not offer to go, was not invited. They both accepted that he was going to have to battle for breath by himself.

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

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

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

With spring came the declaration from Dad and Grandma that they were ready to return to Montana. I agreed. The winter had worked out to plan: Dad had escaped all chest infection, he was very much stronger than when he had come, he seemed better able to cope with the emphysema. I made
the trip to Montana with them, doing all the driving to keep Dad's nerves steady for the time ahead of him.

In a matter of a few months, Dad's propped-up health plunged apart. The chest infection hit, there was hospitalization again. But worse, day-by-day signs of failure started to show now. He began to fall deep asleep any time of the day, for alarming lengths of time, then be unable to close his eyes at night. Grandma saw this in astonishment, then fury: No wonder you can't sleep at night, sleeping all day long too. Gee gods. Get up and around and you'd get over that sleepyheadedness. His usual answer was to sit forward for some minutes with his head in his hands, despairing, then to fall back again as if exhausted. I checked with his doctor at the clinic, and was provided the unbrambled version of Grandma's viewpoint: Dad was in carbon dioxide narcosis, caused by his lungs' failure to rid themselves of their after-breath wastes. The carbon dioxide residue worked like a slowing drug in his bloodstream. The remedy was for him to get up, walk, ride an exercise bicycle, anything to get the deadening build-up pumped from him—exertion demanded exactly when he felt least able to make any.

This period of narcosis, with Dad asleep hour upon hour and his skin color with a dangerous hint of bluing in it, like some dark seepage beneath ice, was the most
terrifying yet. It seemed very much like death practicing on him. We were in a time of fast erosion—of the deadly gullying in my father's lungs, of my grandmother's failing chance to bolster his life, of my ability to find medical help which would make much difference now. My father day upon day lay back in his big chair in the living-room in White Sulphur and gilled in air, as if out of breath from the long stopless run through life. But that it was not stopless, each of us knew too well; we could read that in the bulk of the oxygen tanks which came oftener and oftener into the house now.

I can chart my father's last years by the medical apparatus that attached itself to his existence. The first, the machine that blew a fog of medication into his lungs, sat at his bedside with some innocence. A bland metal-gray and not much larger than a typewriter, the device awaited him several times a day, took in his puffs of exertion and traded out its mysterious mist, sent him away breathing less hard. But next to come were the huge-calibre oxygen tanks, and their quickening march to his bedside were the tempo of doom for him. He began their use sparingly, a minute or so of relief at a time into his lungs a few times a day. But across the months, the oxygen imbibing became oftener, longer. Grandma was at her most baffled and furious with this terrifying new addiction:
Charlie, the more of that you use, the more you just want to use! He gave her a weary fury back: I can't help using it, I've got to breathe. And in the next minute she would have gone to the kitchen to bring him a cup of coffee and he would have thanked her softly, and the two-sided helplessness would have passed for the moment. The one winner was the oxygen, which the next day would tether him a few moments longer.

At last came the time when he slumped in the chair with the oxygen tether forever in his nose, slept with it. All had been reversed: from the outset when he was bolstered by a few minutes of oxygen each day, now there were only a handful of moments when he could bear to be without it. Everything now had thinned to the whiffs holding him in life, like a breeze scudding a dried leaf barely above the ground. He was everlastingly weak now, could scarcely have put breath on a mirror without the pure oxygen from the metal bottle. No longer could he even make a recuperative trip to Seattle; the doctor said there was medical risk in travel and Dad felt the greater risk in himself, could not bring himself to such a move.

On one of my Montana trips, back again in the house in White Sulphur after the bleak task of having delivered Dad into another hospital stay, Grandma said out of the blue: Dad asked me never to let you put him in a rest home.
I said nothing for a long minute, which of course said that I had thought of it. What reply I eventually made to her I no longer know, but it was not definite enough for either of us. That was the problem—to be definite in the unclearest of moments. Here was fact: my father was hopelessly afflicted, every breath a fresh agony. Here was proposition: warehouse him as the less-than-alive presence he was becoming. But then here was judgment: whose benefit would it be for? Not Grandma's. Not his own. Mine.

In the end, I turned decision back on itself. Not to choose the one crevice-crossing was to choose the other. I stayed by a conviction that had been forming silently in me—that the best that could be done in this desolate situation was to help this beset pair, Dad and Grandma, endure through it together in their own home.

Across twenty years, I had watched the two of them wear grooves into each other until at last the fit of their lives became a mutual comfort, a necessity bridged between the both of them. Their time together had passed through armistice into alliance and on to acceptance, then to affection, and at last had become one of the kinds of love. I saw that now, even as I had missed seeing the early signs of the procession. Now my father leaned his very life on my grandmother, on her care of him. When his life toppled away, as it must soon, a presence would go out of
my grandmother's existence like something lacking in the air of her own breathing. This told me all the more that as long as he yet lived, as long as Grandma had the health and verve to care for him at home, she should. She was in some ways the oddest possible angel of mercy, put together as she was of a fast temper and oblique notions of illness and its consequences; yet she still was sturdy, still had to keep herself busy every moment that she was not asleep. And there was that fiercest of all her capacities, her ability to prop other lives with her own. I lacked her knack for such entire sacrifice, her habit of putting all else before her own needs. The most I could do for my father was to warehouse him in my own home, assuming he could be gotten there, or within other walls. Grandma, if I allowed her, could do very much more. What that tokened to me was that as long as Dad could remain in known surroundings— in the valley, in the house he had chosen and bought, with this woman he had come to such deep alliance with—for whatever little was left of his life, he should.

There were other unheard-of equations to this time. For one, Dad had become both thinner and larger— face and hands going gaunt, but the exertions of his lungs building his chest out to a broad shell, an encasement as if heft from everywhere else in his body had been summoned there. The great chest of course was a cruel fake; the muscles
which had stretched out and out to squeeze air into the failing lungs still were unable to pull in the torrent of air needed, and the more barrel-like Dad became, the more grudgingly breath dragged in and out of him.

For another, my father stayed in the moments of my days steadily now, even as his body dwindled from me. All of his way of life that I had sought escape from—the grindstone routine of ranching, the existence at the mercy of mauling weather, the endless starting-over from one calamity or another—was passing with him, and while I still wanted my distance from such a gauntlet, I found that I did not want my knowing of it to vanish. The perseverance to have lasted nearly seventy years amid such cold prospects was what heritage Dad had for me; I had begun to see that it counted for much. Through all this ran the zipperlike whisper of history as well. Dad's timespan, and even the late portion of it when I was growing up at his side, quickly was being peeled away by change. To my constant surprise, in our years in the north and the time I was away at college, White Sulphur had swapped itself from being a livestock town to a logging town. Each time I drove in now across the long deck of the valley, the blue plume of smoke from the sawmill's scrap burners at the edge of town startled me, made me wonder for an instant whose house had caught fire. Out from town, along the forks of
the Smith River and beneath the flanks of the Castles and Big Belts, the ranches were being reached by the continental metamorphosis from agriculture to agribusiness. No longer were there the summer's haying crews Dad had foremanned so many times, only a few men on galloping machines. Nor were there any longer the dozens of shepherders, nor the roving shearing crews, because there no longer were sheep; we are a people swathed in synthetics now. Even the sagebrush, the very coloration of that so-high prairie country, was beginning to be erased under potent new plows and tractors and farming theories, the topsoil which had defeated the homesteaders now laid back like a pelt being skinned off. And beyond even that, the large valley ranches, which to my mind had croupiered an area that could have sustained many medium-sized ranches into a single fistful of huge holdings, were beginning to notice a bigness beyond their own: corporate America. Ye know who owns the Dogie now? Dad demanded indignantly when I arrived on one of my visits: A-goddamn-Kansas-City-paper-box-company.

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

As my decisions do, the one now of how to direct my own life came slowly, doggedly. I kept on through the seminars and exams, claimed the degree at the last dusty furrow of it all, but then I abandoned the offer of a job at one of the country's largest universities. Instead, I began to work full-time at writing, by the shaggiest and most marginal of its modes, free-lancing for magazines. I offered to Carol: I know you married me for better or worse, but this is somewhere off the scale. She answered as ever: Do it. Academic friends plainly were puzzled and a bit disturbed, as if I had declared I was going off to be a wheelwright or a buffalo-hunter. When I undertook
to explain myself during one of the Montana trips, Grandma simply offered her blanket assumption that whatever I did made some sense all its own, and Dad, I noticed, seemed to understand this drastic veer better than any other I had ever done. At least, he said, ye'll be your own boss.

My father's heritage of perseverance, I have said. At last, the emphysema began to gnaw even that from him. During another of my Montana stays, more than four years now since the diagnosis of what was at work in Dad's lungs, a neighbor stepped in to visit. As we sat in the living-room and Grandma racketed in the kitchen to make coffee, the neighbor remarked to Dad how good it was to see him up and around, what relief it must be to be back from the hospital bed. At once Dad made a futile tossing motion with his hand and told her: My heart's just hanging by a thread. I looked at him in alarm. Perhaps everything else inside his chest was becoming a horror, but time after time the doctor's examinations had found that engine of a heart had not yet shown falter, had withstood amazingly the fierce load on it.

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

So forlorn about his existence—life was too generous a word for it now—that he had begun to base everything on the operation, Dad was wrenchedly depressed at the latest advice against it. Whatever you think, son. But I don't know how I can go on like I am.

Those words battered in me for weeks as I tried to weigh through the misery toying with him now, think what could be spoken into that tortured hopeless life. At last, in early January of 1971, I wrote one more of my careful letters. Saying: I had come to believe that here was one decision which I could not make for him. I would fly to Montana, we would attempt whatever slight relief there might be for him—perhaps another recuperative spell in the hospital when he felt able to decide, I would listen and help him to weigh facts. But the words of this decision finally would have to come from him.

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

When I arrived the next day, Dad was breathing with less labor than I had seen him in for some time, but he told me there had been a glorious half-day after the operation when he had no sensation of breathing hard at all. Ivan, it was like I was a well man again. Then he had begun to feel the labor creep back. I sat with him the next few days, urged him into a small routine of life again. And heard the first cough from him like a scraping sound in the night.

By the end of a week, he plainly was coming down with the lung infection again. I despised the task as never before: it took me the large part of a day to talk him into another hospital stint.

When my plane time came and I stood to say goodbye to him, he was sitting on the edge of the hospital bed, his dismay at being there once more mixed with the relief of drawing on steady oxygen and the familiar care. He looked stronger than he had at home. I turned in the doorway to say my usual parting: I'll talk to you on the phone soon. Take care. He said as ever: Goodbye to ye, son.
The hospital stay did bolster him again, did renew his strength and ease his lungs enough until, as usual, in about two weeks' time he was able to go home to White Sulphur and Grandma's care once more. He still struggled for breath, but seemed somehow slightly more enduring than he had been. And his prompt return home carried hope, for the chronic collapses back into hospitalization had told me how he would die—a last torturing confinement in the angled bed, tubes looped to his body, but breath eroding, eroding, despite all apparatus; within the white sheets a sharp panting for life like my mother's agony re-echoed, then a gasp to stillness. It would be the last terrible smother of his crippled lungs, and I could see it in every exactness but the moment on the calendar. But he was home once more now, away from that marked moment, and even escaping winter's usual pneumonia attacks. That and other delvings for reassurance were on his mind; in mid-February he sent to Carol and me his first letter in years. Hi, you two. I am going to see if I can write you a short letter. I am doing pretty good, I think. My breathing seems to stay about the same. My legs still are so darn weak but I am slowly getting a little more strength in them. I am using the exercise bike all I can...
about the same... all I can. And soon after, the confirming lines of puzzle and suspicion from Grandma. He doesn't seem to improve any. He's getting the same as before. Sleep days and up and down all nite. Usually eats three sandwitches during the nite with milk. But he doesn't eat a good meal... For the thousandth time I thought through the spectre of his final hospital stay, and readied myself for the news that I would have to come once more and deliver him to the prospect.

I had forgotten that the great constant in my father was surprise. In early April, on the third morning after Dad's seventieth birthday, Grandma stepped to his doorway to begin him on another day of existing. At the bed, he was on his back with his head and upper body tilted to the right, his mouth open, as if having turned to speak an answer over his shoulder. In his custom now, the bedcovers had been flipped aside because of their burden on his laboring chest. His pajamas were scarcely mussed, and the square-cut face was freed of its straining look. And in the instant when his heart at last had convulsed in him and ended his life so silently and immediately that no hint of it could be heard in a room fifteen feet away, his right arm had flung wide, catching the tether of oxygen tube and tearing it from his nostrils.

By early afternoon I was in Montana, by dusk had made the burial arrangements, that night slept in the bed where
my father had died less than twenty hours before. Grandma was teary-eyed, but steadier than I would have been from looking in on a body in the dawn light. We both were startled, after the dragging years of near-helplessness, at the staccato pace of everything to be done now. Having arranged a furlough from her classes, Carol flew in from Seattle, propped us both with her efficiency. Late in the second day, the minister who would read the funeral service came to the house. Across the years, I can think of little more remote from my father's range of mind than religion. Once in my boyhood, a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses had come to our door. Dad gave them his levellest look, proclaimed We're staunch Presbyterians here, and had the door closed on the visitors before they could blink. I gaped at him, and received his joke-calculating grin: Never knew we was that pious, did ye? I certainly didn't, and can think of no other time religion became a topic under our roof.

The funeral minister now found that I was a bland target for his tries at commiseration. He soon asked what Bible reading I wished at the funeral service.

The one where God speaks to Job from the whirlwind.

Job 38, that would be? He sat higher in his chair. It's not a...usual funeral choice. I said nothing. Well... The first few verses, I imagine? The readings usually are brief...
No, all of it. All the chapter. We're in no hurry after these years.

He nodded, offered a hand, was gone.

I did not believe in funerals and the customs of public grief, but I believed less in doing anything not understandable to Grandma. I braced, and on the morning before the funeral drove her across town to the chapel to see Dad in his casket. He looked milder than in life, calm and unscarred except for the star-print in the center of his square chin. She looked down at him, gave a sob, and said her one last sentence to him: Oh Charlie, why did you have to die?

Then the afternoon, and across the chapel, faces from two lifetimes--my father's, my own--hung row on row. I looked out among them as the preacher's words marched.

Where was thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?...
The lone black face of Taylor Gordon, nodding softly to the Bible rhythms. Clifford's head among the pallbearers, undressed without his rancher's hat atop it. Hast thou commanded the morning...Sun-dark faces Dad had ridden with and foremanned on the Dogie and the Camas and a dozen other ranches; paler faces from the saloons and stores. Hast thou entered into the treasures of the snow?...Faces from the Basin, from winters a half century ago, from homesteads gone empty and echoing. Canst thou send lightnings...Faces absent, alive only in specific tales of death:
Nellie queerly quiet in the metal casket of his car, battered by the rolling plunge from a hill road. At a canasta table, a heart attack astonishes McGrath; he flings his cards as if sledged in the chest, topplies backward as the jacks and queens flutter down upon him. Kate and Walter Badgett, each lying down in ancientness not to arise again, but of course Walter passing first, Kate watchfully next. Wilt thou hunt the prey for the lion or fill the appetite of the young lions...And last, always and always piercing through it all, the memory of my mother's deathday on the mountain, my father's life in a way having begun to end there where hers did...

And at last, the procession to the cemetery, the brief graveside ceremony quickly done in bitter, wind-whipped weather, and the last glimpse of Dad's casket within the walls of earth.

Nothing new can be said of the loss of a parent; it all has been wept out a million million times. During the funeral preparations and the days afterward, I could find in myself only the plainest, broadest of emotions--anger that Dad had suffered so steadily and so long, relief that he was released from the squeezing bars of his own ribcage, and that I was released from the guesswork decisions over his existence. Those, and the gratitude that of all interesting men I knew, this one had been my father.
Now there was Grandma's grief to be worked through. On some footings, she was as unshakable as ever. When the chore came to choose a tombstone for Dad's grave, she startled me by saying at once that she wanted to be buried exactly beside him, and to have her name on the same stone. All right, sure, I offered. Then she went silent for a minute and amended: No, not together on the stone. Right alongside him, a stone like his one. We ought to each have our own gravestone but the same. But days after the funeral, when the time neared that I would have to leave for Seattle again and we had talked through what she would do--how she would fend alone in the house, the bonus that her youngest son lived near enough to look in on her often, the luck of having neighbors who fussed over her--she suddenly put in: Maybe I could of done better. Maybe I could of been better to Charlie, he was so sick...The words rivered out of me: Good God, you waited on him hand and foot these years, you were the one person of any of us who could have done it. There's no blame on you and I never want to hear you saying there is...I broke off, choked by tears. My so-rare fury impressed her, and one woe of this after-death was dispelled.

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

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

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

Across half the earth in September of 1971, she was
met in Australia by the son not seen for 25 years, and by
the daughter-in-law and three grandchildren entirely new
to her. Quickly her letters came in across the Pacific
as if she was remaking the host land: ... The flowers are
so pretty here. Nobody seems to pick them for bouquets
but I do their so lovely...I been teaching the kids card
games Rummy and Solitare and they want to play all the
time now...I went downtown with Joyce this morning. She
said it was her pie day. I couldn't see and couldn't see
why she would go buy pies when we both bake good and
finally I asked her. She said No not that kind of pie she
meant it was her pay day. They sure talk a brogue here don't
they...I grinned with the thought of her looking at kangaroos,
living with this newfound family in their house so queerly
stilted above a Queensland flood plain, going off with them to see salt mined from ocean water and to stand for her picture at a monument proclaiming something called the Tropic of Capricorn: I don't just know what it's all about but you will. She sent me a clipping of what the newspaper there had written about her visit, and I read it thinking they knew only the scantest fraction of this caller.

When she returned in a month, Carol and I met her at the airport, hugged her in triumph and admiration, and hurried her to our house to sleep off 6,000 miles of flight. The next morning she did not wake up until past eleven o'clock. I was entirely scandalized: Gee gods, why didn't you get me up hours ago? I lifted my eyebrows and tried to tell her about jet-lag, but for once she was having none of my explanations. I never slept this late in my whole entire life, she huffed, and was on her feet.

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

The habit and patterns grew just in time, for in the spring of 1972, a few days less than a year after Dad's death, Grandma suffered a heart attack—the first blow on her health in her eight decades of life. I flew to Montana to do the cooking and housework when she came out of the hospital. She was going to be, I knew, the world's most restless convalescent, and as soon as I had her seated in the house, I started on her: We are going to make a deal. I'm going to do all the work in this house for the next week or so—her lips already flying open in protest—and you can help me with these. I showed her a shoebox filled with file cards, the index material for a textbook Carol and I had just written. All right, she said, in immediate purpose, show me just what there is to it. Across the next several days, she sat quietly and sorted and alphabetized as I hovered carefully out of the way. At last she pronounced, I think that's all of it, Ivan. I studied how much more vigorous and restored she had become, smiled and said: I think it is.

She recuperated briskly enough to go on living much as she had, but to her disgust needed to rely on heart-regulating pills. Whenever she felt the first signs of
angina, usually needle-like sensations at the tops of her arms, she would pop a glycerine pill into her mouth as if it were an aspirin, determinedly sit still for a few minutes, and be up and at some chore again. Outwardly, she aged hardly at all. I compare photos of her taken five years apart, and they seem to have been snapped within the same minute, the identical pursed smile beneath the resolute upper face and gray-white field of hair.

I found that now Grandma filled not only her own role for me, the one of stand-in mother begun twenty years before, when she and I moved into the house in Ringling, but what had been Dad's as well: my compass-point to the past, to my own youth. Whenever she visited Seattle or I came to Montana, she began to talk easily of the gone years, to tell even of her marriage to Tom Ringer, and of life on the Wisconsin farm. Her mind was not wandering back—it was as solid and set on the chore of the moment as ever—but she seemed freed at last of the tempers which had covered over such stories. True, there still came bursts out of her which could have resounded at any point of her past sixty years in the valley. Leave a light switched on in her house past early morning, and you would hear hmpf! burnin' a hole in the daylight! and the abrupt click. A long-haired white cat had recognized her front porch as a provision port, and he came and went, battered from alley fights and matted with cockleburrs, to the rhythm of her
feedings and scoldings. But most of the time now, Grandma was in mellower mood than I could ever remember, as if old age was coming gently into her in compensation for the way it had ripped apart Dad. I took the chance to have her re-tell what I had heard from her as a boy, confirm the details, imprint her private wordings. Before I quite knew it, the cadences of this book had begun out of listening to her. Listening and seeing, for the one scribe of my family's past had been the Brownie box camera. I dug out Grandma's photo albums which had gathered dust under one bed or another for sundry decades. I remember one early evening spent in her house, a pair of hours spent as she went through for me an album which had belonged to my mother. Picture upon picture of my father and mother—in their herding days on Grass Mountain, on horseback at rodeos, dressed up in flat-cap-and-bonnet finery beside the square hulks of 1920s automobiles—brought snifles or hard-swallowed sentences from Grandma, and by the time I had jotted my notes on the final page, the emotion she had been putting into the room had worn me out. That should be enough for tonight, I said in a weary glaze. She turned to me in surprise: But we got these others to get through. Hadn't we just as well to keep on? And we did.

And then the moment, for there always is such a pivot moment, when it truly became clear how far along in life she was. At the end of September, 1974—she was eighty-one
by now—she flew to Seattle to spend a few weeks with us. When Carol and I saw her coming slowly up the ramp from the plane, we waved, she gave us her pursed smile. Then she stopped and leaned against the wall of the ramp, and I bolted toward her. By the time I reached her, she was fumbling the bottle of heart pills from her purse. A pill and getting her to a chair eased the angina; before long, we were on our way, but with her now a more fragile piece of life than she had been minutes before.

Time and again in that visit, she had to sit and ease the heart symptoms. But she would not be kept idle, nor did I think she ought to be. She had lived under the same roof with Dad's helplessness; a repeat of that would be the cruelest affliction that could happen to her. And so I invented chores, tasks she could do while sitting. She clipped her way through mounds of newspapers to sort references for my writing files, and her only complaint was that it wasn't work enough. If two minutes of page-flipping didn't yield a headline circled for clipping, her mild grumble would come: Ivan, I'm not finding none to cut out.

This visit of hers now had a sharp hook at the end of it. I had written articles about the World's Fair in Spokane, and Grandma longed to see it. The plan had been that at the end of her stay, Carol and I would drive her to
Spokane, shepherd her around the Fair for a day, and she would fly home to Montana from there. Plainly her heart spasms were too chronic now for that, but just as plainly this might be her last outing in the world. And I believed more than ever, seeing the determination with which she would take a heart pill, sit briefly, and then be back at some chore, that her stride of life should be slowed as little as possible.

Near the end of her stay, I gave her another of my decrees: There’s just too much walking at the Fairgrounds. The only way I see that you can go there is in a wheelchair. She gave me her most mildly regretful Ohhh?, as if I had just told her it might rain sometime in the next week. Then: If you say so.

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

The next morning, in the last minutes before she was to board her plane at the Spokane airport, the awareness flew into me, as it always did now at these partings, that
here might be the last set of moments I would see Grandma alive. Then total commotion: near us had been an orderly family, the mother saying goodbye to the husband and their four children as they set off for somewhere, and suddenly the woman was grappling with the man and shrieking: I've got a restraining order! Don't let him on this plane with my children! As he tried to pull away, she halted him by his necktie and continued to shout. The children erupted into a bawling swirl, the smallest one was belly-whopped to the floor amid the wrestling. The airline workers were slow and reluctant to edge in on the battle. I tried to talk Grandma calm as the brawl went on; the picture of her sagging against the plane ramp when she had arrived in Seattle blazed in me. But she said, No, I'm all right, and sat watching and giving her usual hmpf until the airline people could herd the roaring family to a side room. Then it was time for me to help her down the ramp, and to her plane seat, and to smile a nervous goodbye to her one more time.

The phone call, the metallic blat of worst news, came three weeks later. Again the flight to Montana, the drive from Helena through the Big Belts to White Sulphur Springs, for this last of the burials in the valley's cemetery. Peter Doig, Annie Campbell Doig, Tom Ringer, Berneta Ringer Doig, Charlie Doig: in a somber space not much larger than
a garden patch they all lay, nearly three hundred years of lives, not a life among them easy or unafflicted. A sum of so much of the valley could be found in them, and a sum which would keep emerging in me for however long I lived. Now Bessie Ringer, in her way the most sorrowing to see vanish, because she had been the most durable of them all.

Wonder built in me as I traced out her last day. The morning, Grandma had spent working on a quilt, another of her rainbow-paneled splendors, for a helpful neighbor who looked in on her often. Sometime she had telephoned to a friend at a ranch out of Ringling, asking to be brought a fresh supply of eggs when the woman came to town. At noon she was phoned by her son, and as usual in those checking calls, they talked for several minutes. In the afternoon a funeral was held for a member of one of the last families of the Sixteen country: Grandma did not go to the rites, but at the coffee hour held afterward at the Senior Citizens Club she helped with the serving and chatted with friends for an hour or more. Someone had driven her home, where she had her supper alone. In the evening, there was to be the weekly card party back at the Senior Citizens Club, and she phoned to ask for a ride with her best friend in the group—a woman who had run one of the White Sulphur saloons that had so often thorned Grandma's
earlier life. They had nearly arrived at the card party when, in the midst of something joked by one or the other of them, Grandma cut off in the middle of a chuckle and slumped, chin onto chest. The friend whirled the car to the hospital a block away. A doctor instantly was trying to thump a heartbeat-rhythm into Grandma, and could work no flicker of response from her. She had gone from life precisely as she had lived it, with abruptness and at full pace.

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

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

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

Like a bug down a drain I am sucked feet first into the ocean, gravel beating up at me like shrapnel as the surf plows its roaring way, shore and sky and all else lost in the water avalanche. After forever, I am reversed, surged back to the tideline, slammed down, then rolled to sea again. Now I paddle to stay upright, and simply am turned and turned, toy-like, within the next acres of water until I am struck against the shore again. Taken out into the froth yet again, this time I try to ride the surf with my body, eagling my arms wide; again I am pitched over and over, hurled to gravel, instantly lifted away and out. How many times this repeats, there is no counting—perhaps as few, and as many, as five. Even as my body is being beaten limp, my mind finds incredible clarity, as if the thinking portion of me had been lifted separately and set aside from the ocean's attack. While my arms and legs automatically try trick after trick to pull me atop the water and onto the precipice of shore, the feeling of death settles into me, bringing both surprise at the ease and calm of the process and a certain embarrassed chiding of myself that this is a silly and early method to exit from
life. John later told that, as I came whirling out of the surf one more time, he saw on my face a look of deep resignation. My remembering of that eye-locked instant is of noting him, mouth open in a shout I cannot hear, beginning to run from forty yards away, and then in my next writhe within the dense falling wall of surf, discovering his arm across my back and under me, dragging my weary three-pointed stumble from the undertow. At the shallow moving seam of shore and surf, John exults in my ear: We've got it made now! But I sense, as if a monstrous paw poised just beyond the edge of my vision, the next set of waves toppling toward us: we both are struck flat, but somehow hold the shore. Only then, in the wash back to sea of that aftermost wave, do my boots finally float free from around my neck, and John reaches casually as they pass and plucks them from the last of the water. Now Carol and Jean at our sides, flung to us through the flooding creek by their desperation and the luck of an interval between tidal whirlpools, their hands and John's steadying me until at last, up off the cold bite of the shore gravel, I stand again.

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

I feel, in my musing on it, as if the two of them too somehow stood up out of the slosh of death with me, the one giving his cocked grin of wryness at having survived one time more, the other muttering at the receding ocean and marching us all off into dry clothes.

Then my father and my grandmother go, together, back elsewhere in memory, and I am left to think through the fortune of all we experienced together. And of how, now, my single outline meets the time-swept air that knew theirs.

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