

~~This House of Sky~~
~~The Hills West of Noon~~

by Ivan Doig

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atop it, like a sentry box over the frontier between the sly creek and the prodding meadow, perches our single-room herding cabin.

Alone here on our abrupt tiny shelf, the three of us eased through May and the first twenty-six days of June secure as hawks with wind under our wings. Once a week, the camptender from the home ranch would come the dozen miles of trail to us. The blaze-faced sorrel he rode and the packhorse haltered behind would plod in from the shadows which pooled in our valley under the shouldering slopes, until at last the rider stepped off from his stirrups into the cabin clearing and unknotted from the packsaddle the provision ~~sacks~~ ^{boxes, dark-weathered} ~~white as tiny clouds~~ ^{in their coverings of rawhide}, which ~~bulged~~ ^{carried} with our groceries and mail. My father, with his wise tucked grin, surely tossed a joke: Hullo, Willie. Bring us that side of T-bones and a barrel of whiskey this time, did ye? I've told ye and told ye, our menu needs some fancying up . . . As surely, my mother would have appeared from the cabin, her small smile bidding the caller to the tin mug of coffee in her hands. As surely again, I would have been at the provision ~~sacks~~ ^{boxes} as my father began to unpack them, poking for the tight-rolled bundle of comic books which came for me with the mail.

Minutes later the camptender would be resaddled and riding from sight. For the next seven mornings again, until his hat and shoulders began to show over the trail crest another

time, only the three of us nestled there in the clean blue weather of the soundless mountains.

Three of us, and the sheep scattered down meadow slopes like a slow, slow avalanche of fleeces. Before I was born, my mother and father had lived other herding summers, shadowing after the sheep through the long pure days until the lambs ~~had~~ ^{were} fattened for shipping. ^{Ivan,} You wouldn't believe the grouse that were on those slopes then. The summer we were married and went herding on Grass Mountain, all that country was just alive with grouse then. I'd shoot them five at a time, and your mother--your mother'd cook them at noon when the sheep had shaded up. We'd eat one apiece and seal the rest in quart jars and cool them in the spring water so we'd have them cold for supper. They were the best eatin' in this world. Lot of times we'd have them for breakfast too, before we moved camp. Y'see, on forest reserve you're supposed to move camp about every day. The first summer there on Grassy, we moved camp fifty-eight times in the first sixty days. We had a brand new box camera we were awful proud of, and we'd take a picture of our campsite every time. Your mother . . .

The pair of words would break him then, and fool that I could be, I would look aside from his struggling face. In these afteryears, it is my turn for the struggle inside the eyes and along the drop of throat, for I have the album pages of those campsites along the ridgelines and the swale

meadows of their first summer mountain.

Off the stiff black pages, two almost-strangers grin up into my eyes, like past neighbors seen again across too many years, and I wonder at all I know and do not know of

this set of lives
~~these two:~~
 1

My father looks stronger than I ever knew him, and even more handsome, the straight broad lines of his face framed cleanly around the dimple-scar in the center of his chin. His stockman's hat has been crimped carefully, sits on his head at a perfect angle. His shoulders line out level and very wide for a man just five and a half feet tall, but this strength at the top of him trims away to a lower body slender as a boy's. I am reminded that he was so slim down the waist and hips that the seat of his pants forever bagged in, and the tongue of his belt had to flap far past the buckle, as if trying to circle him twice. Certain photos catch ~~him~~ *this father of mine* as almost mischievous, cocking the dry half-grin which sneaks onto my own face as I look at him. In others there is a distance to him, a sense that except for accident he might be anywhere else in the world just now, and maybe a being entirely unlike the one I knew here. In any pose, he looks at the camera squarely, himself a kind of lens aimed back at the moment.

To see him, the several hims encamped across the pages, is to begin listening for the burred voice, the retellings, the veers and jogs of his life:

Ivan, I think I'll take on those two bands of sheep for

McGrath. He's a bearcat to work for, but the son-of-a-buck knows livestock and he knows how to turn money. . .

That place was a haywire outfit from the start, or I'll put in with you. They had men on that place that by God you wouldn't send to fetch a bucket of water or they'd bring it back upside down. Cliff and I stood it for about a week, then we told the boss to write 'er out for us, we were heading for town. . .

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. . .

Again the sentences snap, I see the handsome steady mouth clamp itself, the chin-dot of scar come close beneath, small but deep like a tool mark nicked in when his strong head was carved. A single quick notch at the bottom of his face, as if it might be the first lightest scratch of calamity on him.

But my mother: my mother, here in some summer of early marriage, already seems frail, so slim--too light a being to last there so near the challenge of timberline. Again, because I know what was to come, I believe myself into the notion that I can read it all gathering on the album's somber paper. I print into my mind from her every pose how fine-boned she was, hardly more than tiny, with a roundish, slightly wondering face where most of my own is quickly read. I coax from the photos all detail which seems to tell the sickness

eroding in her; the pinch across her slender shoulders, the eyes which are almost too calm and accepting.

But the one thing which would pulse her alive for me does not come. I do not know the sound of her voice, am never to know it. Instead she is wound in the other voices tracked through the years. Her teacher at the one-room schoolhouse in a sea of sage: The first morning of school, here I saw this girl coming up on a black horse, just coming as fast as ever she could. And it was your mother, and she was rushing up to tell me there were mice in the well, and not to use that water. The rancher's wife who had neighbored with her in some summer of haying: I wouldn't see anyone for hours, and I would go across to your house and there your mother would be reading to you. She'd read by the hour, on a hot afternoon she'd keep you so cool and quiet just sitting there reading . . . She was so quiet, had such a soft fine voice. The forest ranger who oversaw their range that early season on Grass Mountain: She could do about anything a man could--ride, sling a pack, any of that. She even knew how to trap. We talked sometimes about runnin' a trapline, and I know she did in winters later on. But she had to be careful, y'know, anything she did, or she'd choke right down, short of breath.

Yes. This album of summers again, as if I might finger through the emulsion patterns to the moments themselves. At the backs of my familiar photoed strangers, always a forest,

and always sunlight spattering down through the pine boughs to their rough shirt fronts. The canvas slopes of their tent are triangled grayly at the back of the day camp. Two black herding dogs, ears up in dog surprise, study the lens. A pair of saddlehorses gawk in from the grassy fringes of camp as if afraid any attention might go by them. One creature in these early pictures does not fit, and this intrigues me-- the pet which is being stroked in my mother's hands. Those first seasons of following the sheep, my parents kept with them in their daily sift through the forest a cat, an independent gray-and-white tom they had named Pete Olson. Somehow, amid the horses and dogs and sheep, and the coyotes and bobcats which ranged close to camp, Pete Olson rationed out his nine lives in nightly prowls of the mountain. Then as camp was moved each morning, he would be cradled like a prince between somebody's lap and the saddle pommel as the horses shouldered through the timber. My parents were childless then, told by doctors that they might always be. If the prediction had held, if I had never been, would any but the astral glance of a cat ever have seen into those far summers of theirs? Would that time be different for not having met my eyes?

Yet the two are met, and in this season on the final mountain, the surprising drifter ducking through swags of pine branches on the back of a horse has become me. Later, my father would never tire of telling what a cantankerous

source of pride I made in that riding family. The only thing we could get you on was a sawbuck pack saddle. You know what they are, like a little sawhorse setting on top of the saddle rigging. Hard as a rasp to sit on, but you straddled in there like it was the only thing going. Ride sometimes half a day in it. You were a stubborn little dickens. This, with the grin up at me as I loomed half a head over him. As I tried to find in myself that small flinty son from the past.

Wherever it may point, my own clearest moment of myself in that far summer has ^{just} the mood of sober cussedness he recalled. I had been given a bow and a few arrows, likely an early gift for my birthday. Time and again, my arrows whacked far from the paper target my father had tacked to the side of the cabin. I see myself pouting it out, kicking at the tan bunchgrass as I think, as the creek makes its shying mutter. Then I edge close to the cabin wall until the round sharp tip of the arrow hangs inches from the paper. I let go the bowstring, and the bullseye slashes open with a hard snapping sound.

That, with every instant of remembering clear as the noon air. Yet of my mother's death, whatever I try, just a single flicker, dim and hurtful, ever is called back: the asthma has claimed her, there are only two breathings in the cabin now, my father is touching me awake in lantern glow, his shadow hurled high up onto the wall, to say she is dead, Ivan, your mother is dead, sobbing as the words choke him.

The start of memory's gather: June 27, 1945. I have become six years old, my mother's life has drained out at 31 years. And in the first gray daylight, dully heading our horses around from that cabin of the past, my father and I rein away toward all that would come next.

Memory is a set of sagas we live by, much the way of the Norse wildmen in their bear shirts. That such remembering takes place in a single cave of brain rather than half a hundred minds warren'd wildly into one another makes them sagas no less. By now, my days would seem blank, unlit, if these familiar surges could not come. A certain turn in my desk chair, and the leather cushion must creak the quick dry groan of a saddle under my legs--and my father's, and his father's. The taste in the air as rain comes over the city is forever a flavor back from a Montana community too tiny to be called a town. A man, the same alphabet of college degrees after his name as mine, trumps in a debating point during a party argument, and my grandmother's words mutter in me on cue that he grins like a jackass eating thistles.

Rote moments, these, mysteryless perhaps in themselves. It is where they lead, and with what fitful truth and deceit, that tantalizes. If, somewhere beneath the blood, the past must beat in me to make a rhythm of survival for itself--to go on as this half-life which echoes as a second pulse inside the ticking moments of my existence--if this is what must be, why is the pattern of remembered instants so uneven, so gapped and rutted and plunging and soaring? I can only believe it is because memory takes its pattern from the earliest moments in the mind, from childhood. And childhood is a most queer flame-lit and shadow-chilled time. Think once

more how the world wavers and intones above us then. Parents behave down toward us as if they are tribal gods, as old and unarguable and almighty as thunder. Other figures loom in from next door and the schoolyard and a thousand lanes of encounter, count coup on us with whatever lessons of life they brandish, then ghost off. We peek into ourselves and find deviling there as well. Riddles are delight at its most tricksterish high chant: Thirty-two white horses on a red hill. Now they're tramping, now they're champing, now they're standing still. Where are they? Bafflement to the other, triumph to you: In your mouth! And darker frolic: this first sudden set of years also is the one season of life, for most of us, when we can kill emotionlessly--or worse, simply from curiosity, to see how the tiny mice prodded from their field nest are different, dead, from the tiny mice, alive, of an instant ago. Cruelty comes new to us, and astonishing, yet we are at our cruelest to each other, mocking playmates home in sobs. Marauders, we are marauded, too. Darkness blankets down around a child as if the planet's caves have emptied all their shadows over him. Everything fights the child's ambitions--fences reach too high, streets stretch too wide, days too short and too long. Imagination is the single constant friend of the child, and even imagination does its share of betrayal, scowls itself in some stalled passage of time into scaredness and doubt.

X OK-
Encye
am.

Just so does life blaze and haunt around us before we learn we are sober creatures of civilization. Just so, when childhood itself has passed into the distance behind me, does my remembering of the thirty-year story that begins with my mother's last breath go on the way it was recklessly shaped in me then.

VALLEY

The clockless mountain summers were over for my father. Forty-four years old, a ranch hand, now a widower, Charlie Doig had a son to raise by himself. He needed work which would last beyond a quick season. He had to fit us under a roof somewhere, choose a town where I could start to school, piece out in his own mind just how we were going to live from then on. It tells most about my father over the next years that I was the only one of those predicaments that ever seemed to grow easier for him.

Some homing notion said to bring us back to old ground; his mood, maybe, that we were lost enough without braving places he had never been. Beginning when his legs were long enough to straddle a horse's back, Dad had spent all but a few years of his life riding out after cattle and sheep across

the gray sage distances of the Smith River Valley and the foothill country hunkered all around it. Any ranch in sight could start a story: The winter of 'twenty-one, I helped that scissorbill feed his cattle. He worked a team of big roans on the hay sled. Oh, they were a pair of dandies . . . Diamond Tony was herding there on Grassy Mountain, and this one day he had a Wyoming scatter on the band, sheep from hell to breakfast . . . It was just up over the ridge, the two of us were ridin' fence. Pete started working over that mare with his quirt again. 'Damn ye anyway,' I says to old mister Pete. 'Beat up on a horse like that, would ye?' I cussed him up one side and down the other, don't think I didn't. . . Into that remembered countryside, the two of us came now like skipping rocks shied across a familiar pond.

In the years beyond, when we would talk through that time and try to find ourselves there in the early lee of my mother's death, our tellings ended up athwart one another, like the stories of two survivors, each of whom had come ^{out of blankness} to at a different moment and in a different corner of the scene. Such of each story, that is, as we allowed out of ourselves, for there too a difference sloped between us. It was my father's habit to say and re-say a version as it had first taken shape in him. It became mine to mull and prod away at all versions. Yet between us, we could summon a kind of truth about that fierce season of bewilderment.

Angus wasn't done with his haying yet, you remember.

After your mother's funeral, he asked me to come help out.
Yes. The early weeks, the first act of rescue: Angus, my father's favorite brother, brought us to live with him and his family. We tucked ourselves into an upstairs room of the ranch house there. While Dad worked in the hayfield, I was left at the ranch buildings to play with my three cousins. This again was something new and unfair in my life. Before, the aloneness of the way we lived, out on a foothills ranch or in the Bridger peaks, had spread open my days for whatever I could think up. If I wanted to spend half the daylight hours face down over the creek trying to scoop my hand under tadpoles, I did it. If I wanted to play a pretend game of flipping rocks at a tree and making with my mouth the kchew, kchew sound of shooting, I did that. But now such lonesome pleasures were crowded away. Now, just as my mother had, my aloneness was dying, and that loss mourned hard in me, too.

Then, wouldn't ^{ye} you know it, Clifford came up with the
idea of us moving in there with him so you could start to
school. More easily can I imagine my father's life without me in it than without Clifford. The two of them had been friends since before they could remember, left home together as youngsters to go off to a lumber town away out on the coast, cowboied and drank and storied with one another, knew

~~change~~

and liked each other in the automatic way that happens only a time or two during life. Clifford had come out of a homestead family as poor as the shale slopes crowding in on their shanty. He had never flinched from anything for very long ever since, and he did not flinch now to take in his saddlefriend and a bereft boy. Well, hell, y'know, me an' Charlie was like brothers. Closer, maybe. I seen your dad was havin' a hard time gettin' over your mother's passin' away. I don't think he ever did get over it, in a way. Clifford's ranch lay a few miles from the valley's town, White Sulphur Springs, where I now began school. Each morning came a too-quick trip to the schoolyard; a trudge from the pickup to the high brick box of a school; a trudge up the broad flight of stairs to the classroom where I would be cooped for the day with twenty small strangers, not one of whom had ever ridden a sawbuck packsaddle or shot an arrow in the Bridger Mountains. Those early weeks in the first grade, only two little blurts of excitement set off any interest within me. We went through a drill about how to line up and quick-march out of the old brick building if it caught fire, which gave me hope that maybe it would. And one morning when we were fanned around the teacher for reading, the blond girl sitting next to me peed herself and set up a sobbing howl as the rest of us backed off from her puddle and watched to see how school handled something like this. The teacher's hankie ended the tears,

and a janitor with a mop sopped up the other. I sat with my feet up on the chair rungs for the next few days of reading lessons.

Those first weeks of school, they were a kind of tough time for ye, weren't they? They were. Even before the alarming peeing, I was unimpressed with lessons, which seemed to be school's way of finicking around with things I could do quicker on my own. Already I could read whatever the surprised teacher could put in front of me, and add or subtract numbers as fast as she chalked them on the blackboard. How this had come to be, I ^{had no idea} ~~was unsure~~; I only knew that I could not remember when I hadn't been able to read, and that the numbers sorted out their own sums before I had to give them any close attention. School struck me as a kind of job where you weren't allowed to do anything; I had free time in my head by the dayfull, and spent it all in being lonesome for ranch life and its grownups and its times of aloneness. To keep what I could of myself, I moped off on my own every recess and lunch hour, then sulked in some corner of the playfield after school until I could see Dad or Clifford driving up the street to fetch me.

I guess ye'd have to say that spell was none too easy for me, either. A tiny plopping sound of surprise, made by clucking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, might come from my father when he suddenly remembered something,

or felt a quick regret of some sort. This time, the soft salute meant both those things. Godamighty, Ivan, I did miss your mother. That cannot begin to tell it. If it was Dad instead of Clifford who came to take me from the schoolyard, I stepped from the shadows of my mood into the blacker shadows of his. Years afterward and hundreds of miles from the valley, I was with him when he met a man in the street, backed away, and stared the stranger out of sight in wordless hatred. The man had worked at the ranch where my mother died, and a few days after her death ~~had~~ told Dad bluffly: Hell, ^{Charlie,} you got to forget her. That's the only way to get on with life: don't let a thing like this count too much.

All that time and distance later, Dad still despised him for those clumsy words. Not until that moment did I entirely understand how severe a time it had been when he came for me after school in those earliest weeks after my mother's death and we ~~could~~ ^w drive back to a borrowed room in a pitying friend's house.

Day by day as autumn tanned the valley around us, now with bright frost weather, now with rain carrying the first chill of winter, ~~Dad~~ ^{my father} stayed in the dusk of his grief. That sandbagged mood, I understand now, can only have been a kind of battle fatigue--the senses blasted around in him by that morning of death and the thousands of inflicting minutes it was followed by. He might go through the motions of work,

even talk a bit with Clifford, but at any time his eyes could brim and he would lapse off, wordless, despairing. I never knew either, when some sentence I would say, or some gesture I would make in the way my mother had, would send him mournful again.

Then coaxing began to finger through to us. My turnabout must have come first. The one classmate I knew at all was a black-haired, musing girl named Susan Buckingham; a few summers before, Dad had foremanned the haying crew at the valley ranch owned by her family, and Susan and I had become shy friends for the time, drawn together on the shaded afternoons when my mother would read aloud to us. Now in some one instant--amid the giggles from a game of tag, or the arc of a swing going so high it looked good and risky--Susan tugged me at last toward the center of the school playground and into more friendships. Also, several of my classmates carried their black tin lunchboxes to school as I did; we had to congregate to see which sandwiches or cookies could be swapped, and whether anybody had been lucky enough to get chocolate milk in his thermos instead of white. And when a too-early first snow came, draping across a few days of early autumn, all the rocks I had thrown at trees in the pretend games paid off: I could chunk a snowball hard enough to make even the sixth-grade boys flinch. Whoever chose up sides for the game we played of attacking a snow fort began to choose me first.

Suddenly the schoolyard no longer was a jail to me.

And by luck, the teacher in that coop of a classroom was crafty. She was a small, doll-like woman who, after she had done her first weeks of sorting, somehow could push twenty beginning minds at their separate speeds. For me, she began to get out extra books, put me to helping others with their alphabet and first words--anything to bring my eyes down into the pages, and all of it telling me that here, in as many words on paper as I could take in, stretched my new aloneness.

At the same time, Clifford was nudging Dad out of his sour haze. He heard of a small ranch for rent at the south end of the valley, and somehow drew Dad into ^{promising} ~~saying~~ he would look it over. The ranch never could amount to much--too little water, too many scabbed hillsides of glum rock--but it could carry several dozen head of cattle and maybe a few hundred sheep as well if a man knew what he was doing. And the true meld to be gained from the place, Clifford knew, was that the work demanding to be done there would elbow the grief out of Dad's days.

Somewhere in himself my father steadied enough to decide. I didn't much want to do it, ye know. But Clifford got hold of me and took me down there to see the place and gave me a talkin' to, and I couldn't find enough reason against it. He shook hands on the deal for the ranch. For the third time in a dozen weeks, the pair of us bounced across the Smith River Valley.

Little by little, and across more time than I want to

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map

count, I have come to see where our lives fit then into the valley. If Dad ever traced it at any length for himself, he never said so in more than one of his half-musings, half-jokes: As the fellow says, a fool and his money are soon parted, but ye can't even get introduced around here. Yet I believe he too came to know, and to the bone, exactly where it was we had stepped when we went from Clifford's sheltering. On the blustery near-winter day when we left the highway and drove onto the gray clay road of our new ranch, the pair of us began to live out the close of an unforgiving annal of settlement which had started itself some eighty years earlier.

It is not known just when in the 1860's the first white pioneers trickled into our area of south-central Montana, into what would come to be called the Smith River Valley. But if the earliest of them wagoned in on a day when the warm sage smell met the nose and the clear air lensed close the details of peaks two days' ride from there, what a glimpse into glory it must have seemed. Mountains stood up blue-and-white into the vigorous air. Closer slopes of timber offered the logs to hew homestead cabins from. Sage grouse nearly as large as hen turkeys whirred from their hiding places. And the expanse of it all: across a dozen miles and for almost forty along its bowed length, this home valley of the Smith River country lay open and still as a gray inland sea, held by buttes and long ridges at its northern and southern ends, and east and west by mountain ranges.

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Lot C
NF map

A new county had been declared here, bigger than some entire states in the East and vacant for the taking. More than vacant, evacuated: the ^{Pagan Blackfeet} ~~Plains~~ tribes who had hunted across the land by then were pulling north, in a last ragged retreat to the long-grass prairies beyond the Missouri River. And promise of yet another sort: across on the opposite slopes of the Big Belt Mountains, placer camps around Helena were flushing gold out of every gravel gulch. With the Indians vanished and bonanza gold drawing in the town builders, how could this neighboring valley miss out on prosperity? No, unbridle imagination just for a moment, and it could not help but ~~checker~~ ^{foretell} all these seamless new miles into pasture and field, roads and a rail route, towns and homes.

Yet if they had had eyes for anything but the empty acres, those firstcomers might have picked clues ~~even from~~ ^{the pretty uplands} that this was a somewhat peculiar run of country, and maybe treacherous. Hints begin along the eastern skyline. There the Castle Mountains poke great turrets of stone out of black-green forest. From below in the valley, the spires look as if they had been engineered prettily up from the forest floor whenever someone took the notion, an entire mountain range of castle-builders' whims--until the fancy stone thrusts wore too thin in the wind and began to chink away, fissure by slow fissure. Here, if the valleycomers could have gauged it in some speed-up of time, stood a

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measure of how wind and storm liked to work on that country, gladly nubbing down boulder if it stood in the way.

While the Castle Mountains, seen so in the long light of time, make a goblin horizon for the sun to rise over, the range to the west, the Big Belts, can cast some unease of its own on the valley. The highest peak of the range--penned into grandness on maps as Mount Edith, but always simply Old Baldy to those of us who lived with mountain upon mountain-- thrusts up a bare summit with a giant crater gouged in its side. Even in hottest summer, snow lies in the great pock of crater like a patch on a gape of wound. Always, then, there is this reminder that before the time of men, unthinkable forces broke apart the face of the biggest landform the eye can find from any inch of the valley.

Nature's crankiness to the Big Belts did not quit there. The next summit to the south, Grass Mountain, grows its trees and grass in a pattern tipped upside down from every other mountain in sight. Instead of rising leisurely out of bunchgrass slopes which give way to timber reaching down from the crest, Grassy is darkly cowled with timber at the bottom and opens into a wide generous pasture--a brow of prairie some few thousand feet higher than any prairie ought to be, all the length of its gentle summit.

Along the valley floor, ^{still} omens go on. The South Fork of the Smith River turns out to be little more than a creek named

by an optimist. Or, rather, by some frontier diplomat, for as an early newspaperman explained in exactly the poetry the pawky little flow deserved, the naming took notice of a politician in the era of the Lewis and Clark expedition--

Secretary Smith of the Navy Department/The most progressive member of Jefferson's cabinet/. . . thus a great statesman, the expedition giver/is honored for all time in the name of "Smith River." The over-named subject of all that merely worms its way across the valley, generally kinking up three times the distance for every mile it flows and delivering all along the way more willow thickets and mud-browed banks than actual water. On the other hand, the water that is missing from the official streambed may arrive in some surprise gush somewhere else. A hot mineral pool erupting at the north end of the valley gave the name to the county seat which built up around the steaming boil, White Sulphur Springs.

But whatever the quirks to be discovered in a careful look around, the valley and its walls of high country did fit that one firm notion the settlers held: empty country to fill up. Nor, in justice, could the eye alone furnish all that was vital to know. Probably it could not even be seen, at first, in the tides of livestock which the settlers soon were sending in seasonal flow between the valley and those curious mountains. What it took was experience of the climate, to remind you that those grazing herds of cattle

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NF map

and bands of sheep were not simply on the move into the mountains or back to the valley lowland. They were traveling between high country and higher, and in that unsparing landscape, the weather is rapidly uglier and more dangerous the farther up you go.

The country's arithmetic tells it. The very floor of the Smith River Valley rests one full mile above sea level. Many of the homesteads were set into the foothills hundreds of feet above that. The cold, storm-making mountains climb thousands of feet more into the clouds bellying over the Continental Divide to the west. Whatever the prospects might seem in a dreamy look around, the settlers were trying a slab of lofty country which often would be too cold and dry for their crops, too open to a killing winter for their cattle and sheep.

It might take a bad winter or a late and rainless spring to bring out this fact, and the valley people did their best to live with calamity whenever it descended. But over time, the altitude and climate added up pitilessly, and even after a generation or so of trying the valley, a settling family might take account and find that the most plentiful things around them still were sagebrush and wind.

By the time I was a boy and Dad was trying in his own right to put together a life again, the doubt and defeat in the valley's history had tamped down into a single word.

Anyone of Dad's generation always talked of a piece of land where some worn-out family eventually had lost to weather or market prices ~~or both~~ not as a farm or a ranch or even a homestead, but as a place. All those empty little clearings which ghosted that sage countryside--just the McLoughlin place there by that butte, the Vinton place over this ridge, the Kuhnes place, the ~~Burkey~~ ^{Catlin} place, ^{the Callen place} the Winters place, ^{the McKeynolds place,} all the tens of dozens of sites where families lit in the valley ^{at its rimming foot hills,} couldn't hold on, and drifted off. All of them epitaphed with that barest of words, place.

One such place was where our own lives were compassed from. Southwest out of the valley into the most distant foothills of the Big Belts, both the sage and the wind begin to grow lustier. Far off there, beyond the landmark rise called Black Butte and past even the long green pasture hump of Grassy Mountain, a set of ruts can be found snaking away from the country road. The track, worn bald by iron wagonwheels and later by the hard tires of Model T's, scuffs along red shale bluffs and up sagebrush gulches and past trickling willow-choked creeks until at last it sidles across the bowed shoulder of a summit ridge. Off there in the abrupt openness, two miles and more to a broad pitch of sage-soft slope, my father was born and grew up.

This sudden remote bowl of pasture is called the ~~Turney~~ ^{Tierney} Basin--or would be, if any human voice were there to say its

XOK
Helena
NF map

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name. Here, as far back into the ^{tumbled beginnings} foothills of the Big Belt ~~Mountains~~ as their wagons could go, a double handful of Scots families homesteaded in the years just before this century. Two deep Caledonian notions seem to have pulled them so far into the hills: to raise sheep, and to graze them on mountain grass which cost nothing.

A moment, cup your hands together and look down into them, and there is a ready map of what these homesteading families had in mind. The contours and life lines in your palms make the small gulches and creeks angling into the center of the Basin. The main flow of water, Spring Creek, drops down to squirt out there where the bases of your palms meet, the pass called Spring Gulch. Toward these middle crinkles, the settlers clustered in for sites close to water and, they hoped, under the wind. The braid of lines, now, which runs square across between palms and wrists can be Sixteenmile Creek, the canyoned flow which gives the entire rumpled region its name--the Sixteen country. Thumbs and the upward curl of your fingers represent the mountains and steep ridges all around. ~~cock~~ [≡] cock the right thumb a bit outward and it reigns as Wall Mountain does, prowling its rimrock out and over the hollowed land below. And on all that cupping rim of unclaimed high country, the Scots families surely instructed one another time and again, countless bands of sheep could find summer grass.

OK -
Wall
Doig's
letter

Exactly what had plucked up the Doig family line from a village outside Dundee in Scotland and carried it into these gray Montana foothills this way, ^{I can't say} ~~there is~~ no account of. Dad simply wrote it off to Scots mulishness: Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out. I have but the rough list of guesses from the long westering course of this country's frontier: poverty's push or the pull of wanderlust, some word of land and chance as heard from those who had gone earlier to America, or as read in the advertisements of booking agents. Perhaps some calamity inside the family itself, the loss of whatever thin livelihoods there had been in laboring on a laird's estate. Or it may truly have been an outcropping of the family vein of stubbornness. Some unordinary outlooks on life seemed to jaw out in my grandfather's generation, attitudes which might not have set well with a narrow village way of existence. Three Doig brothers and two sisters are known to have gone off from the Dundee area to risky futures, and at least two of them clearly went about life as if it was some private concoction they had just thought up.

The first remembered for doing entirely what she pleased was the sister Margaret, the one in the family who launched off from Scotland into the British Empire, alighting on some remote flood plain of India as a teacher or missionary,

no one now is quite sure which. She is at the outermost edges of the family memory, a talisman of intrepidity glimpsed and gone in someone's reminiscences as remembered by someone yet again. The rememberers do tell that twice in her last years she came around the world alone to visit the relatives in Montana, a sudden spinsterly ghost from Victorian days in her long black dress and odd wooden ^{sandals} shoes of India. She spent the rest of her life in India--died there, was buried there--and in her own way must have been entirely bemused with the existence she had worked out somewhere under the backdrop of the Himalayas.

The other original spirit was the eldest brother among those who packed up for Montana--David ^{Lanson} Lewis Doig, called D. L. The one clear fact about the route from Dundee is that a number of Scots came in succession, like a chain of people steadying one another across a rope bridge. Whoever arrived first--and no records name him--his letters talked the next one into coming to file on a homestead, and the one persuaded after that was D.L.'s own brother-in-law. Of course, D.L. stepped off next. By 1890, he had followed on with his wife and two children and set to work in Helena as a tailor until he could size up the Montana countryside.

He sized it up entirely backwards to the way his heirs have wished ever since, passing over rich valleys to the west and south to adventure up into the remote ^{Tierney} Turney Basin, where

5 Anna's
letters

POK
archie
Campbell
letters

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a homesteader who was giving up would sell him his cabin.^{claim}
 D.L. settled into his new site on Spring Creek, by long
 workdays and clever grazing made his small sheep ranch begin
 to prosper, and fathered hard until the family finally numbered
 nine children.

As promptly as he had enough offspring and income to
 keep the ranch going, D.L. devoted his own time to the hobby
 of raising brown leghorn chickens. He proved to be an entire
 genius at chicken growing. Before long, he ~~had~~^{his} a bloodline
 of brown leghorns, ~~which were~~^{with their} sleek glosses of feather and
 comb, ~~and~~^{were} renowned as prize breeding stock. He went to the
big shows in California and all over the East, a son tells
it. Beforehand he'd bring in his show cages into our front
room and he'd have his chickens in there, and he'd prune
'em and pick at 'em with a pointer stick, make 'em stand
certain ways and train their combs and everything like that,
y'know. He had the best anywhere. When he was at the Coliseum
Show in New York, the Russian government paid \$1400 for three
or four of those chickens. Something like that happened
just a numerous lot of times. I didn't like no part of 'em--
we all had to pitch in to take care of these blasted chickens--
but he was one of the best hands in the world with his birds.
 The trophies won at fairs and expositions covered most of
 one wall of the house, and D.L.'s wife sewed a quilt from
 the prize ribbons. Until the Depression and old age at last

~~copy~~
 Walt's
 father
 1966

forced him out, D.L. could be found there in the Basin, a round deep-bearded muser fussing over his prize chickens, sending someone down to the railroad tracks in the Sixteen canyon to fetch the jug of whiskey consigned for him each week, and asking not one thing more of the universe.

D.L. was followed into his oddly chosen Montana foothills by two of his brothers. Another of the faintest of family stories has it that the brother named Jack came to D.L.'s ranch on a doomed chance that mountain air would help his health, and there patiently waited out the year or so it took him to die. His would have been the first Doig grave to be put down amid sagebrush instead of heather. The other brother, Peter Doig, somehow made his way from Scotland in the spring of 1893, just after his nineteenth birthday. He had been a tailor's helper, and in the new land at once began a life as far away from needle and thread as he could get. For the first few years, he did the jobs on sheep ranches that his son would do a generation later, and which I would do, a generation after that, as his son's son--working in the lambing sheds, herding, wrangling in the shearing pens.

There can't have been much money in the ranch jobs which drew my father's father in those first years. But *what* there would have been ^{was} all the chance in the world to learn about sheep--and sheep in their gray thousands were the wool-and-meat machines which had made fortunes for the lairds

XOK-
Jeanne
compiled
letter

of the Scotland he arrived from. What was more, this high Montana grassland rimming the Big Belts had much of the look of the home country, and had drawn enough Scots onto ranches and homesteads that they counted up into something like a colony. The burr of their talk could be heard wherever the slow tides of sheep were flowing out onto the grass. Between the promise of those grazing herds and that talk comfortable to the ear, Peter Doig found it a place for staying.

Beyond the basics that he had relatives and countrymen in the new land and that he was medium height, slim, red-mustached, and had the ^{purling} ~~throaty~~ lowlands way of speech, nothing can be found now of what young Peter Doig was like. Not a scrap of paper from his own hand, not a word from those who would have known him then, not one thing to show him head-on and looking out at the world. What he did for himself is likewise known only in scantest outline: he met and married D.L.'s sister-in-law, Annie Campbell, a young women who had come from Perthshire by that chain of relatives and their relatives, and who now cooked for ranch crews. A year or so after the marriage, one son born, the young couple took up land a mile west of D.L.'s small ranch in the Turney Basin.

Those homesteading Scots families of the Basin--Doigs, Christisons, Mitchells, a few who came later--could not know it at first, but they had taken up land where the long-standing

habits and laws of settlement in America were not going to work. For one thing, this: the homestead staked out by Peter and Annie Doig lay amid the Big Belts at an elevation of 5700 feet. At first, the hill country did pay off with its summers of free pasture. In the bargain, however, came Januaries and Februaries--and too often Marches and Aprils--of hip-deep snowdrifts.

There was no help in law, of course, for the blizzards which bullied through the ^{Turney} Basin. But ~~there was~~ little help ^{derived,} either, where law supposedly was shouldering its share of the load. Simply, it came down to this: homesteads of 160 acres, or even several times that size, made no sense in that vast and dry and belligerent landscape of the high-mountain west. As well try to grow an orchard in a windowbox as to build a working ranch from such a patch. Quilt more land onto the first? Well and good--except that in an area of sharp natural boundaries, such as the Basin, a gain for one homestead could come only with someone else's loss. Simply go on summering the livestock in the shared open range of the mountains, as the Basin people did at first? Well and good again--except that with the stroke of a government pen which decreed the high summer pasture into a national forest, all that nearby free range ended. And promptly--so fast it'd make your head swim, ^{my father} ~~Dad~~ would have said of such promptness--the allotments for forest grazing began to pass

to the ^{region's} corporate valley ranches which already were big, and getting bigger.

Even if you somehow outlasted the weather, then, no foothills homestead you built for yourself could head off a future of national forest boundaries and powerful livestock companies. Like much else in the wresting of this continent, the homestead laws were working to a result, right enough, but not to the one professed for them. The homestead sites my father could point out to me by the dozen--place upon place, and our own family soil among them--in almost all cases turned out to be not the seed acres for yeoman farms amid the sage, nor the first pastures of tidy family ranches. Not that at all. They turned out to be landing ^{sites} spots, quarters to hold people until they were able to scramble away to somewhere else. Quarters, it could be said, that did for ^{that region of} rural America what the tenements of the immigrant ghettos did for city America.

But that is my telling of it, across the gulf of a second generation after Peter and Annie Doig took up land in the Basin. They had other things in their heads than the years beyond tomorrow. The young wife ^{from Parthenia} could hear the howling of wolves and coyotes--and worse, the splitting cracks of thunder when lightning storms cut down on the Big Belts. To the end of her life, she claimed she never ^{could forget} ~~had gotten~~ over those unruly sounds of the Basin, nor its isolation. The young

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Doig
etc.

husband was more the one for staying. ^{Peter Doig} ~~He~~ built a house of pine logs from a nearby timbered slope and filed homestead papers for the 160-acre site--which ominously qualified best under a law for the taking up of "desert land." Over the next dozen years, ^{a couple} they managed to double their owned acreage and to make a start in the sheep business, then used the profits to buy cattle, the easier livestock to pasture. As well, they added to the first son five more, until the names in the family began to resound like the roll call of a kilted regiment: Edwin Charles, Varick John, Charles Campbell, James Stuart, Angus McKinnon, Claude Spencer.

Then, on a September day in 1910, a little past noon, Peter Doig stepped outside the log house. He had been spending time on errands--to the county fair the day before, where he had won prizes for his chickens and dry-land potatoes and treated himself to a fine rewardful drunk, this morning to his nearest neighbor's house on some small matter--and the ranch chores were piling up. He strode down the path to the garden to begin digging the rest of the prize potato crop. Going through the gate, he clutched at his heart, fell sideways, and died. He was four months short of his 37th birthday.

A few mornings later, a lumber wagon with a casket roped in place jolted out of the ^{Tierney} ~~Turney~~ Basin and set off on the day-long trip to the cemetery at White Sulphur Springs.

Ed 7/29/10
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Behind the rough hearse coiled a dusty column of riders on horseback and families in spring wagons, neighbors and kin. They buried Peter Doig, tailor's helper in Scotland and homesteader in Montana, and rode their long ride home into the hills.

Charles Campbell Doig was nine when his father died, made old enough in that instant to help his mother and his brothers carry the body in from the dark garden dirt. It must have been the first time he touched against death. And touched ahead, too, somewhere in his scaredness, to the life he was going to have from then on in that lamed family, on that flinty Basin homestead.

That is as much as can be eked out--landscape, settlers' patterns on it, the family fate within the pattern--about the past my father came out of. I read into it all I can, plot out likelihoods and chase after blood hunches. But still the story draws ^{itself} away from the dry twinings of map work and bloodlines, and into the boundaries of my father's own body and brain. Where his outline touched the air, my knowing must truly begin.

He was, as I have said, not more than five and a half feet tall, and he had the small man's jut of jaw toward heaven about that. I never saw anybody so big I couldn't take him on in a fight, anyway. That would have been said from his declaring stance, standing flat-backed as if a strut

had been stopped in mid-stride. Then the grin would have worked at the handsome straight mouth and the wryness come: He might of cleaned my clock when I took him on, too, but that didn't matter. Oh, as the fellow says, I'm awfully little but I'm awfully tough.

As the fellow says. That signal began seven of every ten of his jokes, the Dutch fellow or the Chinese fellow or the Irish fellow intoning one jape or another--and inevitably performed in Dad's dialect tries, all hopelessly but happily lost in his own heathery burr. My father had a humor unusual in a ^{tense} nervous man, a casual gift of storying which paid no attention to the ~~twanging~~ ^{twanging away} nerves in him. This may account for the way people sometimes have talked to me of him as if ^{Charlie Doig} ~~he~~ were two separate men. I remember Charlie could spiel with the best of us knotheads, one will say, had a story ready whenever he remembered to look up from his work. And another, He knew sheep ranchin', that feller did, but you know he could kind of get excited workin' cattle, he ^{was} too nervous to be the best cowman. He divides like that in my own memory as well. Here, the natural pace of story which would have me listening without daring a blink. There, his marks of worry or tension, the tongue-click against the roof of his mouth or the spaced rhythm which began to parcel his words: Damn-it-to-hell-anyway. . .

Too, I somehow see ^{my father} ~~him~~ in different sizes at once--

the box-jawed man so far above me as a boy, the banty of a fellow beside me when I had grown. But at whatever version, a remarkable economy of line about him. As if making it up to him for the shortness and a weight of only about 135 pounds, Dad's body went wide and square at the shoulders and then angled neatly down, like a thin but efficient wedge. His arms were ropy with muscle, yet not large; it was a mystery where the full strength of him came from, for he was as strong as men half again his size in lifting hay bales or woolsacks or westling calves down for the branding iron.

The quick parts of his brain, and they were several, mostly had to do with such ranchcraft. This came both from that Basin upbringing and from having flung himself out of it. He was just pretty catty about anything to do with a ranch. And I knew Charlie when he wasn't much more than dry behind the ears, out and ridin' for these stock spreads. . . .

So to me now, looking at my father's early life is something like the first glimpse ever into a stone-rippled reflection in a pond, and wondering how it can be that the likeness there repeats some of what I know is me, growing up at his side thirty years later, along with so much more that is only waver and blur and startlement, and so can only belong to some other being entirely. Crowding all his home hours in that log cabin beneath the Big Belts,

five brothers, and a sister born after Peter Doig's death; the one of me, alone and treasuring it that way. His eight years of school which, shying from those Basin winters, began with spring thaw and then hurried hit-and-miss through summer; all my summers until well into adulthood ending in earliest September quick as the bell at the end of a recess, school of one kind or another creeping on then through three entire seasons of the year. Some schoolmates of his came from families drawn back so far into the hills and their own peculiarities of living that the children were more like the coyotes which watchfully loped the ridgelines than like the other Basin youngsters. One family's boys, he remembered, started school so skittish that when someone met them on an open stretch of road where they couldn't dart into the brush, they flopped flat with their lunchboxes propped in front of their heads to hide behind. Thought we couldn't see 'em behind those damned little lunchboxes, can ye feature that? I barely could; my classmates always were town children, wearing town shoes and with a combed, town way of behaving.

Dad on horseback every chance he had, on his way to being one of the envied riders in a countryside of riders; me reading every moment I could, tipping any open page up into my eyes and imagination. He grew up with a temper fused as short as he was, but also with some estimates of

himself considerably more generous than that; maybe because I held in all my temper and dreams, I filled out like a ~~prize~~^{brick-fed} calf, bigger and solider and more red-haired every time anyone glanced in my direction.

Another wonderment at once follows this one, like a stone hurled harder into the pond. On his way to growing out of boyhood, my father came very near to dying. Then time and again after that, it would happen that he would draw alongside death, breathe the taste of doom, then be let live.

I have had to think much about how death has touched early into my family. It touched earliest of all toward my father. Why, if what is so far from having answer is even askable--why was his life so closely stalked this way? And how was it that he lasted as he did? The costs that this father of mine paid in all the surviving he had to do, I know enough about. But about why life had to dangle him such terms, not nearly enough.

That first slash at him, in 1918, came when the planet was dealing plentifully in killing. World War One had gutted open entire nations, the influenza epidemic now was ripping at family after family. Dad barely missed the war; he was 17½ years old at armistice time. But only days later, he was closer to death than if he had been in the frontmost trenches.

The last year or so of the combat, Dad had been hired by Basin neighbors whose son had been plucked away by the draft board. That job, on a tatter of a ranch near the canyon where the railroad snaked through the Sixteen country, was a youngster's worst dream. All day, for one square meal--oh, and they'd give me an apple to eat at bedtime, the honyockers--and a few dollars a week which he had to pass along to his mother, Dad did a man's share of ranch work; on top of that, mornings and evenings he slogged through the chores of chicken-feeding and hog-slopping and kindling-splitting which a country child grows up hating.

It got worse. The soldier son was put on a ship to France, and now every day Dad was sent off on the mile and a half trudge down the railroad track to the Sixteen post office, to fetch a newspaper so the fretful parents could read through the list of battle casualties. I tell ye now, it didn't take me long to be wishin' that the son-of-a-buck would be on that list, so I wouldn't have to fetch that damn newspaper.

It was like my father to call down exasperation of that sort on somebody else, then undergo worse himself. The soldier son survived. But in mid-November of 1918, Dad set out on a day of deer hunting with a cousin, one of D.L.'s strapping sons, and the pair of them came down first with pneumonia, and then influenza. For days they lay

delirious in the log ranch houses their fathers had built a mile apart. On the first night of December, the cousin died, and Dad's fever broke.

Those two had started out even when they put their first footprints in the snow on that hunting trip. Why death for one, and not the other? No answer comes, except that even starts don't seem to count for much. If that was what saved Charlie Doig then, he was going to need several such bylaws of fate before he was done.

That first siege on his health behind him, Dad went back to the hired work which each of the young Doig brothers started at just as soon as he was ^{big} ~~old~~ enough. For years, their wages had had to be the prop under the family homestead, which at last was almost pulling itself up into ^{a semblance of} a ranch. By the autumn of 1919, all their cowboying and shepherding and scrimping together had added up: We'd got our debts paid off, and built up quite a little bunch of cattle. Sold 90 head that fall, put the money in the bank, laid in a winter's supply of groceries, bought a tremendous amount of oat straw a guy had there--it was just like hay, y'know. So we started in that winter with 190 head of cattle, and about 40 head of dandy horses. And also my mother just had inherited five thousand dollars from a relative that died in Scotland. Luck, it seemed, could hardly wait to follow on luck. Then, weeks ahead of the calendar, winter set in.

Death
OK

It became the winter which the Basin people afterward would measure all other winters against. The dark timbered mountains around them went white as icebergs. The tops of sagebrush vanished under drifts. And up around the bodies of bawling livestock, the wind twirled a deadlier and deadlier web of snow. Day upon day, hay sleds slogged out all across the Basin to the cattle and horses as mittened men and boys fought this starvation weather with pitchforks.

By late January, the weather was gaining every day. The Basin's haystacks were nearly gone, and the ranch families shipped in trainloads of slough grass which had been mowed from frozen marshes in Minnesota. Fifty dollars a ton. Fifty-five. Then sixty. We never heard of prices that high. And there was no choice in the world but to pay them. Godamighty, it was awful stuff, though. You had to chop the bales to pieces with axes. Sometimes out of a bale would tumble an entire muskrat house of sticks and mud. And roads and brush and Christ knows what all. Down to this brittle ration, the Basin country began to feel winter fastening into the very pit of its stomach. I helped load what was left of a neighbor's sheep into boxcars there at Sixteen. Those sheep were so hungry they were eatin' the wool off each other. And even the desperation hay began to run out. If we could of got another ten ton, we could of saved a lot of cattle. But-we-could-not-get-it. Cows struggled to

stay alive now by eating willows thick as a man's thumb. And still the animals died a little every day, until the carcasses began to make dark humps on the white desert of snow.

It was early June of 1920 before spring greened out from under the snowdrifts in the Basin. We had about 60 head of cattle left, and about half a dozen horses, and not a dime.

The losses killed whatever hopes there had been that the Basin ranch would be able to bankroll Dad and the other brothers in ranching starts of their own. Like seeds flying on the Basin's chilly wind, they began to drift out one after another now.

Dad did not neglect to savor his earliest drifting. An autumn came when he and his ^{younger} brother Angus went off to the Chicago stockyards with a cousin's boxcars of cattle. For every carload of stock, see, you were entitled to your fare both ways. We were a pair of punk kids, out for a big time. So we took off to see Chicago. On the cattle train with them was a valley rancher who celebrated such trips by spending his cattle profits and then papering the city with overdrawn checks. Oh, he'd go back there and have a high old time. He took the young cowboys in tow, and the three of them sashayed through Chicago. One morning after several days of cloudtop living, they were sprawled in barber chairs

for the daily shave which would start them on a new round of carousing. The policeman on the beat--a helluva big old harness bull--paused outside the window at the sight of three pairs of cowboy boots poking from under the barber cloths. He sauntered in, lifted the hot towel off the rancher's face, and said: Hello, White Sulphur Springs. When you get that shave, I want you. Their financier on his way to the precinct station, the Doig brothers caught the next train back to Montana.

And some other autumn--it seemed to be his migration time--Dad and his friend Clifford Shearer talked each other into heading west for the Coast. What they were going to do out there, they had no idea whatsoever, but probably it would be more promising than the spot they were standing on at the moment.

Clifford and Dad made, as a valley man has said it to me, a pair of a kind. They both were under medium height, wiry, trim, Clifford with his own good looks more sharply cut than Dad's square steady lines. Both were what the valley called well thought of. The night before they left, the Basin people threw a farewell dance at the Sixteen schoolhouse. Women were bawling and carrying on, you'd thought the world was coming to an end.

Out in the unknown as job seekers, Dad and Clifford fizzed with more imagination than their first employment

allowed for. They stopped in Washington's Yakima Valley long enough to try the apple harvest. The idea, they were told the first morning, was to pluck each piece of fruit with care--now, you young fellers, give it this little twist so the stem don't come off, see?--so it would go into the box unblemished for the market. But quality was not what they were being paid for; quantity was. Their orchard career hardly had got underway before they were caught efficiently shaking apples down into their boxes by the whole battered treeload, and were sent down the road. We had five dollars apiece to show for it, anyway. They headed west some more through the state of Washington. The Pacific Ocean stopped them at Aberdeen, where they hired on as pilers in a lumber yard.

Charlie and I didn't know what a stick of lumber was, hardly--this from Clifford, with his drawling chuckle--we thought everything was made out of logs, y'know. But they asked us if we knew anything about lumber, and we said 'Well, sure.' When the first rain of the Aberdeen winter whipped in, the pair of them slopped through their shift wondering to one another how soon the yard boss would take pity, as any rancher back home would decently have done, and send them in out of the downpour. By the end of that wettest day of their lives, they still were in the rain but had stopped wondering.

Well, hell, we needed the job, y'know. It was November
and the streets was lined with men, and we was a long ways
from home. So I said to Charlie, by gollies, I'm goin' uptown
and see if they won't trust a feller for some rain clothes.
Clifford slogged off and talked a dry-goods merchant out of
two sets of raingear on credit. But a drier skin didn't ease
Dad's mind entirely. He got homesick, y'know. You never saw
a guy got so homesick as Charlie. Dad toughed it out in
Aberdeen for some months, told Clifford he couldn't stand
it and headed back to Montana. That Aberdeen winter was
the longest one in my life, and godamighty, the rain.

When he came home shaking off the Pacific Coast damp,
Dad was less interested in the world beyond the valley. He
did some more cowboying, and some more time on sheep ranches;
three seasons, he sheared sheep with a crew which featured
a handsome giant shearer named Matt Van Patton. The best
looking guy I think I ever remember seeing. A sheep shearing
sonofagun, too; he could really knock the wool off of 'em,
went over 200 ewes on his tally every day. And a drinking
sonofagun. ~~The last time~~ Dad ^{last} saw him ~~was~~ when the crew
finished its final season and broke up. Old Matt, he started
hittin' the booze, he had a jug somewhere, along the middle
of the afternoon. By suppertime he was so drunk he couldn't
walk. The crew had a dead-ax wagon to haul its outfit in,
and he was layin' in the bottom of that with his head hangin'
out over the tailgate.

When Clifford returned from the Coast, there was serious roistering to be caught up on with him, too. I remember that me an' Charlie might get a little bit on the renegade side now and then, y'might say. This once, there was three of us--me an' Charlie and D.L.'s son Alex--caught the train from Sixteen up there to the dance at Ringling one night. We got our room from Mrs. Harder, the old German lady who run the Harder Hotel there. Then we went on down to the bootleg joint and bought a gallon of moonshine. So of course we got pretty well loaded off of it, and full of hell. Anyway, Mrs. Harder, she called up the sheriff's office and said for the sheriff to get down there: 'Dere's sechs boys from Sechsteen, and dey're wreckin' my hotel!' Well, hell, there was only three of us, but I guess she thought we was as bad as six.

But the deep ingredient of my father's adventuring in those years of his early twenties was horses. It was a time when a man still did much of his day's work atop a saddle pony, and the liveliest of his recreation as well. And with every hour in the saddle, the odds built that there was hoofed catastrophe ahead. Built, as Dad's stories lessoned into me, until the most casual swing into the stirrups could almost cost your life: I'll tell ye a time. I was breakin' this horse, and I'd rode the thing for a couple of weeks, got him pretty gentle--a big nice tall brown horse with a

stripe in his face. I'd been huntin' elk up in the Castles,
and I'd rode that horse all day long. Comin' home, I was
just there in the Basin below the Christison place, and
got off to open a gate. My rifle was on the saddle there,
with the butt back toward the horse's hip, and it'd rubbed
a sore there and I didn't notice the rubbin'. When I went
to get back on, took hold of the saddle horn to pull myself
up, y'know, the rifle scraped across that sore. Boy, he
ducked out from under me and I went clear over him. I caught
my opposite foot in the stirrup as I went over, and away
he went, draggin' me. He just kicked the daylights out of
me as we went. It was in a plowed field, and I managed to
turn over and get my face like this--cradling his arms in
front of his face, to my rapt watching--but he kept kickin'
me in the back of the head here, until he had knots comin'
on me big as your fist. And he broke my collarbone. Finally
my boot came off, or he'd of dragged me around until he
kicked my head off, I guess.

The accident of flailing along the earth with a horse's rear hooves thumping your skull was one thing. Courting such breakage was another, and it was in my father not to miss that chance, either. Most summer Sundays, the best riders in the county would gather at a ranch and try to ride every bucking horse they had been able to round up out of the hills. It was the kind of hellbending contest

young Charlie Doig was good at, and he passed up few opportunities to show it.

The hill broncs which would be hazed in somewhere for this weekend rodeoing--the Doig homestead had a big stout notched-pole corral which was just right--were not scruffy little mustangs. They were half again bigger and a lot less rideable than that: herds grown from ranch stock turned out to pasture, with all the heft of workhorses added to their new wildness. Eventually there came to be a couple of thousand such renegades roaming the grassed hills around the valley. Some would weigh more than three-quarters of a ton and measure almost as tall at the shoulder as the height of a big man. A rider would come away from a summer of those massive hill broncs with one experience or another shaken into his bones and brain, and Dad's turn came up when the last two horses were whooped into the Doig corral at dusk one of those Sunday afternoons.

Five or six of us were ridin', all had our girls there and were showin' off, y'know. Neither of the last horses looked worth the trouble of climbing on--a huge club-hoofed bay, and a homely low-slung black gelding. Someone yelled out, That black one looks like a damned milk cow! Dad called across the corral to the other rider, Which one of those do you want, Frankie, the big one or that black thing? The bay was saddled, and thudded around the corral harmlessly

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on its club hooves. Then the corral crew roped the black for Dad and began to discover that this one was several times more horse than it looked. Oh, he was a bearcat, I'm here to tell you.

The gelding was so feisty they had to flop him flat and hold him down to cinch the saddle on, the last resort for a saddling crew that took any pride in itself. Dad swung into the stirrups while the horse was uncoiling up out of the dirt. When the bronc had all four feet under him, he sunfished for the corral poles and went high into them as intentionally as if he were a suicide plunging off a cliff. Horse and rider crashed back off the timbers, then the bronc staggered away into another quick running start and slammed the fence again. And then again.

He like to have beat my brains out on that corral fence. Then, worse: He threw me off over his head upside down and slammed me against that log fence again, and still he kept a-buckin'. I jumped up and got out of his way and tried to climb the fence. ^{Dad} He had made it onto the top of the fence when the battering caught up with ^{his body} him. Blacking out, he pitched off the corral backwards, into the path of the gelding as it rampaged past. The horse ran over him full length, full speed. One hoof hit me in the ribs here, and the other hit me in the side of the head here, and just shoved all the skin down off the side of my face in a bunch.

The gelding would have hollowed him out like a trough if the corral crew hadn't managed to snake Dad out under the fence before the horse could get himself turned. By then, someone already was sprinting for a car for the forty-five mile ride to a doctor. I was laid up six weeks that time, before I could even get on crutches.

That was his third stalking by death; Dad himself had invited most of the risk that time, although in the homely black gelding it came by the sneakiest of means. But the next near-killing hit him as randomly as a lightning bolt exploding a snag. It began with the yip of coyote pups on a mountainside above the Basin. I was workin' for Bert Plymale, and we lambed a bunch of sheep over there near the D.L. place. Coyotes, sheep killers that they were, were hated as nothing else in that country, especially on the lean foothill ranches where any loss of livestock hurt like a wound. They were eatin' the lambs just about as fast as we could turn 'em out. And we could hear these coyotes in a park up on the side of the mountain, yippin' up there early morning and evening. So I had a young kid workin' with me, and we decided we'd go up there and find that den.

When they reined up in a clearing in the timber where the yips were coming from, Dad stepped off his horse and walked ahead a few steps to look for the den. I was carryin' the pick and the kid was carryin' the shovel--in case we

found the den, we could dig it out. I'd stepped off of this bay horse, dropped the lines and walked several feet in front of him, clear away from him. That sap of a kid, he dropped that shovel right at the horse's heels. And instead of kickin' at the shovel like a normal horse would, y'know, he jumped ahead and whirled and kicked me right in the middle of the back. Drove two ribs into my lungs.

Dad hunched on the ground like a shot animal. I couldn't get any breath at all when I'd try to straighten up. When I was down on all fours, I could get enough breath to get by on. The kid, he was gonna leave me there and take off to find everybody in the country to come get me with a stretcher. I said no, by God, I was gonna get out of there somehow. Spraddled on hands and knees in a red fog of pain, he gasped out to the youngster to lead his horse beneath a small cliff nearby. Dad crawled to the cliff, climbed off the ledge into the saddle. Then, crumpled like a dead man tied into the stirrups, he rode the endless mile and a half to the ranch. That was one long ride, I'm-here-to-tell-you.

Getting there only began a new spell of pain--the pounding car ride across rutted roads to town and the doctor. By then, Dad's breathing had gone so ragged and bloody that the doctor set off with him for the hospital in Bozeman. Two gasping hours more in a car. At last, by evening, he

lay flat in a hospital bed. But I always healed fast, anyway, and a few weeks later, he climbed stiffly onto a horse again.

He wouldn't have thought, when he was being battered around from one near-death to the next, that he was heading all the while into the ranch job he would do for many of the rest of his years. But the valley, which could always be counted on to be fickle, now was going to let him find out in a hurry what he could do best. Sometime around 1925, when he was twenty-four years old, Dad said his goodbyes at the Basin homestead another time, saddled up, and rode to the far end of the Smith River Valley to ask for a job at the Dogie ranch.

More than any other ranch, the Dogie had been set up-- which is to say, pieced together of bought-out homesteads and other small holdings--to use the valley's advantages and work around its drawbacks. Wild hay could be cut by the mile from its prime bottomland meadows; a crew of three dozen men would begin haying each mid-June and build the loaf-like stacks by the hundreds. Cattle and sheep--like many ^{Montana} ranches of the time, the Dogie raised both--could be grazed over its tens of thousands of acres of bunchgrass slopes along and above the north fork of the Smith River, and sheltered from winter blizzards in the willow thickets cloaking the streambed. And the trump card of it all: hard years could be evened out with the wealth of the Seattle

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shipping family who owned the enterprise and ran it in a fond vague style.

The Dogie ^{readily} gladly put Dad on its payroll, but that was the most that could be said for the job. He was made choreboy, back again at the hated round of milking cows and feeding chickens and hogs and fetching stovewood for the cook. But he had come to the Dogie and was biding time there because the owners were signing into a partnership with a sheep rancher from near Sixteenmile Creek. The "Jasper" at the front of his name long since crimped down to "Jap" by someone's hurried tongue, Jap Stewart had arrived out of Missouri some twenty years before, leaving behind the sight in one eye due to a knife fight in a St. Joe saloon, but bringing just the kind of elbowing ambition to make a success in the wide-open benchlands he found ^{a few} ~~several~~ miles east of the Basin. Drinker, scrapper, sharp dealer and all the rest, Jap also was a ranchman to the marrow, and he prospered in the Sixteen country as no one before or since. Now he was quilting onto the Dogie holdings his own five thousand head of sheep and the allotted pasture in the national forest for every last woolly one of them. He also moved in to kick loose anything that didn't work, such as most of the Dogie's crew.

Jap began by giving them a Missouri growling at--most of you sonsabitches've worked here so goddamn long all you

know any more is how to hide out in the goddamn brush--and
ended up sacking every man on the ranch except Dad and a
handful of others. While Jap's new men streamed in past
the old crew on the road to town, Dad, at the age of 25,
was made sheep boss, in charge of the Dogie's nine bands
grazing across two wide ends of the county. In another
six months, I was foreman of the whole damn shebang.

What one-eyed old Jap Stewart must have seen, watching
Dad as he grew up in those ranch jobs which Annie Doig's
sons were always pegging away at, was that he would know
how to work men. Skill with horses and cattle and sheep
were one thing; Dad had those talents, but so did every tenth
or twentieth young drifter who came along. The rare thing
in the valley was to be able to handle men. Ranch crews were
a hard commodity, a gravel mix of drifters, drinkers, gripers,
not a few mental cripples, and an occasional steady worker.
No two crews were ever much alike, except in one thing:
somebody was going to resent the work and any foreman who
put him to it, and sooner or later trouble would be made.
Anyone who had spent time on a ranch crew knew the stories--
of a herder who sneaked the stovepipe off his own sheepwagon
while camp was being moved so he would have something to
be mad about and could quit, or of a tireless hay stacker
who packed up and left on the first rainy day because he

couldn't stand the hours of being idle. Darker stories, too, of a herding dog bashed to death with rocks in some silent coulee, a haystack ablaze in the night when there had been no lightning, a man battered in an alley after an argument with a broody crewman.

It would have been something to mutter about, then, for ranch hands who came onto the ^{Dogie} job to find this kid foreman barely five and a half feet tall parceling out orders in a soft burred voice. Plainly Dad was too short and green to handle a crew of a 45,000-acre ranch. But there was the surprising square heft across his shoulders and down his arms--more than enough strength to be wicked in a fight, and, remember, I never saw anybody so big I couldn't take him on. But along with muscle and feistiness, Dad had a knack of handing tasks around in a crew reasonably, almost gently: Monte, if you'd ride up to the school section and salt those cows there. Jeff, if you'd work over that fence along the creek. Tony, if you'd . . . That soft if of his seemed to deal each man into the deciding, and it was a mark of Dad's crews that they generally went out of the bunkhouse to the school section and the creek fence and a dozen other jobs just as if the work had been their own idea all along. Oh, he could handle us 'rangutangs, all right--this from a Dogie man, a half century on--no ructions on a crew of your daddy's.

These years when my father began to ramrod crews were amid the era when the homesteaders' valley was dimming away, and the lustrous wealth of big new ranch owners had begun to show itself. President Woodrow Wilson's son-in-law toyed with a ~~ranch~~ ^{section of land} on Battle Creek for awhile. A family named Manger began to quilt together vast sprawls ^{valley} of grassland for its sheep. John Ringling of Wisconsin and New York and Florida put some of his circus fortune into buying 75,000 acres of range, erected a mammoth dairy barn near the White Sulphur Springs stockyards, and financed the twenty-mile rail-line which squibbed down the valley to connect with the main track of the Milwaukee and St. Paul railroad. John's railroad may be only twenty miles long, but it's just as wide as any man's railroad, the other Ringling brothers joshed, but John Ringling was serious as any squire about his sagebrush empire. He held to his investments in the valley for a quarter of a century, and the valley people talked casually about the Ringling family, as if they were neighbors who had happened to come into a bit more flash and fortune than anyone else.

But one name was beginning to be spoken most often in the valley: Rankin. It would be spoken in contempt nearly all of my father's remaining years there, and through my own boyhood and beyond. Wellington D. Rankin was a lawyer in Helena, a courtroom caricature with flowing silver hair

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and an Old Testament voice. And, be it said, a pirate's shrewdness. When the Depression began to catch up with John Ringling's indulgences, Rankin was there to buy the every acre--the so-and-so got that Ringling land for a song, and did his own singing--and then further ranch after ranch in the hills hemming the Big Belts, until an ~~ominous~~ ^{ducal} new style had come into the valley.

Rankin poured in cattle by the thousands--his herd eventually was said to be ten thousand head--and then ^{apparently} skimped every expense he could think of. His cowboys were shabby stick figures on horseback. The perpetual rumor was that most of them were out on prison parole or other work release somehow arranged by Rankin; old Rankin's jailbirds, the valley people called them. More forlorn even than the cowboys were the Rankin cattle, skinny creatures with the huge Double O Bar brand across their ribs like craters where all the left had seeped from them.

These wolfish cows roved everywhere: That bastard of a Rankin always had more cattle than country. . . I tell you, I'm afraid of 'em. A storm'll come and here Rankin's cows'll come up the road from Rock Creek, and they reach through your fences eatin' weeds and willows, and if they break in they can eat you out in one night. Another of the rumbles against this new duke of the valley was the supposition that he was responsible for Montana's lack of

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Mile upon mile, Rankin's land ran unfenced along valley highway, a law requiring fencing along the state highways. How ever it had come to be, the legislative gap kept the valley wide open to Rankin's pillaging herds, and ^{his herds} they grazed along the highway shoulders ^{of the road} and regular as the dark of the moon were smashed by cars cresting the ^{routes} valley highway's inky little dips.

As the giant ranches took more and more of the country, then, men such as my father became more valuable as foremen --the top sergeants for the country's regimenting. A few of them held the same job for decades, the seasons of haying and lambing and calving as steady and ceaseless in their lives as the phases of the moon. Dad was of the ^{ilk} group more contentious than that. The valley ranches often were miserably mis-managed--few owners having the deftness it takes to budget the grazing of thousands of animals across rough miles of sage country, in a chancy climate--and it was common for a feisty foreman to give his job one last thunder-blue cussing, quit, and move on somewhere else in the valley. Dad seared himself loose that way a number of times, even from the Dogie when the hand of ownership would get too clumsy there.

His quittings, as he told and retold them, would take on all the shape and pace of a pageant. It would begin with the rancher swaggering into the bunkhouse after breakfast to have his say about the work to be done that day. Dad would listen, never giving a sign, until the rancher had

finished. Then ^{Dad} he would casually answer, No, someone else could line out the crew on those jobs, he was through.

Puzzled, the rancher would ask what he meant.

Dad would reply that he meant he was quitting, that's what.

Unbelieving, the rancher would begin to stammer: For bejesus'sake why, what was wrong?

This was Dad's cue to tell him with all barrels blazing --that he'd never worked on a haywire outfit with such broken-down equipment, or that he'd had enough of daylight-to-dark days with no Sundays off, or that he'd never been on a place before where he'd been given so damn few men to put up the hay.

The rancher next would plead: Hell, he didn't need to quit, they'd fix it up somehow.

This was the trumping time Dad had been waiting for: No, by God, he wouldn't work on any ranch run the way this one was, not for any amount of money. Write 'er out, whatever salary he had coming; he was going to town.

That the event did not always happen in just this fashion did not matter; it held that shape in Dad's mind, and left him free to revamp his routine of ^{foremaning} ~~life~~ as promptly as he felt like it. Go to town he would, and in a day or so on to the next job as foreman--never for Rankin, I'd rather

scratch with the chickens than work for that bastard--because
the bedrock fact under young Charlie Doig's life was that he knew nearly all that was worth knowing about ranch work in the valley. It came of an irony: the one thing that hardscrabble Basin homestead had done for Dad and his brothers was to teach them how a ranch ought to operate. From having had to take that homestead apart and put it together time and again as they tried to make it go, the Doig youngsters could not help but learn more than they could forget. Out of that way of growing up and some unaltered ability all his own, then, this young ranchman who would become my father had a feel for the valley's seasons and each of their tasks and the crews needed to achieve them, and it made him some reputation early.

My father, now, at twenty-seven. Three or four times back from death's borderlines. ^{Some time} ~~A few years~~ as foreman of the Dogie before pushing off for another of the valley's ranches, and others after that, whenever he was unfractured and in the saddle. Still putting a ^{quick} ~~brief~~ hand to the Basin homestead every so often with a couple of the other brothers, as if they couldn't stand to let the sage hills take back that grudging patch of ranch. If he was headed nowhere grand in history, at least he seemed not to mind the route. But now, as it had that way of doing, his life swerved hard. He met Berneta Ringer, my mother.

Some Saturday night in the spring of 1928, he danced with her in the community hall at the little town of Ringling, where John Ringling's branchline railroad wandered down the valley from White Sulphur Springs. Berneta was a slim high school girl, not much more than five feet tall, with a fragile porcelain look to her--pale skin set off by dark hair, a dainty way of arching her head forward a few inches as if listening to a whisper. She had a straight, careful smile, her lips just beginning to part with amusement. Her face was too round and the nose too broad to allow beauty, but a tidy prettiness was there. And she carried ~~an~~ admiration from anyone who knew her situation: her family, which skimped along in a life hard and poor even for a country which had tumbleweeded so many families out of desperate foothills ranches, had come west from Wisconsin some years before, in the hope that the crisp Montana air would ease her asthma. That dainty thrust of her head came from breathing deep against the clutching in her lungs.

Probably Dad liked the grit Berneta showed against such odds. More than likely Berneta was flattered by the attentions of the clean-featured cowboy. Romance seems to have perked fast in both of them, and a few months later, the first full set of days they spent together brimmed with it.

It was the Fourth of July celebration in White Sulphur

Springs, and they took the town. In my mother's photo album, that holiday's snapshots show up in a happy flurry; every scene has been braided to its moment by her looping writing. Ready for the Big Day: Dad and his brother Angus have doffed their black ten-gallon hats for the camera, grins in place under their slicked hair, and bandannas fluttering at their necks like flags of a new country. The Wildest Bunch in W.S.S.--seven of them from Ringling and the Basin are ganged along the side of a car, handrolled cigarettes angling out of the men's mouths, my mother and her cousin small prim fluffs in the dark cloudbank of cowboy hats. Angus, in showy riveted chaps, slips an arm around the cousin. Dad looks squarely as ever into the camera from where he has tucked down on the running board; the halter dangling over his crossed arms must mean he is about to bronc-ride. My mother stands as close beside him as she can, tiny and very girlish in a flapper's dress. She is a few months past her fifteenth birthday.

Then a pose which didn't need her words: the two Doig brothers in the rodeo corral, the pair of them straddled onto Angus's star-faced roping horse. Angus sits the saddle deep and solid, the loose ready loops of his lariat held by a pommel strap. Dad straddles snug behind him, and as they both turn toward my mother's camera, all the lines of their bodies repeat one another in such closeness--down the

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two of them, the same crimped curves of hat, nip of sleeve garter, sweep of chaps, pointed lines of boot.

no ¶ It is a picture which has caught, in this middle of a moment, how young they were, and how good at what they could do, and how ready they were to prove it. ¶ All of this which paraded through those few quick days of celebration told my mother what she wanted to know about Charlie Doig. There is another photo taken soon afterward, in which my father grins cockily, hands palmed into hip pockets, dressy new chaps sweeping back from his legs as if he were flying. On this one is written: My Cowboy.

Yet marrying didn't develop. Berneta was too young, and her mother seems to have had doubts about cowboys. The courtship settled down to a slog. Dad would come horseback twenty miles along a rim of the valley and ease up to a ramshackle ranch house. Inside, with the three younger children looking on gap-mouthed, the mother telling him with cold eyes all the doubts there ever were about footloose cowpokes, and the talky father who could gabble by the hour, he did whatever wooing he could.)

~~Plainly, in those days he had wells of determination deeper than what was left in him when the two of us came back into the valley together all that time later. He needed them, because this slow courtship went on for six years.~~

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At last, just before my mother turned 21 years of age in 1934, they married.

From then, their story tells itself in a rush, just as Berneta Doig's life was hurrying to an end. Their first summers of marriage were the quiet, wandering ones they spent herding sheep in the mountains. Other seasons, Dad hired on and moved on as he had always done. Old age and the Depression were dislodging his mother from the Basin homestead she had come to so doubtfully forty years before. The next years brought Annie Doig's death, and the emptying of the Basin of its very last diehard settlers, the bowl of immigrants' dreams now become the fenced pastures of a cattle company. Brought, too, another of the close licks of death: Dad's brother Jim, his closest in age, was thrown from a saddlehorse and killed.

The sale of the Basin homestead for a few dollars an acre closed the circle back to the landlessness the Doigs started off with. By then, Dad had found his way around that lack of footing. Notching up from the jobs as foreman, in the late 1930's, he began to run other men's ranches for them--all the responsibilities and decisions his, and the profits divided between him and the owner.

The South long and long has had its word for this system: sharecropping. Our West was edgier about that, and called it instead working on shares. But either way, the notion

was that the landless man did the labor for the landed, and said his prayers that the weather or market prices wouldn't nullify his year's effort. For my father, going on shares was both an opportunity and an exasperation. He knew the work of raising livestock, and could do as much of it as any man in the valley. But even if he sweated forth some shares of profit--and a number of times, he did--there was little bidding he could do for ranchland wanted by any of valley's big ownerships. And I decided I'd be damned if I'd scratch along on a dab of a place like we did back there in the Basin.

By the time I was born in 1939, Dad had settled into managing, on shares, a cattle ranch owned by Jap Stewart's brother, beneath the ~~south~~^{east} slope of Grassy Mountain. The years there made steady money, but my mother's asthma was clenching worse and worse. The final winter of World War Two, the three of us went to Arizona to try the climate for her there. Dad started work in an aircraft factory, and almost before he was in the door was made a foreman. It may have been that my parents would have chosen Arizona for good, once the war was over and they could have had some time to talk themselves into a new direction of life. But they had arranged to run a thousand head of sheep on shares the next summer, and to give themselves one more season of the mountains. And so we came back to Montana and rode the

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high trail into the Bridger Range, one to her last hard breaths ever and the other two of us to the bruised time after her death.

This journey of life, then, my father had come by the autumn of 1945, when he and I began to blink awake to find ourselves with the stunted ranch he had managed to rent, and with my niche as the boy he now had to raise alone. It seems to me now that the ranch, even though it was our entire livelihood, counted little in this time. A few thousand acres hugging onto the Smith River just as it began kinking through sage foothills into the southern edge of the valley, the place had more to offer me than it did a man trying to coax a profit from it. Its shale gulches and slab-rocked slopes pulled me off into more pretend games alone than ever, more kchews of rock bullets flung zinging off boulders, more dream-times as I wandered and poked and hid among the stone silences. For Dad, the reaches of rock can only have been one more obstacle which cattle and sheep had to be grazed around, and my wandering games the unneeded reminder that he had a peculiar small person on his hands.

It may have been that he thought back to what his own boyhood had been like after his father died, how quickly he had grown up from the push of having to help the family struggle through. It may have been only habit, out of his

years of drawing the fullest from those reluctant crews. Or maybe simple desperation. From whatever quarter it came, Dad took his decision about me. My boyhood would be the miniature of how he himself lived.

That policy of his corded us together at once, twined us in the hours of riding to look over the livestock, the mending of barbed-wire fences, all the prodding tasks of the ranch. But more than that. Dad's notion that I was fit for anything he himself might do carried me, in this time when I was a six-seven-eight-year-old, on a journey which stands in my memory as dappled and bold as the stories I heard of his own youth. For after our early months on the ranch, Dad had mended himself enough to enter the life of the valley again in full--and in the valley's terms, and his, this meant nights in White Sulphur Springs and its nine saloons.

Dad was not what the valley called a genuine drinking man. Although he could tip down a glass of beer willingly enough, ^{with him,} alcohol stood a distant second to the company he found along the barstools. The pattern is gone now, even from White Sulphur Springs, but in its time it was as ordered and enlivening as a regimental trooping of the colors. I come to it yet, even as Dad with me at his waist did, a night or two a week and Saturday nights without miss, as a traveler into a street lit with festival.

The Stockman Bar started us for the night. Just walking through its door stepped you up onto a different deck of life. Earlier the lanky old building had been the town's movie house, and it stretched so far back from the sidewalk that its rear corners began to sidle up the hill behind the main street of town. The builder could have scooped out at the back so the floor would have come out level with the street at the front. Instead, he saved on shovels by carpentering from back to front much the way things were, and when the floorboards came out at the street about the height of a man's waist, a little ramp was angled up through them from the doorway.

It made a fine effect, the customers all at a purposeful tilt as they came climbing toward the long dark-brown span of bar. Then, sitting up on one of the Stockman's three-foot stools, you could glance out and down through the street window at passers-by going along below your kneecaps. In early evening, it was a chance to look out at humanity as unseen as if you were hidden away on a shed roof, and Dad and I would settle in to watch the town's night begin to take shape.

The Stockman had other likable lines besides its lofty floor. From end to end, the wall behind the bar was almost all mirror and whiskey bottles, held in regiments by a great dark-wooded breakfront. Glass and liquor and liquor and glass reflected each other until my eyes couldn't take in

the bounce of patterns. The label print and emblems would have added up to a book, and the ranks of bottles with their mirror images shouldering behind them seemed to crowd out toward us as we sat at the bar. But in gaps along the bottom shelf, saved for the clean glasses which ^{rested} sat mouth-down on white towels, were propped the curiosities I would pick out to look at long and often--the tiny cellophane packs of white salted nuts or smoked meat strips. ~~Once~~ every ^{As often} ~~several~~ weeks, someone might buy a packet and share it along the bar. Every time, the white nuts tasted as chalky as they looked, and the smoked meat let loose a seasoning which made us work each piece around in our mouths as if our tongues were gradually catching fire. These samples would disgust us all for awhile, but before long I would forget just what the tastes had been, and start all over again the staring at the packets and the wondering what the snow-colored nuts or the blades of meat must be like.

Untasty as it was, the cellophane food offered the harmless choice I could focus on back of the bar. What I would look at with a peeper's stealth a hundred times an evening was the nakedness of the calendar lady.

You could depend on her year after year: some passing salesman from a brewery would provide the saloon with a long calendar to put up next to the cash register, and on the

calendar just above the brewery's name would be a picture big as a sitting cat--the naked lady with breasts coming out like footballs. The style then was to photograph the kneeling calendar lady under a bluish-purple light. The play of this cold tint onto her breasts shaded the nipples down to dark pointed circles like the ends of ripe plums, and tended to make a brunette--as calendar ladies generally seemed to be, across the years--look as if she were only waiting for the shadows to deepen one notch more before lunging points--first right at you.

The single thing I knew about women was that I wasn't supposed to be seeing them in this condition. I felt I had to resort to ^{great} big casual sweeps of looking: start my eyes at a high innocent corner of the whiskey shelves, work like an inventory-taker along the bottle labels until the neighborhood of the cash register, loiter around the cellophane snacks while trying to sense out of the corners of my eyes whether anyone was watching my peeping. Then straight and fast as I could, the peek right onto the glorious purplish-blue breasts. Hard-earned gazes, every one, but I was willing to work at it.

The Stockman had even another night-in, night-out attraction. Against the wall opposite the bar, a smeary rainbow of colors glowed out of the jukebox. Each shade slid in behind the fluted glass front as you watched, maybe a

dim red followed by a tired green, a mild orange forever chased by a bruise-like purple which was likely to remind a person of the calendar lady again.

This slow spin of colors seemed to be the chief job of the jukebox, because it rarely put out music. A song from it meant either there were strangers in the saloon, or one of Dad's friends had pressed a dime into my hand and steered me off to play a tune while he said something I shouldn't hear. Months on end somewhere in that span of time, I spent each bonus dime on Good Night, Irene. The record would slide out of hiding and flip into place, I would press my nose against the jukebox glass to see the needle jab down, and then I would feel the sound strum out: Sometimes I live in the countreeee, sometimes I live in townnnn. . . A lot of times, men would turn sideways along the bar to listen as the sad chorus went on. Sometimes I take a great notionnnn, to jump into the river and drownnnn . . .

With its movie house length--long enough, in fact, to make the trip back to the toilet a hazard for a drinker too full of beer--the Stockman at dusk would be as open and uncrowded as a sleepy depot. ^{And} Like a depot, it had someone veteran and capable in charge when the clientele did start showing up. Always, Pete McCabe would be waiting, watching. His soft gray shirt and the long oval of his face and bald brow seemed fixed behind the spigot handles which thumbed

up at the center of the long bar. A dozen barrels of beer a week purled out of the spigots under his steady pull, and never a glass of it came along the bar without a good word from Pete McCabe.

There are listening bartenders, who are the storied ones, and there are talky bartenders, trying to jaw away the everlasting sameness of their hours. Pete was neither, and better--a bartender who knew how to visit with his customers.

When the two of us straddled onto stools across the slick bar wood from him, Pete would push a schooner of beer in front of Dad, listen close as a minister to whatever he had on his mind, and in turn begin quietly telling Dad who had come into town that day and what price they were getting for their lambs or wool or calves and how far along they were with the haying, and on into bigger currencies: Hear they had a little flabble down the street last night. Couple of fellows squared off and pushed each other around a little. I just don't care too much for that fightin', Charlie, I don't let it get goin' in here, just have to slap 'em a little before they start in on it . . . Hear a lot about turnin' this into a big gamblin' state. I don't want to see that. It's just a sharpshooter's game, that gamblin'; you'll see the crossroaders comin' in here like they were flies after a bunch of dead guts. . . Government trapper was through,

said they got an early snow down in that Sixteen country.

About six inches of wet, heavy as bread dough. . .

Pete's rich ration of talk wasn't done for the business of it. In White Sulphur Springs there was steady thirsty commerce no matter how a bartender behaved. Pete simply had made it a hobby to size up people, and to work out a routine of friendship with those deserving. He had a tribute for the few best men he knew. Glancing off into the glass hodgepodge behind the bar, Pete would say slowly: He's a nice fellow. Slow nod, and slower again: A real nice fellow. When that was said, you knew the fellow must be a prince of the world. And plainly enough, Pete deemed this wry-smiling father at my side a real nice fellow.

Only now do I understand how starved my father was for that listening and gossip from Pete McCabe. Nowhere else, never in the silences of the life we led most of the time on the ranch, could he hear the valley news which touched our own situation, and in a tone of voice which counted him special. Nowhere else, either, did Dad's past as a ranchman glow alive as it did in the Stockman. Just then in its history, White Sulphur was seeing the last of a generation of aging shearers and cowboys and other ranch hands. Several of them, I remember, had nicknames of a style which would pass when they did: Diamond Tony, who had a baffling Middle European name and an odd, chomping accent to go with