it, Damon?” Toby gave his estimation as we rounded the cooktent and looked for the Pronovosts’ house of canvas where Isidor had told us to. Sure enough, ahead was the tent flap open in welcome. But what we could see inside caused all three of us to halt hard. Something was wrong. The Pronovost kids were dressed up.

It turned out they were doomed to a relative’s wedding in town. When Isidor and Gabriel and Inez, spick-and-span and dismayed, poured out to meet us, their mother followed to say she was sorry but they had to leave for Westwater as soon as Mister Pronovost had the horses hitched. We stood around, two awkward squads, until the Pronovost buckboard drew up. As we were trading glum goodbyes, Isidor paused before he vaulted into the wagon and said as if he had been giving it a lot of thought:

“You want to get yourselves a look at the Holy Willies. They’re sure somethin’.”

The buckboard was not even out of sight past the cooktent yet when Damon spoke up:

“What about it? We gonna go see?”

“Father didn’t tell us not to, did he,” I reasoned.

“Not that I heard,” Toby contributed.

“O sinners, stop and think before you further go! Turn, and turn now!”

Brother Jubal’s deep voice blasted us back a half-step as we approached the rear of the big tent. One thing about a sermonizer of his sort, though: if you were undecided about some precept of his, another would be along in a moment. Shortly he was thundering “We must learn the only happy lesson there is! Not to fight against Providence!” and we slipped in.

Isidor had not been kidding. The congregation, the Holy Willies as he called them, were on their feet swaying as if the wind of heaven was sweeping
through them. Every eye was fixed on Brother Jubal, up on the spacious platform
that strenuous religion required. “Wow,” Damon breathed, dragging a toe
appreciatively as we crept forward. I saw what he meant. The floor of the tent was
covered with straw, in the event that any of the worshippers were so stricken with
spirit that they would need to get down and roll around. The hopeful three of us
found the lee side of a big tent pole and clustered there.

“The Bible!” Brother Jubal was shouting as he brandished that item. “I ask
you, brothers and sisters, the one question that shall be asked at the gates of
salvation: what use have you made of this powerful book? If you can only answer
that you have held it over your head to stop a nosebleed—well, then, I’ll tell you,
friends, you are in everlasting trouble.”

As he restlessly paced and stopped and pivoted, I kept trying to think who
Brother Jubal reminded me of. When he spun into profile in one of his pirouettes
with the Bible, I figured it out: although not so old and not so paunchy, he was a
spitting image of William Jennings Bryan, whom Father would have voted for in
every presidential election forever and practically did. Same Roman brow, same
coal-chunk eyes. Similar undertaker suit and scrawny tie. I would say Brother
Jubal outdid W.J.B. in acrobatic ability, though. On the balls of his feet for as long
as we had been watching, abruptly he was across that platform in a flash, pulling
up just short of a small table with a pitcher and a glass on it, as he trumpeted:
“From borning to burying, cradle to grave, the Bible is your only ticket out of
Hell!” Toby had timidly slipped his hand in mine, something he hadn’t done in a
long while.

Pausing there to deposit the Good Book—somehow his pause seemed as
loud as his preaching, and the congregation didn’t lose any of its sway—Brother
Jubal picked up the pitcher and glass and poured.
Damon whispered in my ear: “I bet you it’s panther piss.” Whether or not the pitcher held that notorious local brand of moonshine, Brother Jubal resorted to it for a good long swig.

Swiping the back of his hand across his mouth in a manly way, the sweating preacher seemed to be suddenly reminded of something.

“Our hymn! We have not yet lifted our voices,” although he certainly had. As one, the crowd snapped the songsheets in their hands taut.

Disappointed as the three of us were that the preaching had not yet led to any holy rolling, we always liked music. Damon gave the other two of us a grin and tapped his toe like a square-dance fiddler, and Toby giggled. Then Brother Jubal’s voice all but swept our hair back again, as he led off the singing in a roaring bass:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Let us fight the holy fight} \\
& \text{On the wild Montana bench--} \\
& \text{Here the congregation chorused in:} \\
& \text{Lord, oh Lord, lend us might!}
\end{align*}
\]

“Paul, look, there’s--”

“Toby, shhh, I’m trying to listen.”

In operatic fashion, Brother Jubal swelled his chest and sang on:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{With a coyote for a bugler} \\
& \text{And the Big Ditch for a trench--} \\
& \text{“Damon, Paul--”} \\
& \text{“Toby, it can wait until this is over.”}
\end{align*}
\]

Damon took the more direct approach of lightly squeezing Toby’s lips together like a duck’s bill, a reminder we used on each other when someone was gabbing too much.

\[
\text{Lord--}
\]
Toby managed to get himself unclamped from Damon’s fingers.

“B-b-but, over there--”

\textit{oh Lord--}

Damon and I at last looked over to where our pesky brother was pointing, at the back of the tent across from us. To a rawboned pair of figures whose shaggy heads stuck out over everybody else’s bowed ones. Brose Turley and Eddie.

\textit{--lend us might!}

The sight of them took all the fooling around out of Damon, and the power of thought out of me. Brose Turley had the music up almost to his nose, gnashing away in some semblance to singing. For his part, Eddie didn’t seem to be paying much attention to the songsheet. Gawking around the tent in bored fashion, it was only a matter of time before he spotted us, and he did so now. He blinked and looked again, and it was still us. We could see him whispering urgently into his father’s ear, even automatically clutching the front of his pants in the universal need-to-go gesture. Brose Turley gave him a heavy-browed look, but jerked his head to dismiss his son toward outside. Eddie headed our way.

“Let’s get,” I said, even though Damon and Toby needed no urging.

We made it out of the tent all right, but there was no getting ourselves out of range of Eddie. He was onto us like a staghound on wounded deer. “You damned peepers.” He caught hold of my shoulder and spun me around as if I weighed nothing. “What’re you doing here? Come to rub it in?” Looming in on me with his Sunday watered-down pompadour flopping wildly, he looked bigger than he had on horseback.

“Simmer down,” I tried. “Our father’s here hauling freight, we just rode along.”

“Yeah, sure. Where’s any freight in the preacher’s tent?”
“Lay off, can’t you.” I tried to sound as tough as I could. It didn’t seem to faze Eddie. “We were just curious, is all.” From the corner of my eye I could see Damon shifting his weight restlessly, one of his signs of temper. Before I could think of any way to defuse matters, I heard out of my feisty brother:

“Why’re you bothering us, anyway. Don’t you have to scoot back in there and get yourself saved?”

Eddie took a long step toward Damon.

“Eddie,” Toby asked suddenly, short of breath just from thinking about it, “they gonna put you under the water?”

“Put me where?”

Damon undertook to set Toby straight. “These aren’t baptizers—”

“Baptists,” I said.

“—these are the ones who throw fits. What about it, Eddie? Thrown any good conniptions? Had any good cases of the jerks?” As if there was any chance his target didn’t take his meaning, Damon crossed his eyes, groaned in a reverential way and went into an open-mouthed spasm of shaking all over.

Red-faced, Eddie watched Damon’s antics, looking as if he would go to pieces any moment. When he did, it was not the way I expected.

“My old man makes me,” he said helplessly, dropping his hands. “ Might help get the devil out of me, he says.”

Damon quit jerking. Toby looked Eddie over sympathetically for any signs the devil was on his way out. My own expression, and I should have known better, must have told Eddie I felt sorry for him. Our pity or whatever it was fired him up again. His voice went high as he threatened:

“If you squirts tell anybody at school I’ll—”

“You’ll what,” Damon was on the prod again. “You can’t touch Paul, remember?” He balled up one fist, and then the other. I saw him eyeing Eddie’s
chin speculatively. Even I had managed to land one there at least once, hadn’t I?

“And maybe you can whip me,” Damon’s common sense and courage were arguing out loud with one another, “but you’ll know you’ve been in a scrap.”

I stepped in. “Eddie, we won’t tell. It’s none of our business.”

“How’m I supposed to believe that,” he scoffed.

Toby turned the moment. Spitting in his small hand, he then thrust it out toward Eddie’s mansize paw.

“Work off some of that energy in the haymow, you two.” Father was unhitching the horses while Damon and I, who could just as well have been helping him, were busy roughhousing. Toby already was in a footrace to the house with Houdini. It was a wonder the barn rafters were not shaking from the high spirits the two of us were giving off. All the way home from the Big Ditch, behind the backs of the earnest grownups on the dray seat, we’d traded Chessy cat smiles at the thought of it: we had something on Eddie Turley. It didn’t even matter that we could never tell anybody. We knew. There was this about it, too: as much as anything, our secret mightily added to the Milliron family repertoire, junior division. From then until the end of time, all Damon would need to do to set Toby and me and himself to laughing would be to cross his eyes and give a meaningful twitch.

Right now my brother the cutup halted in mid-tussle with me and cocked an ear in Father’s direction as though he had gone hard of hearing. “Hey? Oh, hay.” Somehow I found that uproarious.

Draped in horse harness, Father turned around in that way parents do when they are about to tell you they mean business. But Damon already was scampering up the ladder to the haymow. I thought it prudent to dash over and help Father heft the welter of leather onto the wall pegs. From what I had overheard before we left
off Rose and Morrie at the Schrickers’, he probably was nearing the limits of his tolerance for one day. His efforts to suggest the Big Ditch to Morrie as a logical site of employment had met polite but undentable resistance. “I find I rather like the solitude of a homestead workday,” Morrie said, veteran of several such days.

“George keeps coming up with chores for me to do on his mother’s place, it’s quite remarkable. And should you ever need a hand at anything that is too much for you, Oliver, I have two.”

Father was weighing this when Rose burst out:

“Oh, Oliver? I have a favor to ask, the next time you go to town. It’s about the dust.”

That caused all the Millirons to look over our shoulders, back at the dray’s billowing bridal train of dust that every conveyance in Montana dragged after it, seven months of the year. Dust was such a part of our life we had never heard anyone bother to comment on it.

“I take exception to dust,” Rose said decisively.

Bewildered, Father cast another look at the chronic brown fogbank we were raising with every turn of the wagonwheels. “I don’t quite see what I can do about--”

“In the house, I mean. It would help with the housekeeping ever so much if dust didn’t blow in all the time. The next time you’re in town, couldn’t you bring back some draft excluder?”

“Draft excluder--?” Even though Father liked to read a couple of pages of the dictionary every night for pleasure, it took him a few moments to work that out. “Do you by any chance mean ‘weather stripping’?”

“I do, don’t I. My poor husband always called it the other.” We had not heard the late Mister Llewellyn mentioned in the last day or two, but here he was
again. "The Welsh have such a gift of gab, you know, and--well, it runs in our blood, too, doesn't it, Morrie."

"Like dye," he vouched and gave her arm one of those pats.

"Surely it would take you no time at all to tack some whatsit, weather stripping, around the doors and windows," Rose persisted to Father. "As I say, it would do wonders for the housekeeping." He knew he was caught; he couldn't be against wonders of housekeeping. Helpfully, Morrie asked how many windows and doors the house had, and given the number, he announced in a feat of lightning calculation that fifty yards of the stuff ought to dustproof our house.

_Whoosh._ A cloud of hay cascaded down into the horse stall nearest Father and me, interrupting my reverie and making Father wince.

"Damon! Get a little of it in the manger, can't you?" Father looked in exasperation at the high-priced alfalfa mixed in with the horse manure on the floor of the stall. I was already on my way to the ladder by the time I heard him telling me, "Go up there and regulate the lunatic, while I water the horses."

"My turn," I informed Damon as I popped up into the haymow. Yielding the pitchfork and the field of battle to me, he flopped into the hay like someone keeling over backward into a swimming hole. He sprawled there, arms out, in sheer exuberance at our incredible luck lately, and I could not help grinning along with him as I carefully pitched hay down through the loft hole into the manger.

"Hah! Can you believe it?" he marveled, still unable to get over it. "Old Eddie, in there with the Holy Willies. You must have knocked him into Sunday with that haymaker."

"Damon, don't."

"Don't what? You play yourself down too much. One-Punch Milliron!"

He pantomimed a roundhouse swing of such arc and ferocity it rolled him over in
the hay. "I tell you, the look on old Eddie when you popped him. No wonder he raced like such a boob, he was still so surprised--"

The silence of the barnyard caught up with him as it had with me. We should have been hearing the sound of the pump as Father filled the horse trough.

Damon scrambled on all fours to peek over the edge of the haymow. I teetered behind him for my own fearful view of below.

Father, holding the skimming bucket for the trough that he had come back to the barn for, stared up at the white-faced pair of us.

"Climb down. Now."

The instinct was to bolt and run, but we knew better. We assembled, in a criminal rank of two, in front of Father. I could not bring myself to look at Father and I did not want to look at my squealer brother. Damon stood there stupefied.

"It--he--we--"

"By all report, this involves Paul," Father said stonily. "Go to the house, Damon. Now." He turned his attention to me, prisoner in the dock and guilty written all over me. "We need to have a conversation."

He marched me into the grain room where we could sit on bags of oats for what promised to be a long session. From the direction of the doorway of the barn, telegraphic blurs followed us there.

"Paul was only--he didn't really--"

"Damon," Father roared, "I am telling you one last time. Clear out."

When the vast silence after that satisfied him, he turned to me again. "So. Am I to understand that you popped Eddie Turley first?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked pained. "Paul, for crying out loud. I thought Damon was the pugilism fanatic in this family. I should be able to have my eldest son know when to hold his temper."
“I held it for a week, honest I did. Then Eddie mouthed off too much and I let him have it.”

Father sighed. “Tell me the particulars. ‘Too much’?”

“He--” I paused.

“Out with it.”

“--teased me about Rose.”

His face changed. Maybe there was hope for me, I thought at the time. Even then I understood at some level that Father had set himself to ignore whatever might be rumored about a wifeless man employing a single woman in his household. Circumstances had helped out--Rose could be seen perfectly nicely traveling back to her room at George and Rae’s after work each day, and lo, her very own brother was on hand as chaperone if the situation required any--but Oliver Milliron, a pillar of Marias Coulee, nonetheless had to occasionally choose what not to hear, surely. He did not seem to mind that for himself. But it evidently had not occurred to him the rest of us might have to face some unpleasant chin music about our housekeeper.

He studied me. “Not to put too fine a point on this, Paul, but what exactly did Eddie say?”

I told him, exactly.

Father made a mouth. “Paltry vocabulary. Son, you have to consider the source, in that kind of situation.” Something more than Eddie Turley’s lingual ability was troubling him, I could see. “This famous fight of yours. I don’t see a mark on you.”

“No, sir.”

“And Eddie?”

“He’s a little marked up.”
New concern flooded into Father’s face. “The next time you decide to massacre one of your schoolmates, look at who’s at home, will you? Brose Turley isn’t to be fooled around with.”

“Father, Eddie wouldn’t tell him about me hitting him.”

“Oh? How does he explain ‘a little marked up’ then?”

“He’d probably say his horse surprised him and next thing he knew, he was on the ground.”

“And if you were in his position, is that what you would tell me?”

“Pretty much.”

That drew me a stern look right out of the book of fathers. He proceeded to inform me in his best lecturing tone, “The schoolyard code of honor is not going to save your skin every time,” although, I could have pointed out to him, it had been working perfectly fine for me until Damon blabbed. I hoped I was an absolute picture of attention while Father further stipulated: “I want the truth out of you in any case like this ever again, hear?” I nodded vigorously. A lecture wasn’t a spanking or extra chores or exile to my room immediately after supper or any other degree of punishment, and it was beginning to look like I was going to get off with a lecture. “I don’t want you instigating any more fights, either,” Father had reached what seemed to be his final point. “No more of this ‘One-Punch’ business.”

“No, sir.”

“Is that all understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

He stood up and started out of the barn, then paused.

“What’s this about a race?”

That night. Spanked and sent to bed before sundown and lectured to a degree that definitely did constitute punishment, I lay there unstrung at how the
world had turned over from that one moment in the hayloft. My mind, my whole being, was questions. Why couldn't Father have been safely out there operating the noisy rusty pump at the horse trough when Damon's mouth got away from him? And why was it worse, on the Oliver Milliron punishment scale, to beat someone in a horse race than to punch that person in the jaw? For that matter, why was it worse to ride a galloping horse facing one direction instead of the other? ("What, backwards?" I can still hear Father's voice rising.) And what manner of added afterschool chore was going to be inflicted on me, tomorrow and beyond? How I hoped it was not going to be the milking. And most of all, why couldn't this whole episode have missed me and afflicted someone else, such as, say, Damon?

_That in the nature of the universe_, Rose's spirited quoting from the dictionary echoed all through this, _by which things come to be as they are_. If this turn of events was a fair sample of that, fate was not anything to look forward to in life.

Damon and Toby came to bed as if tiptoeing around an invalid. After he climbed in next to me, Damon wriggled for a minute. When he finally managed to say anything, his voice trembled.

"Paul? Paul, if you want I'll go right down and tell Father the race was all my idea."

Dragging in an accomplice to my wrong-end-to crime would only spread the misery, not do away with mine. "Just shut up, will you," I said and rolled over away from him.

On the list of questions without answers, how, if tears are silent, could I hear Damon begin to cry at that exact instant? Across the bedroom Toby already was sniffling to himself. Dry-eyed, I tried to fight off sleep, dreading what dream would come.
The next morning Eunice Schricker went out to her winter woodpile, pulled out the first stick of fresh stovewood, and found it was four feet long. Every stick in all three perfectly stacked cords was that length.

"I distinctly remember," Morrie defended when George brought him over that evening for a council on how to deal with the wrath of Aunt Eunice, "I distinctly remember your stipulation of the dimensions, Oliver." He reflected for a moment. "I did think it a custom peculiar to homestead life to store firewood in such length. I supposed it had to do with keeping snow from infiltrating the woodpile."

There still was a grim set to Father's chin from his session with me the day before, and this firmed it further. "Morrie, the next time you have a supposition of that sort, run it by me, all right?"

"Mum is madder than a wet hen," George reported, which did not come as particular news to any of us in the Milliron household except Toby. "She wants Morrie off her place, off my place, and probably off yours."

"She may think so," Father said briskly, "but she'll feel better when she sees the guilty party out there sawing all that wood into sixteen-inch chunks." He waited until Morrie inclined his head to attest that he understood the concept of sixteen-inch chunks. "And to perk her up even more," Father meted out further justice while he was at it, "I have just the volunteer to help bring that woodpile down to size. You'll meet Morrie at Eunice's every day after school, won't you, Paul."

"There is this about it," Rose sympathetically provided in the morning when I told her about my next phase of punishment. "Morrie won't bore you with silence."
Three cords is a lot of wood when you have to unpile it, drag each piece to the sawhorse, situate it between the crossbucks to hold it into place, find the rhythm of sawing with the person at the other end of the bucksaw, move the saw and cut again, then pile it all back up. Pretty quick I was wishing Father had sentenced me to milking duty instead.

This time around, Morrie was taking no chances. Before we started, he measured a stick to precisely sixteen inches and cut it off square. He used that and a carpenter’s pencil to mark where our sawcut would be for each chunk.

“Do we have to?” I protested this time-consuming approach. “Stovewood never gets cut that close.”

“From my limited experience with Mrs. Schricker,” Morrie maintained, “I conclude that obsessive precision is our only possible defense against her.”

Sure enough, Aunt Eunice descended on us at our labor every day, and sometimes twice a day. The first few of those peckish inspections, we stopped to listen to the list of imprecations that plentifully applied ‘incompetent’ to Morrie and ‘young ruffian’ to me. After that we simply kept sawing.

The ultimate afternoon, however, she came out to give us a going-over that would have to last us a while, because George was taking her by train to Great Falls to have her teeth seen to. Morrie did not know what we were in for, but this one I recognized as leading into her full Sunday-special ‘oh well soon I’ll be dead’ lamentation. Doom enlivened her every utterance as she had us know that the woodpile was the first thing she was going to check on as soon as she got back and so if we knew what was good for us we had better be on the lookout for her return, day after tomorrow. Aunt Eunice was not of a persuasion to cross herself, but her words seemed to do it for her as she delivered her patented sighing finale: “If I’m spared.”
This time Morrie had halted our sawing, perhaps to try to put together the connection between our woodpile proficiency and her self-assigned fate. Now he smoothed his mustache thoughtfully and provided, courteous as could be: "You may ease your mind on that score, Mrs. Schricker."

Accustomed as Aunt Eunice was to mumbled general assurances by George and others that she was sound as a coin, Morrie's frank exercise of predictive powers surprised her. "How so?"

"If you're dead, we won't expect you."

Aunt Eunice speechless as she traipsed off in retreat was not a sight I had ever expected to witness. It started me wondering, in a fumbling thirteen-year-old way, what other rogue capacities Morris Morgan was masking behind that mustache. Perdition, Rose had said she and he and the late Mister Llewellyn had wandered into in their fancy-glove way of life. That sounded exciting, but exactly what was it? A far cry from a woodpile, surely, yet Morrie did not seem to mind. True, he still looked like a total misfit around any kind of manual labor, with George's hand-me-down clothes draped on him and the beautiful brown hat showing sweat stains but no sensible downward crimp of the brim to ward off the sun. What was it like to work with such a man? Exasperating and exhilarating, in about equal measure. One minute Morrie would fuss as maddeningly with the woodpile as if he were arranging diamonds (even Toby could have stacked wood in his sleep), and the next he would be off on some mental excursion that took the breath out of me. A curlew foraging with its long-handle bill drew forth Morrie's observations about the adjustable tools of nature Darwin had discerned in the beaks of finches from isle to isle in the Galapagos. The deep-afternoon silence of our homestead dot on the prairie made him wonder aloud why Thoreau, if he wanted a full-fathomed pool of solitude, had never joined the Oregon Trail migration and come west. "Who's 'Thorough'?" I asked, and then and there learned that a
person could go through life as a self-appointed inspector of snowstorms. Morrie’s mind never rested, although the pair of us on the bucksaw did, more and more often, now that Aunt Eunice was off the property.

Looking back, I see that it was just as well that Morrie was dosing me with knowledge after school, because school itself had turned confusing. Each day started sour, with me still mad at Damon, which made him miserable, and that left Toby fretting about both of us. The Marias Coulee schoolyard sensed that I was in trouble at home, no doubt because of the wrong-end-to race, and so my celebrity dwindled away before it could get a good start. Besides that, at every recess Eddie Turley hung around squinting suspiciously at Damon and Toby and me even though we had given him our most solemn word, sealed with spit. It didn’t help that Miss Trent strangely turned sunny in the schoolhouse, gaily leading us in song sessions instead of recitation period a couple of times that week. Did she have some kind of sixth sense toward the Millirons, I pondered, that brightened her up when any of us went under a cloud?

One way or another, I sawed away at that long week until, midway through our Friday afternoon stint on the woodpile, Morrie looked across at me as we pushed and pulled and asked:

“What do you dream of, Paul?”

Was it possible? Did I dare believe my ears? A grownup was asking about my rampaging nocturnal mind. And if ever a dream needed a broader audience, it was this one of mine. Each stroke of the saw bit with more ferocity as I divulged to Morrie the nightly trance in which I would be walking along a road when a commotion kicked up behind a mudstone formation off to one side, and when I reached there the eroded hill was being circled by a couple of people and a pack of wolves—sometimes the people chased the wolves, then the wolves would chase the people, I took care to explain—and no matter how hard I tried to find a stick to
throw at the wolves there never was any stick, and things went on like that until on
one pass the wolves and the pair of people vanished around the hill together and
when I shouted that I was going to come around there with a stick if all of them
didn’t quit this, someone’s head rolled out from behind the hill, at which point I
always woke up.

I looked across the sawhorse expectantly.

Morrie appeared boggled. “All I meant, Paul, was what do you dream of
becoming when you grow up?”

My disappointment was massive. Morrie chucked aside the piece of wood
we had just cut and set another length into place and marked it before referring back
to my dream. “They’re working on those in Vienna, I believe. I’m sorry I’m no
guide on this, truly. But my own are more the daydream sort.”

One of those. He really was like Father. Provider of moonbeams when I
wanted full illumination. Downcast, I leaned into the sawing again. We had only
done a couple of strokes when Morrie spoke up again. “I haven’t wanted to pry.
But what did you commit to earn three cords of punishment?”

“Nothing much.”

“Something, surely.”

“I wouldn’t like for it to get around.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“There was a fight at recess, well, not much of a fight, and he’s so much
bigger than me that we settled it in a horse race that was sort of special, and the way
it worked out, I won. And Father came down on me for that.” There. The case of
injustice was laid out.

To my surprise, the bucksaw stopped going. At first I thought we had hit a
knot in the wood, but no, Morrie was holding us to a halt as he gazed across at me.
A light I had not seen before came into his eyes, the kind of glint that comes off a
lightning rod when the sun catches it just right. “Tell me about this fight and ‘special’ contest of yours.”

The oilcloth took the beating of its life from sullen elbows that evening after supper. At my accustomed place I sat stonily propping my head with both arms as I pretended to read *Ivanhoe* to show Father it took more than a woodpile to break my spirit. Damon similarly had his face in his fists as he stared down at his domino solitaire game, not bothering to make any moves. Toby’s chubby hands pressed against his cheeks while he idly kicked the air under his chair. We were like the proverbial three monkeys, except all stuck on ‘hear no evil.’ Father, going over his Big Ditch freight accounts at his end of the table, occasionally glanced around at us but kept at his bookkeeping. The knock on the door jarred all of us, as if the sound had shaken the table.

When we scrambled to peek while Father opened the door, Morrie stood there on the porch step. He was holding up a bullseye lantern to see by, and I swear, he and Father swept over the part about Diogenes searching the world for an honest man without either of them having to speak a word of it. Instead Morrie broached:

“I’m here to borrow a morsel or two of newsprint, if I may. Rose tells me you have an abundance of newspapers.”

I believe what Rose probably said was that we had a surplus of newspapers, but ours was a reading household. Father took the Sunday *Denver Post* by mail, which with luck arrived the following Thursday or Friday, and the daily *Great Falls Leader* and the weekly *Westwater Gazette*, and other people passed along their mail copies of various city papers when they were done with them; it all tended to accumulate. “You’re welcome to any Damon hasn’t
cannibalized,” Father offered. Homestead etiquette was taken care of in his next breath. “But come on in and sit a spell first.”

Morrie cast a yearning glance toward the parlor, and followed Father on into the kitchen where the coffee lived.

Toby and Damon bounced into their spots at the table, practically glistening with readiness for anything that might change the mood of the household, and even I, who already had Morrie as company all those woodpile hours, went way up in spirit at this visit of his. Yet you could never quite be sure of the consequences of having Morrie around--those four-foot-long sticks of firewood, remember--and part of me stayed leery as he leapt into conversation with Father. The weather of Montana versus that of Minneapolis, the scandalous condition of the nation, the curious byways of mankind: they ranged over topics like the veteran talkers they were. The younger three of us swung our attention back and forth between them like onlookers at a tennis match, and I must say I didn’t see it coming (although Father didn’t either) when Morrie tossed into the mix:

“Oliver? Do you know the martial history of the Crow Indians?”

“Somehow it has escaped my notice. Why?”

“They were the daredevils of the northern plains,” Morrie spoke with the lilt he gave to his most soaring notions. “And the boldest of them were their contrary warriors. You have in Paul here a contrary warrior.”

I was petrified. The last thing I needed, around Father, was to be made known as a daredevil of the northern plains.

But Morrie unstoppably was going on: “I suspect you have your own tribe of them.” Damon and Toby tried to look off to distant corners of the room. “You see the parallel between those dauntless young Crow warriors and your own, I trust, Oliver? They rode into battle backwards on their horses.”

Father blinked at this anthropological news. “Why on earth--?”
"People do these things to transcend the ordinary, I'd say," Morrie pronounced as if it was the most reasonable thing he had ever heard of. "Wouldn't you? To find their own boundaries, of bravery or willpower? To plow a deeper furrow of life, if I may put it that way?"

"Morrie," Father drew a slow circle on the oilcloth with his cup, "I know you intend well with this. I simply don't want my children breaking their necks."

"Every neck I see in this room is intact," Morrie pointed out. "And I believe Paul's adversary agreed to the terms of the race, and came out in one piece."

"You think I should close the book on this 'contrary warrior' episode of Paul's," Father weighed the matter and he sounded dubious to me. I felt as if I didn't dare breathe so as not to tip the balance.

"I do. Warriors learn from survival. I've spent enough time with Paul under the adverse conditions of the woodpile and Eunice Shricker to rate him a very sobered young combatant."

It may have been the invoking of Aunt Eunice that gave Father pause about the extent of my punishment. In any case, something flickered in his set expression. After a long moment he said: "I'll take it under advisement. You would have made a good defense attorney, Morrie."

A wiggle of relief ran through the other three of us. Damon could restrain himself no longer. "Uhm, Morrie? Would you like to see my scrapbooks? I have Coach Stagg in them and everything."

"Damon, I would be honored. But--" He looked to Father to see if perhaps the evening should be closed down.

Father waved them off to where the scrapbooks lived, our bedroom. "The lot of you, except our fabled contrarian here. Paul, I need your help with a couple of duns."
My head still spinning from the turn of events Morrie had brought about, I assembled my writing materials. Wordlessly Father passed me the bills of lading that were past due, and I wrote the dunning letters. The kitchen was still except for the skritch of my pen and Father’s shuffling of papers, while from upstairs the voice of the sports fiend, Damon, and Morrie’s more melodious murmur drifted down. When I set the last letter aside for the ink to dry, I stayed in my chair instead of bolting for upstairs, unsure of the ground I was on with Father.

After an amount of time that I somehow knew he was measuring in his head, he glanced up from his accounts. Then put his hands on the edge of the table and pushed back a bit, as if trying to add to his perspective on the youngster across the table. “When you and Thucydides finish the woodpile,” Father kept his voice down as he began, “we’ll call the matter of that race square. All right? That does not mean you are free to go galloping around backwards, ever again. I am not raising the pack of you to be rodeo trick riders.”

“No, sir. I didn’t think so.”

“What Morrie said about outdoing the ordinary is entirely valid, but there are ways to do it and still stay in one piece.”

“I’m not against that, Father, honest.”

“Paul. Son.” His mouth worked at stifling a swallow. “I don’t know how I could get along without you.” He scraped his chair back and headed for the stove and coffee pot so that I couldn’t see his face. “Now scat. I have to finish up this bookkeeping.”

As I mounted the stairs my lips silently tried out the two words “contrary warrior” together. *Valid, but,* according to Father. How was I supposed to put a paradox like that together? Maybe better to be Damon, whom I could hear had passionately worked his way from football to boxing in the scrapbook tour, which I
supposed was fitting for the review of my case just concluded. "It's funny, the name and all, but know who I liked best, before? Casper--

--"the Capper, yes, yes, I see it here," Morrie throatily finished for him, doubtless under the strain of keeping up with Damon's enthusiasm. "I swear, headline writers are more ruthless than Cossacks. 'Pug Takes Long Walk Off Short Pier,' indeed." Damon would have bristled to be told so, but he had a Shakespearean taste for heroes who came to some gory end or another. The outfielder who fell from the bar car of a train. The fullback who rashly wrestled a sideshow bear. Those unfortunates, I knew from my brother's bedtime tales of them, were there in the album pages with the pugilist under discussion, who by all evidence had thrown a championship fight and ended up in the bottom of Lake Michigan. To me, that did not sound like the kind of contrary warrior a person wanted to be. But Damon, I remembered, had been heartbroken about no longer being able to follow the career of the scrappy Capper, and Morrie was so feelingly providing a wreath of solace I did not want to interrupt. "He perhaps did make a misstep, so to speak," Morrie concluded gently. "Before that, he was a boxer nonpareil."

I knew that meant something like one of a kind. Maybe I just had to take this as a nonpareil night. Damon, though, was dealing wholesale in comparisons, asking keenly:

"Could the Capper have beat the Real McCoy, you think?"

"If bouts were fought on a first-name basis," Morrie was sent to musing, "one would have to think not."

His voice had taken on the timbre I recognized from his more soaring disquisitions, and appreciative audience that I had grown to be at the woodpile, I waited outside the bedroom doorway to see where this one would go. "'Casper' versus 'Harry,' that would sound like a first-round knockout for the latter,
wouldn’t it. But nicknames capture an essence, an augmented personification of the individual.” One-Punch Milliron listened to this with care. “No,” Morrie was concluding as though he could see the match in some ring beyond this world, “the Capper would have capped the McCoy off, I’m sure of it. Eight rounds, no more.”

What a picture the three of them made as I entered the room. Toby was half sprawled onto the worktable next to the pair hunched over the spread-open scrapbooks, his eyelids desperately heavy. In the lamplight Morrie pensively stroked his mustache as Damon ran a guiding finger through that holy writ of the true sports fan, the fine print, the agate type beneath the story of the event. “I couldn’t believe it when he lost to Ned Wolger, that time. Look at the round-by-round, the Capper was winning almost all—” Damon became aware I was there. He swiftly looked around at me, his hand groping toward another scrapbook. His voice broke a little as he said: “Paul, I just put the World Series in. Want to see?”

He knew that baseball was the one sport I cared anything about.

I figured I might as well thaw; Damon was going to be my brother forever, no matter what. “Sure.” But before I joined them at the scrapbooks, there was the matter of Morrie coming over tonight to act as my advocate. I had no idea how to thank him enough. “Morrie, I--”

“It’s all right, Paul, you may have to return the favor sometime.” His forefinger took its turn at the fine print of life, alighting into the lineup of the world champion Pittsburgh Pirates. “Honus Wagner, the Flying Dutchman, now there’s an ominous nickname if there ever was one.”
When I came downstairs in the morning, fresh from a dreamless night, I could tell there still was something on Father’s mind. Hoping it wasn’t me, I dropped to my place at the table to try to fade into the routine of breakfast.

No breakfast was in sight.

“The time has come, Paul,” Father said with determination, one warrior to another. “I am going to have it out with Rose on the cooking.”

“Really?”

“Watch and see.”

I ran back upstairs to shake Damon and Toby awake.

By the time they more or less had clothes on and spilled out onto the stairs to take a grandstand seat as I had, here came the customary brisk knock.

We watched avidly as Father let Rose in and, just like that, was rewarded with:

“Isn’t this a morning to remember? Oliver, I have decided I am going to tackle the kitchen.”
“You are?” Father sounded like someone who had hit the jackpot. Damon, always our hungriest of the hungry, showed Toby and me his fingers crossed for luck.

“Absolutely,” Rose vowed. “There is not a shelf in there that doesn’t need scouring down.”

She bustled by Father, the curls on her forehead giving a little flip as she sighted us perched on the stair treads. “Toby, Damon, Paul, good morning, good morning, and good morning. My, aren’t you the early birds on a Saturday.” The lunch sack that barely would have fed a chickadee went to its accustomed place, off came her coat, and we knew it was only a matter of seconds before she would be whistling into her day’s work and for all intents and purposes incommunicado. Damon groaned and Toby twitched. Father cast a harried glance up at us and cut her off halfway along the hall.

“The kitchen. That brings up something. I wanted to have a word with you.”

“Certainly, Oliver.”

“Ah, Rose? I--the boys and I,” he shamelessly resorted to, “rather hoped that you might lend us a hand with the cooking. Naturally there could be an adjustment in wages.”

Rose appeared mystified. “Did my advertisement contain a misprint?”

“No, no. We all got a rise from ‘can’t cook but doesn’t bite,’ believe me. It’s just that we assumed the first part was as much a jest as the second part.”

“Alas,” Rose emitted, one of the few people in the modern world who could say that word and seem to mean it, “it was not.”

“Can’t cook at all?” Desperation was coming into Father’s voice. “How can that be?”
“I was never taught it. Housekeeping, yes, every wrinkle. I entered household service on Lowry Hill when I was just a slip of a girl, but was never on a kitchen staff. And even if I had been assigned to kitchen duty, there are obstacles.”

“Such as?”

“Eggs,” she confided. “I can’t stand the sight of them.”

“What, eggs? But you gather them every day!”

“They’re still in their shells then, aren’t they. It’s the yolks that get me. And the runny stuff, what’s it called, eggwhite. Ugh.”

Floundering fatally before our very eyes, Father did make one last try at grasping Rose’s cookery-free existence:

“But you were a married woman--how on earth did you and Mister Llewellyn eat?”

“Out.”

Twenty-four hours later, the still disconsolate crew of us pushed our spoons around in mush that was even less appetizing on Sunday than the other mornings of the week. Our fate stretched ahead of us, plate by usual dismal plate, into infinity now that we knew Rose honestly meant ‘Can’t Cook.’ Father had to use the last card in his sleeve to cheer us up at all. “Gather up your long faces,” he directed. “I have a load for the Big Ditch and you’re all riding along, you can see your friends. Then Rae is feeding us dinner, although I can’t imagine where she got the notion we need a square meal, can you?”

Some days are all ups and downs. October was drawing to an end with nice clear weather that could not have been prettier, but the wind was practicing for winter as we bunched on the wagon seat next to Father in our caps and coats. Then when the dray crested onto the Westwater plain there was the insatiable steam
shovel, and the hubbub of the construction camp, but where Brother Jubal’s tent should have been, there was only the leftover strew of straw from the muscular worshiping. Damon said something under his breath, which drew him a sharp warning nudge from me. But Father didn’t hear, and only instructed us to keep an eye on the time while we were visiting the Pronovosts and, need he add, stay out of trouble.

At the sight of us, the three Pronovost kids practically tore through the front wall of their tent to race out and give us the news. Gabriel and Inez impatiently jiggled in place waiting for Isidor to summon the words. Drawing himself up to his skinny best, Isidor said for the ages:

“You hear yet? Teacher run off with that preacher.”

Toby looked puzzled. Damon and I grinned tentatively, waiting for the rest of Isidor’s joke.

However, Isidor made the quick cross over the center of his chest that meant he was serious. “Pa’s foreman seen ’em get on the train together yesterday with their suitcases. Kissin’, too. If that don’t count as runnin’ off, I don’t know what does.”

It is the kind of bulletin that still freezes my heart. A teacher erased from the school year. The casualty reports that come to my office sometimes are as awful as can be. *Car slid on black ice. Or caught in the blizzard, or the teacherage caught fire in the night.* Other times simply bad enough. *Death in the family or taken ill.* Each time my department rushes the files of availables to the beleaguered rural school board, but any gap in the seam of the school year is troubling to me. A one-room school and its solitary teacher must exist on something approaching matrimonial terms, for better and for worse, and back there when Isidor’s words were registering on us, I instantaneously missed Adelaide Trent even though I had never liked her. The confused mix on the faces of Toby and Damon said the same
for them. All of us were far too young to know the weather of the heart that caused her to flee off with a Bible-thumping spieler. But we understood that Marias Coulee had been jilted.

Isidor was mustering the remainder of his report. “Seen her here a couple of Sundays in a row. We figured she was just here for the singin’. Guess not.”

Two minutes later, Father looked around in surprise at the three of us screeching to a halt. Damon and I let Toby tell it, he was going to anyway.

“Miss Trent loped!”

“Did she.” Father’s eyebrows lifted commensurately. “That must have been a memorable change from her usual gait.”

“Father, Toby means ‘eloped,’” I said.

“Hopped on the train with that sky pilot,” Damon elaborated.

Father sat down on the tailgate of the dray.

“Let me try to catch up here,” he said. “Addie Trent has landed a man? And quit the country with him, just like that?”

We three nodded in unison.

“Destiny strikes again,” he said wearily.
“Good morning, young scholars.”

Three dozen sets of schoolchild ears took a considerable moment to adjust to that form of address. Until then, our day was always started with Miss Trent’s all-purpose, “Children, hush.” After a ticktock of contemplating the unexpected new source of articulation at the front of the classroom, all of Marias Coulee school raggedly chorused back to Morris Morgan:

“Good morning, teacher.”

Morrie gave a bit of a bow, his crisp white shirt so maximally washed and starched and ironed by Rose that I thought I could hear it crackle. Not that I dared hope it counted for much, but at least the school had gained sartorially in the swap of baggy Miss Trent--Sister Jubal now?--for this exemplar of tailoring. Morrie stood before us like an emissary from those farthest places in our books, where prime ministers attired themselves in tweed and vest and a tie as prominent as a chin napkin. Topped off in this case with the imperial mustache, of course.

While I sat there fidgeting, the collective gaze of the schoolroom rested solidly on the figure at the front of the room. In it, I know from experience at both ends of a classroom, were measures of doubt, awe, trepidation, hope, something
approaching dread and something approximating adoration—the ingredients of every first sighting of a teacher by those whose fate it is to sit and be taught. Morrie fingered a piece of chalk as he gazed back at the legion of us. My case of the fidgets grew worse. Hours on the woodpile instructed me about a good many of his mannerisms, and I could tell he was rubbing up one of his gigantic thoughts, genie-in-the-lamp style, from that chalk.

But whatever it was, Morrie managed to stow it for the time being. “The day’s first lesson,” he sent the hearts of Marias Coulee school down and just as swiftly up, “is for me, to learn your names.” He whirled to the blackboard as gracefully as if ice-skating. “In exchange, here is mine.” My pride in my penmanship leaked away with every swiftly stroked letter of his name; he wrote an exquisite hand, worthy of copperplate.

“So.” Quick as the word, he turned to us again. “If you will please stand one by one and announce yourselves, I can acquaint names with faces. Let’s start here with this handsome fellow at the end at the front row.”

Shy with this mighty honor, Josef Kratka barely managed to find the floor with his feet and blurt his name. The other first-graders wobbled up one after another, as little different from one another as ducklings. Then the second grade, where differentiation took hold. Inez Pronovost popped to her feet like a girl cadet, but Sigrid Peterson barely surfaced to deliver her accented syllables. Hot-eyed Emil Kratka rapped out his name as if challenging anyone to deny it. There was the faintest ghost of a smile on Morrie as Toby reared up and enthusiastically identified himself.

“Sally Emrich, teacher sir,” the school’s leading fussbudget led off primly for the third grade. Maybe this first schoolday under the unlikely generalship of Morrie was marching in place, but even I had to admit it had not fallen on its face yet.
From the moment Father talked himself into the idea and set about coaxing the other school board members into it as well, I was apprehensive about the whole notion of Morrie being tapped to finish out the school year. For one thing, most of that year remained ahead, and all across those months it would take only one lapse on the order of those four-foot sticks of firewood to make a laughingstock of him—and by extension, of the Millirons. For another, he had never taught school a day in his life, up until now.

“Oh, how funny,” Rose said when Father broached the job to Morrie.

“I am rather out of practice at submitting a job application,” Morrie said nervously. He looked at Rose as if she ought to back him up in this. “The leather trade, that was all in the family—”

“Gone, every trace of it,” Rose sounded the sad note for him.

“It's of no matter,” Father skipped over that, “we want someone in that classroom with knowledge running out his ears, not commerce. Morrie, why so coy? The job of teacher would fit you like those kid gloves you used to have dealings in.”

Rose, at least, seemed persuaded by that reasoning. “If Oliver gives his word for you—”

“Oliver, you are all too readily casting me in a role with the heroic echoes of antiquity,” Morrie mused. “'Gladly would he learn, and gladly teach.' I am not sure I have the capacity to play that dual part.”

Any other time, Father might have dusted off Chaucer himself and parried with the further description of that book-laden pilgrim to Canterbury: ‘But all be that he was a philosopher/Yet had he but little gold in coffer.’ Instead he clapped Morrie on the shoulder. “I'll just need to run this by a few people.”
The emergency session of the Marias Coulee school board precipitated by the elopement of Adelaide Trent was called to order in our kitchen that same night. As we expected, Damon and Toby and I were shooed off to our room, and just as inevitably we took our usual perches at the head of the stairs to overhear. Right away Joe Fletcher wondered out loud why a man of Morrie’s sort was unmoored from previous career:

“He isn’t a bughouse case, is he?”

“No more so than thee or me, Joe,” Father attested. “Make the mistake of arguing with him sometime and you’ll wish he wasn’t so sane.”

Walt Stinson voiced the next suspicion. “Then how about tonsil paint? Is he in the habit?”

Father warded that off stoutly. “From everything I can see, he leaves the bottle strictly alone.”

I could have told them Morrie’s intoxication with the brew of knowledge was the real worry. Schoolchildren are quick as sharks to scent something amiss with a teacher, and if he rambled off too far into his excursions of thought in the classroom—well, the three of us there on the stairs would be pining for the old days in the schoolyard when the only topic we heard about was Rose. More than any razzing at recess, though, what bothered me about the prospect of Morrie as our teacher was what it could do to him. If he was branded as ridiculous, it would not stop with the student body of Marias Coulee. People were not a bad lot generally, in what opinion I had been able to form at that age, but there were always some who could drive a nail through a butterfly, too.

Beside me, Damon was on edge. He rightly sensed that having Morrie in the schoolroom every day, with all the rest of us there, would be a drastic dilution from the two of them poring over sports exploits together. Toby’s reaction was the exact opposite; as far as he was concerned, Morrie was the next best thing to having
Rose on hand. With our hopes going off in various directions, we listened while Father used every caliber of persuasion in his arsenal to bring around his fellow school board members to the concept of resorting to Morris Morgan.

Walt Stinson was ending up where Joe Fletcher had started out, the apparent gap between Morrie’s attainments and his current situation:

“Then why’s he not doing better for himself in life than chores at Eunice Schricker’s place? Can’t be he likes exercise that much.”

“All I can tell you, he and his sister are gluttons for work.” Father expended a breath that must have made the walls of our kitchen move. “Gents, we are up against it. We are short of a teacher, we have a man right here handy to the job, and the man happens to be a granary of learning. I ask you, isn’t the logic looking us right in the face? Are we ready to take a vote?”

Without incident Morrie’s call of the roll reached Damon’s grade, the populous sixth. First up was the bashful girl in front of me who had a certain corner of all our hearts because her long and lonely ride to school. She gave a shy little curtsy and said:

“Wiwian Willard.”

Morrie’s forefinger paused in its journey through the Marias Coulee enrollment register. He tapped the paper tentatively as if to encourage its help on this.

“Lillian, I’m sorry but I don’t seem to have you on the roll.”

“Wiwian,” she said again.

“Miriam?” Morrie tried again.

A guffaw erupted from the back of the room, the den of eighth-grade boys. Morrie peered back there in interested fashion. “A volunteer, full of gaiety. Just the kind of messenger the gods like to send when enlightenment is required.” He
singed out the author of the gusty laugh, Milo Stoyanov, with a stare as level as a pointer. “Well? Enlighten me.”

Caught off-guard, Milo looked right, looked left, then gulped out:
“Vivian’s her name.”

With that clue, Morrie managed to spy *Villard, Viv.* on his list.

“Ah.” He gave her a gesture of apology. “*Mea culpa, Vivian, not youa culpa.*” Everyone in the schoolroom except Damon and Toby and I blinked.

Catching a second wind, Morrie briskly elicited names from Isidor Pronovost and Miles Calhoun. Then Barbara Rellis sprang up and identified herself in her cheeky tone of voice. Every male in the room over the age of nine knew she was going to go out in the world and break hearts. Morrie nodded in satisfaction after finding her on the list, but Barbara stayed standing.

“Teacher? May I please trade my first name in for another one? Just for school.”

All who knew Barbara could have told him it was not a wise move, but Morrie asked speculatively: “And what would that be?”

“Rabrab.”

I saw Morrie brace for a gale of laughter from the rest of us, but none came. We were all as intrigued as he was. In the expectant silence, Morrie made a try at formulating:

“Technically, Barbara--to address you in the customary manner, for the moment--what you are requesting seems to be an antonymous nickname. If I am not mistaken, ‘Rabrab’ constitutes your given name, at least a majority of it, backwards. Why would you prefer that?”

“Boys get to be contrary warriors their way,” she said with a devilish innocence I could have throttled her for. “I figured I could at least do it with my name.”
My face felt red enough to ignite. Her usual elbow-length away from me, Carnelia Craig snickered to herself.

Morrie managed to quell the outburst of debate—whether she was Barbara or Rabrab, half the school instantaneously backed her and the other half reflexively rallied to the opposing view—and take the matter under advisement.

"Names are mighty things," he intoned, folding his arms on his chest in what I recognized as his deep-thinking mode. "They may carry the essence of our person, particularly if incised, which is to say nicked, with an apt bit of elaboration. Think of Richard the Lion-Hearted. The Divine Sarah Bernhardt. The Real McCoy," his gaze just above Damon’s head for that one. "We mustn’t take lightly what the world knows us by, and I commend Miss Rellis for the imagination to seek something she finds more fitting. But there is also the matter of official record," he tapped the roll call list again, "community custom, and need I say, parents."

With that word, the conspiratorial air that had preceded the wrong-end-to race returned to the room. In the hush, every one of us watched Morrie intently as he deliberated. "I need to know if there is a foundation of precedent upon which ‘Rabrab’ might be installed. Does anyone else go by a nickname, just here at school?"

"Me." Miles Calhoun raised his hand as high as it would go.

Morrie stared at him in consternation. "Miles, I am as certain as anything that you just now informed me that your name is--Miles."

"That’s what everybody calls me. That’s what I go by. But my name’s Hector and that’s what I get all the time at home."

"Then why--" From the corner of his eye Morrie caught my infinitesimal shake of my head. A trackless bog lay ahead of him in the fact that Hector was dubbed Miles by the schoolyard at large because of his habit of saying by a mile,
as in “Is two against one fair, by a mile?” and“I don’t believe a word you say, by a mile.”

Pulling back just in time, Morrie returned to the issue at hand. With a Solomonic flair that impressed even those who did not want Barbara to get away with anything, he rendered his decision: “If you can sufficiently convince your fellow young scholars, Rabrab it can be, until different notification.”

Peering once more into the ranks of the sixth grade, Morrie looked relieved at the prospect of getting the roll call back on track with Damon. I knew better. Damon had given me a wicked wink during Barbara’s--Rabrab’s--mischief and I could about hear what was coming, some wisecrack about reversing his name to Nomad. But before he got to pull this off, he happened to turn in the direction of his deskmate as he started to stand up.

“Gaahhh! She’s bleeding to death again!”

Damon’s yelp would have raised the hair on the dead. For all his fascination with gruesome fates of sports heroes, he shared Father’s queasiness around actual blood. And there beside him sat Marta Johannson, perfectly calm, with a red rivulet coming out of each nostril and darkening her upper lip. Marias Coulee school had probably more than its share of nosebleeds, usually brought on by fists, but this spontaneous one of Marta’s was judged sensational. As Damon tried to scramble away from her, Grover Stinson leaned across to see past him, adjusting his spectacles for a better look. The Drobny sisters, Seraphina and Eva, smiled at Marta’s plight like a pair of drawn stilettos. Several sets of feet drummed on the floor excitedly. “I think I’m going to throw up,” Rabrab announced. “You do and I’ll hit you one,” Eddie Turley pledged. Milo let out another room-shaking guffaw.

“Everyone! Quiet, a moment.”
Speeding down the aisle toward Marta, Morrie glanced to the seventh grade for interpretation as he passed.

“She gets these,” Carnelia and I said together in veteran fashion.

Morrie slid down onto one knee in front of Marta, working fast. He tore a strip of tablet paper and rolled it into a tight little ball. “Push this up under your lip and hold it there, that’s the way.” With Marta staunching the flow, he professionally dabbed away the bloody residue with a wetted handkerchief. It was all over in record time.

Breathing a little hard, Morrie walked back to the front of the room and resolutely picked up the roll call list again. I began to wonder if he was going to get us to first period, arithmetic, before the end of his initial teaching day.

The remainder of the sixth grade, perhaps impressed with Morrie’s capability around blood, reeled off names without event. Carnelia and I, the total seventh, accounted for ourselves in no time. This left the eighth grade, that logjam of big boys. Carl Johannson and Milo Stoyanov had both needed to repeat a grade along the way, and Eddie Turley meanwhile had flunked two. There was a rim of fuzz on the upper lip of each of them, as if they were starting to grow moss from all their years trapped in the schoolroom. Martin Myrdal and Verl Fletcher merely were mansize ahead of schedule, and markedly brighter than the others, but their renegade moods of growing up were such that you had to watch your step around them, too. I had the impression that even Carnelia was taking an interest in how our new teacher would fare with this bunch. Permanently mad at each other though we were, she and I shared unspoken relief that we did not have to go through life amid the galoots of grade eight.

Morrie did not appear perturbed as one after another of them unfolded out of the desks that were too small for them and muttered a name. He did pause a barest moment when the roll call reached Eddie Turley. Just sitting there, Eddie looked
like a menace to society. He took his time about getting onto his feet and made a face at the whole process, to show he had no problem with sneering at the new teacher.

But beginner’s luck was with Morrie. When Eddie lurched back down, the last student of all happened to be Verl Fletcher. Before Verl could reclaim his seat, Morrie popped him a question:

“Verl, I must ask--do you happen to know the derivation of your distinguished family name?”

“Nope.”

“No? Allow me then to tell you what a vital profession it was, that of a ‘fletcher,’ one who ‘fletched.’”

I was the one person in the schoolroom who had ever witnessed Morrie soar off into full trapeze flight this way. The whole student body, however, instinctively understood that our new teacher had to catch onto something up there or fall far. Already Verl was looking uneasy with a family tree of ones who fletched.

Morrie advanced on the lanky eight-grader unfazed. “You see, Verl, in days of old a fletcher was an arrowsmith, a maker of arrows. Knights of the Round Table, huntsmen, Robin Hood, they all depended on the skill of the fletcher to make that arrow straight and true.” Snatching up the yardstick that Miss Trent used to whap on the blackboard to get our full attention, Morrie pantomimed an archer drawing back the arrow to let fly. “We take the measure, so to speak, of those long-ago fletchers every day of our lives. Verl, what do you notice about the length of this ‘arrow’?” Morrie patiently held his archery pose.

“It’s a yard?” Verl hazarded.

“Exactly! And that is where we get that unit of measure from. The cloth needed for a bowman’s coat had to be as wide as that arrow was long, didn’t it.
Watch!” Morrie whipped off his suitcoat, turned it upside down, held one corner up by his ear where the feathered end of the arrow would have been, thrust out his arm in drawn-bow fashion again with the other corner of the coattail in his fingers, and there it was, the yardlong length of cloth. Everyone in the room had seen their mothers or the clerk at the Westwater mercantile measure from a bolt of cloth that way, and now we knew why. Several of the girls who sewed, Carnelia among them, verified Morrie’s domestic insight with testing motions of their shoulders. Toby and the others in the lower grades were examining their arrow arms with new respect. Verl looked somewhat dazed but newly knighted along with it.

Putting his coat back on and adjusting his cuffs, Morrie headed toward the more usual teacherly territory at the front of the room. “You may sit down, Verl, thank you very much. That excursion into times past whence measurements come from brings us, I believe, to arithmetic period.”

Rose mercilessly took charge of putting the place in order when Morrie moved in to the teacherage out back of the schoolhouse, shaking her head over its prior level of housekeeping every way she turned.

“I take exception to flounces,” she declared of Miss Trent’s taste in curtains as she flung up a window to air the place out. “Absolute dustcatchers. Oliver, surely the school board—”

Father gave Rose a look that seemed to say there it was again, that exceptional disposition of hers. Nonetheless he patted his pockets for something to write new curtains down on. Toby and Damon and I proiwled the previously forbidden premises, disappointed not to find teacher secrets cropping out anywhere. Damon in particular was convinced Miss Trent, when she was away from the eyes of the schoolroom, had spent her time smoking cigarettes. “Why was her breath like that, if she wasn’t?” So far, despite his best efforts he had not
been able to find where she might have stashed her Woodbines. Toby divided his
time between pitching in on Damon’s search and shadowing Rose as she swept and
swiped at dust. My role as water bearer followed me from home, and no sooner
did I have the stove reservoir and the drinking bucket freshly filled than Rose was
brandishing the mop bucket in my direction and saying, “Paul, would you terribly
mind--?” Once more I headed out to the pump in the schoolyard.

This time I passed Morrie on his way from the wagon, dispatched to fetch a
box of housewares Rose had insisted he could not get along without. Did
Thoreau’s luggage include a toasting fork, I wondered as I saw that item poking out
of Morrie’s box? “Thank goodness it is a small house,” he murmured to me in
passing, one servant of Rose to another.

It was late in the day and the day was late in the season. The pewter cast of
light that comes ahead of winter crept into the schoolground as I performed the last
of my water errands, shadows growing dusky instead of sharp almost as I
watched. From the feel of the air, night would bring our first hard frost. The
schoolyard seemed phenomenally empty as I crossed it this time. I could distinctly
hear my lone soft footsteps on ground that was stampeded across at each recess.
Around at the front of the school where the pump stood next to the flagpole, I slung
the mop bucket into place under the spout, but for some reason did not step to the
pump handle just yet.

I suppose it was the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be
something more than a boy, that set me aware of everything around, as though
Marias Coulee school and its height of flagpole and depth of well were the axis of
all that was in sight. I remember thinking Damon and Toby might come around the
corner looking for me any minute, and if I wanted this for myself I had better use
my eyes for all they were worth. So, there in the dwindling light of the afternoon I
tried to take in that world between the manageable horizons. The cutaway bluffs
where the Marias River lay low and hidden were the limit of field of vision in one direction. In the other, the edge of the smooth-buttered plain leading to Westwater and the irrigation project. Closer, though, was where I found the longest look into things. Out beyond the play area, there were round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles around their picket stakes. Perhaps that pattern drew my eye to the other, the one I had viewed every day of my school life but never until then truly registered: the trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard spot where I stood unnaturally alone.

Forever and a day could go by, and that feeling will never leave me. Of knowing, in that instant, the central power of that country school in all our lives. It reached beyond those of us answering Morrie's hectic roll call that first day, although we were that clapboard classroom's primary constituents, its rural minnows much in need of schooling. Everyone I could think of had something at stake in the school. For Father, all the years he spent as a mainstay of the school board amounted to his third or fourth or fifth line of work at once, depending on how strict the count. Along with him, the other men of Marias Coulee had built the snug teacherage with their own hands the summer before, and the graying schoolhouse itself back when the first homesteaders came. The mothers dispatched their hearts and souls out the door every morning as they sent waist-high children to saddle up and ride miles to school. Somehow this one-room school had drawn from somewhere Morris Morgan, walking encyclopedia. Now Rose had arrived on the teacherage scene and dust would never be the same in the vicinity of Marias Coulee School. We all answered, with some part of our lives, to the pull of this small knoll of prospect, this isolated square of schoolground.

There at the waiting pump I could not sort such matters out totally, but even then, I am convinced, began in me some understanding of how much was recorded
on that prairie, in those trails leading to the school. How their pattern held together
a neighborhood measured in square miles and chimneys as far apart as smoke
signals. I would say, if I were asked now, that the mounted troupes of
schoolchildren taking their bearing on that schoolhouse on its prairie high spot
traveled as trusting and true in their aim as the first makers of roads sighted onto a
distant cathedral spire. Yet that is the erasure, those tracks in the grass that have
outlined every rural school district of this state for so long, that I am called on to
make at the convocation tonight.

"I was about to send a search party," Rose met me with as I lurched in with
the heavy bucketful of water. After she put it to immediate use--she could mop a
floor while most women were thinking about it--Father reappeared from whatever
he had been doing at the wagon and stood inside the doorway surveying the
scrubbed teacherage and its fresh occupant. Stowing silk socks in the rude
pinewood dresser, Morrie looked more out of place than ever. Father swallowed,
as a man will who has stuck his neck out quite far, then took care of the last of
business for the day. "Morrie"--he warily included Rose in his inquisitive glance--
"is there anything else within the less than infinite power of the school board that
we can provide for you?" He checked his jottings. "So far, it's curtains, fresh
ticking for the mattress, draft excluder, and lamp wicks."

Morrie's answer was swift. "Maid service would be appreciated."

Father had his nose down in his list. Damon was investigating the flour bin
and other kitchen nooks, Toby assisting. I am sure I was the only one who caught
the look that passed between Rose and Morrie after he said that. Sisterless as I
was, I had nothing to compare it to. But there was a surprising amount of give-
and-take in the lift of his brow as he gazed at her and the considering tilt of her head
as she returned the gaze for quite an extended moment. Enough to tell me two
sexes, even related as closely as possible, must be drastically more to deal with than
the male cast of our family. Watching, I could not have foretold whether Rose was
going to answer him with bouquet or shrapnel.

"Surely you don't think I would abandon you," came her eventual
response. "I'll tend to everything, per usual."

Over his shoulder Father called out, "Damon, quit that, you're going to
wear out every drawer in the place." With a quick glance apiece he rounded up
Toby and me. "Get your coats on, the lot of you, it's time to break ground for
home. The thrill of suppertime awaits as usual. Rose, weren't you going to ride
back with us?"

She didn't seem to have heard. Then roused herself and sent another
freighted look Morrie's direction. "I'll stay."

Morrie gauged that response for a moment, then snapped to as if he had just
thought of something. "Everyone stay. For supper. I insist."

The Milliron family in its entirety halted in its tracks.

Father was the first to find power of speech.

"You can cook?"

"Certainly." Morrie had shed his jacket and was rolling up his shirtsleeves.

"In bachelor fashion, but an acquaintance of mine was chef for the Harrimans for a
time. Rose, you remember Pierre. No? Well, no matter, he showed me a few
things about putting together a meal. Now then, I believe that is a haunch of deer
out in the coolbox." By now he was rummaging through the sparsely stocked
cupboard. "Here we have dried noodles--actually macaroni, but close enough. And
onions--a bit desiccated, but they will serve. Venison Stroganoff, how does that
sound to everybody? I'll just start some water to going and Rose can set the table
and--Oliver, why are you putting on your hat? Did I say something amiss?"

"I need some air."
“See?” Only Damon’s rear end was visible as he pawed among the bison bones at the boulder-strewn base of the cliff. He and Houdini were our best diggers, that next Sunday afternoon. “See, the black ones are chipped different on the sides.”

Hard to imagine, something that innocent as the starting point toward one of my worst dreams. But the mind goes its own way at night.

“Beveled, Damon, that angle of edge is called.” Morrie told him. “Very discerning of you, though, to notice the difference.” Kneeling there, big brown hat pulled low against the wind that followed the river through the Marias bottomland, he looked nearly prayerful as he turned over and over in his hand the dark arrowhead Damon had just handed up to him. In the next breath Toby came charging over and, proud as a kitten with its first mouse, presented him the intact bison horn he had just found. Carefully Morrie laid it and Damon’s find alongside the lance point I had pried out of the nearby clay bank. “They could have used the three of you on digging up Troy,” he commended. “Superb specimens, all around.”

Our audience clucked a storm of disapproval down at us. I had to laugh. “She doesn’t necessarily agree.” We had scared up a sage hen when we clambered
to the bottom of the buffalo jump, and it strutted nervously on a ledge of rock above us, steadily scolding our presence.

“Didn’t know Aunt Eunice was along with us.” Damon’s wisecrack drifted from where he still was head-down in the boneyard.

“I did not hear that,” Morrie maintained, lips twitching. Toby had rambled off again, whistling for Houdini to come help him dig. As if suddenly remembering another dog duty, however, Houdini pointed his nose toward the sage hen, lifted one paw as if ready to advance, and growled way down in his throat. Dimwitted as it was, the plump bird took the hint and whirred off to the top of the precipice above us. I watched the flight in some admiration. It always took hard scrabbling for us to climb back up the tiered cliff-face of the buffalo jump, and agile though Morrie could be in a number of ways, he no longer possessed the billy-goat surety of a boy. One more time I wondered if this was such a hot idea of Damon’s.

At that moment, though, Morrie seemed as invincibly juvenile as any of us, overjoyed with the treasures we kept unearthing and handing him. This particular rockfall beneath a thrust of the cliff, with its scatter of bones so old they were turning stone color, was our mother lode of arrowheads. How many times over how many centuries had the Blackfoot tribe harvested meat here? What a thing, I thought then and still do, to have the hunting skills to aim a herd of skittish buffalo off the cliff above our heads.

But now the buffalo were a piece of the past and the Blackfeet nearly so, a remnant people cooped up on the Reservation on the other side of the river, and this old killing site was fair game for boys with a streak of badger. I was happily spitting on a nice light-colored arrowhead I had just discovered, to rub off the dirt, when Morrie held up the coal-black one toward me.

“Paul? Correct me if I’m wrong, but I haven’t noticed stone of this sort anywhere in the vicinity.”
I paused in the spitbath I was giving to my own arrowpoint. At times like this, I savvied Father’s mixed emotions about Morrie and his ready erudition. Morrie always was stimulating to have around, but always gets to be a lot.

Still, I had weathered the woodpile sessions with him and come out a bit better for it, hadn’t I. “Me neither,” I contributed on the origin of the stone, and knowing school was now in session even though it was Sunday, duly looked inquisitive.

“It’s obsidian, I swear,” he mused. “Which is volcanic.” That did make me blink. Our part of Montana had more than enough geography, but I definitely did not know of any local volcanoes. “How does this come to be here?” He bounced the arrowhead gently in his palm as if weighing it. “Care to take an educated guess?”

I gave it some thought. Those contrary warriors that I was an inadvertent honorary member of must have roamed around, to pick fights with enemies. “Some other tribe? In a scrap with the Blackfeet here?”

“Close. I’d say it was trade.” Morrie’s eyes had that deep light of the past in them. “The Missouri surely was a main route,” he gestured off in the direction where the Marias and the countryside’s other tributaries met the big river, “and tribes would have come from all points of the plains in pursuit of buffalo. They couldn’t fight one another all the time. Every so often they would have had to mount up and resort to commerce.” He made even that sound heroic, a foray across the prairie to swap a mysterious dark rock for, what, a buffalo hide robe? I could feel the hair on the back of my neck come up a little. All points of the plains: without my ever having said a word to him about it, Morrie was conjuring paths beneath the paths that had arrived to my eyes back there at the schoolhouse pump.

Cupping the black arrowhead in his hand again, he looked off appraisingly at the prairie bluffs around us. “With all the crisscrosses possible, this may have
been a Mediterranean of a kind.” As if Father had invisibly put in his two cents’ worth, he gave a slight smile of concession. “Dry-land, of course.”

“Morrie? On that. They’re going to be getting home.”

This was the day the latest in deep plowing was being demonstrated at the agricultural experiment station, possibly on the premise that it would give the dryland farmers something to dream about during the long winter, and Father and George had talked Rae into going with them to socialize afterwards. Rose, to Toby’s temporary dismay, chose to keep Rae company rather than wallow in buffalo bones with us.

Morrie yanked out his watch, then jumped to his feet. “Toby!” he called. “Kindly put back those big bones, please. I am instructed by your father, with Rose concurring, that any part of the buffalo coming home with you has to arrive in your pocket. Damon, good job done.”

Damon hated to be called off from digging. On the other hand, archeological triumph was his, this day. When Morrie had wanted to borrow a handful of our arrowheads to use in the classroom–heaven only knew what arsenal of lore he had in mind next, after the fletching performance–Damon saw no reason why the school should not have its own collection. “Never know when you might need them.”

Now Damon whipped out of his back pocket a flour sack and with the aplomb of a gem dealer scooped our specimens in. Swag bag in hand, he looked elated enough to reach the top of the buffalo jump in two bounds. But he remembered his manners enough to say to Morrie: “Ready?”

“Or not, as the case may be,” Morrie acquiesced in a kind of sigh, stepping over the bones of a bison that had plummeted from where we were going.

I worried, but Morrie managed to stay in one piece as we scrambled back atop the cliff to where our horses were tied. Even as he stood there blowing and
inhaling, he studied the surroundings. “Extravagant scenery,” he declared, and from there on the high river bluffs it truly was. Farthest west, the tips of the Rockies were white with first snow, an iceberg flotilla that seemed to go on forever under the dark blue sky of late afternoon. All the hills in the world were stacked in shades of tan between there and where we stood. Almost at our feet, juniper patches pintoed down the breaks in the rimrock of the bluff, and lower still, wild roses blew gently in the wind. It added to the pleasure of the day, Damon’s and Toby’s and mine, that our site was showing off for our guest.

When Morrie’s breathing was back in the vicinity of normal, we moved off to our horses. Before we could mount up, Houdini started to whine. Usually that bargained some petting from Toby, but this time the dog bounced away from him. Nose down, it raced toward the buffalo jump.

“Houdini!” Toby tried to call him back. “Crazy pooch.” The agitated dog was searching for something, back and forth along the edge of the drop-off, whining louder all the while. “Houdini,” Toby’s indignation was growing, “do you want a spanking?”

“Houdini, here, boy,” I took my turn, “that sage chicken is long gone.” Damon tried a more direct approach, whistling sharply through his teeth. Houdini lifted an ear, but kept on snuffling along the top rock ledge of the cliff.

One look at Morrie told me his command of subjects did not extend to canines. We had to do something, though. Toby would fret all the way home if we left Houdini. “I’ll get him,” I said and started toward the recalcitrant dog. “No, Tobe, you stay back.”

Seeing me coming, Houdini wagged his tail guiltily but stood his ground. Heights didn’t bother me, but Houdini was a sizable mutt and I most decidedly did not want to have to wage a tug-of-war with him that close to the lip of the buffalo
jump. I knelt a few feet away, patting a coaxing rhythm on my knee. “Come on, Houdini, get away from there.”

The dog whined, wagged, whimpered, and refused to budge.

“What’s got into you? Houdini, now I mean it, come here or--”

*Bwhoom!* The sound of a rifle and the instant echo of the shot rang in all our ears.

I shall always owe Damon. He leaped toward the pair of us at the brink and latched onto me by the tail of my coat as I swooped and grabbed Houdini around the neck. The load of a struggling dog, my blind exertion and Damon’s, the thunder roll of the rifle shot yet in our ears, the gape of the cliff so near, everything mixed in some oldest instinctive wrestle to exist. Fate’s heart is hard, ours were temporarily harder. In some common will the clump of us lurched back onto safe ground. Morrie had hold of Toby. We all had our footing, and my hand somehow still was over Houdini’s muzzle, keeping him quiet except for the whimpering. It took a considerable moment for the fact to soak in that each of us up there had life left in us. Together we stared down off the cliff at what Houdini alone had sensed was happening.

My throat suddenly had as many kinks in it as the winding river below. There in the broad bottomland, around the nearest bend of the river came the steel-gray horse I had run the race against, galloping as hard as ever, but this time with its rider hunched forward in the saddle as he jacked another shell into his rifle. A smaller gray creature fled ahead in a struggling lope. When it tried to veer toward one of the breaks in the bluffs, the rifle spoke again and a small geyser of dirt exploded just in front of the animal, making it turn back toward the flat ground of the bottomland, in front of the relentless gray horse.

Morrie exclaimed as though something hot had been spilled on him: “What on earth--?"
By the time the words were out of him, the pursued animal had started to labor across an open stretch of meadow, dodging desperately. Now the man on horseback had plenty of time to rein up and shoot again, but did not, keeping the chase going.

I found enough voice, barely, to tell Morrie what he was seeing.

"Brose Turley. He’s wolfing."

As we watched the zigzag marathon--Damon was open-mouthed and Toby had crept down to hold on to Houdini with me--Morrie sounded more confounded than ever. "But--he runs them to death? Isn’t the man licensed to trap?"

"It pulled loose. There, see everything it’s dragging?" By now the chase had drawn near enough below us that the instrument of destruction on one hind leg was visible. Somehow the wolf had fought the trap stake loose, digging, lunging, the jaws of the trap surely cutting bone deep. As the wolf scrambled along crookedly on three good legs the clamped trap skittered beneath the crippled foot, and the iron stake trailed it like a flattened-out ball and chain.

Toby whispered across, "Paul, I’m goose bumpy. If that was Houdini, I’d feel so awful." He looked at me to see if that was all right, and I nodded that it certainly was. Anyone who grows up around farm animals cannot side with a wolf in the long clash of things. But you can be against tormenting any creature.

Another gunshot. This one steered the wolf away from our side of the river bluffs, toward some rocky broken country that looked across to the buffalo jump.

"He’s herding it someplace," I figured out. "Don’t you think, Damon?"

"Box canyon. Up over there."

Through it all Brose Turley never looked up. Knee, rein, whole body, he aimed the big gray horse after the wolf as if jockeying in a derby.

The wolf struggled harder as the ground began to climb. Whenever it tried to head for the shelter of a rock formation, a bullet zinged in its way. Turley hazed
it like that past the wings of the box canyon. Before long the wolf could find no more room to run, straight-up stone penning it in on three sides. We saw it make a staggering loop along the base of the inmost cliff, the trap in and out of sight in the harsh rockspill. Then the wolf leaped at the cliff face, paws scrambling, vaulting its full length up the steep canyon wall. And fell back.

Turley was there on the grizzled horse at once, forcing the wolf to its feet with another shot that shattered rock near its head. The animal clambered off into the rockspill, dragging its shackles.

As the brutal chase went on, Morrie had sunk to a squat beside Toby and me and our quivering dog. His voice still held incredulity as he asked, of us or the universe:

"Why doesn't he just shoot it and put it out of its misery?"

Damon, ever our expert on things gory, knew.

"Fur dealer won't give him as much if there's a hole in the pelt."

That was one answer. Another came in the night, in the cruel clarity of my dream. I was outside a corral of bones and rock—ribcages and femurs stacked on boulders, some combination of the buffalo jump and an arena. The Turleys, father and son, shapeless hats on the back of their heads, circled the middle of the corral looking over their catch of wolves. I followed around on the outside trying to see in as Eddie advised me not unkindly, "You stay on out, Milliron. Leave this to us."

He flapped his hat at the wolves to tease them and said as if making a schoolyard boast, "We know how to deal with these woofs." Brose Turley said, "Quit wasting time. Let's pelt 'em up." He had a knife out. The wolves huddled like sheep. One after another, they were dragged by a hind leg to the center of the corral and skinned alive, Brose kneeling down on the neck, Eddie holding on to the tail. As I watched the wolves being slaughtered and the pelts thrown into a pile, someone showed up beside me. "They are getting blood on everything," I heard
the disapproval in Rose’s voice. Rose? All along I had been expecting Morrie—
dreams have that odd element of illogical anticipation. It was unmistakably Rose at
my elbow, though, apron on, saying over and over, “But why do they do that?” I
seemed to be tongue-tied, for I had no answer then. Each gutting slash by Brose
Turley drew a whimper from a wolf. The pelt pile grew. Dead or alive or
somewhere between, the wolves lay there in skinned sinew and gutpiles. “But
that’s terrible. Don’t you think that’s terrible?” Rose kept saying indignantly as we
peered through the bone corral. Of course it was, I would be able to tell her now,
mankind at its most remorseless always is.

That nightsweat was hours ahead yet, and Brose Turley held front and
center in the long shadows of the box canyon as the four of us and Houdini
watched now. The horseman kept the wolf on the move, its tether dragging, until
finally the stake tangled in the rocks. The exhausted wolf fell over, the caught hind
leg angled behind. Satisfied at last, Turley pulled out a stout forked stick about as
long as a shovel from alongside his rifle scabbard and swung down from his
saddle. He obviously had done this many times before.

Approaching the wolf, he feinted with the stick, the creature snapping at it
with what ferocity it had left. Quick as anything, Turley slid the fork of the stick
just behind the wolf’s ears and onto its neck, putting his full weight into pinning the
animal down. Carefully maintaining his balance, he lifted his booted foot nearest
the animal. He stomped on the wolf’s chest, crushing its heart.

“Beastly,” Morrie spat out. We knew he did not mean the wolf.
The house was cold when I fumbled my way out of bed and the wolf-butcher dream. Dancing unhappily on the bare floor as I struggled into my clothes, I checked on Damon in the dimness. He had rolled to the wall, as far away from me and my dream tumult as it was possible to get and still be in bed. I supposed I had to sympathize, although it was his proclivity for the sharp edges of things that had led us to the buffalo jump the day before.

I knew my way in the dark, step by measured step down the stairs and to the matchholder in the kitchen and, in the flare of the struck match, to the lamp on the table. Father always banked the stove for the night by chocking it full of coal, and there were ruby-red embers left for me to feed a crumpled newspaper and sticks of kindling. With everything lit, I took stock of myself.

It did not require much: I felt like a wreck. Sweet dreams, hooey. *Nightly awaits that sweet address/Principality of Sleep/Happy Land of Forgetfulness*--could a poet be any farther wrong than that? If those were the best the grown-up world had to offer on the subject, I would need to construct my own approach to what went on in me when I was not awake. *Don’t let it get to you,* I sermoned myself, although there still was so much leftover ventriloquism in my head that the voice sounded like Eddie Turley telling me to how to best behave around woofs.
That made me mad--people hanging around in me when I was trying to evict them--but it also triggered the thought that, frazzled though I might be, at least I was better off than anything that met up with Brose Turley by day or night. This and a cup of cocoa when the teakettle began its tune improved my outlook a bit. If the past was any guide, little by little the disturbing dream should cool down into manageable memory. I pulled out *Robinson Crusoe* and sat to the table to read. It would be nearly an hour yet before the alarm clock went off in Father’s room and our household began to muster itself toward what passed for breakfast and then another adventurous schoolday under Morrie.

I was buried in hermit life on a desert island when the front door creaked open. The wind? When wolves and bloodthirsty wolfers have been roaming the back of your mind, you doubt the ability of the wind to turn a door handle.

Unanchored as I was in all the waters between actuality and imagination, I knew nothing to do but try to stay motionless while I waited for whatever was coming in to come in. One instant the kitchen doorway breathed the cold rush of air from the door opening, and the next there was the whisk of a coat already being taken off.

“Will you look at us!” the whispered greeting practically pranced in. “At least there are two people in the world up and going.”

Rose. As if she had alit from my dream, before it could quite pull out of the station.

Rose had a talent for arriving. Just by showing up, she turned the mood of a place around the way a magnet acts on a compass. “I saw your light all the way from George and Rae’s,” she kept to a speedy whisper as she came over to stand by the stove, rubbing her hands. “*One if by land,* Paul Revere?”
“Slept in a hurry, I guess,” I alibied my presence at the opened book and glowing lamp. She herself seemed to have traded her bed for a lantern. This was her earliest ever at the house.

She must have read curiosity all over me. “Every mitten in this house needs mending,” she provided. “I thought I had better do it before you need to go to school with them on.” She peered at me in the lamplight, the brown eyes lively even at this time of day. “The last person I knew who gets up this early was my poor husband. He didn’t sleep well either.”

“Nightmares?” I whispered back tensely.

“Just worries, I would say. There at the last. And then--” Realizing that did not lead in a promising direction, she tempered it with a rapid smile. “We all have off nights,” which sounded particularly confidential when whispered in the houseful of sleepers around us. “Morrie tells me you seem to have a lot going on in your head, for someone your age.”

More than she was going to know. Maybe it simply proved that I was green in years, but I was not about to tell a woman she had just spent the night in my dream. “Uh, want some cocoa?”

Rose started to shake her head, but on second look at me she whispered back: “Yes, I could have some. Let me gather up the mending and I’ll join you.”

In a flash she raided the mud room of its mittens and, while she was at it, Toby’s much-abused scarf and Father’s winter sweater. Putting the pile on the table between us, she got busy with yarn and darning needle and every so often remembered to take a teensy sip of the cocoa I had fixed for her.

“Well, demonstration day was quite something!” she said as if I had asked. “Plows and more plows. Rae bowled over everyone at the potluck with her, what’s that called, rhubarb cobbler?” The wavy curls bobbed on her brow as she moved her head this way and that to take advantage of the lamplight for whatever
item she was mending. Her eyes were quick, back and forth to me and her task.

“Oh, and did your father report that we met up with the entire other half of your
class? The county agent’s daughter? Cornelia?”

“Carnelia. Like in carbuncle.”

“Oh now, tsk. She’s not a bad-looking girl.”

“You watch. She’ll marry a banker.” Why I said that, I have no idea. But it
turned out to be true.

Rose giggled. “Such powers of prediction. You have blindsight.”

“I have what?”

“It’s a knack. Some people just know how a matter will turn out, while the
rest of us are in the dark.”

“Huh uh. I don’t think I want that.”

“I’m not surprised you have it, though,” she said, as if that would soothe
me.

I wanted off the topic of me. “Rose?” It was taking me a while to work
around to this, especially in whispers. “Can I ask you something? About Morrie?”

“I’m only in the same family, you realize, not the same make.”

“All right, but how does he know all those things? I mean, how does he
put them together like that?” Morrie’s latest magic trick with his mouth had come
when the fifth grade was listless toward the multiplication table. “When you play a
fiddle, you want music to come out, don’t you, even though it takes a set of strings
that once inhabited the inside of a cat.” As usual I held my breath, but at the next
recess the schoolyard, that saucer of terrible swift opinion, brimmed with
appreciation of catgut having its day in the scheme of things.

“Morrie is educated up to here.” I looked. Rose was holding her hand six
inches above her head. “Schooling suited him.” Her face had a fixed expression,
as if this was not an easy thing to be telling. “When it’s that way, the other in the
family--" That dangled in the air until she brought it down by tapping Robinson Crusoe where it lay open. "I always have to think twice whether this is about the opera singer or the shipwrecked sailor."

"Yes, but--" I was trying to find a diplomatic way to say that she was smart in her own style and people kept telling me I was bright enough, for a boy, yet Morrie could run rings around both of us in mental exploits, and at the same time ask her if he secretly practiced at that or what, when Father yawned a greeting to us from the doorway.

"Look at the time," he exclaimed, as if Rose and I hadn't been up for hours examining it. "Roust those brothers of yours, Paul, the schoolbell waits for no man."

This day seemed determined to get off on the wrong foot. What with one thing and another--Damon must have spent fifteen minutes traversing the bed and finding his way into his clothes--we had to ride hard to school and even so, everyone else had gone inside and Morrie was giving the iron triangle a last chorus when we piled out of our saddles.

Instead of turning back through the doorway, though, he came out to waylay us, and sulking right behind him was Carnelia. This put me on my guard, especially when he shooed Toby and Damon on into the schoolhouse and announced to Carnelia and me that he had an honor in store for us: he was bestowing on us the duty of raising and lowering of the flag.

She looked as taken aback as I was. This was unheard of. Always, always, the oldest students were the ones who took turns at that high responsibility. Morrie must have decided, not without good reason, that this civic rite was wasted on the current eighth-grade mob. From now on, he proclaimed, flag duty would migrate from grade to grade, starting with our own, which was to say with the discomfited duo of us.
Carnelia and I had one thought between us: the possible wrath of the hairy mammoths of grade eight descending onto grade seven. But the change of procedure was entirely a teacherly doing rather than ours, a fact we would plead to high heaven in the schoolyard if we had to. Duty having blindly singled us out, she and I squared ourselves up in what might have been flagbearer fashion.

Then, like a delayed continuation of my bad dream, the door of the boys’ outhouse opened and out sauntered Eddie Turley.

Possibly it irked Morrie that Eddie’s preferred start of a schoolday was to go to the toilet, or possibly he saw this as a providential changing of the guard. In either case, we had an immediate conscript into our flag detail. “Eddie propitiously is on hand to show you the ropes,” Morrie nailed him before he could slouch into the schoolhouse. “We are running late this morning,” he concluded with a telling glance at me, “so I will leave you to it while I take attendance.”

Morrie vanished inside, and the three of us stood like stumps while the empty prairie yawned around us. By his picked-on expression Eddie would have just as soon walloped me as look at me, and likely that held true toward Carnelia, too. Was I going to be in another fistfight before I even set foot in the schoolhouse? Fortunately for once, the one person who was a match for Eddie in candlepower of glower was Carnelia. “All right then, Mister Helpful,” her voice would have jabbed any living thing into action. “How are we supposed to start?”

“Could get out the flag, if you snotnoses are gonna do this yet today.”

Carnelia and I of course knew the folded flag was kept in its own special drawer at the cabinet end of the cloakroom. In we went, took it out as if we were handling dynamite and, neither of us quite certain of protocol, carried it between us, each using both hands. Eddie trailed after us in a kind of slinking way that uncomfortably reminded me again of wolves and wolfers.
“You would be late,” Carnelia muttered to me on our stately way to the flagpole, “our first day doing this.”

“Didn’t know it was, did I, so save your breath.”

No doubt it was proximity across the compactly folded flag which brought to mind Rose’s remark that Carnelia was not bad-looking. Myself, I’d had to keep a constant eye on her for seven years now, and I had never seen her improve measurably. I took a good look to be sure. Same turned-up nose. Same milky complexion. Same eyes like the queen in a deck of cards. Catching me studying her, she snapped: “What do you think you’re looking at, frog eyes.”

“Nothing worth mentioning, toad spit. Don’t let your side droop.”

At the flagpole, we drew to a halt with the colored wedge of cloth still held between us. It was the splendid new forty-six-star flag, with Oklahoma now in the union. An unquestionable beauty, the fresh-dyed stars and stripes silky in our hands. Now, though, came the question dominating both our minds. Exactly how did a person thread and fasten the glorious thing securely onto the flagpole rope swinging ominously there in the breeze? Oxlike Milo Stoyanov knew the secret, less-than-bright Carl Johansson knew, even Eddie Turley knew. But Eddie was standing there mute as the flagpole, smirking at the pair of us.

“So, what do you say, Eddie?” I tried prompting him man to man. “Ready to show us how to handle the rope, here?”

“Whyn’t you go at it backwards?” he mocked. “Your brain kicks in when it trades places with your butt, don’t it?”

Giving Eddie a look of pure disgust, Carnelia laced into him as only she could. “Think for once in your life, horse nose. We need to get this done or we’re all in trouble.”

“Wouldn’t be nothing new for me. Might be for you two.”
Eddie Turley was one thing Carnelia and I could agree on. We both knew what an incurable pain in the neck Eddie could be when he wanted to. Panic starting to show in us, she and I faced each other with the breeze-blown rope between us. We had to invent together or else.

"I think we first of all have to put that through there and then--"

"No, dummy, that's backwards, we need to--"

"You're not the boss of everything. Let me--"

"Will you just not be so grabby and--watch out!"

It was not clear who had been in main possession of the flag and who hadn't. But there it lay, dumped in the dirt between us.

The pair of us stood there stricken into stone. Rules of the flag were as stark as Scripture. The flag had to be handled with utmost respect at all times. It had to be folded and unfolded in prescribed manner. Above all, the flag must never touch the ground. Incalculable consequences blazed up at Carnelia and me from the bright heap of cloth there at our feet. For all we knew, Oklahoma now had to get back in line for statehood.

"Huh!" Eddie marveled, a foxy grin spreading over his usually vacant face.

As if our heads were on the same swivel, Carnelia and I shot a look toward the schoolhouse. There were no windows there on its front side, Morrie had closed the doors after him, no one had seen the seventh grade of Marias Coulee disgrace itself. I snatched up the flag, rubbing the dirt off it onto my pantleg. Her mouth working silently in shock, Carnelia could only bob encouragement to me.

"Wait'll everybody hears this," Eddie could barely wait to unload on us.

"Teacher's pets can't even keep the flag up out of the--"

My loud humming interrupted him. Carnelia was looking at me as if I had lost my mind, but Eddie sobered up sharply as the tune sunk in on him. Just to be
sure, I hummed another line of “Let us fight the holy fight...” in even more vigorous Holy Willy fashion and twitched a little along with it.

Eddie’s face turned beet color. “You said you wouldn’t tell!”

“I won’t about that if you won’t about this.”

Eye-level on me was the Adam’s apple on Eddie, and when I saw it working strongly, I had hope that he was thinking things over. All of a sudden he grabbed the flag from my hands, gritting out, “Here, see?” He sped the rope through the grommets a certain way, fastened it in a blur of fingers, and sent the flag shooting to the top of the pole. Without a word more the three of us headed for the schoolhouse, Carnelia glaring daggers at both Eddie and me.

She and I trooped to our double desk and sat there, both jittery, while Morrie orchestrated lessons among the other grades, gradually making his way to us. He said nothing about the inordinate length of time we had been at the flagpole, however, and merely handed back our essays on Magellan’s voyage around the world. “Top marks, both of you.”

Putting the pair of us to penmanship practice, Morrie moved on to the heavy timber of grade eight. Since I was pretty well up on penmanship and the day’s other assignments, I stole time that morning to watch him go through his pedagogical paces. That question still intrigued me, of how he managed the mental high jinks he did. I did not solve that, but I discovered something else. Having been around Morrie at his most systematic during our woodsawing sessions, I knew perfectly well he was scraping through here in the schoolhouse much of the time on nerve and desperation, thumbing into things mere moments ahead of administering the next lesson to some bunch or another in the relentless stairstep system of eight grades in one room. Aplomb counts, however, and here I speak as a public figure whom the newspapers can never resist calling ‘oracular.’ Whatever being in charge of ‘the kid glove end of things’ entailed in the prior life of him and
Rose and the misfortunate late Mr. Llewellyn, there in the well-trodden aisles between our desks Morris Morgan looked as if composure was a middle name he had come by honestly.

So, on the day of all this Morrie did not bat an eye when the sixth-grade delegation detoured to his desk when all of us clattered in from afternoon recess. Consisting of Lily Lee Fletcher, as earnest as she was quiet, and Miles Calhoun, who had a slow circling intelligence but you never knew where it would alight, and Rabrab Rellis in her inevitable role of mouthpiece, the group plainly represented a mysteriously broad constituency. Morrie listened level-headed as a judge while Rabrab made her case in feline whispers. Our unexpected teacher was gaining steady adherents in the schoolroom by giving almost any matter a hearing--the one thing Marias Coulee school was united on was scorn for the maxim that children should be seen and not heard--and he was about to win a quantity more. When everyone had settled into their seats, Morrie rose to his feet and announced:

“I am reliably informed that due to unforeseen circumstances”--Miss Trent’s abandonment of us--“there has been no spelling bee since, in Rabrab’s words, ‘practically forever.’ That does sound like an unduly long time.” The reaction that greeted this was about as if he had thrown handfuls of chocolate bonbons into the room. “Line up, everyone. Alternate grades, is it, each side of the room?”

Surely by now Morrie knew this was a student body that would rather have a contest than the right number of toes, but even so he was nearly swept aside by the stampede. Grade by grade, desks were rapidly emptied. Carnelia departed ours as if called upon to don a breastplate and lead a crusade to the Holy Land. By habit, I stayed in my seat and pulled out the school’s volume of *Just So Stories*.

No sooner had everyone else lined up along two sides of the room than I heard: “Squire Milliron?” Morrie’s tone of voice could be felt on the skin. “Would you care to join us?”
I looked up in total surprise, no adequate phrase coming to mind.

For Carnelia, this was straight from heaven. “Paul can’t be in the spelling bee,” she reported with relish.

Morrie cocked his head. “And why is that?”

Carnelia simply pursed her lips as if the why of it was too obvious to say. Damon knew it should not come from him, and Toby, itching to speak up, was willed into silence by Damon’s warning look. Around the room my friends and allies were unsure of my wishes on this, my adversaries did not know how to hone it against me as much as they might have liked. It was Verl Fletcher from the back of the room who finally piped out:

“Because Paul every time beats the pants off the rest of us.”

Morrie’s head cocked further sideways. “Does he now, Paul, eleemosynary, please.”

I rattled its dozen letters back to him so fast he blinked. In back of him Carnelia crossed her arms across her chest as if to say, See?

“Hmm. Try prestidigitation.”

Similarly I flashed through that. By now Morrie was looking at me a bit grimly, as Miss Trent and her predecessors had done before him. “This entire sentence, then.” General murmur and a few gasps emanated as he put to me:

“Pharoahs were heirs to hieroglyphics.”

When I spelled it all back to him at about the pace of a crack telegrapher, he walked a tight circle by his desk and then said, “One more, but this time in synphonic fashion: fish.”

Had I misheard? Surely Morrie couldn’t want me to tootle out the composition of the little word as if I were a mock symphony orchestra? No, he always enunciated every curve of every letter when he wanted to drill home a point, and from the roomful of mystified expressions around me, I was not the only one
trying to puzzle out synphonic. Was it like synthetic? In any case, I could not think fast enough to meet Morrie's catch spelling word with anything other than f-i-s-h, although I was greatly tempted to play to the crowd by adding on a y.

"Technically correct, imaginatively off the mark," Morrie gave the not unexpected verdict. "Consider this." He stepped to the blackboard and wrote ghoti.

Every eye in the room strained to take this in as Morrie declaimed:
"Synphonic, meaning 'similar in sound.' You must watch out for words, they have tricks up their sleeves." As he spoke, the chalk in his hand flashed across the blackboard and yielded cough. "When you come down with a cold, this is what you have in your chest, isn't it. Not this." Beneath cough, he chalked cow. Laughter pealed from us all.

"Ah, but," the stick of chalk came up like a finger of warning, "when you feed the fire to keep warm during your affliction, the tree branch you break up and put into the stove is this." Beneath cow, Morrie wrote bough.

While that mischievous chime of rhyme was going off in heads around the room, Morrie further sobered the spelling-bee contestants and for that matter, me. "Always be aware you are at the mercy of the whim of the word. It decides how it is pronounced and what it means. It chooses up its own letters, often in ways we wouldn't. And it can be a shameless mimic, by sneaking in one of those sound-alikes tucked away in the alphabet." He spun to the blackboard again as if those devilish letters were listening there. "Preposterous as this 'fish' looks"--from somewhere he produced his pointer and went en garde with ghoti as if to slay it--"it is made up of similarities perfectly well known to our tongues. Sound it out for yourselves," he whapped through the letters, "gh as in 'cough,' o as in 'women,' and ti as in 'motion.'"
This seized me. Morrie had been addressing us all, from big-eyed first-graders to narrow-eyed eighth, yet it was one of those tingling moments when the entire might of learning seemed to have descended into the one-room school specifically for my benefit. True, I’d have been happier if it happened less obtrusively. I felt I had been taken down a peg, maybe several. I still did not know why. But my experience with Morrie thus far was that any mental extravaganza he went to the trouble of staging was worth some reflection.

“Paul?” His tone of voice relented on me. “I entirely see why you are excused from the spelling bee. Carry on with your reading in peace.” I did my best at that, but a spelling contest with Morrie in charge proved to be as adventurous as anything Kipling was coming up with.

In no time, the schoolhouse was wild with claps and groans and hoots and Morrie’s exhortations. “Lily Lee, put your tongue to mucilage, so to speak.” “A worthy try, Milo, and if any of us were in charge of such matters xylophone indeed would have a z.” He was a dervish of vocabulary; I wished Father were there to savor it. Beyond that, though, he elevated the spelling bee into an everybody-in tournament. For a while he paired second- and fifth-graders, and third and fourth, the younger ones valiantly reciting the letters aloud after frenzied conferences in whispers. (Toby mountaineering his way through r-h-i-n-o-c-e-r-o-s with the entire fifth grade breathless behind him was something to behold.) Then for one ferocious round he pitted the entire sixth grade against Carnelie and she haughtily spelled them down, one after another, until Morrie decided the time had come to take some of the shine off her. The next word he gave her was the crazy one for that celebration where people serenade newlyweds and dress them up funny and wheel them around in wheelbarrows and so forth.

“It is pronounced ‘shivaree,’ but be careful,” Morrie was scrupulous about it, “this one has a number of things up its sleeves.” Did it ever. Carnelie missed it
from the first letter. Damon went down on the same word--actually the same letter--
and sent me a pained look. Next, Rabrab flounced down in defeat. I sat there
restless behind my propped book, wincing as everyone misspelled from the instant
they opened their mouths. Isidor made a brave doomed try at the word. Now it
was up to Grover Stinson, last hope of the sixth grade. Grover and I were best
friends, or as close to that as the year of difference in our ages would let us be.
Both of us read everything we could lay our hands on, Grover's eyeglasses
unfortunate proof of that in his case, and we thought alike in a surprising number of
ways. Naturally enough, then, when he gazed my way in concentration before
tackling the fiendish word, I casually rubbed my eye, hoping he would connect that
to see and from there to c. He blinked a couple of times, pursed up thoughtfully,
and took the plunge: "c, h, a..." So it came to be that Grover was the conqueror of
charivari.

"Well done for grade six!" rang out the commendation from Morrie, already
ransacking his master primer for a next word. If he had not been as busy as a
paperhanger on a divided stairway, keeping track of the contest between grades and
scampering for spelling challenges at the same time, he might have avoided the
trouble just ahead. But without looking up he chanted out:

"That advances grade six to take on grade eight, I believe. The lucky
individual who is next up for grade eight, please. Your word is the triangle that has
two equal sides. It is pronounced--"

Eddie Turley, on the receiving end of isosceles, looked as if he had been
tossed a hot coal.

I closed up Kipling in favor of this. During his ten-year journey through
eight grades, Eddie managed to provide the Marias Coulee classroom some never-
to-be-forgotten moments. Once when Miss Trent sent him to the blackboard to
work on a subtraction problem, he had stomped from the board complaining, "I can
add some, but that takin' from is a bugger.” According to the squinchened-up expression on him now, so was isosceles.

“How’s it pronounced again?” Eddie waffled as seven grades of Marias Coulee school collectively rooted for the word to leave a major bruise on him.

“I-sos-celes,” Morrie delicately sounded out.

“E-y-e,” Eddie agonized out loud and got no farther before hoots went up and Morrie waved him out of the round.

But for Eddie to traipse out of contention to the far end of the room, he had to pass right by the triumphant sixth grade. First in line there was Grover, a sweet-as-pie smile still pasted on him from charivari. Eddie squinted in annoyance at this display of high spirits. “What’re you grinnin’ at, four-eyes?”

Grover had a touch in these matters. “Nothing,” he answered Eddie, but enunciated it in slow, spoonfed syllables the way Morrie had portioned out isosceles.

Eddie’s face flamed. Big as a house, he whacked smaller Grover backhand across the chest, sending him bouncing against the teacher’s desk.

Reaction raced through the spelling-bee ranks like a line of firecrackers going off. The boys of grade six boiled to Grover’s defense, Damon climbing over a desk in an effort to get at Eddie, Isidor determinedly balling up his fists and trying to wade toward his target, the others in a general surge that clogged the aisle. Rabrab contributed a scream.

Sensing riot, Morrie leapt in. “Everyone! Take your seats!” he shouted. It might have ended there if Eddie, fired up to take on the legion of the sixth grade, hadn’t assumed the person charging up behind him was Grover on a mission of revenge. He wheeled around, delivering a roundhouse punch as he came.

By luck or instinct, Morrie bobbed low and took the blow on his hairline. “Ow!” cried Eddie as his fist met skull. All motion in the schoolroom stopped.
Morrie straightened up slowly. Hitting a teacher was a capital offense, we all knew. A teacher hitting back was entirely another matter. White-eyed, Eddie stood there shaking his hurting hand, awaiting his fate. A red place the size of a set of knuckles showed at the edge of Morrie’s mussed hair. His tie flapped down his front and his collar was off-kilter. For long seconds the compact man and the taller schoolboy faced one another, the school teetering on the frozen scene. Then Morrie adjusted his collar and tie and said almost normally, “Eddie, I will deal with you at the end of the day. Everyone else, be seated and prepare for geography period.”

“And then he kept Eddie after!”

Father was grave as he listened to Toby tell about the day at school. Damon and I stood by, content to be material witnesses. Toby’s recitals always carried more oomph than ours. “Eddie doesn’t ever get kept after!”

Rose hovered at the kitchen doorway long enough to catch the gist of the story, rolled her eyes at what Morrie had gotten himself into, balled up her apron and left for the day.

I must have imagined it, but another worryline seemed to come into Father’s wrinkle-mapped cheek as he sat at the table concentrating on following Toby’s titanic tale. Freighting for the irrigation project had not yet let up--winter was holding off, to everyone’s surprise--and balancing that and the workload of the homestead was enough to occupy any man twice over. Now he was something like president of the board of the Marias Coulee school for the unruly, on top of those.

“Morrie didn’t lay a hand on him?” he checked with those of us who had not been heard from yet. “Then or later?”

“Naw, darn it,” Damon responded with the authority of one who had been more than willing to do the job himself.
"When we left, you couldn't tell Eddie from a setting hen," I amplified. "He had to stay there in his desk doing nothing for an hour. Morrie was at the front of the room at his. Reading Shakespeare, I think."

"All week!" Toby imparted.

Father looked relieved at the news that Eddie was unscathed, which I did not appreciate as someone who within recent memory had been spanked. But Damon wiped that off him in a hurry by saying, "I wish Morrie would just lock him in all night and then kick him on out of there. He's cluttering up everything for us tomorrow afternoon."

"How so?" One of those looks, the kind a father gives when he is about to hear something he would rather not, reached around the table to include all three of us. "What's any of this have to do with any of you?"

"We're staying after," Damon said patiently, making the crucial distinction from being kept after school. "To get the arrowhead collection ready. Morrie asked us to, the day at the buffalo jump. You said we could, remember?"

"That was before hostilities broke out."

Damon nearly fell out of his chair in despair. "It's not our fault Eddie blew his stack! He can be there, we won't even look in his direction."

Rubbing his cheek as if consulting the wrinkles, Father weighed that argument. It tipped so suddenly in Damon's favor the three of us were caught with mouths open. "Very well, stay after. I'll pull by on my way home from the Big Ditch. I wouldn't want to miss a chance to see arrowheads, would I."
The Rembrandt light of memory, finicky and magical and faithful at the same time, as the cheaper tint of nostalgia never is. Much of the work of my life has been to sort instruction from illusion, and, in the endless picture gallery behind the eye, I have learned to rely on a certain radiance of a detail to bring back the exactitude of a moment. Perhaps it might be the changeling green of a mallard’s head in a slant of sun, as back there on Father’s pothole Lake District. Or the gun-gray of my thermos jug when I pulled over to the shoulder of the road in The Cut to sip at coffee while reliving a race: the shadowtone of a wolfer’s horse.

The after-school hour when arrowheads were to take on a collected gleam was lit by honest lanternshine. During schooltime the custom was to light the hanging lamps only on the darkest of winter days. But dusk set in so early that overcast afternoon Morrie declared we must banish the gloom. The room of brown old desks was uncommonly cozy, then, as the arrowhead committee went about its work. We had delegated to Toby the task of scrubbing the treasures in a washbasin of warm water, accepting some splashes on the floor in exchange for his enthusiasm. Damon hummed magisterially as he wiped and buffed and breathed a sheen onto the pointed stones one after another. My pen hand had to be at its most proficient in lettering the label for each one. All the while, Eddie Turley squinted
sourly toward us from the back of the room like a prisoner trying to see out of a dungeon.

"Ah, here now, just what's needed." Morrie came back in from the supply cabinet where he had rummaged out a dusty entomological display case in which the specimens were past their prime. "The beetles have had their day. Damon, when you're done there, you can be in charge of exhuming. Oh, and Toby, there are pliers and a spool of copper wire somewhere in the kitchen drawers at the teacherage, if you could scare them up, please."

To a casual visitor, the scene would have looked suitable for engraving on good behavior certificates. Lads nicely busy on their civic project in the twilight, while in the back corner a miscreant sits out his sentence for, oh, probably spitwads. And Morrie in tweed and mustache, presiding as though an after-school gathering of this sort was nothing out of the ordinary. But I was aware he was keeping a sentry eye on Eddie, just as I was keeping mine on Damon. For if you had happened to look in on Marias Coulee school at recent intervals when it served as a boxing ring, all of us there in the ring-corners of that schoolroom—with the cherubic exception of Toby—were either active combatants or potential ones. I had got my famous one punch in on Eddie that time. Eddie had blindly clouted Morrie. Keen as he was to do so, Damon had not yet managed to sock Eddie, nor had Eddie found the right opportunity to wade into him. If we weren't all careful, the roundrobin of fists could go on and on.

The arrowheads arrayed there fresh and shiny kept us at peace, however, at least those of us at the front of the room. Damon seemed to have found his life's work in evicting dead beetles into the coal bucket, gabbing all the while to Morrie about football epics he had been pasting into his scrapbooks as the autumn's newspapers caught up with us. For once, Morrie had nothing to do but look wise
and say little. With time to myself after finishing the final arrowhead label—for the
darker-than-night obsidian one—I fooled with a scrap of penmanship.

Morrie cocked a puzzled look at the writing on my tablet when I went to his
desk and handed it to him. "As Shakespeare said, this is Greek to me. How is it
supposed to read, Paul?"

"Fish," I said as if the five letters on the paper were the most recognizable
thing in the world.

Morrie more closely studied my coinage of phych.

"Ph as in 'phlegm,'" I came to his aid, "y as in 'hysterical,' and ch as in
'charivari.'"

"Well spelled, as always," he said drily, pocketing the piece of paper. "You
are not quite finished with your labels, however. One last one for the front of the
case. Make it read: 'Arrowhead collection donated to the Marias Coulee School,
1909, by the Milliron family.'"

Eddie chose just then to snort, visit his nose with a finger, and flick a
booger contemptuously onto the floor. Fortunately Damon was occupied with
arranging everything to perfection in the display case and so did not go climbing
over desks in hunt of Eddie a second day in a row. And here Toby came charging
victoriously in with the wire and pliers to affix the arrowheads in the display case.
We would be done in no time now, and as soon as Father ever showed up to
admire our handiwork, we could head home and Eddie could sit and stew until he
was blue as far as we were concerned. What waited for him at home was a matter
for my Delphic cave of dreams, later.

Morrie, I noticed, had his big pocket watch out where he could see it on his
desk to keep exact time on Eddie's incarceration. Minutes pass more slowly when
looked at, so it was some little while before the outside door could be heard
opening, the awaited tread at last in the cloakroom, and just in time I dotted the final
of the Milliron family label and blew on it to dry the ink. “Here, Tobe, you can show Father. Hold it in both hands so you don’t wrinkle it.”

Looking down at the masterpiece in his hands Toby hurried toward the doorway. “Father, look what--” he began, as far as he got before seeing the big boots.

Over Toby’s head Damon and I gaped at Brose Turley as if he were a creature that had fallen down from the moon.

According to the scowl that met our gaze, he had not expected the sight of us either. Under the crinkled hatbrim his dark mean eyes shifted from us to Morrie, and then found Eddie at the rear of the room.

“Good afternoon, Mister Turley.” As casual as those words, Morrie moved to stand between Turley and us. He rumpled Toby’s hair and while his hand was there turned him around like a top and sent him back our direction. “To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?"

Brose Turley did not bother to answer. He strode down the aisle toward Eddie, his wolfskin coat brushing the desktops. Eddie seemed to shrink the closer his father came.

I heard Damon and Toby catch their breath, and they must have heard me do the same. But Morrie only called out in the same civil way, “Eddie has fifteen more minutes before I can let him go.” Turley halted, shaking his head in disgust. He was directly beneath one of the hanging lamps and I could distinctly see the crisscrossed weatherbeaten skin of the back of his neck, as though he slept on a pillow of chickenwire. He was a big man all the way up from those tromper boots. No wonder wolves or any other living thing I could think of did not stand a chance against him. I was scared to the roots of myself, and even Damon had lost the color in his face. Toby pressed more tightly against the arm I had looped around him and whispered:
“Where’s Father?”

“He’ll be here,” I barely found enough resource in myself to whisper back, hoping against hope that he was not out there slaughtered in the dusk, from having tried to head off this death dealer in a wolfskin coat.

Brose Turley turned around the way a statue would, every bulky bit of him in one revolving motion. Ignoring us, he zeroed in on Morrie. “I don’t want you keeping my boy after. If he’s done something that don’t suit, belt him one right then and be done with it.”

“Belting people is what has led to all this.” Morrie brushed his fingertips across the bruise at his hairline. “Eddie must learn to keep his fists to himself. This is the best kind of penalty to remind him, I think.”

“You think.” Turley made it sound like that was Morrie’s trouble. His voice was sized to the rest of him, but there was an odd clack to it as if it had been out of use a long while. Something about his face was out of kilter, too. It was as if the upper part belonged to one countenance and the lower part to some other. I only figured it out when Turley, still glowering across the ranks of desks at Morrie, opened his mouth to say more. He had false teeth, but just the uppers. The bottom of his mouth was an ugly sharp ridge of gumline. From sentence to sentence, the choppers on top gnashed away and then the pink gums below leered out. “You go about this like an educated fool,” the voice that came out of that maw was letting Morrie know. “He that spareth the rod hateth his son. I’ll take a preacher over a teacher anytime.”

I was afraid Damon might spout out something about that being just like a Holy Willy, but Morrie was quick with: “A wounded spirit who can bear? Proverbs 18:14, I believe. There is a lifetime of sermons in that.”

Turley looked affronted to have the Bible cited back to him. “I don’t know what kind of a hoosier you are, but you and this school of yours don’t show me
anything. If the law wouldn’t get on me about it, I’d pull my boy out of here so fast it’d make your head swim. His next birthday I can do it anyway.”

“Until that day, Eddie is a student here, the same as any other.” Rather primly, Morrie smoothed the pockets of his suit coat as if to make sure he was as presentable as his argument. I hoped he was not going to bank entirely on manners, although I didn’t see what else he could do. Was Father still on the face of the earth, and if so, why wasn’t he here lending a hand?

Turley answered Morrie with his back, turning away until the full brunt of him again faced his son.

“You. Get on home.”

Awkwardly Eddie unfolded out of his desk, but stayed standing beside it.

“Daddy?”

Could we have heard right? The word that in the Marias Coulee hard school of adolescence only girls and toddlers used, coming out of the usually sneering lips of Eddie Turley? If Toby happened to giggle—or worse, Damon—I didn’t know what might be ignited. But in the pitiful silence Eddie mustered himself and blurted:

“Daddy? I, I can’t. He has to say. He’s the teacher.”

Morrie stepped forward. “If you wish to, Eddie, you may go. You have done well in staying after, and from here on you can stay in at recess and noon hour instead.”

As Eddie edged past, his father gave him the same disgruntled look he had in Brother Jubal’s tent. He made no move to follow his son. Gradually the hoofbeats of Eddie’s horse faded away, and as hard as Damon and Toby and I were listening, we could not bring any sound of Father’s team and dray in place of that. Turley seemed to have all the time in the world as he turned toward Morrie. “Now to deal with you, pettygog.”