Damon." I saw Damon undergo a fleeting seizure at the prospect of sleeping with Father, snorer supreme, but heroically suppress it. Meanwhile, matters were getting away from Father faster than he could see them coming, ~~his expression said.~~ He opened his mouth to speak, but I beat him to it. "Why wouldn't that work?" I asked as if all this was reasonable as moves on a checkerboard, which was pretty much the way I thought of it at the time.

"Everybody has to sleep someplace," Damon clinched the matter.

"There now, you see?" Rose opened her clasped hands as if this solution had been concealed in there all the time. "Don't you worry," she told Father again. I wondered why he didn't seem reassured at hearing it a second time.

"--and then, Tobe, you and I were on this kind of teetertotter, only it was a sawhorse and we were on each end of a giant stick of firewood, and one of us would go down and the other would go way, way up, high as the top of the house, and we kept seesawing like that, higher and higher, until we heard somebody say, *'You boys have won the teetertotter prize!'*"

Sanitizing my dreams for Toby took some doing; it was good training later on for writing my Department of Public Instruction annual reports. What really occurred in that dream was that I was on the teetertotter alone and it went up and down on its own in a manner that mystified me and the voice had called out, *"Paul Milliron, you are going to break your fool neck."* My amended version did the trick for Toby, who wriggled in excitement against his pile of pillows and let out, "Wow, Paul."

"And do you know who it was?"

"Aunt Eunice?"

"Right! And she had a whole wheelbarrow of candy for us--"

"Taffy, I bet."

"Uhm, fudge, more like." In my dream it was firewood and Aunt Eunice was belaboring me that she wanted every stick sawed to the exact length of a rat-tail comb. "Anyway, here she came, big as life, and told us, *'Dig right in.'* Damon was there, too"--I raised my voice on this part so it would carry to the kitchen where he was bent over his geography book; the specter of the inspector, as Father called it, had even him doing homework--"and Aunt Eunice not only fed us fudge until we were about to bust but took all three of us on her lap at once. How, I don't know."

Abruptly Toby's lower lip pooched out. "I miss her."

I didn't. Rather, I didn't have to, for Rose's ~~house~~ homestead still held an inordinate amount of its previous occupant as far as I was concerned. How could a woman that tiny linger in every pore of a house? Especially the bedroom, where every night now I crept between the covers like a trespasser in what had been female territory since time immemorial. Rose had done away with Aunt Eunice's doilies on everything, thank heavens, but that whole fussy room still carried an atmosphere of having been crocheted into existence rather than carpentered. What unnerved me even more was that the place felt occupied by leftovers of existence. It was not simply that death had a dominion at the other end of the house, where I had walked in on Aunt Eunice as she was going cold. No, the immense parade of Eunice Schricker's years still were passing through that borrowed bedroom for me. I had worked it out that she was Toby's exact age the last time Halley's Comet flew past Earth, and from there she had gone on to declaim at the Spencerian Academy and then cornered a husband and gave the world George and single-handedly nagged a Wisconsin town and in old age traipsed west to lord herself over Marias Coulee: vociferously crisscrossing other lives all the way. Then came Rose and her jampacked record of life with Morrie and poor late Mr. Llewellyn, next in the gallery of existences that was that restless bedroom. And here I was, tenant of the

moment, with the night-heightened destinies and fates of everyone I knew swirling around whatever my own were. A person would need an orrery as big as mankind, to keep track of it all. Needless to say, my dreams went after such thoughts like a wolfer after wolves.

Ragged as my nerve ends were from bunking at Rose's homestead, I did my utmost to stay sunny during my bedside shifts with Toby. He was studying me somberly now in the aftermath of my dream recital.

"You're so lucky, Paul. I just go to sleep, bam."

"You'll grow into dreams when you're bigger, don't worry about that."

He dandled a hand down to the snoozing mound of dog that had become nearly permanent beside his bed. "I think Houdini dreams sometimes."

"Probably good ones, too," I agreed. "Catching rabbits while he's lying down."

Toby made a face at my mention of lying down. Bed rest was thought to be the cure for everything then. He, however, was the world's most restless patient. Rose was putting the majority of her daytime into keeping him occupied and Father sat with him evenings and Damon and I pitched in after school, and still Toby was like someone who had been put in a zoo cage. Now he plucked at the bedding and I saw the glisten of tears in his eyes.

"Paul, tell me something. Am I ever gonna get up?"

"Sure you are. You heard the doctor yesterday. Just another couple of weeks yet." Then crutches. Then a long stint of careful footsteps, which did not come naturally to a boy like him. I didn't say any of that.

"I still can't go to school for a while after," he pouted. His face darkened. "It's gonna be awful to flunk a grade. I'd be in the second grade with Josef and Maggie and Alice, and they're little kids."

I was caught off-guard. Rose and Father were making sure he did the schoolwork sent home to him and Morrie himself managed to drop by at least a couple of times a week, but evidently all of that did not weigh the same to Toby as classroom lessons. Myself, I would gladly have lain flat on my back for hours on end and let people spoonfeed education into me, if the subject could be Latin.

"For crying out loud, Tobe, what makes you think you're going to flunk? If you need more help with your schoolwork, I can--"

"I'm not there, am I," he screeched, "for the spelling bees and the comet stuff and reading out loud and all the rest, I'M ABSENT! I DON'T HAVE PERFECT ATTENDANCE ANY MORE, I DON'T HAVE ANY ATTENDANCE!"

"Is that what's eating you?" I tousled his hair; he needed a haircut, but he so hated being barbered that none of us had the heart to give him one. "Morrie is not going to flunk you just because you're not there in the second row every minute, honest. I'll tell you what." I lowered my voice. "I'll get him to show me your grades there in his record book. He's not supposed to," I made this up frantically as I went along, "that's one thing the inspector inspects, whether a teacher blabs grades, but I'll work on Morrie and I bet he'll do it for you. Then I'll tell you if you're flunking or not, how's that? But it can't be anything but a secret, all right?"

Toby attempted to shake his head and nod at the same time, whatever it took to vow secrecy.

"I have to scoot on out of here," I told him, looking at the time. "I won't forget, about Morrie and your grades." I made a beeline for the kitchen, passing Damon at the table, where he was trying to be invisible behind his geography book. "Your turn," I said under my breath.

Damon whispered back, "If I have to read him *Heidi* one more time I'm gonna puke."

"Trade with Rose, then. Milk the cow while she does the reading." That shut him up. "Clear out of here, okay?" I shooed him toward Toby's bedroom. "I need to cook."

'Cooking' was a generous description of it, I realize. But with Father in the fields until the end of each day, I had fallen heir to the can opener and the pot of boiling water for potatoes or beans and and the ham hocks and beef briskets and anything else that passed for victuals. Dismal as my supper efforts might be, no one seemed to think they were any worse than Father's best ~~ones.~~

Mornings now, I crossed the field in the dark toward the window glow of our kitchen where I knew Rose was puttering until I arrived, whistling softly to herself. I carried a bullseye lantern to find my way across the fresh furrows, a chocolate sea perturbed into long regular waves by Father's plowing and seeding, but in the middle of her field I would put down the lantern for a minute and step away from it until my eyes adjusted to the dark, and then scan the sky. The moon went about its business, the stars were set in place, but search as I would, I could find no sign of a miraculous spark traveling from millions of miles away. Sir Edmund Halley and Morris Morgan said the comet was coming. They had better be right, I thought to myself, and picked up the lantern.

The pertinent morning of this, I was barely through the kitchen door before the faint suggestion of a tune broke off and in its place the whisper: "Is anything up?"

"Rose, that field only was planted last week."

"Ah. I lose track of time. The days are so--" She darted to the stove where the tea kettle was going off at an alarming rate. I couldn't tell exactly what description she might have put on our daily household situation, but *strewn* came most readily to mind. I ferried our cups from the drainboard and spooned in the

cocoa and poured the hot water. When we settled at the table and Rose had taken a hummingbird sip, I whispered the usual: "How'd Tobe do last night?"

"He didn't want to go to sleep." The little knit of consternation was between her eyebrows. "How can one boy come up with so much to worry about? The latest thing bothering him is that he won't get well in time for the comet."

It indeed was going to be a close race, whether Toby mended before he drove us all crazy. I sighed. "I've told him twenty times we'll chop a hole in the roof if we have to for him to see the damn comet."

When I glanced up after taking a slurp of cocoa, Rose was gazing at me with concern. "You're getting circles under your eyes. Isn't my bed comfortable?" ~~Aunt Eunice's bed, which was an entirely different case~~. I mumbled something about not being used to such luxury and hoped she would let it go at that. Not Rose. She gave me a knowing smile, as clinical as it was sympathetic, and here it came. "You miss Latin after school, don't you."

That observation had been made to me so many times by so many different persons I was ready to pull my hair out. Because this was Rose, I merely grimaced and muttered, "After-school is shot until Tobe is himself again, that's all there is to it." I shoved back from the table and said crossly, "I have to wake up the bear den," meaning Father and Damon.

I just about made it to the doorway before the murmur cut me off. "Paul?" I turned around, and there was one of those glints in Rose's eye. "And so." When she ~~would say~~ said that, you could never tell where things were heading. "Don't necessarily tell Morrie where you got the idea. But there's always before school."

"Morrie? Does *copulate* mean what I think it does? In English, I mean."

The morning I asked that, he had a terrible time keeping a straight face. Between yawns and cups of coffee that would have given Father's a run for its

money and trying to prepare for the Department of Public instruction inspector coming to lop his head off, he was doing his best to administer Latin to me before everyone else showed up for school. At that hour I was chipper as Chanticleer, which probably was no help to a bleary teacher who had to come an hour early every day to unlock the schoolhouse and light the overhead lamps and stoke up the stove and then face me and my translations. Morrie hadn't yet uttered a peep of complaint, however, and now he looked more than passingly interested in my question. "Dare I ask why you ask?"

"Just wondering." I dabbed my finger onto the open page of the Latin collection of readings he had most recently provided me. "Besides, it's right here."

Morrie blanched, then scrambled over to my desk to take a look. *"Navem capere, copulae cum manus ferreas inicebamus,"* he read aloud hastily, then translated with relief: *"To capture the vessel, we threw ropes with grappling irons.* The grappling is not that severe in the English form. But look it up."

By the time I was through doing so, Morrie had banged the triangle for the start of school and everyone was filing in. This day as others, Toby's desk stayed significantly empty as the rows around it filled, and that absence continued to make itself felt a number of ways between our fellow students and Damon and me. Rabrab made sure to give us each a dramatic dose of pity every time she passed. At the other extreme, Milo leered in our direction whenever it occurred to him. Recesses were touchy, because Milo's was not the only tongue in the schoolyard that would like to have got at Damon and me with gossip from home about Rose's nightly presence under our roof. Ah, but with the Drobnys at our sides, we comprised a Slavic splinter state no one wanted to risk hostilities with. So it went, between sympathy and scandal. I caught Eddie Turley looking at us speculatively a few times, but so far I had managed to stare him down--I didn't want Damon to get into it with him.

"What were you looking up?" Grover whispered as I passed his row on my way back from the dictionary.

"Have to tell you later." I slid into my seat just as Morrie wondered aloud if we happened to know who Archimedes was. Good, it was going to be one of those days. I settled back to digest my morning's Latin, not even particularly minding the existence of Carnelia next to me, and listened to Morrie start in on how you could move the world if you had a lever long enough.

Five minutes into the school day, he was in full spate when the door behind him opened. The visitor was well into the room before Morrie became aware of him, although that was not the case with the rest of Marias Coulee school. A suck of wind went through us all.

"A visitor, do I detect from your faces?" Morrie said resolutely, straightening his tie. More than half expecting the inspector all this while, he turned around.

Brose Turley stood there.

It was nothing like what my dreams had been forecasting all those months. The schoolroom door did not splinter and fly off its hinges. The wolfman of the high country did not come garbed in shaggy winter mackinaw and bloodstained mittens. Far from it. He had materialized there at the front of our schoolroom in everyday trapping attire, which in my first instant of seeing him seemed even more horrible. The heart-destroying boots. The greasy slouch hat made of who knows what. The well-used haft of the skinning knife sheathed at his belt. Turley seemed to be enjoying his school visit; he strutted a few steps closer to our ranks of desks, looking us over as if we were a menagerie. Like everyone else, I swung around to check on Eddie. The eyeglasses were off, hidden in his desk, and with remarkable presence of mind he was rubbing the telltale place on the bridge of his nose. Had

he somehow heard the hoofbeats of the big gray horse when the rest of us didn't, or simply sensed his father?

"Mr. Turley, I believe." Morrie recovered to the extent of manners. "Good morning. Do you wish to speak with Eddie about something?"

"Lot more than that. I want him home." Brose Turley relished the next words in the pink of his mouth before slowly rolling them out. "From here on." Sparing Eddie nothing, he squinted down the aisle of desks to his alarmed son. "On your feet, boy."

I saw, and I am sure Damon saw, the ever so slight motion as Morrie brushed his fingertips along the side pockets of his suit coat. If brass knuckles resided there, this time they did not emerge. Morrie drew himself up and wielded authority. "School is in session. You can't just--"

"Look it up, teacher man. This is his birthday. Old enough to leave school, and that's what he's gonna do."

Morrie looked stunned. We all were. To show Turley he would not let him run a bluff, he strode to his desk and whipped out the student registration ledger. His head down, he flipped through until we could tell he had come to the eighth grade's page. After a bit, he looked up at Brose Turley. "Eddie should have some say in this."

Turley shook his head, one wag each direction, like some animal ready in ambush switching its tail. All eight grades of us stared at the spectacle occurring over our heads, so silly and savagely sad at the same time. There was fear in the room, and there was hatred. Brose Turley--or for that matter, Father--would have had to pry my cold dead hands from my desk to withdraw me from a place of learning. Damon, Grover, Isidor, Gabe, Verl, Vivian, Carnelia, Rabrab, Miles, Lily Lee, any number of us in that classroom felt the same way, and even those among us who were not as keen on school knew that this was not right from a parent.

Yet the trespasser had the law on his side, something not even Morrie could remedy.

He was trying common sense on the situation. "For heaven's sake, be reasonable," he implored Turley. "It's only a matter of weeks until the end of school. Eddie can graduate--"

"He's doing that this damn minute." Turley made a swipe at the air, it couldn't be called a beckoning gesture, only a signal of impatience. "Come on here, you. Don't make me have to tell you again."

Like an invalid, Eddie uncertainly lifted himself up out of his desk. He bit his lip and kept his eyes down, away from all of ours. One shuffling step after another, he trailed after the blunt back of his father and walked out of the schoolroom to a life of skinning dead creatures.

Morrie crashed a fist down on his desk. All of us sat motionless, in roomwide paralysis.

At last he caught a breath and said in a low voice:

"Everyone, never forget what you've seen here today."

At recess, Milo blustered that he wished it had happened to him, but even he looked a little green around the gills from what had been witnessed.

"Some birthday for Eddie," Grover observed.

"By a mile," Miles agreed.

"What's the old so-and-so gonna make Eddie do, you suppose?" Verl pondered.

"Housework," Rabrab trilled. "Can't you just see Eddie in an apron?"

"The old man is gonna put him to tending the trapline," said Isidor the realist. "He'll have Eddie peeling pelts off his catch till he can't see straight."

"Why couldn't he just leave him alone until the end of school?" Marta voiced the thought in many minds.

Slowly but surely the verdict worked out by the Marias Coulee schoolyard court of justice was that Eddie, leaver of bruises on the majority of us, perhaps did not deserve fond remembrance, but no one deserved Brose Turley.

Riding home, neither Damon nor I said anything until we came to The Cut. All at once I heard out of him, with a crestfallen note in his voice: "You're so lucky, Paul."

"Why? What's the matter?"

"I never did get to punch Eddie."

18

Morrie was low for days after that. I would pop into the schoolhouse early as usual, primed to the tips of my ears for Latin, and he would grunt to himself over my translations and then stick me off in some netherworld such as the ablative case while he graded papers and looked morose. It was the morning I was flailing through the thicket of prepositional attachment to pronouns but never to nouns--what were the Romans thinking, putting something like *pax vobiscum* in the same language with *cum laude*?--when he finally burst out:

"Hopeless."

To say the least, I was startled. 'Imperfect,' I might have said myself about my ablative efforts so far. Maybe even 'inauspicious.' But totally without hope? I sent him a hurt look.

"No, no, not you. Read this." He came down the aisle and skimmed a sheet of tablet paper to me, which proved to be Milo Stoyanov's essay on homestead life.

> *In our family there are seven of us, Papa, Mama, Gramma, Katrina that is just little yet, Marija, Ivo, and I. I and Ivo and Marija go to the Marias Coulee school. I ride Roanie and Marija holds on behind but don't like to. Excepting for horses like Roanie and milk cows the animal everybody raises is hogs, a few. Everybody has chores including children.*

Marija's chore is gather the eggs. Mine is get in wood and empty the slop bucket. The food we eat is mostly deer, antelope, fish, and foul.

Morrie stared out the window. "Sisyphus. I will trade tasks with Sisyphus, straight across." He stood there snapping his sleeve garters in agitated fashion, all the while muttering. "Why Montana? Why didn't I ship out to Tasmania?"

I wished the school inspector would walk in the door right then, which at least would have stirred the blood around in Morrie.

Still with his back to me, all at once he said in a forced voice: "There's something you'd better know, Paul. I am handing in my resignation as teacher." ~~This was turning into the morning from Hell.~~ What he'd uttered shocked me to the extent I could only babble back, "You can't."

The sole sound in the schoolroom for some moments was the *plick plick plick* of the sleeve garters being beset. From the back, in his tailoring and calfskin shoes, Morrie looked naturally rooted here in a place of learning; but that could not be so, I tried to force my mind around, ~~if he was announcing he was abandoning Marias Coulee school.~~ "I feel I must," he softly answered ~~my cry of *you can't.*~~ "Matters are not turning out commensurate to my endeavors. Not for the first time, I might add." He faced around to me now. His deflated attitude alarmed me. How could destiny leak out of a person so fast? "Don't say anything to anyone," I heard him through my daze. "Not even Damon," by which I understood he meant particularly not Damon. "The school does not need more commotion. I'll ride home with the two of you at the end of the day and tell your father first."

I was a wreck as school got underway that day. When Carnelia elbowed me and under her breath demanded to know if whatever was wrong with me now was something she might catch, I whispered back savagely, "I hope so." At the

front of the classroom Morrie soldiered on, a bit subdued but still throwing off a good many more sparks than most teachers. My world had fallen apart. Not merely my world, either. I could not imagine the fate of the school without him up there bobbing and weaving through the fields of knowledge.

At recess, the Drobny brothers were just the company I was fit for. We were kicking a gym ball against the back of the schoolhouse, doing our murderous best to bust its seams, when around the corner came a delegation. Headed by Rabrab, the leading lights of the sixth grade were all there, Grover and Miles and Lily Lee and Damon and Isidor--*Damon?* He was hanging at the back of them, trying to look inconspicuous, but failing with me.

Immediately on my guard, I eyed the group up and down. "What's this, the Feed the Cannibals League?"

"Paul, don't be like that." When she wanted something, Rabrab had a look like the fox coaxing the baby bunny out to play. She had that look now. She glanced at my partners in gym ball mayhem. "We need to talk to you without big ears around."

"Nick and Sam know how to keep a secret, don't you." I whacked the nearest twin on the shoulder in solidarity.

Rabrab stared the Drobny boys into an oath of silence--they knew a fellow assassin when they saw one--then returned her full sly attention to me. "It's Mister Morgan. He's down in the dumps about something."

"Top mark for observation."

"All right, smarty, we all saw it happen. But Mister Morgan has to get over that. He can't help it if Eddie Turley has a father that would gag a maggot. We decided"--she generously indicated her fellow conspirators, with Damon laying low at the back of the pack--"he needs something else to occupy his mind."

"Oh right, Rab. Stamp collecting, maybe?"

"Nobody asked you to be sarcastic, Paul," Rabrab said as if I should not try her patience too far. "You remember the Christmas play, don't you?" Mystified as to how Christmas had come into this, I nodded. "We figure the school could have something like that for Halley's when it comes," she spelled matters out for me, her backers nodding like dipsomaniacs. *Damn*, I thought. If I'd been able to tell Damon about Morrie's mind being made up, everyone could have been spared these shenanigans. "Not exactly a play, maybe," Rabrab still was busily conjuring, "but something. Anything like that would pep up Mister Morgan--he has comet on the brain."

"Well then, why don't you troop in there and see what he says?"

"We think you're the one to."

I felt caught between. The quick way out was to tell the bunch of them Morrie was finished as our teacher. But he had implored me not to. But if I went in there after recess the way they wanted me to and stood up in front of everybody and said the school would like to put on some kind of something or other to mark Halley's Comet, what could Morrie do but say, "I regret to inform all of you--" But this, but that. It was playing me out, juggling those. All I could think to do was to delay; I had just been reading in my primer about the slowpoke general, Quintus Fabius Maximus Cunctator, who avoided battles with Hannibal at every opportunity, and it seemed to work for him.

Accordingly, I squared myself up to Rabrab and the others as if shouldering my duty and wildly procrastinated:

"Well, gee, I don't know, but I guess I could, only if you let me do this my way. Mor--Mister Morgan might think we're putting him on the spot if I get up in the middle of school and ask. It'd be better if I had a chance to talk him into it, off on our own. Just so happens, he's coming over to our place after school."

"He is?" Damon was outraged I had not told him that.

"Quit pulling my leg, Morrie." Father dug into his meal with vigor. "You can't quit. This is excellent pork Stroganoff, by the way." The one gain on the day was that Morrie had pitched in with me on supper and for once we were eating civilized food. Even Rose took a couple of bites.

"Oliver, you are not hearing me. I have decided to resign my teaching position."

"But you can't," Father said around another forkful.

"Yes, don't tease, Morrie," Rose said, turning to Father. "I am sure I saw nice little green things coming up in my field when I looked out today."

"Weeds."

Morrie gazed around the table at the lot of us as if we were a tribe with no ears. "Since when is it impossible for a man to depart a job he did not seek out in the first place? I tell you, I am resigning. Ceasing to be a teacher. Chucking it in."

Father stopped in mid-chew. "You're serious."

"As I have been telling you. I am afraid I am out of my element, posing as a teacher." Morrie seemed composed, although he had to blink considerably to maintain it. Across from him, Rose's cheeks were coloring up like the rise of mercury in a thermometer, not a good sign. Gorging ourselves as we watched all this, Damon and I were the only ones not on record, up to this point. My hope was that Father or Rose or both of them together could talk Morrie out of quitting and everyone would brighten up again, and then I could speak my little piece about some kind of a comet commemoration, and Morrie could do with it or not as he chose, and that would be that. In short, all I wanted was a miracle.

"Out of your element?" Rose sounded incredulous. "You've *always* been--"

"Now, now, Rose," Father headed that off. "Please, let me." He swung around to face Morrie. "You can't leave the school in the lurch like this. The inspector is going to be here any day."

"That's precisely the point." Morrie was as adamant as Father. "What if he had been on hand when that wolfhunting cretin dragged his son out of school? Wouldn't that have been pretty." He drew in a sharp breath. "Who knows what he might walk in on, if I'm in charge of things."

"Good grief, Morrie, we don't have time to find another teacher. My fellow school board members will strangle me if we have to tell that inspector we've had another case of turnover. Like it or not, we're stuck with--"

"FATHER!" issued forth from the bedroom down the hall. "CAN I SHOW MORRIE MY BIG TOE YET?"

We all swore Toby's voice had grown to the size of Enrico Caruso's during his weeks in bed.

"Tobe," Father called back to the autocrat of the bedroom, "not until we've finished supper, I told you that."

Silence. Then: "ARE YOU ABOUT DONE?"

"Almost." Turning toward Morrie again, Father gave him a strong looking over before starting in. "I can't ever get a straight line on you." He glanced aside at Rose, who should have known the ins and outs of Morrie if anyone did, but she chose that moment to spear a shred of pork with her fork. Father returned to the Morrie puzzle himself. "I move heaven and earth to land you into the teaching job, which at first you don't at all want. Then you take to it, and by all reports, you're a ringtailed wonder in the classroom. Now all of a sudden you let Brose Turley buffalo you. Next thing, when we need you to merely be on the premises when the inspector-- "

"I am not 'buffaloed' by Brose Turley," Morrie replied stiffly. "I just do not want to invite any more trouble onto the school. It would be on my conscience, if my methods were to--"

Rose suddenly put in: "What is it you intend? To pack up from Marias Coulee? I'm just asking."

"Perhaps I will become a homesteader. That seems to be in fashion around here."

Rose looked as if she wanted to clobber him one. The rest of us at the table stirred, doing whatever we bodily could to draw off a brother-sister spat. I was restlessly trying to get over the horrible thought that if Morrie went, Latin went, when Damon kicked my chair hard enough to send a jolt up my spine.

"Ah, Morrie?" Damon's reminder triggered the words out of me rapid-fire-t"remember the Christmas play?"

"Pull your head out of the clouds, Paul," Father said impatiently. "What does Christmas have to do with anything?"

"Well, I was thinking--Damon and I were thinking--actually, a whole bunch of us at school were thinking--"

"Spit it out, we don't have all night," this from Father again.

"A comet something-or-other, the school ought to put on some sort of program when it comes, is what we thought. Like at Christmas." I looked hopefully at Morrie, then Father and Rose, then back to Morrie. Encouragement seemed to be asleep at the switch.

But Father got hold of the moment. "You are, after all, the one who spouted comet to them until it's running out their ears," he reminded Morrie pointedly. "Just when is the thing due, anyway?"

Morrie shrugged. "Any night now."

"Any night?" Father's voice went way up. "That's the best you can predict?"

"Oliver, Halley's Comet travels an elliptical orbit across most of our solar system and arrives to our sight on an approximate schedule of every seventy-five years, it does not pull in on the minute like a train." He brushed a hand through the air as if to erase Father's obvious doubt. "It will come. It always has." Morrie turned his attention to the two of us on the edge of our chairs at the far end of the table. "Paul and Damon, I appreciate the school's wish to celebrate the comet. But even if I were to stay on and preside over that, time is short, and there is not a comet Nativity play."

"Wouldn't need to be a play," Damon improvised cagily.

"No, not at all, huh uh," I fumbled out. "Could be a--" I tried to think of anything sufficiently celestial. Where was blindsight when I needed it, Rose? Across the table from me, she watched me as if I could not fail, the archway of eyebrow that coaxed out unexpected thoughts ready and waiting. The only thing that came to my mind were these mornings of gazing up from the dark in the field to the light of the stars and then trooping in here to this kitchen to the whispery anthem of her whistling. "Music. Could be a music program, couldn't it?" Scratching for words, I came up with: "Harmony of the spheres, you told us about that, Morrie, remember?"

I was simply reaching desperately. ~~With Morrie, though,~~ you never knew what little boost would send ~~his~~ Morrie's thoughts escalating. The next thing any of us knew, he was stroking the precincts of lip where his mustache used to be and musing out loud very much as if he were at the front of the classroom.

"Actually, there was a rather nice point about harmony that I did not get around to making to the students. That flaming idiot Brose Turley got in the way of it that day and I never--"

"There now, you see? Comet night, music, that's that," Rose said to us all as if she had neatly bundled up the answers to everything herself. Father looked at her with what might have been startled admiration. Except for anything to do with farming, the two of them got along surprisingly well within the same confines, I was happy to find. I still was paying for making room for Rose in the house around the clock with dream visitations from tireless Aunt Eunice, but even that seemed worth it.

"And besides music, you could make a talk, that night," Damon was busy reeling Morrie in. "Old Beetlejuice or something." Morrie's latest leap heavenward in the classroom had taken us into constellations, and so the bright star Betelgeuse, there at the hinge of the shoulder of Orion the giant, he had cited as a hinge of the human imagination as well. *"Notice how its brighter light draws our attention, and then we see--or think we see--the outline of the giant in the other stars arranged around that point of light. This is called a point of reference, by which we imagine onto the infinite ceiling of the night those expanded figures from our world--here a giant, there an archer, over there the dippers from which they take sips of the liquid darkness--"* Damon's promoter instinct was slick as usual. None of us who ever heard Morrie soar off into the sky and its holdings doubted that he could take all of Marias Coulee with him, on any given night.

Morrie had been listening to Damon as gravely as if he was being enshrined in one of the scrapbooks upstairs. Now he found me with his instructive look and intoned, "*Arma tradeo.*"

"He throws up his arms," I informed those uninitiated ~~in Latin.~~

"'I surrender my weapons,'" Morrie corrected severely.

"That's what I meant."

Morrie gave his upper lip a final pat, the kind I had learned to recognize as introducing an announcement. "This may be lunacy, on my part. But perhaps I do

owe it to the students to mark the comet's appearance. Comet night"--he accorded Rose a wry bow of his head, before turning to Father--"won't be detrimental to the school inspection, I can at least assure you of that. The students are as ready for the inspector as I know how to make them, even if I am not."

"Morrie, all I ask is that your body be warm and visible to that inspector when he hits the schoolhouse," Father reassured him, ~~if that's what that was.~~ "And so"--a locution that had rubbed off Rose onto him--"keep it plain and simple, on comet night. A few songs by the children and a talk from you about the comet and that will do it." Father eyed his newly unresigned school employee across the table. "In other words, spare the budget from harm."

"Of course," said Morrie, although I noticed he was fiddling with his cufflinks, sometimes a signal that an extravagant notion was on its way from up his sleeve.

"NOW CAN I, FATHER?"

"Tobe has the eighth wonder of the world to show you," Father interpreted for Morrie's benefit.

"EVERYBODY CAN SEE IT AGAIN IF THEY WANT."

"We're on our way," Father called back, and the bunch of us trooped down the hall to where Toby held court. Any day now--the doctor's predictive powers were on a par with Morrie's for the comet--when the foot stopped being tender, Toby would be eligible for crutches. Until then, his foot was unbandaged, out in the open but within splints. He beamed at us down the length of the bed, as if he hadn't seen most of us twenty times already that day.

"Morrie, look!" Toby directed, impresario that he was on his pile of pillows.

Morrie leaned over and his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Toby, you are an evolutionary pioneer. It may take the rest of humankind ten thousand years to catch up with you."

"That much, huh?" Toby said with pride. He had lost the toenail off his big toe. He could hardly wait to show that toe off in the schoolyard.

"Rose! Come see!"

I wouldn't have believed a person could shout in a whisper, yet I managed some such feat when I barged into the kitchen and madly beckoned her outside into the dark that had now changed forever.

We went out the door of the house in nearly one person, Rose so close her shawl smacked the back of my neck as she hurled it across her shoulders. I held the bullseye lantern up, ushering her across the yard and into the field, the pair of us tightroping between the seeded furrows, somehow watching our step while trying to read the sky in giddy glances. When I judged we were far enough from the lamplight reflected through the kitchen window, I drew us to a halt. "Here goes." I doused the lantern. Maybe as much as a minute passed while our eyes adjusted to the darkness. "There," I whispered, sheer habit. "Over the top of The Cut."

"Is that it, you're sure?" Rose cupped a hand to her brow.

"Has to be. There's the water bearer, and there's the centaur," I pointed out constellations for her, "and see, that one is just as bright but doesn't fit with any of theirs." No, it was beyond doubt, this was a traveling star. As soon as our eyes had night sight, we could pick out the faint trailing smudge of light, like the here-and-gone strike of a match, that marked the visitor amid the standing clusters in that corner of the sky. The tail of the comet would grow and grow as it neared, Morrie

had told us in school. Each night would add to its paradoxical cloud of brightness. I already was dazzled, that the nature of things could be vast enough to cast a stray diamond of light across the spaces of night probably just once in our lifetimes, yet so legible that the blink of an eye brought this single migratory glow home to us out of all the glimmers held by the sky.

"Oh, Paul, it's beautiful," Rose murmured, my heart dancing to her words. Then she said something odd, her tone wistful. "Morrie needs a comet now and then."

I had no time to puzzle that out. "I need to go in and get everybody up to see it. Father and I can carry Tobe out in a chair."

I have thought back most of a lifetime on how Halley's Comet arrived to our world in 1910--and have come under its aura again time after time in dreams--and the course of it through the atmosphere here below makes me emotional even yet. By the earthly order of things, Marias Coulee and its scattered antecedents through history were granted the visiting star ahead of the populous parts of the world. Goatherds and keepers of sheep and and camel drovers and stalkers of hoofed game at pre-dawn waterholes, the rural earth's earliest risers--theirs always would have been the first eyes to find the arriving comet. Those and the dream-tossed; others on this planet may have seen the coming of the fresh star earlier than I did that sleep-short morning, but they were not many. Then, having made itself known to the prairies and savannahs and deserts, the fiery traveler showered portent in past the walls of the greatest of cities. Soothsayers prospered. Beggars did better. Crowned heads grew uneasy; Halley's Comet was known to carry off kings. Harold, King of England, perished to the Norman invaders following the comet's passage in 1066. Edward VII, King of England, was laid in his bulky casket our spring of 1910. Those who looked to heaven for a wrathful king of

everything could all too readily read the comet as a flaming writ of doom. Morrie brought to school sensational newspaper stories of panic among sects that were sure the world was coming to an end according to one feverish prophecy or another, and instructively paired those with similar accounts across the past few thousand years. "Mark Twain, our greatest living American writer, once told the press association its report of his death was an exaggeration, and down through the ages these lamentations fit that same category," he left it at. If that wasn't enough, the Delacroix print on the schoolroom wall was always there as a reminder that the Star Dragon had flown before and given alarm to inflamed consciences, and would again.

Passing over our own roof, Halley's Comet could hardly have been more auspicious. To universal relief in the household, on his next call the doctor let Toby proceed to crutches. Damon and I made sure to kid him about being Peg Leg Pete the Pirate Man, and he gyrated through the house with a surprisingly sure swagger. Rose allowed him along on her housekeeping swoops through the downstairs rooms, which meant she could keep an eye on him. And Father looked less like a man chased day and night by a swarm of things; he made it downstairs in time to join Rose and me in our comet-watching every one of those mornings. Life somehow smoothed out, under that brightening cloud of comet tail. Morrie one morning wove it into Latin. "There is a line that is tailor-made for Halley's, and you know which one I mean. *Universum lux desiderat*, Paul. Kindly come up with an inspired translation before I become too old and deaf to hear it."

"I will. I mean, I am. Next time, maybe."

Yet one thing strangely troubled me as the great comet progressed across the sky of our lives. The particular fragment of thought never did ascend to dream level, but only because my mind could not quite catch hold of a way to dream it. What plagued me was the idea Eddie--One Punch Milliron's old adversary, ~~the~~

recess lout whom the schoolyard generally said good riddance to, that Eddie might never look upon Halley's Comet. On their ride to school the day after Brose Turley jerked him out of the classroom, the Pronovosts had sighted the pair of them on their way to the mountains, a packstring behind them, swags of traps clanking on the pack saddles. "Eddie looked like a whipped pup," Isidor reported. Plainly Brose Turley was squeezing in another high-country season of pelts and bounties now that he had Eddie to slave for him. Up there in the Rockies, spring and the end of trapping would not come for some time yet, and meanwhile the comet was low on the southeast horizon, blocked from sight in the mountain valleys by the shoulders of the foothills and the front range of peaks. I could not get rid of the thought that a kind of blindness had been put on Eddie Turley, and where did that fit in the beautiful workings of the universe?

Hours after Rose and I made our first sighting of the traveling star, Morrie laid out comet night for his attentive eight grades of listeners in the schoolroom. Naturally he leapt ahead on the calendar--three weeks seemed to us all like a terribly long time--to the night when Halley's Comet would achieve full magnitude, according to his calculations. That particular night, the tail of the comet would extend across the sky from Denver to far Hawaii. Marias Coulee School perhaps could not take full credit for that, but at least we could host the event. "Your parents of course will need to be reminded," Morrie reminded us, "that we will not start until full dark." It shouldn't be too hard to get parents to be nocturnal one night out of seventy-five years, we figured. "I shall make a talk on matters of the cosmos," Morrie said off-handedly. We had thoroughly expected that. "And all of you--" he paused as if this was almost too delicious to tell us. Then he told us.

A hush fell on the schoolroom. Three weeks seemed like a terribly short time.

Carnelia wasn't saying anything, even between her teeth. I knew better than to speak up, because if I did it would come out something like: *"Morrie, have you lost your mind?"* Glancing around the room, I caught a gleam in Damon's eye, not exactly a recommendation for Morrie's scheme. Grover looked dubious. Marta put a hand up to her face to see if this was going to set off a nosebleed. Both sets of Drobny twins licked their lips, tasting conspiracy. Milo, oaf among eighth-grade oafs, inexplicably had a grin on him the size of a calf bucket. At last, next to Milo at the back of the room, Martin Myrdal stuck up a meaty hand. "All of us? The little kids too?"

The first grade en masse--Josef Kratka and Alice Stinson and Maggie Emrich and Dora Rellis--turned and glowered at Martin. The Robespierre of the second grade, Emil Kratka, stuck his tongue out at him.

"All," Morrie said firmly. "First grade to eighth grade."

The next question in the air was from Sally Calhoun. Sally even had a fussy way of raising her hand. "Teacher, is this a secret? Even from our folks?"

"Let's call it a surprise, Sally. And if we want to surprise someone, we do not tell them about it ahead of time, do we?"

If I have learned anything about what happens in a classroom, it is that inspiration does not always follow a straight path. Up in the second row, Inez Pronovost squirmed one way and then the other at her desk, next to Toby's empty one all these weeks, and suddenly piped up: "Spitbath handshake, Mister Morgan?"

I saw Morrie covertly cock an ear for school inspector footsteps in the cloakroom. Hearing none, he spat in his hand. "All right, everyone. The bargain will be sealed in the manner Inez suggests. I'll make the rounds although each of you must provide the rest of the expectoration--I do not have three dozen decent spits in me. We shall discuss the salivary gland when we are finished." And we were launched toward comet night.

Across the next weeks, Morrie found scraps of the day to rehearse us. Last period was always a catch-all, and he used it to the fullest for our one purpose now. Several times we voted to stay in from recess to practice. It was an ensemble effort, whatever the results ~~were going to~~ would be.

"So how is your singing voice by now?" Father asked me one morning after he and Rose and I had checked on the progress of the comet. There still were times when he looked like he was being put through life's wringer--a dry springtime will do that to a farmer--but some matters were not pressing on him quite as hard now. Toby still was the pest of all time, but at least he could periodically be dispatched outside to work off energy by pegging around the yard. Even the specter of the inspector dimmed ~~off~~ with each passing day; Father and Morrie had practically squinted holes in the calendar and the long list of one-room schools in Montana and come to the conclusion that with any luck now, the school term would wind down before the Department of Public Instruction managed to get past its backlog. And while Father would not have said so out loud, having Rose in the house all the time gave the place a feel of ticking along to a natural clock that it had not had for a good long time. She could be heard rummaging around in the mud room that very moment, setting up for what she announced as spring cleaning.

Before I thought, I scoffed: "Oh, we're not bothering with singing. Anybody can sing."

Father stopped whatever he was doing and sent me a long look. Then crossed the room and closed the kitchen door, an exceedingly rare occurrence. He came over close to me and asked anxiously:

"Paul. He doesn't have the whole caboodle of you *whistling,* does he?"

"Father, I can't tell you, can I. It's a surprise. That's the whole idea."



"HERE HE COMES!"

Toby's yelp when he spotted the doctor's Model T chugging along the section-line road toward us would have wakened the dead. Houdini chorused in with him.

"Settle down, you two," Father directed, coming out of the barn where he had been mending harness. This was something he was looking forward to as much as Toby was, if it meant the end of careening crutches.

Damon and I got up from where we were lying flat, trying to snare gophers at the edge of the field. If we caught any, Morrie would have the specimen he wanted to illustrate the history of incisors--from the saber-tooth tiger on down, no doubt--in class the next day. It was a big if. Mostly, this was just such a fine sunny Sunday afternoon we wanted to be out in it. Now we brushed the worst of the dirt off ourselves without Father even having to tell us and headed across the yard, each trying to look more mature and presentable than the other. How often did mighty events coincide like this? Toby was receiving the doctor visit he had been looking for every day all week, and comet night was a mere two days away.

The Model T pulled up to us, vibrated nervously for several moments, and shut down. The doctor from Westwater got out from behind the steering wheel and was instantly set upon by Toby, in one breath wanting to know if he could throw away his crutches yet and in the next wanting a guarantee that his big toenail would never grow back. Another man climbed out the other side of the automobile. This was no great surprise, as the Westwater doctor had said he wanted Toby's one-of-a-kind foot to be looked over by the orthopedic specialist from the Great Falls hospital whenever that worthy made his rounds in our general direction. Certainly Toby would be ecstatic to rate two doctors. Right now his jabbering away had the

Westwater one thoroughly distracted, so Father approached the other. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure, Doctor--?"

"Call me Harry," the man said as they shook hands. "Harry Taggart. School inspector."

It was as if Zeus had appeared in our yard. Father froze. I heard Damon gasp, or maybe it was me.

Actually, Taggart did not look like much. He was a long stick of a man, his bowler hat sitting on him about as it would have on a hatstand. His frowsy mustache made it apparent what an achievement Morrie's had been. But he had slitted eyes, as though his vision was everlastingly pinched to a point by watching people try tricks. And the bag he carried, now that we had a second look, was a dark leather briefcase bulging with whatever a school inspector inspected with.

Taggart explained, "I asked around town and caught a ride out with the good doctor here, to find your place." Those eyes with their visors of lids flicked across the homestead and Father in his barn clothes as if reserving judgment.

"Yes, well," Father rallied, "we weren't expecting you on a Sunday and--"

"Excuse us," the doctor called over, "we are going in the house for me to examine the patient," and Toby vaulted along ahead of him on the crutches.

"And these are your other lads," Taggart belatedly dispensed handshakes to Damon and me. As if a switch had been flipped, now he sounded hearty. "Ready to tackle the standards tomorrow, buckos?" We hated it when that tone of voice was used on us. Not trusting what we might say, Damon and I stood there as soiled as badgers and dug our toes in the yard as though in search of more dirt.

Taggart breezed right back to Father. "First off, I should make sure our records in Helena are up to date." He instantly delved into his briefcase the way a gunfighter went to his holster. "*Marias Coulee School District*," he pulled out an

official-looking piece of paper and read off, "*established 1903, Township 28 North, so on and so on. Teacher, Adelaide Trent--*"

Damon couldn't help it. He snickered.

Father dropped a kindly hand on Damon's shoulder and gave a little squeeze meant to carry all the way to the vocal cords. "Miss Trent is no longer with us. That old epidemic, matrimony." Father forced a chuckle. "The school board fortunately found a sterling replacement."

Taggart frowned.

"This individual's name?" He spread his piece of paperwork onto the skinny hood of the automobile, reached out a fountain pen and scratched Miss Trent into oblivion, and for better or worse, Morrie was entered onto the rolls of the Department of Public Instruction.

Just then Rose quickstepped out of the house, water bucket swinging in her hand, headed for the pump. Wearing satin for Sunday, she looked very nice indeed. Taggart cast a glance at Father as if he thought better of him. He tipped his hat and gallantly called, "Good day, Mrs. Milliron."

"She's not--" Father started and stopped.

"Oh, how do you do," Rose said, swerving over. "Actually, I am more properly called Mrs. Llewelynn," she said in the melancholically musical fashion we had not heard from her for some time now. "I'm the--" She gestured inclusively around, water bucket and all, a sweep that took in our homestead and hers and the fields and evidently the perimeters of things all the way back to Minneapolis.

"Temporary nurse," Father hastily filled in.

"Neighbor next door," I prompted in the same instant.

"Housekeeper," Rose said, looking at both of us.

Damon saved our skins. In back of Taggart, he frantically pantomimed peering through a magnifying glass, Sherlock Holmes style.

"Ah!" Rose let out. "You must be the school inspector everyone has been so looking forward to." She and Taggart shook hands--hers obviously startled him, as strong from work as any man's--and she sped on with the conversation as if she had been waiting months to confide in him. "I live just across the way, so it's nothing for me to pitch in here on the household chores and seeing to Toby since his awful accident, and Mr. Milliron is so busy with farming and the school affairs and all, so it works out well for everyone concerned. You see--" Here she halted and bit her lip. Taggart leaned toward her from the waist as if to make sure he did see. "My husband is"--Rose gestured off to far horizons again--"gone for an extended period."

"What can exceed neighborliness as a virtue?" Taggart proclaimed to us all as if it might be on tomorrow's test. Rose beamed at him and went off to pump water.

Father had not fully recovered from Rose's transit through the situation before Taggart turned to him again. "Mister Milliron--may I call you Oliver?"

"Be my guest."

"Oliver, how I would like to proceed," Taggart went on in a fashion that made it plain it was how they were going to proceed, "is to meet with you and the teacher before school tomorrow. To examine the classroom equipment and the physical state of the schoolhouse, that sort of thing. Say an hour ahead of start of class? That's usually ample."

My face fell. That would crowd out Latin.

Father said in not much voice, "I'll be there."

At that moment, Toby spun out of the house. Crutchless.

"I CAN GO TO SCHOOL! TOMORROW!"

"Hey, wow, Tobe!" Damon congratulated him.

"The more the merrier," Father said, sounding even more peaked. "We'll all see you tomorrow, Harry."

As soon as the Model T was out of sight, the first necessity had to be performed. I was itching to be the one. But on some scale in his own mind Father kept track of these things, and this was not my turn. "Damon," he said wearily. "Saddle up and go tell Morrie, Judgment Day arrives tomorrow."

Rose waited until the last one of us--Toby, bard of the longest-running foot epic since that of Achilles--had the last bite of supper in him before she said it. "And so. I'll need to move back to my place tonight."

Damon and Toby and I looked at each other. This hadn't occurred to us.

Father was a different story. He was behind the fortification of his coffee cup, taking a long slow drink, before the last of Rose's words were out. When he finally put the cup down, he addressed Toby. "You can climb stairs, tiger, can you?"

"You bet." Too late, Toby realized what he had condemned himself to.

Father looked down the table to Rose now. He had a little trouble with his voice when he said: "We don't want to seem to be throwing you out. If it's too much of a rush for you to go yet tonight--"

"I'd better." She made sure to share her commiserating smile around to all of us.

An unforgettable twinge went through me. A sense that something major was ending. I knew I was entitled to feel relief at coming home to sleep, out from under the hovering thunderhead of Aunt Eunice, but that was not what I felt.

Anticipation of Rose alighting into the kitchen full of whispered cheer again each morning instead of me stumbling in from the field, dream-driven, should have filled me; but that was not it either.

A chair clattered. Father was onto his feet, tugging at Damon's collar and giving me a look with plenty of pull in it. "We have to wrestle Tobe's bed back upstairs for him."

"I'll get my things together while you're at that," Rose said just as awkwardly, "and then I'll scoot."

Father paused. "You don't need to run off."

"I'd better," she said once more, and again her smile was carefully equal for each of us but ended with Father. "I thought I'd ride over and see Morrie yet tonight. He may need some bucking up."

We were a motley crew on horseback that next morning. Toby rode double behind me; his foot still was tender enough that he was not supposed to swing up into a stirrup with it, so Father lifted him up behind my saddle and threatened him extensively against falling off or jumping down. By that hour I was bright-eyed as could be, accustomed to riding to school that early for Latin bouts with Morrie, but Damon drooped sleepily on the back of his horse. Father, in his best clothes, looked like an out-of-place pallbearer on top of the pint-size mare Queenie.

Rose had not appeared at the house by the time we left and that worried me. I'd had the comet to myself that morning, a lonely enough sighting. I could only hope our kitchen sessions would get back to what they were, before.

Plainly Father had enough on his mind without us, so on that ride to school we all three stayed as close to mute as boys could humanly be. Toby contented himself with snuggling dreamily into my back as he held onto me, as though I were a horseback version of Houdini. The day broke out in pale spring sunshine. I can

still see the schoolhouse as it appeared when we rode up out of The Cut, its paint a bit worn from the affections of the wind, its schoolyard trampled bare, its dawn-caught bank of windows a narrow aperture to sky and prairie. Any inspector from the Department of Public Instruction would have seen a thousand such places. We were about to find out if he had ever seen anything like Morrie.

By the time we were dismounting at the school, the dreaded automobile was tottering over the horizon from the direction of Westwater. That longest day was underway, whether we were ready or not. The schoolhouse did not appear to be. Its windows were not showing any lampshine, which meant Morrie wasn't on hand yet. "Damon, get in there and make sure the chill is off the place," Father directed hurriedly as he hoisted Toby down from behind me. "Stoke the stove up good if you have to. Tobe, now listen. Take it easy on that foot. No running, no roughhousing, got that?" Toby promised, cross his heart, and all but tiptoed across the schoolyard to join Damon inside. In my usual role, elder statesman of the boys, I waited beside Father for the inspector's Model T to pull up next to the flagpole.

"Where's Morrie?" Father asked me through gritted teeth.

"Brushing up on pedagogical principles," I said as if I knew.

"He'd better be."

Harry Taggart unfolded out of the car, spoke of the weather, shook hands with Father perfunctorily, and headed into the schoolhouse like a man on a mission. Father and I hastened after him, trying not to be obvious about looking around for Morrie.

Inside, the schoolhouse was not exactly dark, but it was a long way from illuminated. Toby was somewhat ghostly as he wriggled this way and that in his desk to see if it still fit him. Damon was over by the stove, but not feeding it; the schoolroom already was toasty as could be. As Taggart squinted around in the gloom, Father struck a match and pulled down the nearest hanging lamp. "Notice

we do not go in for careless expenditure of kerosene," he said piously and lit the wick.

Even with that first lamp, the schoolroom gleamed. By the time Father had them all lit, the place was practically blinding. Clean windows glistened, the scrubbed pine floor was spotless, the blackboard was the pure dark of obsidian--from its shining rows of desks to its perfectly aligned arrowheads in the display case, Marias Coulee School showed the handiwork I recognized with a jolt. The only thing lacking was the lingering echo of Rose's whistling.

"Tidy," Taggart conceded, plopping open his briefcase and snatching out a sheet of paper to make a checkmark.

"We try to keep the vessel of knowledge shipshape," Morrie said from the doorway, causing Father's head to jerk around.

Hand casually out, Morrie advanced toward Taggart, looking as tailor-stitched as when he first stepped off the train. "Kindly pardon my tardiness. I presumed you might like a peek around the premises without the instructional incumbent in the way. Good morning, Oliver, you're looking meditative."

Introductions made, Taggart turned back to Father briefly to ascertain the budgeting for such a level of schoolhouse upkeep, and Morrie took up his station at his desk. I edged over to him and whispered, "We were getting worried. Where were you?"

"Throwing up," he murmured.

Taggart arrived to the desk and got down to business. "Mister Morgan, I understand you are a replacement teacher. Oliver and his board must have been fortunate indeed to find someone sufficiently credentialed, on such short notice." By now the inspector had his fountain pen poised, over another drastic-looking piece of paper. "Where did you take your degree?"

"Yale," Morrie answered with towering dignity.

Father's eyes bugged out.

"No!" Taggart nearly dropped his pen and paper. "Why, that's first-rate! What, may I ask, was your field of study?"

"Yurisprudence."

I was afraid the school inspector was going to choke. His lips crimped in while his Adam's apple bobbed. Then came the burst. A guffaw that would have put any of Milo's to shame. "*Yurisprudence at Yale, by yingo,* eh?" he cackled out. "I never--" Finally he broke off into a helpless snort.

Father seized the opportunity. "We'll, ah, all step outside and leave you to your work in peace, Harry."

Taggart gaily waved us out, shaking his head and moving off in the direction of the orrery.

The instant we were safely in the schoolyard, Father pounced. "Morrie, damn it, this isn't vaudeville."

"He laughed, did he not?" Morrie said with the air of someone who had just broken the bank at a casino. "I would say life approximates a stage quite often, and a bit of low humor may not be amiss. How many times, Oliver, do you suppose an inspector for the Department of Public Instruction gets a chance to laugh?"

"And I say play it straight. If anything goes wrong today, he'll have us fried in butter."

"Never fear," Morrie responded. "Come on over to the teacherage, I have coffee laying in wait. I'll tell our inquisitor."

We killed time in the teacherage--Damon kept Toby occupied in a game of acey-deucey, the pair of them off in one corner furiously slapping down cards; I sat with Father and Morrie and pined for Latin--until Taggart showed up. He was back to looking official, plunking his bulging briefcase down in front of him as if not letting it out of his sight. Even then I had professional curiosity about what was in

the thing. As serious now as if he had never had a laughing jag in his life, the school innspector stuck to formalities. Pen in hand, he elicited from Morrie the University of Chicago and the leather trade and vague smatterings of his existence before teacherhood. At last satisfied, more or less, with Morrie's qualifications, Taggart turned to Father. "I find that the school is exceptionally equipped, and yet the budget is in good trim. Nicely managed by your school board, Oliver."

"We do our best," Father said, avoiding Morrie's eye.

"GOTCHA!" Toby let out, evidently springing a wild deuce on his opponent. "I win again, Damon."

Taggart contemplated the cuththroat card game over in the corner. "Your littlest lad appears to be well on the way to recovery, Oliver."

An alarm bell went off in Morrie and Father and me all at the same time. "Tobias had a perfect record before his accident," Morrie thrust in, true enough as far as it went, "but he has been out for six weeks. Has not the Department of Public Instruction some method of taking a stroke of fate of that sort into account?"

Taggart had to mull that. Finally he allowed: "In an extreme case, and I can see that his may have been one, I am permitted to excuse a student from the grade-wide tests. Perhaps in this one instance--"

By now, Toby's face registered full dismay at the prospect of being left out of anything on his debut back in school. "I can spell and everything," he protested shrilly. "R-h-i-n-o-"

"That will do, Tobe," Father put a lid on that.

"No, no," Taggart said. "A go-getting attitude should be rewarded. I'll test him just on the spelling standard, orally. Otherwise, he can have the run of the schoolyard this afternoon. Thank goodness you are on hand to supervise him, eh, Oliver?"

"Thank goodness."

"As to the rest of the school day, all morning is yours to do with, Mister Morgan." Morrie smiled wanly in response. Taggart busied himself with something in his briefcase, then flicked a look that took us all in. "I simply observe."

Marias Coulee school was never quieter than at the start of that day. Nor more decorous. A fresh haircut shined on every boy, the strips of white on the backs of necks practically blinding from the seventh grade perspective. The girls were tightly braided or ribboned. Clothes that were being saved for an occasion made a surprise appearance: the Kratka brothers echoed one another in plaid shirts obviously fresh from the catalogue box, the homemade dresses of the Drobny sisters were a particularly witchy gray. Grover and Adele and Louisa and Verl and Lily Lee, of the other school board families, bore the same signs of recent ruthless hygiene that Damon and Toby and I did, as scrubbed as new potatoes. Anywhere a person looked in the schoolroom, Damon's thoughtful stops at every homestead along the way to Morrie's yesterday ~~when he made his ride to Morrie's~~ had paid off in style.

In his by-the-book manner, the school inspector was informing us we were not to let his presence distract us in any way whatsoever. "This morning I am merely a fly on the wall." Mine was not the only set of eyes that moved to the swatter hanging on the wall behind Morrie's desk.

"Likewise Mr. Milliron," Taggart officiously swept onward. "He is here to lend a hand as needed." From the row behind me came an involuntary creak of acknowledgment. Father was haphazardly seated in the desk left empty by Eddie Turley.

Now Taggart took the spare chair that usually stood in the supply room, squared his briefcase on his lap to write on, uncapped his pen, and called out, "Ready to commence when you are, Mister Morgan."

Morrie ~~excelled~~ outdid himself that morning. He drilled us through arithmetic like numerary cadets, one grade after another popping to the blackboard to smartly do its sums. Reading period was little short of Shakespearean. As one of those to read aloud Morrie called on Toby, letting off some dangerous steam there. And to stand and recite "Ozymandias," he passed right over me and picked Carnelia. That raised my hackles, until I figured out what he was up to: since she was the oldest girl in school and our desk was near enough to the back of the room, Taggart might be fooled into counting her as an eighth-grader instead of our actual woeful ones. Everything proceeded nicely to geography, which was a constant forest of hands raised to answer. Never had so many known what the capital of Paraguay is. Science of course was our trump card, and Morrie played it with full flourish. Every time I peeked over at Taggart, he was making check marks, hardly frowning at all. I believe all would have ended well if, at the end of that last period of the morning, Milo's hand wasn't still hanging high in the air at the very back of the room.

Morrie hesitated. He'd managed beautifully to camouflage the eighth grade so far, taking answers only from Verl or Myron in the mob of big bodies back there that now included Father, and the artful try at blending Carnelia in with them. In the best of circumstances, calling on Milo was not a promising proposition. *Don't, don't, don't,* I prayed to Morrie.

Too late. Taggart had noticed the sky-high hand, and Morrie had to deal with it. "Milo, something quick, then it's noon hour."

"Yeah, I was just wondering. All this going on, when we gonna get to practice for comet night?"

"Comet night?" Taggart spoke for the first time all morning. "Did I hear right? The comet is there every night. Surely these students know Halley's Comet has arrived?"

"Absolutely they do," Morrie said in a hurry. "We have been working on a school function to commemorate the event, tomorrow evening. Inspired by the science of the matter, naturally." I darted a glance over my shoulder toward Father. He looked pained, and not just from hard sitting in a schoolboy desk.

Taggart did not take the bait on the word *science*. His narrow eyes narrowed further. "You have been able to spare time during school hours to work on hoopla for the comet? We shall see." The school inspector rose out of his chair and advanced to the front of the room, unbuckling the flaps of his briefcase as he came. He reached in and began pulling out sheafs of printed paper. These he dropped on Morrie's desk, one, two, three, until there were eight stacks.

Every one of us in every grade knew what those were.

The Standards.

The men spent noon hour in the schoolhouse readying things for the afternoon-long standard tests, while we ate lunch in the schoolyard. Over by the teetertotter, a crowd was clustered around the spectacle of Toby's big toe. Letting Tobe have his moment, I parked myself on the front steps of the schoolhouse along with Damon and a majority of the sixth grade.

On every mind was the boggling fact that the school could be shut down if it did not come up to standards, whatever those were.

"They sure are out to get us," Isidor observed.

"By a mile," Miles affirmed.

Grover took a bite of a sandwich that looked twice as thick and three times more tasty than mine or Damon's. He asked between chews, "What's *dormitory* from?"

"Umm, give me a minute." On either side of me, the Drobny brothers supported me with silent attention. I thought back to my translation of *Permitte canis dormit jacere,* quite plainly *Do not disturb the canine that is asleep* to me, although Morrie truncated it to *Let sleeping dogs lie.* "'Sleep.' A place of sleeping."

Nick Drobny sounded baffled. "They want to send us all the way to town to sleep?"

"No, the dormitory is where we'd live while we go to school, dunce," said Rabrab.

Damon wasn't saying anything. That meant he was really worried.

Lily Lee reported in a quavering voice, "We'd get to come home weekends, my father says."

"Weekends aren't much, in that kind of set-up," Sam Drobny summed it up for us all.

We filed to our seats for the afternoon with rare lack of conversation. Standard tests were relatively new in the educational scheme of things then, and those of us on the receiving end were not sure what we were in for. All too soon Morrie and Father were passing out tests and giving low-voiced instructions to the grades at the front of the room while the school inspector himself did the same at the back. I watched Carl and Milo and Myron and to a lesser extent Verl confront the long sheets of questions Taggart was inflicting on them. Blood rushed to heads. Hearts very nearly stopped. Urgent inquiries were put to Taggart as to how much time they had for their answers. Days apparently would not have been too much.

When he had untangled from the eighth grade and it became apparent to him that Carnelia and I, quiet as kittens, were a principality unto ourselves, Taggart bent over the pair of us and said in a low tone:

"This is highly unusual, one class so small in a school this size. Are there others of you, out sick?

"We're it," Carnelia mourned, and I nodded abjectly.

Taggart frowned. "I see. Something like this can skew the standards. I will need to count you as anomalous, and parcel the testing of the two of you for a truer picture of your standing as a class. We'll begin with you, young lady. You are to write a two-hundred-and-fifty word essay to demonstrate meaning and knowledge of a scientific topic, by luck of the draw." Taggart randomly yanked out a test paper with a heading on it. "astronomy." He started to hand her the test sheet, then pulled it back to peer at it. "No, wait, my error. I apologize, young miss." He looked at Carnelia with a bit of pity. "Your topic is agronomy." Carnelia did her injured princess imitation, just as if she didn't know more about the gospel of deep-plowing than any other schoolgirl in America, and began writing.

"And this lad"--he looked at me like a hangman trying to do his job well--"we'll need to examine on penmanship."

Next, Taggart tiptoed up to Toby and took him out to the supply room for his private spelling bee. Whatever the quality of the spelling, the high little voice sounded confident. After that, the skritch of all of us writing was the only sound in the schoolhouse for a long while. Toby and Father were excused to the schoolyard, and busy as I was copying Palmer-method whorls and creating salutations, I looked out a number of times to see one happy boy being pushed in the swing. At least Toby now was out of the picture as an instrument of the school's fate. That left only all the rest of us.

Each half hour, Taggart and Morrie administered some fresh test to us until we came to the last hour of the day. Looking out over the spent faces, Taggart assured us we were very nearly there, only grammar and reading comprehension to go. "For most, that is," he added. "The others shall take an achievement test."

Morrie frowned. "'Achievement'?"

"A departmental term," the school inspector saw he had to translate. "A vocabulary standard, for your upper grades. To measure verbal facility at a significant developmental age."

A fleeting look of panic passed over Morrie. "By 'upper,' you include--"

"Eighth grade, of course"--Taggart swung his head around and eyed the overgrown aggregation at the rear of the room, which stared cow-like back at him--"and the age bracket is inclusive to the sixth." The entire sixth grade, nobody's fools, squirmed at the notion of being lumped in with the eighth. Carnelia and I, the taken-for-granted grade between, tried to look like an even smaller sliver of the student body than we already were.

Taggart passed out the vocabulary test, a sheaf in itself, and presided over us. Among the combined three grades, winces went off like fireflies as people encountered words they had never seen before in their lives. Through most of the allotted hour, student after student did what they could with the stiff exam and ultimately signaled surrender by handing it in to the inspector. Eventually everyone was done but me. I was aware of Damon casting worried looks in my direction. Carnelia fidgeted impatiently beside me. I didn't care. I had fallen in love with the test sheets. There it was, language in all its intrigues, its riddles and clues. The ins and outs of prefixes and suffixes. The conspirings of syllables. The tics of personality of words met for the first time. *Look to the root,* Morrie's imprecation drummed steadily in me. Almost anywhere I gazed on the exam pages, English rinsed itself off into Latin. *'Vulpine'* brought the clever face of a fox into my mind.

'Corpulent' necessarily meant something about a body, likely a fat one. On and on, the cave voices of vocabulary coming to me, and when I had been through every question, I went back over each a couple of times, refining any guesses. Finally Taggart told the others they could go outside to wait. At the absolute last, when he checked his watch and called "Time," he collected my test with a look at me as if I must be a total dolt to have taken that long.

It was over. Morrie turned loose the weary three dozen of us, looking considerably done in himself, and the school inspector established himself at the big desk at the front of the room to score the tests.

Father came herding Toby in our direction as Morrie and Damon and I walked somberly to the teacherage to wait for Taggart's verdict. "Give me a day of farming over keeping up with Tobe any time," he stated. "How did the tests go?"

Morrie thrust his hands to the bottoms of his pockets and hunched up as if he was in a hailstorm.

I just shrugged.

"Tough old tests," Damon at least was definitive. "Especially that last thing."

It took more than an hour for Taggart to show up. Those slitted eyes showed nothing as he stepped into the teacherage. Toby and Damon were back at acey-deucey, and I was sitting at the table doodling Roman numerals onto the tablet Morrie had loaned me while he and father sat across from each other and looked bleak. "You will receive the official report within a week," Taggart said, "but I can tell you in a preliminary fashion what it will contain." He glanced around at the three sets of schoolboy ears in the room.

"They can't be got rid of," Father justified our presence to Taggart. "Believe me, I've tried. Go ahead, we're ready for our medicine, aren't we, Morrie."

"Vocabulary," Taggart reeled off from one of his perpetual pieces of paper. "The sixth grade, I am pleased to report, is very much up to standard." Morrie looked simultaneously relieved and apprehensive. Taggart gave him a metallic gaze. "And your seventh grade rescues your eighth grade."

Suddenly the inspector's eyes were on me. "One test score was the highest on record. This lad bears watching. He'll know every word there is." One word I did not know at that moment was *daedelian*, which takes its name from the maze-maker in Greek myth and implies unpredictability of a particularly intricate sort. Not terribly many years from then, in a daedelian turn of events, school inspector Harry Taggart would be answering to Paul Milliron, new Superintendent of Public Instruction.

Having reached his limit of congratulation, Taggart went back to the list of results. We could scarcely believe his recital. Subject after subject, Marias Coulee School came out at that heady altitude: up to standard.

Our grins filled the teacherage as the school inspector stuffed his paperwork into his briefcase. He glanced aside at Morrie. "Well done, ~~Mister~~ Morgan." With a poker face he added, "You evidently majored in something more than high-yinks at Yale." Before going, Taggart turned to Father. "Oliver, if I may see you alone a moment, there are just a few things to go over."

The two of them stepped outside. There was a dazed silence among Morrie and Damon and me. Toby, fresh as a daisy from his day, began yattering: "That's over, huh? I liked the inspector, didn't you? Hey, what's gonna happen on comet night? Don't I get to know, now that I'm back in school?"

"No," Damon and I said together, then laughed. "We'd tell you if we could, Tobe," I soothed, "but everyone in school that day has to keep the secret. Only until tomorrow."

Morrie banged his fist on the table, startling the three of us. Smiling like a madman, he banged it again, in sheer jubilation. "'The highest on record,' Paulus."

"Wait till Rose hears," Damon loyally backed that up.

"Aw," I said, not knowing what else to say. Luckily we heard the grind of a crank and Taggart's Model T coming to life, and Father came back in.

"There, now," Morrie leaned back in mock grand fashion. "I believe we all acquitted ourselves quite well today, wouldn't you say, Oliver?"

"A little too much so, in your case," Father said grimly. "You made yourself so popular with Taggart he's coming back for comet night."

"Oliver, I simply cannot tell you. I gave the students my word. More than that, I pledged on my salivary gland." Father went at him with everything but a crowbar, but he could not get out of Morrie what manner of mysterious performance to brace himself for that next night. Philosophically fiddling with his cufflinks, Morrie kept looking around the teacherage as if drawing resolve from its confines. "You have vowed to keep a secret on some occasion, surely? And knew you had to stand by it, through thick and thin, fire and flood, shipwreck and avalanche?"

"Damn it, Morrie, I could do without the disaster comparisons. At least promise me this: whatever you and the students are up to, it won't cause Taggart to give us a black mark as a school."

"It shouldn't."

"How about upping that to 'I guarantee it won't'?"

"The public arena is always a risk. That is why it's an arena," Morrie said with the air of an impresario. "The one thing I can assure you of, Oliver, is that our students shall do their best. As, may I point out, they did today."

Stormily rounding us up to go home, Father glanced down at Damon, standing there smug, then at me, still somewhere up on the moon with my test score, and lastly at Toby, pouting at the other two of us for not letting him in on the secret either. He shook his head and said: "They'd better."

The comet owned half the sky, that next night, when all of Marias Coulee gathered at the schoolhouse. People oohed and ahhed as they climbed down from their wagons, dusk giving way to dark but Halley's phenomenon shedding so much light the night had its own subdued shadows. I admit, I had mixed feelings about sharing my messenger from the deepest reaches of morning, mine and Rose's, with so many others. As Morrie had said it would, the comet's brightness now equaled that of the North Star; what a thought, that the known sky had a sudden new lodestar. But the most astounding thing about the comet by far was the monstrous tail. In its first few weeks, Halley's Comet grew into the shape of a colossal shuttlecock, its feathers of light flying behind. Now the trailing cloud of light had spread out and arched, curving across the ceiling of the sky. That mysterious stardust of the comet was transparent enough that the constellations beyond could be glimpsed, and this seemed the most magical thing yet, that you could read the other stars through it.

Our bunch stopped for a last look before going into the schoolhouse. The whole lot of us had come in style in George and Rae's big buckboard--Rose and Rae in their finery, three boys scrubbed and polished for the second time in a row, Father and George stuffed into suits generally brought out for marrying and

burying. Clustered there with our heads tipped back, we looked like Sunday visitors to a planetarium. We only lacked Aunt Eunice to recite something baleful to us about star-gazing.

The night's skeptic among us, Father gawked as thoroughly as any. At his elbow, Rose teased: "Tell me I didn't hear you wishing for rain tonight."

"We always need rain, Rose." I knew that what Father wanted was a deluge that would have scared off Harry Taggart from chancing muddy roads. No such luck. The school inspector's Model T could be seen prominently among the wagons ~~of everyone gathering.~~ gathered

"Farming every moment." Rose glanced down from the comet just long enough to bestow a look of mock disapproval on Father. "Rae, is George that bad?"

"At least."

"Now, now, Rae," George said complacently, his head at home in the stars.

The mood of all of us but Father and me could have been bottled and sold as intoxicating spirits. On my mind was the moment I had uttered *the school ought to put on a comet something-or-other,* ~~when the hearer was Morrie.~~ In impetuosity begins responsibility, whatever the Latin for that was. However, Damon was in his element, intrigue. And Toby could barely contain himself since Damon and I relented, just before leaving home, and let him in on comet night; naturally we sealed the secret in him with a spitbath handshake, but even so it was a risk. *"You have to pretend, remember, because you didn't get a chance to practice,"* we told him twenty times, but with Toby you never knew. I crossed my fingers he wouldn't forget and blurt out what Morrie and the rest of the school were up to. I crossed my other set that students and teacher, all, wouldn't look like fools before comet night was over.

Everyone piled in to the schoolroom. Homesteaders dressed to their eyeteeth for an event no one would put a name on, the throng crackled with curiosity. Some of the men had helped Morrie set up board benches, and people large and small filled those and all our desks. It was something of a shock to look around that room and see our schoolmates magnified in their parents--a family nose here, an unmistakable set of ears there. I had never noticed before, but the stocky mother and father of the Drobny pair of twins were practically replicas themselves. Trying to take it all in, I spotted Isidor and Gabriel and Inez waving for us to come and sit by them and their parents.

I felt more than a few eyes on us as our group trooped along the aisle. Rose had not spared the satin, a shimmering Maytime green for tonight. Community amnesty only goes so far. I could tell, from who spoke to us and who didn't, that a housekeeper who had spent nights in Oliver Milliron's house did not sit well with some.

There was enough else to worry about tonight. Morrie was up at his desk fending with Taggart, like a man trying to pet a terrier who might bite. For his part, the school inspector looked as if he was thinking up a test for comet night.

Father saw to it that we were settled there near the back of the room, and then bolted for his schoolboard place of honor in the front row. In two steps he was back. Squatting next to me, he leaned in and whispered across to Rose: "I've been meaning to say. The schoolhouse is spotless. You must have put in quite a Sunday night on it." Rose only smiled. She seemed to know something she wasn't telling.

"May we begin?" the ever so familiar voice at the teacher's desk called out. "The comet is on time, which sets the kind of example a school teacher likes to see."

Now the night was Morrie's. In knowing how to cut a figure, he and Rose really were a matched pair. Tonight he could have stood in for a mannequin in a tailor shop, his tweed suit the definition of dapper and his watch chain hanging resplendent across that vest of paisley. Elegantly he welcomed everyone and then singled out Father and then Joe Fletcher and then Walt Stinson and then our prestigious visitor from the Department of Public Instruction in Helena, and I fretted he was going to get carried away with preliminaries.

I needn't have. With a suitable air of gravity, Morrie now placed the orrery on his desk where everyone could see it, gave the crank a spin so that all the planets orbited, just one time, and then quietly pointed to the center window that framed Halley's Comet and its trail of light.

"Whatever little else we know about the properties of existence, we map our days and nights by the fires in the heavens," he began in his best voice. "Threads of light traveling to us across tremendous time show us that the stars hang there, beyond high. Sunlight grants us sustenance of life as we know it, moonlight clothes us in our own particular fabrics of quest called dreams."

The packed house was silent, hanging on every word as Morrie swept to the corners of the universe and back. He covered everything from Copernicus to the Mark Twain crack about exaggerated reports of demise, in this case that of the entire human race. When he knew he had gone on long enough, like an acrobat dismounting he returned to the orrery and ever so slowly spun it again, sending off the planets in their stately chase, as he concluded. "The astronomer Johannes Kepler gave us the grand concept of harmony of the spheres"--I had the impression Morrie was speaking directly to me, even though I knew better --"a planetary system of worlds orbiting in orderly agreement. Another harmonious component, discerned by a genius named Edmond Halley two hundred years ago, is manifest in the sky over us at this minute." He gestured to the window that held the cosmic

light. "Just once in most of our lifetimes, this comet comes from nowhere and returns to nowhere--but its passage unfailingly strikes a chord somewhere deep in us." He paused. "Harmony can take surprising forms like that. Here beneath the guiding fires of heaven, in the life we pass through, we must imagine our way to our own episodes of harmony. Your schoolchildren, I am proud to say, have done that very thing for this night."

One after another around the crowded schoolroom we got to our feet, Damon in front of me and Toby in front of him, and Izzy and Gabe and Inie beside us, and down the other aisle Grover with his spectacles glinting and Verl and Vivian managing to be next to each other, and Rabrab looking as if she had swallowed the canary and Carnelia as if rose petals were being scattered for her, and little Josef Kratka scared but reporting for duty, and Milo and Carl and Martin doing their clodhopping best to look civilized, and Nick and Sam and Eva and Seraphina, Miles and Lily Lee, Marta and Sven and Ivo--every last one of us filing to the front of the room and assembling in the natural stairsteps of grades one through eight.

Morrie took his place in front of us, facing us. In back of him I could see Father hunched down in the front row with the other school board members and our school inspector. Nervous as a goose, he scanned the ranks of us. If we were not singers and we were not whistlers, what were we? I knew Father was hoping Morrie had turned us into, oh, maybe a handbell choir. There was not a bell in sight.

Morrie waited a minute for the fidgets to get out of us. He put his right hand up to his mouth. We all nodded our readiness.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Morrie announced grandly, still facing us, hand at the ready, "I present to you the Marias Coulee School harmonica band."

Three dozen harmonicas appeared. Morrie blew a musical wheeze on his. Every one of us puffed into our own instrument until we more or less found the note. The drone reached an almost paralyzing level. Morrie cut us off with a chop of his nonplaying hand, gave us the beat one, two, three, and in a single combined gust thirty-six harmonicas launched into *"O Eastern Star!"* Actually, thirty-five, with Toby sometimes remembering to pretend he was playing his and sometimes holding it out to see if he had it right side up.

The music was ragged around the edges, and to the ears out there in the audience it must sounded something like being assaulted by an accordion as big as the schoolhouse. We didn't care. We were only trying to be harmonic, not philharmonic. Morrie had drilled us enough and we had practiced enough that we knew we could put the basics of the tune into the air, and beyond that, unanimous effort had to carry the night. Little kids and big, we blew into the homeliest instrument in the world, with the harps of our hearts behind it.

The moment of danger came when the last note vibrated in the rafters. Morrie had warned us not to take it hard if the worst happened. Tapping our harmonicas dry, we tensely waited for the reaction.

No one laughed. It only would have taken one. A horselaugh, and our harmony of harmonicas would have been relegated to a cute stunt. Instead, the parents of Marias Coulee pounded out applause for us and called out, "More! More!"

"We were hoping for that word," Morrie said happily, bowing for us all. The next number was more of a miracle yet, at least to me. Milo was our virtuoso on it. The mouth organ was the one scale of life he probably would ever master, and right now he did a solo on "Follow the Drinking Gourd" that wafted sweetly off into the night in search of that spiritual constellation, the rest of us coming in as a hurricane of chorus.

Now came our finale. For once Morrie had known not to press luck too far. We had rehearsed only those tunes and this. Turning to the audience, he announced: "We have a confession to make. There is to be singing, after all, this evening. But we of Marias Coulee School are going to ask you to do it. Ah, you say, but you don't know the words?" Stepping over behind his desk, he put up the windowshade map he covered tests with and there were the lyrics on the blackboard in his elegant hand.

"One last thing," Morrie said as he burnished his harmonica to readiness. "A song is always in search of its thrush. Will my esteemed sister, Rose Llewelynn, please come up and lead the singing?"

Her cheeks coloring very fetchingly, Rose made her way to the front of the schoolroom. Damon and Toby and I grinned with pride, while Father tried to look nonchalant. Going up on his tiptoes, Morrie conducted us into the one-two-three beat again. The massed harmonicas struck up the old loved tune everyone knew, and Rose in a clear melodic voice sang for all to follow:

"When I see that evening star
Then I know that I've come far
Through the day, through all plight
To the watchfire of the night."

Our music over, Father and Morrie knew they had to face their own from Taggart. I hung at their side as they approached him while the crowd dispersed, stray hums of harmonicas accompanying most families home.

"I certainly have never seen anything like that in a schoolhouse before," the school inspector said, looking from Morrie to Father and back again. His eyes gave away nothing.

Suddenly he reached out and clapped Morrie on the shoulder. "Top mark for initiative." Then swung around to Father and clapped his shoulder twice as hard. "And that Mrs. Llewellyn, what a trouper."

How distant and distinct it all is, that comet of nearly half a century ago and Morrie's triumph along with it.

And how tear-streaked, today, under the scimitar of Sputnik. My eyes well up and there is nothing I can do about it. At my age now, tears should be saved for times of mortality. For the passing of loved ones and constant friends. For any whose life touched a tender spot in my own. I know that with every bone of my being, and it does no good at all today.

What a sight I must make like this, a man of my position trudging from empty house to plowed field to pothole pond and back again, my cheeks helplessly damp, my fine oxfords and suitpant cuffs filling with dirt. Should anyone come along the road about now--Emil Kratka, who farms this land for me on shares, or one of the other surviving dry-landers--I will be seen as the spectacle I am, over this. The death warrant of one-room schools being asked of me, tonight. Why can't even the fool thicket that is headed by the appropriations chairman see that the countryside purge of classrooms that is on its way, now that mankind has begun to plow the heavens, is so wrong? Sputnik sails no higher over the heads of Marias Coulee than those of New York and Pasadena. Yet it is the rural schools that are being declared behind the times.

Consolidated schools. That is their war cry. Which is to say, do away with one-room schools and put those students to endlessly riding busses to distant towns. Dormitories on wheels.

It has crossed my mind that the appropriations chairman may have invested in school busses. Or he may be sincere in his panic that the launching of one

satellite has turned Nikita Khrushchev into Einstein. Either way, it amounts to the same. Just yesterday he slammed his fist on my desk and called me an old New Deal hack; the man is so dim he did not even recognize the confusion of his modifiers. Morrie would have jumped all over him.

What is being asked, no, demanded of me is not only the forced extinction of the little schools. It will also slowly kill those rural neighborhoods, the ones that have struggled from homestead days on to adapt to dry-land Montana in their farming and ranching. (The better to populate Billings and benefit its car dealers, I suppose.) No schoolhouse to send their children to. No schoolhouse for a Saturday night dance. No schoolhouse for election day; for the Grange meeting; for the 4-H club; for the quilting bee; for the pinochle tournament; for the reading group; for any of the gatherings that are the bloodstream of community.

No wonder the tears come. All those years ago, Damon was ultimately right when he supposed what plagued me was nightmare: this is precisely it. I have gone over and over my choices. Try to temper what I see as the misbegotten policy of putting road miles on children instead of nurturing their minds, or resign in protest. Unluckily, I am not the resigning kind. And so I can already see the faces of the rural school delegates in Great Falls, a few hours from now, when I pull my prepared remarks from the inside pocket of my suit. Oh, I am a known master at taking the sting out of cuts. *"Consolidated schools are an irreversible trend fostered by change in our state and lack of budge in budget chairmen..."* my text establishes. *"The Department of Public Instruction will propose as a guideline that no schoolchild should be required to ride a bus longer than one hour in each direction on a daily basis..."* it vows. *"Every power of my department will be exerted to see that rural teachers are reassigned to the district of their choice..."* it offers. If I know anything, it is how to layer cotton words over hard facts.

Whatever the twist of fate, I am the product of what I am being made to do away with. If Marias Coulee didn't hold full session in the school of life, I don't know where it ever is to be found. For all of Morrie's wizardry in catching the heavenly fireball at the height of its magnitude, Halley's Comet was not done with us. Late one afternoon a couple of days later, Walt Stinson on his way home from a trip to town dropped off our mail, along with compliments on Morrie's talk and the harmonica band, which made Father glow in his own right. While the two men carried their conversation outside as farmers end up doing, Damon--sports starved as always--immediately plowed into the newspapers. I was trying to help supper along by taking over the potato-peeling Father had just abandoned when I heard the intake of breath across the room. "We have to tell Morrie right away," Damon said in a hushed voice.

"What," I kidded him, "did Battle-Axe Nelson knock out the Missouri Mangler or somebody?"

"No. Mark Twain died on comet night."

19

"Keep me company today, why don't you the two of you," Father said out of nowhere the next Saturday morning. "I have to ride over to the Big Ditch, to settle up."

That sounded tiptop to Damon and me. We hurried through our mush while he went upstairs to deal with Toby, sleeping in. Off somewhere, Rose had the first housekeeping chore of the day cornered, whistling *"When I see that evening star"* at it until it surrendered.

"WHY CAN'T I GO?" we heard next, on schedule.

"Tobe, my man, the boys and I need to make a little speed today, so no riding double," Father's voice carried. "We're not taking any chances with that foot, this far along. You know it's only one more week until you go in to see the doctor, and you want him to give you a clean bill of health, don't you?"

"YES, B-B-BUT--"

Rose flew to the rescue. "Oh, Toby?" she called from the bottom of the stairs, "You can help me ever so much this morning, counting out the knives and forks and spoons when I polish them. Then later I'll help you take Houdini for a swim, how's that?"

"Rose," we could hear the relief in Father, "you are a peach."

"I take exception to being compared to anything that grows on a tree," she said back, lightly enough, and whisked off to what she had been doing.

Father came back into the kitchen grinning. "Don't just sit there with your ears hanging out, you two. Let's go."

The big grin still was on him as we saddled up and strung out, three abreast, onto the road to the Big Ditch with the morning sun warm on our shoulders. Normally it takes rain to brighten up a dry-land farmer, but this once, Father's mood was way ahead of the weather. I couldn't help but wonder about him lately. Mornings now, he popped into the kitchen almost before Rose and I were putting cocoa to our lips instead of whispers. That was just the start. On the work of the farm--both farms--it was like New Year's all over again, there was no holding Oliver Milliron from any job that put its head up. This seemed to be another morning when he was setting full sail into life, dry crops or not.

The three of us were a picture not seen on these roads any more. A man above average, a farmer according to the unaccustomed way he sat aboard a saddlehorse, with his best hat on and a manner of looking off for castles in the distance. Two boys, deceptively alike in size but in no way anything like twins. Well-matched with his spirited pinto Paint, Damon every so often stuck his legs out wide in his stirrups as some thought or another hit him while we went along. I slouched atop Joker not moving an outside muscle, yet tugging and pulling at my latest session with Morrie with everything I had.

"What now?" Morrie had warily eyed the unsolicited piece of tablet paper I slipped onto his desk, no doubt remembering the *phych* episode.

"Working on my numerals." Latin was back to its natural existence, after school, and there were just the two of us.

"You'll end up more Roman than the Romans," he said as if that ~~might~~ was a prospect not ~~be~~ altogether to be desired. Still, he was in an unbeatable mood ever since the roaring success of the school inspection and comet night. And Father, carried away

by it all, had promised to somehow to raise his teaching wage next year. I knew I was interrupting the peace, but I had to bring this up. Morrie put aside the Shakespeare he had been reading and peered at my block printing:

MARK TWAIN

MDCCCXXXV--MDCCCCX

Swiftly, Morrie looked up at me. *"The report unfortunately is not exaggerated this time,"* he had started school off, the day after Damon spotted the news. *"A great man has passed, apparently with a comet as a pallbearer. But let us examine 'apparently.'"* From there, he again went through the sermon about portents being mere coincidences, flukes from the countinghouse of chance, and so on. The next thing we knew, we were up to our ears in arithmetic. Obviously he was surprised now to find me voluntarily trooping back into numbers, and in Latin at that. Nonetheless he scanned my effort:

"Let's see, eighteen thirty-five to nineteen ten, yes, correctly rendered, Paulus. Well done."

"Morrie? That's seventy-five years, on the nose. Back to you-know-what, last time."

He sighed. "I would make a good Tasmanian, I know I would." Then an exceedingly level look intended to set me straight came my way. "Don't go superstitious on me, you of all people. There can be more than one coincidence in a set of circumstances, surely you see that? What is drawn from those is merely a matter of assigning meanings." He flapped a hand at my sheet of paper. "In this case they amount to a chance set of dates when someone famous was born and, sadly, now has died. No more and no less."

He was not telling me anything I didn't know; my dreams had never met a coincidence they didn't greedily invite in. But awake or asleep, there are times when something chews on meanings for everything it can get out of them. I

couldn't help it, whatever Morrie said about flukes. The sky-written parenthesis of fact that Mark Twain came into this world with the previous appearance of Halley's Comet and departed it with this one made a person think.

"There the thing goes," Damon spoke up as the road brought us out to the Big Ditch.

His eyes always were the quckest. It took Father and me a few moments to register what looked like a distant structure creeping ever so slightly. The steam shovel was being walked across the plain to Westwater and a railroad flatcar there. In its wake, it had left canals and lateral ditches. Already flowing in those was the irrigation water; the regulated rain, in one way of looking at it. Could I have known, even then, how much the future would favor the projects such as the Westwater one? Even when the sky relented on our dry-land farms and gave the fields a dousing, as it finally would do that spring, it would not be enough. It would never really be enough. Yet dry-land life of one kind or another has persisted in parts of Montana like ours, from that day to this. Plow steel dries out slowest of all.

Damon and I wandered the remains of the construction camp while Father was in the office tent settling up. Nearly all the other tents were down, as gone as Brother Jubal's. The Pronovosts had already moved theirs to the agricultural extension station where their father was doing some ditch cleaning until school let out for the year.

"Gonna miss them next year," Damon said soberly.

"I know. Gros Ventre isn't the other end of the world." Isidor and Gabriel and Inez had given us the news that over the summer, their family was moving to the town over by the mountains. "Maybe we'll catch up with them again."

"Yeah, maybe."

Father came out of the office tent wearing the look of a man with a good deal of cash in his pocket. It seemed to me we were likely to need it. If the bookkeeping of the Millirons had trouble staying ahead of itself when Father had only one homestead on his hands, what was it going to be like now that he was stretched to Rose's as well, in a dry time?

The man sitting companionably in the saddle between Damon and me as we pointed ourselves home showed no such concern, however. Whatever was on his mind today, it weighed about right to him. I rode beside Father wishing such peace of mind could be handed around in the family. Dead ahead on our route, so to speak, was the cemetery. I studiously avoided looking toward it. Now that I was no longer in the haunted bed at Rose's place, I didn't want to give Aunt Eunice another opening.

We weren't far down the road when Father pulled up on his reins, as if a thought had just occurred to him. "How about a bit of a race? If you'll go easy on an old man."

Damon took a big chance. "We won't do wrong-end-to, will that be easy enough?"

"Impertinent pup," he said but he was grinning again. "All right, the Milliron derby. From here to the section-line road."

We lined out across the road, and when Father said "Go!" three sets of boot heels made firm contact with horses' ribs. We built up to a gallop. I still say, the back of a running horse was the most wonderful place to be when you are the age Damon and I were then. Under me Joker's mane flew in the wind, flag of its breed, as I bent low over his neck. Stride by stride with us, Damon was jockeyed onto Paint as if glued there. Father was giving us a run for our money, but the way grownups do, he jounced up and down in his stirrups more than the other two of us combined. The section-line road gravitated toward us hoofbeat upon hoofbeat.

was about, Father seemed to want no help. After awhile he straightened up and stood beside the grave, on one foot and then the other. I could see spasms in his cheek. He always chewed an inside corner of his mouth that way when he was anywhere near Mother's grave.

Suddenly he was saying:

"Damon and Paul--I have something to get off my chest. Don't say anything until I finish up, all right?"

This did not sound all right at all, but Damon and I blinked agreement.

Father put his face in his hands, as if avoiding the sight of the tombstone in front of us, then slowly dropped them. His voice shook with the effort of getting the words out. "I've tried like everything to not let it happen, but I've fallen for Rose. Maybe it took for her to be with us in the house all the time while Tobe was laid up. Maybe I'm just slow. But there's no getting around it any more, I'm in love with her, hopeless as a--" almost too late, he caught himself from saying *schoolboy* to the two of us--"colt." He took another difficult breath. "I'm going to get my courage up and ask her to marry me. I brought you here to the hardest place in the world to say that. To see if I could."

Not even the wind made a sound after that. It gave Father a chance to compose himself a little. "Well, what do you think about this? Rose in the family will be different than it was with Mother."

"I'll say," I said. I had to. Damon uncharacteristically did not trust his voice.

Father shot me a look.

"A lot more whistling."

There was a long pause while Father's face tried to make up its mind, so to speak. Gradually the sniffing sound that announced laughter came. I would not have said my remark warranted it, but Father laughed until tears came.

20

"Morrie? You'll be our uncle as well as our teacher next year, won't you."

"What?" He was caught by surprise, grating the chalk against the blackboard where he was concentrating on tomorrow's history test for the sixth grade. "Ah, that. We shall all have to try to not let it show." Letting me know with a strong glance over his shoulder that I should be more engrossed than I was in translating the twelve labors of Hercules--I was up to number three--he advised: "When you have a chance, look up *avuncular*, so you won't be too disappointed by my failure to match the definition." Chalk still poised, he mused a moment more: "Actually, I suppose step-uncle-in-law would be the cumbersome but apt term. There is no word for that. Where is Shakespeare when we need him?"

The circumference of love depends on the angle you see it from, I learned in the course of that madcap week after Father proposed to Rose.

As soon as he took himself over to the Schrickers and, still nervous and giddy, spilled out the news that he and Rose were getting married, Rae said knowledgably: "Well, of course you are." And George managed: "Good for you." At school, Damon and I ranged through each recess wary of opinions trickling into the schoolyard from parents at home. A few times we had to double up our fists at leers and crude comments, but mostly what reached us--the politics I am in today could learn some civility from the playground kind--was a community sigh of relief at the regularizing of things, finally, under the Milliron roof. The Drobny boys thwacked my shoulder in congratulation until it hurt.

Toby's reaction was the most down-to-earth of all: "Rose, can we still call you Rose?"

When she slipped into the house as early as usual the morning after Father popped the question to her, she still was radiant enough to turn a sunflower's head. A bit giddy myself, I watched her stop short in the kitchen doorway, as though the altar were right there. Her dazed smile hung a little crookedly on her while she checked on me across the room, eternal audience of one.

"I pinched myself, first thing when I woke up," she whispered as if I had asked. "To make sure this is really happening to me. It's so much like a dream, don't you think?"

"Cocoa's ready," I dodged off from that.

She came and sat down catercorner from me, scooting into the chair nearest the stove. It dawned on me this would be her place at the table from now on, every mealtime. The place where Mother always sat.

Rose fiddled with her cup, not even taking a perfunctory sip. Crystal ball-gazing into the cocoa, she murmured: "It makes a person wonder, Paul. Am I the right person to take this on?"

Dumb me, I thought she meant things such as breaking eggs and other feats of cooking. "Well, if they turn your stomach too much--"

"I don't know anything about raising boys," her whisper coincided with mine. "Children, I mean--but especially someone else's." The knit line between her eyebrows was deeper than I had ever seen it. There was a glisten in the corners of her eyes, of the sort Father had at the cemetery.

All at once I felt as if I was in the witness chair. Tongue-tied, clumsy, and without direction. When you have been without a mother, how are you supposed to graft your heart to a new one at a moment's notice? I could have prattled out to Rose any number of fancy reassurances, but there still would have been three sets of facts clopping through this house in boys' shoes. Damon tended to be headstrong, that had to be admitted. Toby on his magic carpet of innocent confusion was going to hit things and break bones, that was proven. Then there was me, something like a dream-wrestling monk mumbling in a foreign tongue half the time. Father was another matter--she would have to judge that for herself--but as far as I could see, we three weren't much of a bargain for her to walk in on. Viewed from our side, adventures in the leather trade and perdition and westbound trains to unknown places weren't the most motherly of attributes, either. Yet we were all ending up with each other, as that oldest utterance of destiny had it, for better or worse.

In the end, the most honest thing I could offer Rose was the benefit of the doubt.

"Father's had enough experience at boys for you both, probably," I whispered. Then thought to tag on: "Anyway, Tobe and Damon and I have it in writing that you don't bite."

Rose let out a kind of a hiccup laugh, relieved to have the conversation go in that direction for the moment. "Morrie put that in the advertisement. Funny man."

She shook her head slightly. "I'll have to learn to get along without him, more." I stirred. Habits of a lifetime were a lot to be sawed through by a wedding ring. At the betrothal news Morrie had declared gallantly, *"I would not want to yield her to anyone but you, Oliver."* Why did that remind me of his last-ditch testimonial after Rose insisted on buying Aunt Eunice's homestead?

Worse, what if cold feet ran in their family? Maybe I was not much of a diagnostician, but I seemed to be the only one available. "Uhm, Rose," I jittered this out, barely hearable even to myself, "I know this is a big step for you, at least that's what people always say. If you're going to have, uh, second thoughts, Father would want you to have them right away now instead of after--"

"No, no, not one little bit," she whispered back insistently. "Paul, your father is a find." Her cheeks colored up. "A surprise, I mean to say. The best ever."

It has always intrigued me: did Rose know what was up, that day of Father's proposal? As soon as he lured Damon and me into the roundabout route to the cemetery, did her whistling change over to Mendelssohn? If so, she hid all sign of it by the time we came galloping back to the homestead. Each time I go over this in my mind, she and Toby are at the pothole pond taking turns flinging a stick, Houdini giving himself a bath a minute by plunging in to fetch. ~~By divine coincidence~~ Father ~~called that the~~ Lake District, ~~and~~ I see her perfectly there yet, apron bright against nature's colors as if she had been thought up in a poem by Wordsworth. *"Back the same day, I see,"* that young Rose of then calls over to us as if males generally did not have such homing instincts. Her arms draws back and she sends the stick sailing again. The Milliron men, for Damon and I felt quite elevated after Father's conference with us, stride three abreast to the pond, grinning like fools. I'd have given skin off an elbow to hear Father's proposal to Rose, and probably that went double for Damon. We did our duty instead. Before Toby knew

what hit him, he had been swept away from the Lake District on the pretense that the two of us could not possibly snare gophers without him and Houdini. Left alone with each other, a woman who was used to bossing dust around and a man trying to master emotions he swore he would never have had to find common ground if they could. Latin was not a hard topic at all compared to romance, from what I could see.

Cold cocoa now brought us to our senses, both a little embarrassed at our kitchen spill of trepidations. Rose laughed softly. "Do you know, I really am a case this morning. I didn't even think to look at the comet."

"You'll be sorry." I glanced quickly toward the window, but at that time of year, daylight was cutting into the small hours when the comet showed itself. "It's growing a new tail."

"You're a spoofer," she murmured, although she didn't sound sure. "As bad as Morrie sometimes."

"See for yourself tomorrow morning," I whispered airily. "Morrie told us in school what it's about." Tracing a long arc in the oilcloth with my fingernail, I showed her. "Back here at the end of the tail , there's a gas that separates from the comet dust. The sun pulls it away or something, nobody knows. Usually it happens over so many nights people don't really notice. But once in a great while the comet goes bobtail, and has to grow back. This is one of those times."

Rose had to take my word for it that Halley's Comet was busily sprouting a new tail, because by nightfall clouds had hidden the sky. When I poked my head out in the last of dark, that next morning, up there was what looked like a vast laundry pile, gray mixed in with white, as if the weather had been saving up all spring and here was the heap. My hopes high, I walked out into Rose's field a little way to listen for the cry of the curlew at dawn, which is supposed to forecast rain.

The curlew could not find its music that morning, but that didn't much worry me. It had to rain sometime, didn't it? Each dark cloudy day after that we started off to school convinced we would need our slickers--Father put Toby's on him before swinging him up behind my saddle every morning, and Morrie did the same for him before hoisting him aboard behind Damon for the ride home--and every time we trotted back into the yard as dry as when we had left. Always threatening and not delivering, the aggravating weather kept on like that all week. I thought to myself Friday night, *Damn. It's going to do it to us, isn't it.*

Rose skimmed in on Saturday blissful as she had been lately. Anticipation looked good on her. She was over her case of the flutters, and every morning now we sat jabbering in whispers about her life ahead with us. Without it ever quite being said, she and Father thought it wise to get off to a clean start with Marias Coulee general opinion. They had set the wedding date--the first Sunday after the end of school--not terribly far off but enough to show they were not being pressed into this by, say, a race with the stork. That all went over my head at the time, naturally. I only knew she was on a cloud of her own, or rather she and Father were. This particular morning, the wavy curls bounced fetchingly on her forehead as she quickstepped through the kitchen doorway and towards me at the table. "It still looks like rain," she reported in a husky whisper, full of faith. "Maybe today it means it."

"There's going to be trouble," I predicted, not bothering to keep my voice down.

Rose froze in mid-slide into her chair, shooting a wide-eyed look of question across at me.

"HE'S NOT GONNA COME, IS HE?"

The earsplitting wail from Toby in the upstairs bedroom hung in the air of the house like a stuck echo, then was chased by loud sobs. "There it is now," I said.

Rose raced out of the kitchen and I followed. There was a clatter in Father's bedroom, and he charged into the hallway trying to tuck in his shirt-tail and slick back his hair at the same time. He pulled up short at the sight of Rose, and gave her the full-of-sap smile a fiance gives a fiancee with two weeks to go before the wedding.

"Good morning, my dear. It sounds as if we have a crisis with our impatient patient. Come on up, you may as well get in practice for this sort of thing. You too, Paul, we may need all the troops."

When we reached there, Damon had floundered over to Toby's bed, dragging most of the bedclothes from his and mine on the journey, and was sitting with his arm draped around Toby blearily reciting "What's the matter, Tobe? Tobe, what's the matter?" although the reason was right out the window.

"THE DOCTOR!" Indignantly Toby managed to break off crying long enough to loose another blast at the sight of Father and Rose and me and point to the grayed-over window by his bunk. "IT'S GONNA RAIN, AND HE WON'T COME! WHY COULDN'T IT RAIN A COUPLE OF DAYS AGO?"

Toby's agony was justifiable. This was the day set for his last looking over by the doctor, but if it wasn't a case of life and death, no physician in his right mind dared to launch a Model A onto Marias Coulee's roads ahead of a deluge. Henry Ford's pride and joy was no match for our mud. Like the rest of us, Toby had seen too many fledgling automobiles in the ditch to hold any hope for a traveler arriving when the clouds were practically dragging the ground, out there. A pang for him went through me. After all his weeks as a patient, from the look of things Toby

was going to have to keep right on lugging his foot around as if it were made of glass and he howled again at the prospect.

"It just isn't fair, is it," Rose at once pitched in, kneeling to dab away his tears with her handkerchief; a stylish monogramed RL one, I noticed, rather than the old yellowed thing Aunt Eunice had always put to the same purpose. "But the doctor will come the first minute he can, I know he will."

I was not going to bawl about it, but I was almost as desperate as my little brother in hoping she was right. As my passenger to school every morning, Toby had nearly worn the skin off my back and middle with his wiggleworm restlessness behind the saddle. Damon now woke up enough to look just as dismayed at any more days of hauling our whirling dervish home behind him. Wall to wall, there was not a being in our household, probably including Houdini, who was not more than ready for Toby to be certified as mended.

Father, however, was in a predicament. Here he was, a farmer who madly wanted it to rain and rain some more, but the parent of a terminally disappointed boy marooned by the prospect of mud. Covertly, I watched him gauge back and forth from the gray swollen clouds outside to Toby's stormy little face and make up his mind.

"Tobe, my man, we'll go to him," he reached the valiant decision. "The team and surrey will take the mud all right, if the weather does cut loose. I'll throw on a vulcanized tarp to keep us dry. We'll get you to that doctor in royal style."

"R-r-really?" Toby's sobs ebbed away at the prospect of a trip to town. He got busy wiping his nose with the back of his hand, Rose determinedly substituting the handkerchief every swipe she could. Blinking away last tears, he peered at her in adoration. "Rose, can you come too?"

She looked up at Father. "If it would help--?"

"I'd love to have your company," Father shook his head, "but you'd better hold down things at this end. Get your clothes on, Tobe. Damon, you could stand some, too."

I had hopes myself on the matter of town, but as soon as Father and Rose and I were back downstairs he made it clear other duties beckoned me. "Barn chores," he rattled off, his mind mostly elsewhere, "you and Damon, need I say more?"

Then, strangely, he drew quite a breath and turned so he was facing Rose square on. Determination was in his expression, and inquiry in hers. Whatever this was about, I started to edge to the kitchen to leave the two of them alone, but Father crooked a finger at me. "I have another task for everybody. Florence's things"--his gaze shifted from Rose's face to include me--"Mother's things--need going through."

"Oh, Oliver. I couldn't." Rose, who had never met a chore she couldn't prevail over, appeared flustered. A closet of clothes every stitch of which would remind me of Mother did not appeal to me, either.

"It needs doing," Father said in both our directions. "I haven't been able to face it myself, and besides, I'm no expert on women's garments. I'd ask Rae to come over and help you, but Tobe and I should try to beat the weather to town." He looked firmer than ever. "You're to have anything you can make use of," he made clear to Rose, "and Paul can set aside anything in the way of keepsakes, and the rest we give away."

Rose and I glanced at one another. That was all it took. If we had to do it, we had to.

Father was heading for his yellow slicker coat, to go and harness the horses to the surrey, when he thought to say over his shoulder to me:

"Get Damon in on it. Maybe it'll get some of the excavating out of his system."

From taffeta to gingham, Damon and I peered in confoundment at our mother's wardrobe in one end of the closet in the downstairs bedroom, when Rose had finished her other chores for the day. I won't say we all put off the task, but none of us were eager for it. Already I had the feeling I would see these garments again, in many a dream.

Lucky for us, Rose saw she had to take charge. She took the first few things at hand from where they were hanging and carefully laid them out on Father's big bed for sorting. "Your mother had some pretty things."

True, but on the other hand she had not been nearly the clothes horse Rose ~~obviously~~ was. Mother's everyday dresses, faded in that bleached-out-all-over way ones from the catalogue do, instantly were as familiar to me as days of the week. The few more elaborate smocks, the ones Father meant when he would say "*Put on a pinafore, Flo, we're going dancing at the schoolhouse,*" on the other hand looked good as new. I could see why this was too much for Father. Mindful of his instructions, Damon and I tried time and again to give something to Rose, but she only thanked us warmly and declined to take any of it, not even an apron. Finally she hesitated over a fox fur muff when Damon reached it down from the closet shelf.

"It's from when we lived back east in Wisconsin," he recognized it soberly.

I was totally awkward about it, but I felt the offer should be made one more time. "Don't you think you should have this, Rose? It can get cold here, winters, honest."

Diplomatically or honestly or even both, she replied: "It's lovely. I'd be honored to have it." When Damon presented it to her, she stroked the fur and smiled at us. "I'll save it for occasions."

The cleaning out went quicker after that. We dispensed and disposed, this for the missionary society bundle, that for the rag bag. A nice patterned dress that Rose thought would suit Rae was carefully set aside. Things flew along that way until Damon reached in way at the back of the closet and pulled out what proved to be Mother's wedding gown.

He and I goggled at it, afraid to say anything. Rose again stepped into the breach. "We'll want to keep this and put it away for your father. Here, I'll wrap it and find a drawer for it."

I believe that turned the last corner for all three of us. While Rose busied herself carrying the wedding gown over to lay it out for folding, Damon keenly dug into the dresser drawer where Mother had kept handkerchiefs and sachets and such. In my case, enough load was off my mind that my thoughts started to roam. They marched into that timeless procession of men and women coming down the aisle together--in my view of history, from Rome on down. *"Nuptiae primae.* Sorry. Your first wedding, I was thinking about, Rose. I bet you had a spiffy gown like that, too, didn't you?"

Rose happened to be passing the mirror on the dresser, and at my words, she drew to a halt and held Mother's gown up to her shoulders as she looked at herself reminiscently. "It was magical. I had the nicest white satin one," she said dreamily, "and Cap always looked his best in--"

Silence came down on us like an eclipse.

The back of my neck prickled. First I sent an inquiring look toward Damon, but he was staring at Rose in the mirror. She had put her hand to her mouth.

The question leapt out of Damon, leaving him breathless. "*Cap* Llewellyn was your mister? The Capper?"

He whirled around to face Rose, and I blindly took a couple of steps toward her, too. She had gone as pale as the gown she was holding. "Really, now," she tried, "couldn't there be more than one Casper Llewellyn in the world?"

"He was! I can tell he was!" Damon's eyes went to the size of turkey eggs. My own probably were no smaller. "Rose, why didn't you ever--"

The answer hit us both at once.

"The long walk off a short pier," Damon went on relentlessly. "Rose, did they--were you--"

"Tell us."

That voice was mine, although I scarcely recognized it. Rose appeared to be as overwhelmed as I sounded. Hastily she laid the wedding gown onto the bed and backed away.

"The 'leather trade'?" I pressed.

Cornered and knowing it, Rose was oddly prim in defending her choice of words. She adjusted her sleeves at the wrists, much in the manner of Morrie, as she stipulated:

"Casper traded punches with the best of them on his way up to champion. You could call it a bit of a fib if you want, but--"

Damon still was working his mouth, but nothing was coming out now. I had to be the one to say it:

"You're on the run."

"Paul, Damon, please, it's not like that." She drew herself up, then slumped. "Well, it is and it isn't. Some people were after me, or at least the betting money they thought I had, and it just seemed best to, what's it called, evaporate