. July came, and the ewes were sheared by a Mexican crew amid an afternoon.

This was ended for us on a morning in midsummer, when a few weeks into that first summer, Dad got up from lunch to go look at the sheep. He asked if I wanted to ride along. My nose already in a book, I said my usual No, not unless you need me. I recognize now that he did need me, in a way neither of us could have put to words then, but he said only no, he'd go alone, be back soon. He came back an hour later and pawing his chin nervously. What's got into you? Grandma demanded. Damn-it-to-hell, he breathed. I just almost shot a man.

When he had climbed into the Jeep to go. Dad took his hunting rifle...
Instead, I began to work at writing, by the shaggiest and most marginal of its modes, free-lancing for magazines. I offered to Carol: ‘I know you married me for better or worse, but this is somewhere off the scale.’ She answered as ever: ‘Do it.’ Academic friends plainly were puzzled and a bit disturbed, as if I had declared I was going off to be a wheelwright or a buffalo-hunter. When I undertook to explain myself during one of the Montana trips, Grandma simply offered her blanket assumption that whatever I did made some sense all its own, and Dad, I noticed, seemed to understand this drastic veer better than any other I had ever made. At least, he said, ‘we’ll be your own boss.’
With September, I came off the reservation for my second school year at Valier, now with the notion beginning in me that I had better become more purposeful about what I studied. This did nothing to cure me of reading whatever print I could lay my hands on, but it did get me out of the direction from her with the compass of learning for all her interest in me, Mrs. Tidyman could not have brought herself about the language. Here was advice which could never come from nowhere else! to the last building—the Tidyman—like I think you have, you've learned something more than any kid I've ever seen, and if you've been paying attention in the farmers—Galba agricola est—as I was in vo-ag's mechanized version.

The school had a new superintendent now, a silent large-headed man who seemed to have to spend his full time trying to look dignified. The effort went to doom at once when someone learned that his middle name was Eldo. As far as I could tell in the rest of my high school days, he showed never an idea about education except to patrol around it with Eldo, Eldo mocking off his measured footsteps. I see now that this ambling swoon may have been lucky for us, ignoring as it did whatever Mrs. Tidyman or a few other of the teachers resorted to in the classroom. By second luck, ours was a self-sufficient class. A dozen girls and ten boys, we were the most equable class in years, no one prettier or handsomer than in the several classes before us, or more winsome or wicked. But several of us were more dogged than was expected, and a surprising number more clever.
My father's heritage of perseverance, I have said. At last, the emphysema began to grow even that from him. During one of my Montana stays, more than four years now since the diagnosis of what was at work in Dad's lungs, a neighbor stepped in to visit. As we sat down in the living room and Grandma went to the kitchen to make coffee, the neighbor remarked to Dad how good it was to see him up and around, what relief it must be to be back from the hospital bed. At once Dad made a futile tossing motion with his hand and told her: My heart's just hanging by a thread. I looked at him in alarm. Perhaps everything else inside his chest was becoming a horror, but time after time the doctors' examinations had found that engine of a heart had not yet shown falter, had withstood amazingly the fierce load on it.

Yet in one sense, at least, the heart truly was going out of him. The desperation of having to fight for every breath, of having to live tied by the nose to an oxygen tank, of regulating himself more and more by all the medication that demanded to be taken, simply had worn away his energy. So long and labored a dying had drawn nearly all worth from his body, and now set in on him the very soul of him, his endurance of mind. Once again, Dad began to yearn toward the surgery he had heard of when he first learned he had emphysema. Again I investigated, again gathered opinions, again told him what I had found: the surgery was considered doubtful, his clinic doctor advised passionately against it.

So forlorn about his existence—life was too generous a word for it now—that he had begun to base everything on the operation, Dad was wrenchingly depressed at the advice against it. Whatever you think, son. But I don't know how I can go on like I am.
As we passed the accident crosses nearer and nearer to our reservation lease, like silveryed warnings along a pilgrimage, the prairie emptied and emptied until there was no hint of flowing water or tree cover.

Then a sudden trench of both: the Two Medicine, a middling river which somehow had found itself a gorge worthy of a cataract. We came down a long sharp skid of slope, looking below to high clumps of cottonwoods, a few tribal houses, even what seemed to be an entire tiny ranch or two; lazily, east, the Two Medicine went out of sight beneath a cliff face which stood like an eroded wall. Then across the piddle of river flow and up the ramp of the facing canyon slope. The Two Medicine was the southern boundary of our summer geography, our lease rimmed off at the cliffs. And so, late in the third day the sheep ran onto the pasture. We call in the disappointed dogs and let the band ease, graze, rest. For the next hundred days and more, the slow munch of the ewes and lambs across the ridges would be our pace of life.

A new country again: this reservation land lay like long green islands in a horizon-brimming grass ocean. Westward the Rockies jagged up like the farthest rough edge of the world, but the other three directions went to grass, grass and grass. Eastering ridgelines such as the one we would live along ran from the base of the mountains as lion’s backs and crouched forward a bit toward the draining rivers, the Two Medicine in its plummet of gorge to our south and the Marias—a name I would hold on my tongue half the summer—beyond sight to the east.

Open and avenging as it was, the land seemed tense with its contradictions, all that flatness and yet a purposeful tilt to it, our own ridge dropping after a few paces southward, hollowing off to a coulee which pitched deeper and darker until it shot like a flume through the cliffs above the Two Medicine.
Those words battered in me for weeks as I tried to think through the misery toying with him now, think what could be spoken into that tortured life. At last, in early January of 1971, I wrote one more of my careful letters. Saying I had come to believe that there was one decision which I could not make for him. I would fly to Montana; we would attempt whatever slight relief there might be for him—perhaps another recuperative spell in the hospital; when he felt able to decide, I would listen and help him to weigh facts. But the words of this decision one risk would have to come from him.

Out of that, a phone call, the day after my letter came to him: it was Grandma, saying that he had had the operation that morning. The greatest fear I can imagine licked through me. As I held the phone my hand shook, the single time that had happened in my life. At last I gulped in breath and said I would come to Montana at once.

When I arrived the next day, Dad was breathing with less labor than I had seen him in for some time, but he told me there had been a glorious half-day after the operation when he had no sensation of breathing hard at all. Then he had begun to feel the labor creep back. I sat with him the next few days, urged him into another routine, and heard the first cough from him like a scraping sound in the night. By the end of a week, he plainly was coming down with the lung infection again. I hated the task as never before: it took me the large part of a day to talk him into another hospital stint.

When my plane time came and I said goodbye to him, he was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, his dismay at being there again mixed with the relief of being on steady oxygen and under the familiar care. He looked stronger than
to imbibe straight from Grandma's presence. Spot, winsome as his brockled coat, proved to be tirelessly happy and helpful. By every instinct in him, he was a superb sheep dog, eager, far-ranging, steady; he had a sense of what he was about to be commanded to do, and seemed to start his policing arc around a strayed sheep before your arm had quite come up to direct him. Tip was as tireless, but for him, that same straying sheep clicked in his mind as a target of opportunity: he was, brain and fang, a born biter. Since Tip also was the fleetest dog any of us had ever seen—his black body sleek and whetted as a racehorse's, the white peak of his tail streaking flat behind him like the flare of a rocket—he constituted a lethal weapon. Dad and Grandma at last harangued and
he had at home. I turned in the doorway to say my usual parting: I'll talk to you on the phone soon. Take care.

He said as ever: Goodbye to ye, son.

The hospital stay did bolster him again, did renew his strength and ease his lungs enough until, as usual, in about two weeks' time he was able to go home to White Sulphur Springs once more. He still struggled for breath, but seemed somehow slightly more enduring than he had been.

And his prompt return home carried hope, for the chronic collapses back into hospitalization had told me how he would die—a last torturing confinement in the angled bed, tubes looped to his body, but breath eroding, eroding, despite the apparatus; within the white sheets a sharp panting for life like my mother's agony re-echoed, then a gasp to stillness. It would be the last terrible smother of his crippled lungs, and I could see it in every exactness but the moment on the calendar.

But he was home once more, away from that marked moment, and even escaping winter's usual pneumonia attacks. That and other delvings for reassurance were on his mind; in mid-February 1938, he sent to Carol and me his first letter in years. Hi, you two. I am going to see if I can write you a short letter. I am doing pretty good, I think. My breathing seems to stay about the same. My legs still are so darn weak but I am slowly getting a little more strength in them. I am
that I would be his fullback. Given Valier's small enrollment and the
lack of heft among the seniors, he had decided simply to field the four
quickest of us as running backs, like dice flipped across green felt.
You'll
be the blocking back, since you're heavier than Butch or
Featherlike--
Vern or Glenn—at 155 pounds I actually was only the least

and we'll show these teams some footsteps.

We did. Ours was the fastest backfield in the conference, and the
frailest. When we managed to mesh ourselves—something less than half the
time—we scattered to easy wins. Other games, we simply whooshed up and down
between the goal lines instead of across them, the field perpetually within a touchdown of stronger and more methodical
teams and exasperating everyone except McCarthy, who seemed to enjoy our
using the bike all I can... The page labored on in his taut, over-careful writing, but the news was in that slide of report: doing pretty good... about the same... all I can. And soon after the confirming lines of puzzle and suspicion from Grandma: He doesn't seem to improve any. He's getting the same as before. Sleep days and up and down all nite. Usually eats three sandwitches during the nite with milk. But he doesn't eat a good meal... For the thousandth time I thought through the spectre of his final hospital say, and readied myself for the news that I would havetto come once more and deliver him to the prospect.

I had forgotten that the great constant in my father was surprise. In early April, on the third morning after Dad's seventieth birthday, Grandma stepped to his doorway to begin him on another day of existing. At the bed, he was on his back with his head and upper body tilted to the right, his mouth open, as if having turned to speak an answer over his shoulder. In his custom now, the bedcovers had been flipped aside because of their burden. His pajamas were scarcely mussed, and the square-cut face was freed of its straining look. And in the instant when his heart at last had convulsed in him and ended his life so silently that no hint of it could be heard in a room fifteen feet away, his right arm had flung wide, catching the tether of oxygen tube and tearing it from his nostrils. Charlie Doig, survivor of so much, had died as close to his own terms as any of us ever can.
By early afternoon I was in Montana, by dusk had made
the burial arrangements, that night slept in the bed where
my father had died less than twenty hours before. Grandma
was teary-eyed, but steadier than I would have been from
looking in on a body in the dawn light. We both were startled,
after the dragging years of near-helplessness, at the pace of everything
to be done now. Having arranged a furlough from her classes, Carol
flew in from Seattle, propped us both with her efficiency. Late in
the second day, the minister who would read the funeral
service came to the house. Across the years, I can think of little
range of mind
more remote from my father's interest than religion. Once in my
boyhood, a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses had come to our door. Dad
gave them his levellest look, proclaimed We're staunch Presbyterians
here, and had the door closed on the visitors before they could blink.
I gaped at him, and received his joke-calculating grin: Never knew we
was that pious, did ye? I certainly didn't, and can think of no other
time religion was a topic under our roof. The funeral minister now
found that I was a bland target for
his tries at commiseration. He asked what Bible reading
I wished at the funeral service.

The one where God speaks to Job from the whirlwind.
Job 38, that would be? He sat higher in his chair.
It's not a usual funeral choice. I said nothing.
Well... The first few verses, I imagine? The readings
usually are brief...

No, all of it. All the chapter. We're in no hurry
after these years.

He nodded, offered a hand, was gone.
I had this fever when I was a baby, he told me. Must've shorted something out in there, with blunt fingers to his forehead as if testing the warmth of an engine wall. Numbers were his worst perplexity, having to be thought and rethought into their doubtful sums. I remembered my trick knack for instant arithmetic and wished I could speak it into Tom's mind. It was Tom, I saw soon, who had been behind Gertie's hunch to take me into her household.

You two are a lot of company for each other, aren't you? she said cheerily, and we were. Each having been raised alone in such assorted circumstances. The company improved. It was found to be fine for speech and before long we were making little trips into the surrounding settlement.

We abandoned the stragglers, humped white on the prairie behind us.
I did not believe in funerals and the customs of public
grief, but I believed less in doing anything not understand-
able to Grandma. I braced and drove her across town to the
chapel to see Dad in his casket. He looked milder than in
life, unscarred except for the star-print in the center of
his square chin. She looked down at him, gave a sob, and
said her one last sentence to him: Oh Charlie, why did you
have to die?
That was Dupuyer, entire and uncomplaining, and it enchanted me with its tidy life and the caress of its past. A tiny ancient homestead named Fred Groh at once told me of arriving in Dupuyer when he was as young as I, and at the break of spring hearing the thaw wind begin its roar down across the crags of the Rockies: They told me it was the chinook, and I wondered what kind of animal that could be, to make a noise like that. A gnome-faced man named Joe Smith came into Gertie's cafe for his meals, laughed with a haw-haw-haw which shook him all over, disappeared betweentimes to the trap-lines he had set along the creeks beneath the mountains. Harold noticed my interest and began mumbling information: That Joe, by the god, he can catch any beaver he wants to. How the hell he does it, I dunno. He'll go out there to a beaver dam and catch all the big ones, leave the little ones. These ranchers'll ask him to catch all them beaver, but huh-uh: he leaves them little ones for seed, by the god, for next year. Besides the men when The gentle postmaster John Wall eats across the street each lunchtime, puffing his pipe and sparring jokes with Gertie. She upped the odds once by snipping a circle of cardboard and sliding it beneath the meat pattie in his invariable hamburger. As she turned back to the kitchen, she spotted the disc and slipped it out. Wordlessly he ate away as Gertie gnawed her lip. At last she shouted: Don't you notice anything about that hamburger at all? He dabbed napkin to lips: No sir, Gertie, it tastes just like your hamburgers always do. Ranchers and farmers spilled for coffee and talk as they passed through town: You fellows who've got winter wheat in will be able to be called Mister this fall...It'll be a bea...ner if I can get it harvested in this christly weather... They haled out up across the Marias. Pounded the damned wheat flat on the ground.... Looks like eighty-pound lambs up on the Reservation. Just a world of grass for 'em there this year...
Across the chapel, faces from two lifetimes—my father's, my own—hung row on row. I looked out among them as the preacher's words marched. Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?...The lone black face of Taylor Gordon, nodding softly to the Bible rhythms. Clifford's head among the pallbearers, undressed without his rancher's hat atop it. Hast thou commanded the morning...Sun-dark faces he had ridden with and foremanned on The Dogie and the Camas and a dozen other ranches; paler faces from the saloons and stores. Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow?...Faces from the Basin, from winters a half century ago, from homesteads gone empty and echoing. Canst thou send lightnings...Faces absent, alive only in tales of death: Nellie queerly quiet in the metal casket of his car, battered by the rolling plunge from a hill road. At a canasta table, a heart attack astonishes McGrath; he flings his cards as if sledged in the chest, topples backward as the jacks and queens flutter down upon him. Kate and Walter Badgett, each lying down ins:ncientness not to arise again, but of course Walter passing first, Kate watchfully next. Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion? or fill the appetite of the young lions... And last, always and always piercing through it all, the memory of my mother's deathday on the mountain, my father's life in a way having begun to end there where hers did...
And at last, the procession to the cemetery, the brief graveside ceremony in bitter, wind-whipped weather, and the last glimpse of Dad's casket within the walls of earth.

Nothing new can be said of the loss of a parent; it all has been wept out a million million times. During the funeral preparations and the days afterward, I could find in myself only the plainest, broadest of emotions—anger that Dad had suffered so steadily and so long, relief that he was released from the squeezing bars of his own ribcage, and that I was released from the guesswork decisions over his existence.

Those, and the gratitude that of all interesting men I knew, this one had been my father.
During springtime, another of the Jensen Ranch's routine calamities conked us: a mid-May blizzard, which sealed the ranch in fat heavy snowdrifts.

The Hoots came crashing across the benchland with giant bulldozers and punched our way to the stranded bunches of sheep. We had some loss, but not nearly what it might have been, and we pushed the sheep north to the reservation at the start of summer with the thought in our minds that this year's worst lay behind us.

But worry set in when we finished shearing the sheep in the first few days of July. The weather had an unaccountable chill, and on our shorn ewes we had on our hands thousand of the world's most undressed creatures, caught in only their paunchy yellow-white carcasses, like hospital invalids with their gowns suddenly ripped away. Within a week, they would be gray and hardy again, their next fat round sponge of fleece already beginning to cloak them. But for those first days, they stand naked, helpless to a storm. And dragging across the spire-line of the Rockies, black clouds were beginning to fray into rain.
Mrs. Thorson—

As I mentioned on the phone, this material resumes exactly where you left off on the earlier batch—simply begin adding it to whatever page you left off with, please.

There are about 13 pages here, and I'd like them ready by Friday morning, if possible. I'll have a final batch of pages for you then, I imagine somewhere between 20 and 30 pages, which I would need done by late afternoon on Tuesday, the 13th; is that okay with you?

Ivan Doig

542-6658
Now there was Grandma's grief to be worked through. On some footings, she was as unshakable as ever. When the chore came to choose a tombstone for Dad's grave, she startled me by saying at once that she wanted to be buried exactly beside him, and to have her name on the same stone. All right, sure, I offered. Then she went silent for a minute and amended: No, not together on the stone. Right alongside him, a stone like his one. We ought to each have our own gravestone but the same. But days after the funeral when the time neared that I would have to leave for Seattle again and we had talked through what she would do—how she would fend alone in the house, the bonus that her youngest son lived near enough to look in on her often, the luck of having neighbors who fussed over her—she suddenly put in: Maybe I could of done better. Maybe I could of been better to Charlie, he was so sick...The words rivered out of me: Good God, you waited on him and foot these years, you were the one person of any of us who could have done it. There's no blame on you and I never want to hear you saying there is...I broke off, choked by tears. My fury impressed her, and one woe of this after-death was gone. Dispelled.

Others took more time. When she arrived the next month for a stay with us in Seattle, I came back from putting her suitcase away to find her standing in the living room weeping. Everywhere I look, I see Charlie here.
I had no fury for that, only the stab of knowing how late the emotion of familyhood had come to us. And for once in all these beset years, I did know the cure for something. Deliberately, sometime during each day with her, I brought Dad briefly alive again in one conversation or another, made his life a matter of fact among us rather than a storm center of grief. She steadied. As soon as she returned to Montana, there were the words in her letter that I read like a line of song: I'm feeling pretty good now again and getting a little more straightened around every day.

Now that she was alone, in the last of her odd widowhoods, again I would have to divine across seven hundred miles how a life was holding up, how much attention was wanted, what decisions and soothings and temperings were needed. Carol knew best the one clinching thing to reassure her that her own life was far from over, a plan suggested by the wife of one of my cousins during the swirl of the White Sulphur household after Dad's death. I worried the notion for awhile, then began the phoning and letters needed and by mid-summer could tender it to her. Do you want to go to Australia to see Paul? We'll send you.

She had been in an airplane only a few times, had never seen an ocean, let alone been up over the top of one, flown alone, never been above an ocean, never changed planes at vast terminals, never done twenty dozen impossible things she listed to me at once. As I had known, it took weeks to talk her around to the notion—that yes it could be afforded, yes I could handle mysteries of passport and visa, no she
was not too old, although the fact of her seventy-eight years haunted me no little bit—until at last came the question which I knew meant she would do it: Do you really I can go there all by myself? I laughed into the phone the one last word needed: Really.

Across half the earth in September of 1971, she was met in Australia by the son not seen for 25 years, and by the daughter-in-law and three grandchildren entirely new to her. Quickly her letters came in across the Pacific as if she was remaking the host land: ...The flowers are so pretty here. Nobody seems to pick them for bouquets but I do their so lovely...I been teaching the kids card games Rummy and Solitaire and they want to play all the time now...I went downtown with Joyce this morning. She said it was her pie day. I couldn’t see and couldn’t see why she would go buy pies when we both bake good and finally I asked her. She said No not that kind of pie she meant it was her pay day. They sure talk a brogue here don’t they...

I grinned with the thought of her looking at kangaroos, living with this newfound family in their house so queerly stilted above a Queensland flood plain, going off with them to see salt mined from ocean water and to stand for her picture at a monument proclaiming something called the Tropic of Capricorn, I don’t just know what its all about but you will. She sent me a clipping of what the newspaper there had written about her visit, and I read it thinking they knew only the scantest fraction of this caller.
When we saw the telltale kick of hooves in the air, I would run to the ewe, grab deep into her fleece and heave her over; she would wobble off, lopsidedly bulging with the gas built up in her, but alive. Grandma used Spot and Tip: a ewe's desperation as she looked along the ground and saw those eager jaws bulleting for her usually was enough to thrash her onto her feet.

But we could not be everywhere every moment, and so we lost sheep—one, sometimes two a day, which I would skin out bitterly and carry the spongy pelt.
When she returned in a month, Carol and I met her at the airport, 
hugged her in triumph and admiration, and hurried her to our house to 
sleep off 6,000 miles of flight. The next morning she did not wake 
up until past eleven o'clock, and I scolded: "Gee gods, why 
didn't you get me up hours ago?" I lifted my eyebrows and tried to 
tell her about jet-lag, but for once she was having none of my 
explanations. I never slept this late in my whole entire life, she 
huffed, and was on her feet.

The single thing I knew I had done properly in Dad's last years 
was to keep him mobile as long as it could be managed. Given Grandma's 
restless insistence to be, as she would put it, up and around and doing, 
I thought that it was even more vital for her to stay active. I had 
forgotten what an ally a small town such as White Sulphur could be in 
this. Neighbors and friends and relatives kept an eye on her, mowed 
her lawn, delivered gossip to her kitchen table, delivered Grandma 
herself to what became a prized new pastime for her, a newly-formed 
Senior Citizens Club. When I visited the small house in Montana now, 
I looked at the tacked-up sheet of paper on which she scrawled the 
phone numbers of her support system, saw it lengthen steadily, and 
nodded in satisfaction.

The habit and patterns grew just in time, for in the spring of 
1972, just less than a year after Dad's death, Grandma suffered a 
eight decades 
heart attack—the first blow on her health in her 79 years of life. 
I flew to Montana to do the cooking and housework when she came out 
of the hospital. She was going to be, I knew, the world's most restless 
convalescent, and as soon as I had her seated in the house, I started
Sheep after shearing are the most undressed of creatures; they are
before the world caught in just their paunchy yellow-white carcasses, like hospital invalids
with their gowns suddenly ripped away. Within a week, the ewes will be
and hardy gray again, their next fat round sponge of fleece already beginning to cloak
them. But for those first days, they stand naked to the weather—and
dragging across the spine-line of the Rockies, clouds were beginning to
gray into rain.

Early on the second morning after shearing, Dad came back to the
not yet trailer house gnawing his lower lip. He had turned the sheep out of the
temporary corral where we were penning them these first uncomfortable nights.
The worst thing that could happen would be for a storm to panic the band in
the corral and stampede them onto one another in suicidal piles. But the
next worst thing would be for the same coming storm to maul into them on
the unschooled range, and that was the risk the storm clouds were
forcing on us. We’re gonna have to hightail it for the brush on Two
Medicine with these sheep. Lady, you’ll have to work the dogs; dog the
bejesus out of ‘em. Ivan can run, he can get on the head end of the band
and try push ‘em toward that big coulee. I’ll take the Jeep to round in
the breakaways. The first blast of wind swayed the trailer. We piled
out the doorway into the longest  day of our lives.
on her: We are going to make a deal. I'm going to do all the work in this house for the next week or so--her lips already flying open in protest--and you can help me with these. I showed her a shoebox filled with file cards, the index material for a textbook Carol and I had just written. All right, she said in immediate purpose, show me just what there is to it. Across the next several days, she sat quietly and sorted and alphabetized as I hovered carefully out of the way. At last she pronounced, I think that's all of it, Ivan.

I studied how much more vigorous and restored she had become, smiled and said: I think it is.

She recuperated briskly enough to go on living much as she had, but to her disgust needed now to rely on heart-regulating pills.

Whenever she felt the first signs of angina, usually needle-like sensations at the tops of her arms, she would pop a glycerine pill into her mouth as if it were an aspirin, determinedly sit still for a few minutes, and be up and at some chore again. Outwardly, she aged hardly at all. I compare photos of her taken five years apart, and they seem to have been snapped within the same minute, the identical pursed smile beneath the resolute upper face and gray-white field of hair.
And so we fought, running, raging, hurling the dogs and ourselves at the storm-blinded waves of sheep, flogging with the gunny sacks we had grabbed off a corral post, shaking the wire rings of cans to a din, and steadily as the rain drilled down on us, we lost ground. We were like skirmishers against a running army: we might bend the band slightly and gradually toward the coulee, but all the while their circling panic was carrying toward the cliffs now not more than a few thousand yards away. Only several minutes away for sheep running headlong. It was not yet mid-day, and grayness had clamped in on them the last few inches to the west, a trickling few sheep at the front of the sodden swirl at last were dodging into the coulee.

It cost us the rear hundreds of the band. When the rain bulleted harder again, they broke sideways around the dogs and spilled away from us like wheat out of a tipped sack. The rest of the band we held, barely, at the ground we had gained, and watched the breakaways scuttle across the rain-beaten grass toward the cliffs.

Now the fight in the coulee became one both to hurry and to hold back. The sheep still trying to plunge ahead of the rain's flay could pile themselves

"..."
I found that now Grandma filled not only her own role for me, and stand-in mother, the one begun twenty years before when she and I moved into the house in Ringling, but what had been Dad's as well: my compass-point to the past, to my own youth. Whenever she visited Seattle or I was in Montana, she began to talk easily of the gone years, to tell even of her marriage to Tom Ringer, and of life on the Wisconsin farm. Her mind was not wandering back—it was as solid and set on the chore of the moment as ever—but she seemed freed at last of the tempers which had covered over such stories. True, there still came bursts were moments out of her which could have resounded at any point of her past sixty years in the valley. Leave a light switched on in her house past early morning, and you would hear hmpf! burnin' a hole in the daylight, and the abrupt click. A long-haired white provision cat had recognized her front porch as a tick port, and he came and went, battered from alley fights and matted with cockleburrs, to the rhythm of her feedings and scoldings. But most of the time now, Grandma was in mellower mood than I could ever remember, as if old age was coming gently into her in compensation for the way it had ripped apart Dad. I took the chance to have her re-tell what I had heard from her as a boy, confirm the details, imprint her private wordings. Before I quite knew it, the cadences of this book had begun out of listening to her. Listening and seeing, for the one scribe of my family's past had been the Brownie box camera. Grandma I dug out Grandma's had me dig out the photo albums which had gathered dust under one bed or another for sundry decades. I remember one early evening spent
to destruction even in the veers of the coulee and had to be headed,

beaten to a slower pace; the ones beginning to give up and drop had to
be savaged into moving on. The white vee of sheep accordioned wildly
down the coulee as we pushed and held, held and pushed. None of the
three of us said a word now, our voices long since given out as silently we
flogged sheep with the damp gumnysacks and watched for the mouth of the
coulee to inch out of the rain toward us.

We reached it in near-dark, and the sheep spewed to the river's
brim of willows and cottonwoods. In fourteen hours, we had managed to
flog 3500 bighorn sheep a little more than three miles; a hundred or
more carcasses spotted the prairie behind us, dozens more strewed the
base of the cliffs which the runaway clump had avalanced toward. If this
was victory—and we had to tell ourselves it was, for we could have lost
nearly all the sheep in the Two Medicine cliffs—I knew I wanted no part of
any worse day.

I remember that I looked back from the mouth of the coulee toward the dusky
north ridges, still smoked with gray wisps of the storm. As much as at any
one moment in my life, I can say: here I turned myself. Two decades later,
amid an interview of a man who had become famous in forestry, first as a
research chemist and then for his skills of administration, I asked him how
he had gone into his career. In no more words than this, he told me of
deciding one day, when he was a schoolboy plowing in his father's field


coulee's banked sides
in her house, a pair of hours spent going through an album which had belonged to my mother. Picture upon picture of my father and mother--
in their herding days on Grass Mountain, on horseback at rodeos,
dressed up in flat-cap-and-bonnet finery beside the square hulks of 1920s automobiles--brought sniffs or hard-swallowed sentences from Grandma,
and by the time I had jotted my notes on the final page, the emotion
she had been putting into the room had worn me out. That should be
enough for tonight, I said in a weary glance. She turned to me in
surprise: But we got these others to get through. Hadn't we just
as well to keep on? And we did.

And then the moment, for there always is such a pivot moment,
when it truly became clear how imaginary far along in life she was.

At the end of September, 1974 she flew to Seattle to spend a few
weeks with us. When Carol and I saw her coming slowly up
the ramp from the plane, we waved, she gave us her pursed smile.

Then she stopped and leaned against the wall of the ramp, and I bolted
toward her. By the time I reached her, she was fumbling the bottle
of heart pills from her purse. A pill and getting her to a chair
 eased the angina; before long, we were on our way, but with her now
a more fragile piece of life than she had been minutes before.
When I went from the reservation that mid-summer to my first work as a hired man, I thought it would hurt me. The first and clearest way I had stepped across time to Dad's life at the same age, going off to earn from the very surroundings which had been so lovely in the household. But

beside a combine to load the downspouting grain without stopping an instant of harvest. Clock hours changed, stretched, in that summer light.

Lunch happened whenever food arrived in the field, to be eaten gratefully in the shaded dust beneath a tractor or truck. Supper was eaten when at last it was too dark to do anything else. I sweated rivers, and went through weeks masked with dust, even a thin curd of dirt rimming my teeth like a fallen mustache.

Time and again, I would have luck, or made it. My second summer of hiring out, I heard of a job on a ranch far north of the reservation. I asked Dad for our old car, we had acquired, the Dodge and set off, fighting muddy roads and asking directions at any house I saw, until at last, fifty miles beyond Browning and within a glance of the Canadian border, I found the ranch. Dusk was going to dark, and no one answered my knock. I stepped out of my muddy shoes on the porch, walked in and went to sleep on the couch in the living room. In a few hours when the rancher came home and snapped on the light, his wife large-eyed behind him, I said my name and Dad's, and asked if I could have the job. I could.
Time and again in that visit, she had to sit and ease the heart symptoms. But she would not be kept idle, nor did I think she ought to be. She had lived with Dad's helplessness; a repeat of that would be the cruelest affliction that could happen to her. And so I invented chores, tasks she could do while sitting. She clipped her way through mounds of newspapers to sort references for my writing files, and her only complaint was that it wasn't work enough.

If two minutes of page-flipping didn't yield a headline circled for clipping, her mild grumble would come: Ivan, I'm not finding none to cut out.

This visit of hers now had a sharp hook at the end of it. I had written articles about the World's Fair in Spokane, and Grandma longed to see it. The plan had been that at the end of her stay, Carol and I would drive her to Spokane, shepherd her around the Fair for a day, and she would fly home to Montana from there. Plainly her heart spasms were too chronic now for that plan, but just as plainly this might be her last outing in the world. And I believed more than ever, seeing the determination with which she would take a heart pill, sit briefly, and then be back at some chore, that her stride of life should be slowed as little as possible. Near the end of her stay, I gave her another of my decrees: There's just too much walking at the Fairgrounds. The only way I see that you can go there is in a wheelchair. She gave me her most mildly regretful Ohhh?, as if I had just told her it might rain sometime in the next week.

Then: If you say so.
The job was to drive a grain truck, and exactly at an impatient time in my growing up it gave me all the velocity I could ask for. The rancher's grown son Ron drove one elderly red truck, I drove its mate; by gunning along the narrow gravelled dike of road as fast as we dared, we could make one haul to the grain elevator at Cut Bank in the morning and another in the afternoon. There was a breakneck hill in the middle of the run which Ron and I traded jokes about. I had the world moving on my last load, he would drawl, by the time I hit the bottom of that son-of-a-bitch hill I must have been going a thousand miles an hour. Near the end of summer, I was slamming my truck into higher gear on a flat stretch of the road when I saw a trench of potholes ahead. With no traffic coming,

I was at less risk, but adventuring as far from all before, in having gone across my second line of decision in the summer of the storm-hit sheep. I wanted now to go to college and to learn something besides ranching. Dad came around to the idea so entirely that he began to think of it as his own. By god, yes, you want to get into some other sort of living. Ranching is a hard go unless you inherit a hellish amount of land and have the health to work it. I never had those, and maybe you won't either. He suggested I think about becoming a pharmacist, as the son of one of his brothers had. I didn't know what livelihood I wanted, but pharmacy didn't sound like it. Dad shrugged. Do whatever it is you want, son, and we'll back you just as much as we can.

Any backing to be drawn from a life divided between the Jensen ranch and the reservation, I knew, was chancy. It became chancier a few days after next-to-last I finished my junior year of high school.

The morning of our third spring gather of the sheep for the reservation drive, we had edged the sheep onto the highway when...
I expect never to have another inspiration click to the perfection this one did. Grandma in her rented wheelchair, as Carol or I propelled her, instantly was eligible to go ahead of every line into every exhibit. She saw her World’s Fair as effortlessly and grandly as if she were Queen Victoria somehow being trundled through time. Gee gosh, she said as Carol and I helped her into the car at the end of the day, obviously pleased with herself and the pair of us, that was sure the way to do that.

The next morning, in the last minutes before she was to board her plane at the Spokane airport, the awareness flew into me, as it always did now at these partings, that this might be the last set of moments I would see Grandma alive. Then total commotion; near us had been an orderly family, the mother saying goodbye to the husband and their four children as they set off for somewhere, and suddenly the woman was grappling with the husband and shrieking: I’ve got a restraining order! Don’t let him on this plane with my children!

As he tried to pull away, she haltered him by his necktie and continued to shout. The children erupted into a bawling swirl, the smallest one was bellywhopped to the floor amid the wrestling. The airline workers were slow and reluctant to edge in on the battle. I tried to talk Grandma calm as the apparent went on; the picture of her sagging against the plane ramp when she had arrived in Seattle blazed in me. But she said, No, I’m all right, and sat watching and giving her usual hump until the airline people could herd the roaring family to a side room. Then it was time for me to help her down the ramp, and to her plane seat, and to smile a goodbye to her one more time.
weeks to come. Grandma visited with Gertie at the cafe, and as we should have known it would, work came looking for her. Dupuyer lacked babysitters, especially babysitters with five raisings of children to their credit. Grandma began spending entire days with the small daughters of a family busy with travel, then evenings for other families. When a night came that two stints were offered her at once, she eyed Dad: Why don't you take this other one, Charlie? I looked at him for the fight to start. Instead he said: Yes and why the hell don't I?

Through the heart of winter, the two of them regularly babysat for several evenings a week. At first the notion embarrassed me, it didn't seem genuine work for grownups. But I began to see that both of them were good at it, enjoyed it; the household was easier to breathe in when we weren't crammed against each other every moment. They soon had more babysitting than the two of them could handle, and I took some evenings

when the two of us straddled onto stools across the

must be a prince of the world.

and slower again: A real nice fellow, and you knew the fellow.

bar, Pete would say slowly: He's a nice fellow. Slow nod, he knew, glancing off into the glass Madison behind the anybody deserving. He had a tribute for the few best men size up people, and to work out a routine of friendship with

Some of the people went to Conrad to do some shopping, and

they all managed to come back through Dupuyer. From there they came home fighting and singing... Jesse Black Man was picked up at a ranch feather game. All were game. Stole had a belly ache for a week...
The phone call, the metallic blat of bad news, came three weeks later. Again the flight to Montana, the drive from Helena through the Big Belts to White Sulphur Springs, for this last of the burials in the valley's cemetery. Peter Doig, Annie Campbell Doig, Tom Ringer, Berneta Ringer Doig, Charlie Doig: in a somber space not much larger than a garden patch they all lay, nearly three hundred years of lives, not a life among them easy or unafflicted. A sum of so much of the valley could be found in them, and a sum which would keep emerging in me for however long I lived. Now Bessie Ringer, in her way the most sorrowing to see vanish, because she had been the most durable of them all.

Wonder built in me as I traced out her last day. The morning had been spent working on a quilt, another of her rainbow-paneled splendors, for the helpful neighbor who looked in on her so often. Sometimes she had telephoned to a friend at a ranch out of Ringling, asking to be brought a fresh supply of eggs when the woman came to town. At noon Grandma was phoned by her son, and in usual in those checking calls, they talked for several minutes. In the afternoon a funeral was held for a member of one of the last families of the Sixteen country: Grandma did not go to the rites, but at the coffee hour held afterward at the Senior Citizens Club she helped with the serving and chatted with friends for an hour or more. Someone had driven her home, where she had her supper alone. In the evening, there was to be the weekly card party back at the Senior Citizens Club, and she phoned to ask for a ride with her best friend in the
In that last year of high school, 180 classroom days between me and the world, I began shotgunning for ways to go away to college. I did not

cuffed him into a rough civility, which put him in a mood of hurt astonishment that he should be veered from anything so natural as savaging a ewe. But for all efforts, sending ... near an ammunition dump, and the sheep learned to shy and stampede into retreat at the sight of the black fury. Spot watched his brother with curiosity—he knew to the marrow that the sheep were never to be bitten—and spotted his routes around the band like a guiding angel. But Spot too had an insistence in him: a lust for appreciation. From Grandma, he had

It took me long minutes amid the spilled wheat and strewn gravel to trace out what had happened: the rear spring on one side of the truck, weakened from an old break, had snapped entirely when the wheels struck the potholes, and the following force of the other side hitting them wrenched away the underbody, springs, axle, wheels and all. When the rancher arrived and had a look, he said I was not to blame myself and it was time he bought a new truck anyway. I continued to drive for him until my school year began. The next summer, when I was working fields for a farmer near Dupuyer, I came in from the tractor one sunset to hear that a truck had been wrecked on the breakneck hill, killing its driver: Ron.
group—a woman who had run one of the White Sulphur saloons that had so often thorned Grandma's earlier life. They had nearly arrived at the card party when, in the midst of something joked by one or the other of them, Grandma cut off in the middle of a chuckle and slumped, chin onto chest. The friend whirled the car to the hospital a block away. A doctor instantly was trying to thump a heartbeat-rhythm into Grandma, and could work no flicker of response from her. She had gone from life precisely as she had lived it, with abruptness and at full pace.

Once more the funeral, the Bible rhythms, the lines of faces brigading back out of the chapel into the past. The relatives had raised their eyebrows when I told them the one funeral request Grandma had ever made to me: I want a closed casket. Makes me spooky to think of everybody gawping down at me like that. I flinched in turn when the minister's reading from Ecclesiastes began flatly: The sun rises and the sun goes down, then it presses on...I had forgotten to specify the King James language to him. Then the wryness came to me. Why had I expected my grandmother's exit to be any less touched by contention than her life had been?

At the graveside at last, in the cold coming-winter weather, the rites had to be hurried through, the casket rapidly roped down from sight. Condolences quickly spoken in smoking breaths and as quickly taken by me. Carol's arm in mine was the single spot of warmth in the last of the cold minutes. As the groups of us began to turn toward our cars, the valley's mountain-chilled wind skirled hard among us. I recognized it from the afternoon of my father's burial.
This set of sagas, memory. Over and over self-told, as if the
mind must have a way to pass its time, docket all the promptings for
itself, within its narrow bone cave.

A final flame-lit prism of remembering: the February afternoon
at a northern Pacific coastline, Carol and I with a pair of friends
hiking beside the exploding surf. Gray, restless after-storm weather,
my favorite mood of the fir-shaggy wild shore. In a dozen journeys
here, Carol and I repeat to each other; never have we seen the waves
break so high and far. After a short mile, at Ellen Creek, the four
of us pause. The creek's meek tea-colored flow has boiled wide,
swirly, as the ocean surf drums into the mouth of the channel and
looses giant whirls of tide up the start of the stream. John, ever
the boldest of us, explores a route inland, across a log to the
coiling creekbank opposite and there brushwhacking his way atop other
logs and debris until he at last drops safely back to the ocean
beach. I am uneasy, thinking through the chances of one of us snapping
a leg in the rain-slick debris or slipping the ten-foot drop into the
creek. The Ellen is a known channel that Carol and I have crossed
and re-crossed all the times before. With the storm surf nosing at
it as it is, the stream may have risen now to thigh-high, but still
a wader's depth. I suggest that I go across the
upstream
of the surf line, find the shallowest route
for Carol and Jean to come after; they agree. Boots slung around
my neck, I slog rapidly into the water. At the deepest part the
water surprises me for an instant by lapping up just over my belt,
then as I begin the last dozen pulling strides to the shore,
water swells across the top of my chest and undertow lifts away my
feet.

Like a bug down a drain I am sucked feet first into the ocean,
gravel beating up at me like shrapnel as the surf plows its way roaring way, shore and sky and all else lost in the water avalanche. After forever, I am reversed, surged back to the tideline, slammed down, then rolled to sea again. Now I paddle to stay upright, and simply am turned and turned, toy-like, within the next acres of water until I am struck against the shore again. Taken out into the froth yet again, this time I try to ride the surf with my body, sagging my arms wide; again I am pitched over and over, hurled to gravel, instantly lifted away and out. How many times this repeats, there is no counting—perhaps as few, and as many, as five. Even as my body is being beaten limp, my mind finds incredible clarity, as if the thinking portion of me had been lifted separately and set aside from the ocean's attack.

While my arms and legs automatically try trick after trick to pull me atop the water and onto the precipice of shore, the feeling of death settles into me, bringing both surprise at the ease and calm of the process and a certain embarrassed chiding of myself that this is a silly and early method to exit from life. John later told that, as I came whirling out of the surf one more time, he saw on my face a look of deep resignation. My remembering of that eye-locked instant is of noting him, mouth open in a shout I cannot hear, beginning to run from forty yards away, and then in my next writhe within the dense falling wall of surf, discovering his arm across my back and under me, dragging my weary three-pointed stumble from the undertow. At the shallow moving seam of shore and surf, John exults in my ear: We've got it made now! But I sense, as if a monstrous paw poised just beyond the edge of my vision, the next set of waves toppling toward
from my father

A story, one saga out of my memory, have not told.

I heard my father's favorite story a hundred times, and never enough:

It was along about 1934. Your mother and I were herdin' sheep at the old D.L. place. Jobs was scarce in those days. You had to take anything you could get. Well, a damned bear got to comin' in to the ranch there, killin' sheep. Boy, he'd kill 'em right till and left. He'd always wait until after the moon went down, till it got good and dark. All the neighbors, there'd be some of 'em there pretty near every night with me, to try get that bear, but we never could.

Uncle Paul,

Your oldest boy — a nod here — my grandmother — he came down there. The two of us was gonna spend the night in a old log barn there, the loft end of it was open. This bear'd just kill his sheep and leave 'em lay, that's the way a bear does.

They don't like fresh meat, they like it after it gets spoiled.

So we got one of the first sheep he'd killed, up on the hill, and drug it down there, to lure him down there under that loft. We both swore we never slept a wink, but that night the bear ate the whole sheep within 30 feet of us, and we never knew it.
us: we both are struck flat, but somehow hold the shore. Only then, in the wash back to sea of that aftermost wave, do my boots finally float free from around my neck, and John reaches casually as they pass and plucks them from the last of the water. Now Carol and Jean at our sides, flung to us through the flooding creek by their desperation and the luck of the interval between tidal whirlpools, their hands and John's steadying me until at last, up off the cold bite of the shore gravel, I stand again.

That forenoon, a few dozen months into the past, has stayed much in my mind, and not only for the marvel of finding myself undrowned and for the gratitude of having had three lives offered up instantly for mine. By the time of that incident this book already had begun to take over my fingers, and my scuff against death inevitably called up in me the endings put to other figures in my family, with less reason than my mistaken wade into the Ellen. Spaced where I am, past having been young but not quite yet middle-aged, the odds of life-and-death still loom quite from my usual thoughts. Yet this much has been brought home to me fully: that added now into the lineage of all else I share with Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer is the sensation of having been spared out of deepest hazard. The links are made instantly by memory. I am spun and spun within the frothing wave: creek water rises over Grandma's stirrups as she edges the roan to the flood-trapped cattle. Surf gravel beats up at me like shrapnel: the hooves of the black gelding rampage across Dad in the corral dirt.

I feel, in my musings on it, as if the two of them too somehow stood up out of the slosh of death with me, the one giving his...
We went on not havin' any luck that way. Generally all we'd
see would be his eyes as he'd take off out of there in the dark.

This one evening, Berneta and me and the neighbor, Mrs. Christison,
as an out-of-the-clouds hunch which surprised her as she said it; after all,
she had not even seen me yet. But your grandma just had a way about her. I
liked her right then, and figured I might like you. We would learn in turn
that Grandma had landed me with three people it was impossible not to cherish.
Gertie herself was Dupuyer's touchstone. Short and square-set, almost boxy-
hers parents had been stocky immigrants from Belgium, and the family line had
gone even broader and more short-necked with her--she was steadily amiable as
she provided the community its brimming coffee cups and the daily victual
of counter-stool chat to go with the brew. Gertie's cafe
and its place in the life of the town reflected her exactly: plain,
hearty the day long, and years-deep in polished affections.

the house. That bear was after 'em. I grabbed the rifle -- didn't
have a very good rifle, either, just an old broken-down one I had
loaded and sittin' there -- and went back through the dining room
through the kitchen and sneaked out the back door. I got behind
the bunkhouse. Then there's a creek there with heavy willows,
I was gonna get on the edge of them and sneak around behind the
bear. I thought I'd sure fix that boy this time.

I got about halfway to the brush and I looked up and here he
had a sheep cut out right against the house wall. There's a pole
fence come up and nailed right onto the corner of the house, and
that sheep was tryin' to dodge to get away from, and he was trying
coiled grin of wryness at having survived one time more, the other
muttering at the receding ocean and marching us all off into dry clothes.

Then my father and my grandmother go, together, back elsewhere
in memory, and I am left to think through the fortune of all we
experienced together. And of her, now, my single outline meets the
time-swept air that knew theirs.
to catch her there. The radio was again', and Berneta and Mrs.

Christison were standing there in the window just like that, watchin'.

I cut down on him with that old rifle, and he went WOOF. I
don't know if I hit him or not, but I changed his mind anyhow.

Well, he either had to come toward me or go right back through
the middle of the sheep, so here he comes toward me. He got, oh,
about sixty feet from me, and he was gonna walk around the edge
of the sheep then. I cut down on him again, and I know I hit him
that time.

He let another WOOF out of him, and he was mad now. Here he
comes. He had his old head turned sidewise. I could have counted
his teeth there in the moonlight.

I never give it a thought to run. Anyhow, he got up, oh, pretty
close, I'd say about here to that window, six feet or so. I was
tryin' to shoot him between the eyes. He had his head turned a
little bit, and I got him right -- you know a bear's head is, his
ears are up towards the top of his head -- I got him right the side
of the ear there. It went down through his neck and all the way
into his lungs. That took the WOOF out of him.

That took the WOOF out of him. Set him back on his haunches,