The Whistling Season

by Ivan Doig
When I visit the back corners of my life again after so long a time, littlest things jump out first. The oilcloth, tiny blue windmills on white squares, worn to colorless smears at our four places at the kitchen table. Our father's pungent coffee, so strong it was almost ambulatory, which he gulped down from suppertime until bedtime and then slept serenely as a sphinx. The pesky wind, the one element we could count on at Marias Coulee, whistling into some weathercracked cranny of this house as if invited in.

That night we were at our accustomed spots around the table, Toby coloring a battle between pirate ships as fast as his hand could go while I was at my schoolbook, and Damon, who should have been at his, absorbed in a secretive game of his own devising called domino solitaire. At the head of the table, of course, the presiding sound was the occasional turning of a newspaper page. One has to imagine our father reading with his finger, down the column of rarely helpful want ads in the Westwater Gazette that had come in our week's gunnysack of mail and provisions, in his customary search for a colossal but underpriced team of workhorses, and that inquisitive finger now stubbing to a stop at one particular
heading. To this day I can hear the signal of amusement that line of type drew out of him. Father had a short sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first.

I glanced up from my geography lesson to discover the newspaper making its way in my direction. Father’s thumb was crimped down onto the heading of the ad like the holder of a divining rod striking water. “Paul, better see this. Read it to the multitude.”

I did so, Damon and Toby halting what they were at to try to take in those five simple yet confounding words:

**Can’t Cook But Doesn’t Bite.**

Meal-making was not a joking matter in our household. Father, though, continued to look pleased as could be and nodded for me to keep reading aloud.

*Housekeeping position sought by widow. Sound morals, exceptional disposition. No culinary skills, but A-1 in all other household tasks. Salary negotiable, but must include railroad fare to Montana locality; first year of peerless care for your home thereby guaranteed. Respond to Boxholder, Box 19, Lowry Hill Postal Station, Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

Minneapolis was a thousand miles to the east, out of immediate reach even of the circumference of enthusiasm we recognized growing in our father. But response wasted no time in trying itself out on the other three of us. “Boys? Boys, what would you think of our getting a housekeeper?”

“Would she do the milking?” asked Damon, ever the sparring one.

That slowed up Father only for a moment. Delineation of house chores and barn chores that might be construed as a logical extension of our domestic upkeep was exactly the sort of issue he liked to take on. “Astutely put, Damon. I see no reason why we can’t stipulate that churning the butter begins at the point of the cow.”
Already keyed up, Toby wanted to know, “Where she gonna sleep?”

Father was all too ready for this one. “George and Rae have their spare room going to waste now that the teacher doesn’t have to board with them.” His enthusiasm really was expanding in a hurry. Now our relatives, on the homestead next to ours, were in the market for a lodger, as unbeknownst to them as our need for a housekeeper had been to us two minutes ago.

“Lowry Hill,” Father had turned back to the boldface little advertisement as if already in conversation with it. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s the cream of Minneapolis.”

I hated to point out the obvious, but that chore seemed to go with being the oldest son of Oliver Milliron.

“Father, we’re pretty much used to the house muss by now. It’s the cooking part you say you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy.”

He knew—we all knew—I had him there.

Damon’s head swiveled, and then Toby’s, to see how he could possibly deal with this. For miles around, our household was regarded with something like a low fever of consternation by every woman worthy of her apron. As homestead life went, we were relatively prosperous and “bad off,” as it was termed, at the same time. Prosperity, such as it was, consisted of payments coming in from the sale of Father’s drayage business back in Manitowoc, Wisconsin. The “bad off” proportion of our situation was the year-old grave marker in the Marias Coulee cemetery. Its inscription, chiseled into all our hearts as well as the stone, read Florence Milliron, Beloved Wife and Mother (1874-1908). As much as each of the four of us missed her at other times, mealtimes were a kind of tribal low point where we contemplated whatever Father had managed to fight onto the table this time. “Tovers, everyone’s old favorite!” he was apt to announce desperately as he set before us leftover hash on its way to becoming leftover stew.
Now he resorted to a long thoughtful slurp of his infamous coffee and came up with a response to me if not exactly a reply:

"These want ads, you know, Paul--there’s always some give to them. It only takes a little bargaining. I’ll bet that Mrs. Minneapolis there isn’t as shy around a cookstove as she makes herself out to be."

"But--" My index finger pinned down the five tablet-bold words of the heading.

"The woman was in a marriage," Father patiently overrode the evidence of the newsprint, "she had to have functioned in a kitchen."

With thirteen-year-old sagacity I pointed out: "Unless her husband starved out."

"Hooey. Every woman can cook. Paul, get out your good pen and paper."

This jilted old house and all that it holds, even empty. If I have learned anything in a lifetime spent overseeing schools, it is that childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul. As surely as a compass needle knows north, that is what draws me to these mindful rooms as if the answer I need by the end of this day is written in the dust that carpets them.

The wrinkled calendar on the parlor wall stops me in my tracks. It of course has not changed since my last time here. Nineteen fifty-two. Five years ago, so quickly, when the Marias Coulee school board begged the vacant old place from me for a month while they repaired the roof of their teacherage and I had to come out from the department in Helena to go over matters with them. What I am startled to see is that the leaf showing on the calendar--October--somehow stays right across all the years: that 1909 evening of Paul, get out your good pen and paper, the lonely teacher’s tacking up of something to relieve these bare walls so long after that, and my visit now under such a changed sky of history.
The slyness of calendars should not surprise me, I suppose. Passing the newly painted one-room school, our school, this morning as I drove out in my state government car, all at once I was again at that juncture of time when Damon and Toby and I, each in our turn, first began to be aware that we were not quite of our own making and yet did not seem to be simply re-warmed tovers of our elders either. How could I, who back there at barely thirteen already realized that I must struggle awake every morning of my life before anyone else in the house to wrest myself from the grip of my tenacious dreams, be the offspring of a man who slept solidly as a railroad tie? And Damon, fists-up Damon, how could he derive from our gentle mother? Ready or not, we were being introduced to ourselves, sometimes in a fashion as hard to follow as our father’s reading finger. Almost any day in the waystations of childhood we passed back and forth between, prairie homestead and country school, was apt to turn into a fresh puzzle piece of life. Something I find true even yet.

It is Toby, though, large-eyed prairie child that he was, whom I sensed most as I drove slowly past the small old school with its common room and the bank of windows away from its weather side. Damon or I perhaps can be imagined taking our knocks from fate and putting ourselves back together into approximately what we seemed shaped to be, if we had started off on some other ground of life than that of Marias Coulee. But Toby was breath and bone of this place, and later today when I must go into Great Falls to give the county superintendents, rural teachers, and their school boards of Montana’s fifty-six counties my edict, I know it will be their Tobys, their schoolchildren produced of this soil and the mad valors of homesteaders such as Oliver Milliron, that they will plead for.
The news of our housekeeper-to-be galloped to school with us that next morning, or rather, charged ahead of Damon and me in the form of Toby excitedly whacking his heels against the sides of his put-upon little mare, Queenie.

"I bet she'll have false teeth, old Mrs. Minneapolis will," Damon announced as we rode, wherever he got that from. "Bet you a black arrowhead she does." Before I could say anything he spat in his right hand, thrust it toward me, and invoked "Spitbath shake," the most binding kind there was.

I was not ready to stake anything on this housekeeper matter. "You know Father doesn't like for us to bet."

Damon just grinned.

"Let's get a move on," I told him, "before Toby laps us."

As soon as we topped the long gumbo hill at our end of the coulee, the other horseback contingents of schoolchildren loped or lolled into view from their customary directions, each family cluster as identifiable to us as ourselves in a looking-glass. Toby by racing ahead had caught up to a dilemma. Should he go tearing off to as many troupes of schoolcomers as he could reach, or make straight for the schoolhouse and crow our news to the whole school at once?
He settled for the Pronovosts, the newcomers who joined us every morning at the section-line gate.

"Izzy! Gabe! Everybody!" That general salutation was to Inez, riding double behind Isidor. She was in Toby’s grade and sweet on him, an entangling alliance he did not quite know what to do with. “Guess what?”

Whatever capacity for conjecture existed in the three minimally washed faces turned our way, it surely did not stretch to the notion of domestic help. The Pronovosts were project people, although the distinction between those and drylanders such as us was shrinking fast. Father already was spending less time on farming and more on hauling wares from the Westwater railhead to the irrigation project camp nearest us, the one called the Big Ditch; the father of the Pronovosts drove workhorses on the gigantic diversion canal under construction there, that breed of old-time earth-moving teamster called a dirt skinner. Not just by coincidence, all three of the Pronovost kids were skinny as greyhounds--a family their size living in a construction camp tent was never going to be overfed.

After hearing out Toby’s full recital, Isidor, who did most of the talking for the three of them, granted: “Pretty daggone good, it sounds like.” I noticed he gave his younger brother Gabriel a strong look, the button-your-lip kind I recognized because I had given Damon enough of them. But from where she was perched behind Isidor’s saddle, small Inez piped up:

“Is she gonna be your new ma?”

Instantly Damon reddened, and Toby, mouth open, for once failed to find anything to say.

“This is something different, Inie,” I quickly spoke up. “Housekeepers are all as old as the hills, aren’t they, Damon.”

The bunch of us clucked our horses along faster. To Toby’s dismay, Miss Trent already was banging on the iron triangle that served as a bell by the time we
got the horses picketed to graze out back of the school. Miss Trent was death on whisperers, so his news needed to stay sealed tight in him until morning recess. Then, though, he burst into the schoolyard in full voice.

"--all the way from Minnieapples!" he concluded on a high note to a ready audience of the Stoyanov brothers and the two sets of Drobnys and gangly Verl Fletcher and his shy sister Lily Lee. At the edge of his following, Inez Pronovost listened to it all again breathlessly.

"She gonna make your beds?"

"Who's in charge of spankings, then--your pa or her?"

"Will she bring one of those featherdust things along with, you think?"

As the questions flew, Toby fended as best he could, all the while trying to gravitate toward the rival contingent at the other end of the schoolground, consisting of the Johanssons and the Myrdals and Eddie Turley, and gather them into his oration about the wonderful imminence of our housekeeper. Worried, I tried to keep an eye on the factions while Grover Stinson and I played catch with Grover's ancient soft-as-a-sock baseball, as the pair of us evidently were going to do throughout every recess until our throwing arms dropped off. Damon was busy taking on Isidor and Gabriel at horseshoe pitching. The clangs as he hit ringers meant he was on a streak hardly anything could interrupt. The littler kids chugged around amid the rest of us in their own games of tag and such. At the moment, peace reigned. All it would take for the schoolyard to erupt, though, would be for Toby to draw a few of the bunch trailing him with intrigued questions into range of the other group. For it was the hallmark of a Marias Coulee recess that the Slavs and the Swedes never got along together, and Eddie Turley didn't get along with anybody.

I will say for Miss Trent, whenever Milo Stoyanov and Martin Myrdal or the Johannson brothers and the Drobnys male twins or some other combination blew
up and went at each other, she would wade in and sort out them out but good. However, plenty of fisticuffs and taunts and general incitement could take place by the time she ever managed to reach the scene, and those of us who a minute before were neutrality personified might abruptly find ourselves on one side or the other, right in it. Has it ever been any different, from Eton on down? Over the years in that sanguinary schoolyard I'd traded bloody noses with both Milo and Martin, and Damon naturally had more than his share of tussles with each. But ever since we had become motherless, that had all changed. Some invisible spell of sympathy or charity or at least lenience had been dropped over us, granting us something like noncombatant status in the grudge fights. Neither Damon nor I were particularly comfortable with this unsought absolution--it had a whiff of pity-the-poor-orphans to it--and Toby was too young to grasp it, but the schoolyard community's unspoken agreement to spare us in the nationality brawls did have its advantages.

Here was where my worry came in. I somehow sensed that Toby's innocent bragging about our acquisition of a housekeeper might poke a hole in the spell and render us fit for combat again before we quite knew it.

Tobe's always considerable luck was holding, though, as I watched him scoot free from his first audience, cross the schoolyard at a high run, and start in successfully on the taller forest of the Scandinavian boys and overgrown Eddie.

Until Carnelia Craig emerged from the girls' outhouse.

Carnelia always spent a good deal of recess time enthroned in there, probably to spare herself from the childish hurlyburly of the schoolyard. By a fluke of fate, with nearly two years of Marias Coulee classroom yet to be endured she already was the oldest girl in school, and it showed. The front of her dress was growing distinct points, and her attitude was already fully formed: life had unfairly deposited her among unruly peasants such as us instead of putting her in charge of, say, Russia. Admittedly, her family was of a different cut than any of the rest of
ours because her father was employed by the state of Montana. He was the county agent, working out of the nearby Marias River agricultural experiment station, and her mother had taught homemaker courses before Carnelia deigned to be born. So, the Craigs were up there a bit on such social scale as we had. And in a strange way, I frequently felt I comprehended more of Carnelia’s lofty approach to life, jaded as it was, than I did of my own father’s latest castles in the air. The reason for that was all too simple. She and I were oldest enemies.

Even yet I can’t fully account for the depth of passion, of the worst sort, between us. After all, more than a dozen years apiece in this world—together we amounted to a responsible age, or should have. But Carnelia and I were the entire seventh grade of the Marias Coulee school, as we had been the entire first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth, and there was not a minute of any of it when the pair of us did not resent sitting stuck together there like a two-headed calf until that farthest day when we would graduate from the eighth grade. Until then there would be battle between us, and it was just a matter of choosing new ground for it from time to time.

As soon as I saw Carnelia halt, turn her head a bit to one side as if hearing something sublime the rest of us had missed, and then aim herself straight toward Toby, I knew the terrain of hostilities ahead. Even Carnelia’s family did not have a housekeeper.

I yelped “Last catch!” to Grover while throwing him the ball and raced over to head off Carnelia.

Too late. By the time I got there she was practically atop Toby, her hands on her knees in the manner of Florence Nightingale bending over a poor fallen boy, and crooning her first insidious question:

“Tobias, will she tuck you and Damon and Paul in at night?”
“Huh uh!” Toby answered with the terrifying honesty of a second-grader. “She’s gonna sleep at George and Rae’s. I asked.”

“Oh, is she,” Carnelia noted for posterity. “Not a live-in, then,” she lamented, evidently for Toby’s sake and Damon’s and mine. I tried to break through the circle around Toby, but Eddie Turley chose that moment to get me in a casual hammerlock around the neck and I barely managed to croak out, “Pick on somebody your own size, Carnelia!” By now Damon had tumbled to what was impending, and he yelled out in fury, “Carnelia hag, leave him alone!” But he couldn’t reach there from the horseshoe pit in time either.

Carnelia was smart--worse, she was clever--and what she asked next sounded for all the world like a note of concern for the well-being of the Milliron household:

“But then she’ll have to get up ever so early to come over and cook your breakfast, won’t she, Tobias?”

“She can’t cook,” Toby confided sadly to what was now the entire listening schoolyard. Then he brightened. “But the newspaper says she doesn’t bite.”

That did it. We slunk home after that school day with even the Pronovosts barely able to contain their smirks.

“You were night-herding again,” Damon murmured, as if I didn’t know.

By then it was Sunday, and my dream the night before had nothing to do--for a change--with the teasing circle of Hell that the schoolyard had been for him and Toby and me all week long, and everything to do with what lay in wait ahead of us at Sunday dinner.

“Bad?” I said back in the same low tone he had used. Just out of hearing behind us, Toby romped with our dog, Houdini, both of them hoping for an ill-destined jackrabbit to cross their path. “Worse than usual?”
Damon considered while he reached for the next pebble of the right size. He was in one of his baseball phases at the time and had to throw rocks at fenceposts the whole way along the section-line road to George and Rae’s place. He wound up and fired, frowning when he missed the post. “Usual is bad enough, isn’t it?”

Naturally Damon figured that my excursions while asleep were nightmares. It was nothing that simple. I rapidly thought back over this particular nighttime spell and decided against describing it to him in precise detail. I had tried that before. “I keep telling you, give me a poke when it bothers you that much.”

“Paul, I’m scared to. You’re like somebody one of those mesmerers”--

“Mesmerists.”

“Yeah, like somebody one of those has put to sleep.” Hypnosis? Even if I had the knack of administering it to myself, the nocturnal state of my mind was not subject to command.

We trudged on toward the beckoning finger of smoke from the kitchen stovepipe next door—which in homestead terms always meant half a mile away—neither of us knowing what more to say. Until Damon, who could all but wink with his voice when he wanted to, intoned:

“Anybody I know? In your big dream?”

I had to laugh. “What do you think?”

“I can just see her.” Squinching his face into the approximation of a prune, he mimicked: “Cat got your tongue, boys?”

It was like that most Sundays. Once in a great while the Sabbath-day invitation to Father and his three omnivorous boys would come from the samaritan Stinsons, Grover’s parents, or from the reliably civic Fletcher family if school board business needed tending to, but standardly we were asked over to our Schricker relatives’ for Sunday dinner. The meal itself we always were
surpassingly grateful for. Rae Schricker was our mother’s cousin, and with the same calm flint-gray eyes and impression marks of amusement at the corners of her lips, she resembled Mother to an extent that sometimes made my throat seize up. Certainly Rae seemed to regard herself as Mother’s proxy on earth at the cookstove on given Sundays. Any of us would have had to grant that Mrs. Stinson’s mincemeat pie and Mrs. Fletcher’s Guernsey-cream creampuffs could not be bettered anywhere. But Rae operated on the assumption this was our one square meal of the week and tucked ham with yams or fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy into us until we wobbled in our chairs. Meanwhile George in his whiskery way would attempt to preside over the feast with encouraging injunctions of his own: “Oliver, heavens, you’re out of coffee already! Toby, here you go, the wishbone!” I say attempt because unlike us, George still very much had a mother, right down there at the opposite end of the dinner table from him. At these Sunday repasts Aunt Eunice, as we boys were forced to address her, ate sparingly as a bird, preferring to peck in our direction.

“Old Aunt YEW-niss,” Damon now crooned in rhythm to his pitcher’s motion, and bopped a post dead-center.

“Go easy,” I warned, with a glance toward Toby as he raced Houdini to catch up with us.

“Maybe she won’t’ve heard,” Damon muttered to me.

“And maybe the cat will get her tongue for a change,” I muttered back.

“But I wouldn’t count on it.”

Father was sending us over first this Sunday noon, as usual. “Tell George and Rae I’ll be there in a jiffy,” he instructed, his favorite measure of time. It was strange how many last-minute chores in the horse barn demanded his immediate attention when visiting with Eunice Schricker was the other choice. First, though, he had made sure to curry us up, insuring that we scrubbed behind our ears,
slicking our hair down for us with the scented stickum he called “eau de barber” and judiciously working us over with a comb the size of a rat-tail file. It was then that Damon, who hated to have his hair parted, pulled away from under the comb and demanded to know: “How is she our aunt?”

A perfectly sound question, actually. By what genealogical bylaw did we accord aunthood to our mother’s cousin’s husband’s mother? Particularly when she showed no affinity with the human family?

“By circumlocution,” Father said, which I resolved to look up. “I want you boys,” he tapped Damon with the comb, “to tend to your manners over there. It’s good practice for when our general domestication happens.”

When, indeed. By mutual instinct Damon and I had not mentioned to Father the teasing we were taking at school about the non-biting housekeeper. “Does she come with a muzzle?” “Is she so old she’s a gummer?” And we were managing to keep a stopper in Toby by telling him over and over that our tormentors were merely jealous. But the housekeeper matter was wearing us down day by day. The letter had gone off to Minneapolis, my best Palmer penmanship setting forth Father’s much mulled-over wage offer, and all we had to show for it so far was red ears from the torrent of razzing. I longed for our phantom correspondent, whoever she proved to be, to materialize as such a model of domestic efficiency that the rest of Marias Coulee would swoon in tribute; but at the same time I harbored doubts that I could not quite put words to. Besides, Father more than once had warned us not to get our hopes up too high, although plainly his were elbowing the moon.

So, when we were sent off to the lioness’s den at George and Rae’s, two of us couldn’t wait for this Sunday to be over and Toby couldn’t wait for it to start. No sooner had Rae let us in the kitchen door and slipped us an early bite apiece of
the gingerbread she had just baked, than the sort of thing Damon and I dreaded was issued to us from the parlor.

"Is that those boys?" came that voice, snappish as a whip. "Don't they have manners enough to say hello?"

His face full of smile and gingerbread crumbs, Toby charged in, the other two of us apprehensively trailing after. There Aunt Eunice sat as if not having bothered to budge from the week before, perched bent-over in her spindleback rocking chair, the toes of her antique black shoes barely reaching the floor. George as usual was seated stiffly on the horsehair sofa at the other end of the room. As I look back on it, the Schricker family line contradicted the principle of inherited traits. You would have had to go to their back teeth to find any resemblance between George, his ever hopeful broad countenance wreathed in companionable reddish beard, and the elderly purse-mouthed wrathy figure, half his size, whom he felt the need to address as "Mum." Sunday-clad in her Victorian lavender dress, crochet hook viciously at work as ever on another doily to foist onto Rae--the parlor looked snowed-on, so many of its surfaces were covered with this incessant lacework--Aunt Eunice was the obvious victor over any number of challenges of time. Thus far, the twentieth century had no effect on her except to make her look more like a leftover daguerreotype.

George beamed in relief at us, desperate for any diversion from making conversation with his mother, and we variously mumbled or blurted our greetings back. As Damon beat an immediate retreat to the Chinese checker board kept on the tea table by the window and I edged dutifully toward the far end of the sofa, George said from the corner of his mouth: "No word yet?" I shook my head. He sighed a little, which indicated to me that he too had been receiving an earful on the subject of our housekeeper.
Right now, though, Aunt Eunice was all sparkle. "Toby, come here by me," she coaxed as if calling a puppy, and next thing, our sunshine boy was groaningly hoisted onto her venerable knees.

Damon scowled but did not look up from where he was devising across-the-board jumps with his marbles, and I sat there trying to appear congenial. It was part of the Sunday ritual that where the other two of us drew dark mutters from Aunt Eunice about "young roughnecks" and "overgrown noiseboxes," she literally lapped up Toby. Out of her sleeve now came a lace-edged handkerchief which she put to work on his gingerbread traces. "Poor thing, sent off from home looking like a mudpie."

Toby squirmed adorably while she clucked over him, and I mentally told him to enjoy being doted on while he could. The minute he grew too big for Aunt Eunice's scanty lap, he would be consigned to rogue boyhood with Damon and me.

"And school, dear?" she probed. "How are you getting on at school these days?"

Bless him, Toby thought to look my way before answering, and I twitched my mouth in warning. With effort, he stuck to: "I have perfect attendance, same like last year."

With an oof Aunt Eunice discharged him from his perch on her knees, meanwhile declaring: "What a pity it doesn't run in the family. That father of yours would be late for his own funeral."

"Now, now, Mum," George protested weakly. Damon, thunder on his brow, clattered marbles into place for Toby to join him at the checker board. It was up to me to defend Father, seldom a rewarding task: "He had to tend the workhorses, is all."
“As per usual,” Aunt Eunice crowed. Now that I had drawn her attention, I could be worked on to the fullest. She lifted her chin as if sighting in on me with it, while her face took on an expression of grim relish. “So, you, Paul--”

“Yes, Aunt Eunice?” I was not going to let her corner me into the cat-and-tongue situation.

“--does that teacher of yours make you learn anything by heart? I always stood first in my class at elocution.” Who could doubt it?

“I can say ’The boy stood on the burning deck--’” Damon volunteered with deadly innocence. I shot him a look that said Don’t, knowing how his version ran:

--his feet were covered with blisters.

He tore his pants on a rusty nail

So then he wore his sister’s.

Luckily Aunt Eunice wanted no competition. “Your geography and physiology and spelling bees and all that, will only carry you so far,” she remained intent on me. A Nile of vein stood out on her frail temple as she worked herself up. What was behind such ardor? Rage of age? Life’s revenge on the young? Or simply Aunt Eunice’s natural vinegar pickling her soul as usual? In any case, something about me that Sunday had set her off. “I know you have your nose in a book all the time, but those are not the only lessons in store for you. When you get out in the world, Paul Milliron, you’ll see.” Pursing up dramatically, Aunt Eunice delivered in singsong fashion:

“Life lays its burden on every soul’s shoulder,

We each have a cross or a trial to bear.

If we miss it in youth it will come when we’re older

And fit us as close as the garments we wear.”

Not even George knew what to meet that with but abject silence.
Just in time came the bang of the kitchen screendoor and further sounds of Father arriving. "Hello, Rae. It smells delicious around here. Brought you a sack of Roundup coal, not that slack stuff. Remind me to take the scuttle out and fill it for you." His theory evidently was that if he bustled enough, it would seem as if he had been here all the while. "Oh, the nourishment is about ready? Give me a minute to freshen up and reacquaint the boys with the wash basin, and we're yours to command."

He stuck his head through the parlor doorway, his face ruddy from shaving and his raven-black hair slicked back the same as ours. "Eunice, my goodness!" he exclaimed as if surprised to find her there. "Aren't you looking regal today."

Soon after, we sat up to the table and began to do justice to Rae's fried chicken and baking-powder biscuits and milk gravy and compulsory vegetables, with the promise of that gingerbread spurring Damon and Toby and me to clean our loaded plates. Father and George talked crops and weather and horses and the doings of neighbors, the argot that farmers had been speaking since seedtime on the Euphrates. For while those generous Sunday noons were presented to our cookless household as rituals with victuals, I am convinced it was the table talk that nourished Father and George in their unforeseen lives as adventurers in homesteading.

"The steam plow is going to be at Stinson's place anyway, why don't you go ahead and break that five acres on your east end? I'll throw in with you, I have that couple of acres of gumbo around the Lake District that needs doing."

"I don't know, though, Oliver. I'm stretched as it is, to handle what I planted this year."

These were not fluff-filled men. Father could be a bit high-toned and more than a bit fanciful, but along with it he put in staggering days of manual labor, for others as well as himself. I always thought that the world got two for the price of
one, when Father's personality was counted into the earthly mix. One minute he could summarily kill a rattlesnake with a barrel stave, and the next, he might be fashioning out loud a theory of the evolution of the human thumb. In an earlier time, Father would have been the kind to take ship for the farthest places; I can see him as someone like the ever-curious naturalist Joseph Banks, sailing around and around the world with Captain Cook. His inborn hunger for a fresh horizon may seem hopelessly mismatched with the drayage business handed down to him, in a set-in-its-ways Wisconsin city that wasn't even Milwaukee. But one last unexpected unfolding of the American map came to his rescue. As the finale of homesteading, the federal government offered a vast wager: western dry land thrown open free for the taking, if you were willing to uproot yourself and invest the requisite years of your life on that remote virgin patch of earth. With Montana singing in his ear, he had piled everything with the name Milliron on it—including Mother and us; I was five at the time, Damon four, and Toby merely a gleam in Father’s eye—into an “emigrant car,” one of those Great Northern Railway boxcars that held our furniture and dishes wrapped in bedding and a few Wisconsin keepsakes at one end, and pallets for us to sleep on at the other. Astutely, as it proved, a second boxcar brought the best one of Father’s drays that had conveyed beer and meat through the cramped streets of Manitowoc, and his top two teams of workhorses. Marias Coulee awaited us, a promised land needing only agricultural husbandry and rain. Within a year, George and Rae followed from their becalmed life of dairy farming near Eau Claire, equally ready to try a new point of the compass.

"Neither one of you works a field enough," came a certain voice again now, sharp as a pinch. "My place looks like a cat scratched around on it when you're through with your so-called plowing."
And, I must always make myself admit, just as much a homesteader as either of the field-weathered men at that table, was Eunice Schricker. George may have thought he was putting two states between him and his mother when he made his move west, but he had only managed to transmit Montana fever. In no time at all she too had alit into Marias Coulee, filing her homestead claim on the acreage next to George and Rae's, living on it in her shanty for proving-up purposes, and giving George and our father constant fits as they tried to farm it for her in anything resembling the way she wanted it done.

Sod was comparatively safe ground, so to speak, in these dinner-table contentions. I was hoping that the agricultural trio of them would stay dug in on dry-land plowing until past dessert. But keeping tabs on Aunt Eunice even more than usual this perilous Sunday as I was, the instant her chin took on that particular lift and she aimed it dead-straight at Father, I knew we were in for it about the housekeeper.

"Household help always steals," Aunt Eunice announced as if her opinion had been broadly solicited. "I am surprised someone of your experience of life doesn't know that, Oliver. You watch. This housekeeper of yours, if she ever manifests herself, will be lightfingered. They all are."

Nervously Toby looked at Father.

"Eunice, please, the poor soul hasn't even set foot across our threshold yet," Father protested. "Besides, as long as it's the dust and the clutter, she's welcome to everything we have."

"Go right ahead and make jokes," Aunt Eunice snapped. "If you end up robbed blind, don't say I didn't tell you."

"I never would," Father said levelly. "Eunice, all I am trying to do is to bring a bit of order out of a houseful of chaos. The boys pitch in as best they can, but they're not laundresses, downstairs maids, seamstresses"—
--"or cooks," Damon contributed.

--"or cooks," Father picked that up gamely, "so if it takes a housekeeper to set us to rights, why on earth shouldn’t we get one?" He scanned the table in beleagured fashion. "Is anyone else going to take mercy on that last Missouri T-bone?"

Rae passed him the final chicken drumstick. "Keep your strength up, Oliver."

Aunt Eunice was not going to be deterred or detoured. "Times change, they say," she uttered as if not believing any of it. And immediately followed up with:

"Yet, Experience spake,
the old ways are best;
steadfast for steadfast’s sake,
passing the eons’ test."

Again, general silence met her spirited recitation. Aunt Eunice appeared to expect no understanding from this gathering.

"Oh, well," she fanned herself with a tiny veined hand, "soon I’ll be dead."

That particular utterance of hers never failed to drive an icicle straight through the heart of every male in the room, except Toby. He turned as soulful as a seven-year-old could. Around most of the rest of the table, I could have predicted the responses. George’s tone broke slightly as he tried to make the usual hearty assertion, "Mum, you’re sound as a dollar." Then Father: if Father nicked himself shaving he thought he was two feet into the grave. Invocations of mortality, with Mother’s memory so raw to him, always turned him still as a castaway. Damon’s eyes narrowed; if Aunt Eunice was on her way to the hereafter, it plainly seemed to him to be by a highly roundabout route.
Rae, who had been hearing Aunt Eunice predict imminent demise for years, merely lifted an eyebrow as if interested in the prospect. But then I caught her notice across the table.

"Paul?" She sounded concerned. "Paul, you look a bit peaked."

Certainly the inside of my head had gone pale. Against my will, the floodgate of remembrance had been jarred open by Aunt Eunice's icy utterance, and my dream from the night before poured back to me.

Since that time I have had nearly half a century of indelible dreams. People are always telling me they wish they could remember exactly what their dreams were about, but I wonder if they have any idea what that means. Only the few persons closest to me know anything of the quirk that causes the roamings within my sleep to live on in me intact in every incised detail and every echoing syllable. My wife learned, in our first nights together, that my mind does not shut down at midnight, it goes visiting in the neighborhoods of imagination and recapitulation and other nocturnal regions that do not quite have names. Damon could have warned her. Anyone is familiar with the concept known as amnesia: a departure of memory. My condition, as I have gingerly explored it, is best called simply mnesia: protraction of recall. Dreams slide over into my memory, in a way that I am helpless to regulate; as well as I can describe it, my dream experiences become something like frescoes on the countless walls of the brain. Not that this mental trick will ever win me a job in a sideshow. Except for the acuity I am credited with by my supporters in state government, reward for the right guesses I have made in the administration of education down through the years, there seems to be no other particular power of mind in my mnesiac case. As often as anyone else, I lose track of my fountain pen somewhere between the ink bottle and whatever awaits signature on my desk. But I never forget a dream. They stay with me like annals of the Arabian Nights, except that mine now go far beyond a thousand and one.
So it was with the episode that had everyone at the Sunday table cocking an eye at me now. Dreams--at least mine--are scavenger hunts to anywhere, but I could sort out some of the sources of this one. When we arrived west on the train of emigrant cars and the boxcar next to ours was unloaded at the Westwater siding, out came a casket, empty; we never did know if it represented some settler's pessimism or was merely in shipment or what. The version of it delivered in my dream was not empty, and Mother was missing, and Damon and I and Toby--who did not exist at the time--were by ourselves in the doorway of another boxcar, one so high off the railroad bed we could not figure how to hop down. Sitting out there supervisory in the buffalo grass was Aunt Eunice in her rocking chair. Father and, for some reason, his fellow school board member Joe Fletcher were laboring to lift the coffin onto the unhitched dray. "They forgot the horses," Damon kept fretting as we toed the brink of the boxcar, wanting to go to the aid of the men. Aunt Eunice was the only person around who could help us down, but she wasn't about to. "Don't let those boys," she bossed the men struggling with the casket's brass handles. "They'll drop it."

"At least we know you're not off your feed, Paul," Father deduced from my empty plate, his words snapping me out of the dream visitation. Leaning my way at the table, he reached to feel my forehead with the back of his hand. I had no idea what he would find there, fever or chill, but the diagnosis never took place. Instead came the ear-shattering wail from Toby:

"AUNT EUNICE, I DON'T WANT YOU TO D-D-DIE!"

This commotion took some while to settle down, Toby first sobbing the front of Father's shirt wet and then Rae's blouse. I suspected Aunt Eunice of being secretly pleased, but outwardly she showed only impatience as she at last directed: "Oh, for heaven's sake, let me have the child."
Still full of snifflies, Toby went to her, the lifting oof was given, and he perched unsteadily on what there was of her knees. “Mustn’t cry,” she ordered, dabbing him dry with the lace hanky. “Now I want you to be a good boy all week, and tell me all your doings, next Sunday.”

As Toby blinked and tried to muster a shiny-eyed smile, she added as piteously as before:

“If I’m spared until then.”

The letter was there when Walt Stinson dropped off our sack of provisions and mail the Friday of the next week.

Father plucked it up as if it were the royal invitation he had been expecting. But he tapped the envelope thoughtfully against the fingertips of his other hand a few times before sitting down to slit it open with his jackknife blade.

The other three of us crowded around him at his place at the kitchen table. The page full of staccato handwriting, like miniature turkey tracks if the turkey had been wearing spats and spurs, was too much for Toby. “Read it to us,” he implored. Damon’s lips were moving silently as he tried to scan the closely worded sheet of paper from over Father’s shoulder.

“I think Paul should be in charge of the elucidation,” Father said as soon as he had figured out the gist of the letter.

The Dear Mr. Milliron salutation and the rest of the formal part of the letter I read off as if it had come from Shakespeare himself; perhaps Aunt Eunice’s nagging about elocation had made more impression than I thought. I slowed up markedly, though, at the penultimate paragraph and then the ultimate:

The salary you have suggested is, may I say, not quite adequate to my current needs. Fortunately, however, I do see a way out of impasse on this matter.
Were I able to draw my first three months of wages ahead of time, that would be a sufficiency to enable to me to take my leave of Minneapolis and join your employ.

If you will send the wage sum and the ticket price by Western Union, I will embark on the most immediate train for Montana.

Sincerely yours,

Rose Llewellyn

“Rose Llewellyn,” Toby all but rolled in the sound of it. “That’s a swell name, isn’t it, Paul? Damon, don’t you like it too?”

Damon, though, was rocked back on his heels by something else. “We have to pay her until after Christmas to even get her here?”

“Wait, there’s something on the back,” I said, seeing the ghostline of ink that had come through the paper. I turned the letter over and read aloud:

P.S. May I say, Mr. Milliron, you write a splendid hand. It is inspirational to correspond with one to whom penmanship is not a lost art.

I tried to hide a grin of pride. Meanwhile Father, who had not been heard from during any of this, cleared his throat.

Damon and Toby and I expectantly sank to our chairs at the table, awaiting his verdict.

He still said nothing. As we watched, he held the letter up in front of him and ran his other hand back and forth through his hair, as if massaging his next thought. I still wonder what the outcome would have been if Houdini had not chosen that moment to get up from his spot by the stove, shake himself vigorously, and plop back down in a settling cloud of dog hair and dust. Father took so long he might have been counting the motes, but eventually he straightened up in his chair, gave a little sigh, and sent the letter across the tabletop in my direction.

“Paul, get out your pen. We have to draft a telegram of surrender.”
What a tireless instructor memory is. Don’t I wish I could put it on my department’s payroll. Its hours are unpredictable, however. Keeping an eye on the time today as I must, I see that the future—with whatever lasting recognition it will attach to October of 1957—is about to pay a visit. I have to make myself go out for a look.

At least the day itself seems neutral, which does not happen often at Marias Coulee. I think back to the winters here and shiver, and to the dry summers when Father and George and the other homesteaders watched the tufts of rain catch on the distant peaks as the underbelly of a cloud would drag across the Rockies and never reach their fields. But around me now, the sky could not be more guiltlessly empty. Even the wind has nothing to say, for once. The only sound anywhere around is at the pothole pond—Father called it the Lake District—where waterfowl, passing through with the seasons, sometimes alight. Swans are the maestros, and geese next, but today it is a few dozen mallards that have migrated in and formed a fleet, with much quacking. Some kind of duck event and they have the prairie to themselves for it, except for me and whatever is passing over.

I search the unmarked blue sky, even though I know the human eye isn’t adequate any more. It is up there seventy-five miles, the newspapers say. The Russian orbiter, Sputnik, that emulates the moon—and that will have such a tidal pull on our education system. Now that the Soviet Union has sped past this country into space, science will be king, elected by panic. It has already started, in the editorials and legislative rumblings. Those rumblings soon will grow into growls. If I have an enemy in this world, it is the chairman of the appropriations committee. He knows how many times I have outwitted him. This time, even though it is a borrowed sum for an I.Q. like his, substance of debate is on his side. There will be no mercy on budget categories that can’t be argued as miracle cures in
catching up with the Russians in the launching of satellites. Such as one-room schools at the thin edges of the counties of Montana. A thousand such schools.

I have to catch my breath at this barbwire twist of my career. It is as if the person I thought was me--the Paul Milliron whom the world of education knows--has been eclipsed by this Russian kettle of gadgetry orbiting overhead. Yes, I was the youngest state superintendent of schools in the nation back when I was first elected--inevitably, "the boy wonder of the West" in the LIFE magazine article--and am now the longest-serving. Yes, I took the schools of Montana through the Depression without such wholesale closings. Yes, my depleted department fended tooth and nail during the Second World War when everything was rationed and teachers evaporated daily into the war effort, and again we never closed schools by swipe of the hand. But now it has fallen to me to decide the fate of an entire species of schooling, the small prairie arks of education such as the one that was the making of me.

To some extent I know how it will go, in Great Falls this evening. The convocation of delegates from the rural school systems will include old friends, people I have known since I had my own country classroom. "Mr. Milliron, good to see you," they will say, or "Superintendent, hello again." Not a woman nor a man of them is comfortable calling me "Paul." They likely are not going to want to anyway, after today.

There is time before that yet. For the meeting of another sort where, like Toby, I can at least boast perfect attendance. On my way to here I drove by the depot where Rose stepped down from the train, bringing several kinds of education to the waiting four of us.
She alit to the planked platform of the Westwater depot on feet as dainty as Toby's little ones.

In those days people poured off the afternoon train--it was called that even though it was the only one all day--and peered around like sailors in uncharted latitudes as they waited for their belongings from the baggage car. Babies lulled by the rocking motion of the train were coming awake with shrieks at their new surroundings. Coal dust from the engine tender and the smell of mothballed things gotten out for long journeys clung in the air. Our eyes big with the occasion, Damon and Toby and I couldn't help but stare at the black-clad Belgian boys in the latest colony of families transplanting themselves from Flanders, and they at us.

Father, who in strongest terms had prescribed best behavior for us at the depot, was standing on tiptoe and teetering a bit as he tried to sort anyone housekeeperly from the swelling crowd of land pilgrims and Big Ditch workmen and homestead people like us on town errands that called for Sunday clothes.
The disembarking passengers were dwindling rapidly, though, and Father's composed expression along with them, when we heard "Coming through!" and had to move back to dodge the cart of cream cans which were the freight for the train's return run to the mainline. Ever since, I think of Rose as having materialized to us like a genie from a galvanized urn.

For when the creamery cart had passed, there she was on the top step of the nearest Pullman car, assembled in surprising finery, targeting us with an inventive smile which somehow seemed to favor all four of us equally, while at the same time allowing herself to be helped down by an evident admirer from the train.

"Mrs. Llewellyn?" Father addressed her as if wondering out loud.

"Yes, absolutely!"

Before we were done blinking she was across the platform to us, a smartly gloved hand extended. "Oh, I'm exceedingly happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Milliron. And these are your young men!"

Naturally Damon and Toby and I puffed up at that promotion in rank. Names were given, handshakes exchanged right down the line--Rose's hand, like the rest of her, was slender but firm--and our notion of the league of widowhood seriously readjusted. Aunt Eunice always excepted, in our experience widows were massive. We felt ourselves shrink in the presence of those great-bosomed old creatures shrouded in dresses as solemnly gray as the gravestones whereunder their late husbands lay. But this mourner of Mr. Llewellyn, whoever he may have been, was all but swathed in a traveling dress the shade of blue flame--Minneapolis evidently did not lack for satin--and there did not seem to be an ounce extra anywhere on her gamin frame. In fact, I had noticed Father give a double look as if there must be more of her somewhere.

And she was awfully far from being old.
“Mr. Milliron, let me say at once,” the words rushed from her as if she had been holding them in all the way from the train station in Minnesota, “your kind understanding in letting me draw ahead on my wages made a world of difference to my situation. Really it did. I don’t know what I would have done but for your letters of—” Here adequate tribute to the Milliron corresponding hand--mine--obviously failed her, and she accorded Father a look of overpowering thankfulness for his existence.

“IT was nothing,” Father replied, magnificently bland, “an A-1 housekeeper is worth a bit of extra ink.”

Rose blushed becomingly. Modesty’s rush of blood went well with her gently proportioned cheekbones and the demure expression that came to her lips. Over that, though, there still were the warm brown eyes to contemplate, and the hairdo where wavy curls and fair forehead played peekaboo in a style slightly saucy compared with, well, our notion of widows. None of which caused disturbance in any of us, let me say, including Father. Toby was not advanced enough in life yet to think about it, but Damon and I knew Father was immune to women because he missed Mother so. “I will not go through life resenting a woman because she isn’t Florence,” he had made plain when George and Rae pointed out that people were known to marry again. “And a stepmother for this tribe of heathens”—he meant us—“is apt to be a cure worse than the affliction.” So, he was at his most academic as he sized up—more likely, sized down--Rose Llewellyn there at the depot. All he wanted was a housekeeper, and this one had come with proclamations to that effect all over her. Besides, there were those three months of wages and a train ticket invested in getting her here.

“Well, shall we be on our way, Mrs. Llewellyn?” His baritone was a bit brusque as he indicated to where our horses and wagon were hitched. He unrooted Damon and me and even Toby with seat-of-the-pants pushes of encouragement
toward the baggage car. "The boys--the Milliron young men will gladly fetch whatever you've brought."

An exclamation that defied translation came from Rose and she gave her head a quick little shake, her dark brunette curls flipping on her forehead, as though just then remembering something. She spun half around, her gaze flying across the now nearly empty platform.

Our four sets of eyes followed hers to the tweed-suited traveler who had helped her off the train.

Like her, this individual believed in sparing nothing on appearance. A paisley vest peeked from amid the tweed. A gold watch chain was swagged across the vest. The man was not at all tall, but held himself very straight as if to make the most of what he had. He was lightly built, and an extraordinary amount of him was mustache. It was one of those maximum ones such as I had seen in pictures of Rudyard Kipling, a soup-strainer and a lady-tickler and a fashion show, all in one. Almost as remarkable, he was the only bare-headed man in Montana, the wind teasing his dramatically barbered hair. As we gawked at the stranger he appeared somewhat ruffled, and not merely by the breeze.

Rose went, took him by a wrist and led him to us.

"Mr. Milliron, Toby, Damon, Paul," she reeled off as if we were a select regiment, "may I present my brother, Morris Morgan."

"I'm sorry to intrude on the tableau," he said with melodious articulation. My ears and Damon's and Toby's perked up at the newcomer's cultured way with words. This was like hearing Father meet up with himself. "But I'm afraid it's what comes of an attachment to Rose."

"Such luck!" Rose said as if it was an explanation for his presence. "That Morrie was able to accompany me."
“Are you also relocating to Montana?” Father inquired pleasantly enough over a handshake he obviously had never expected to make. Morris Morgan appeared not to hear that, instead glancing nervously aside.

“Rose? My chapeau? The ransom, remember?”

Rose’s hand flew to her mouth and she whirled toward the train again. There the heavy-set conductor stood, his railway cap squarely on above his uplifted eyebrows, while he twirled a nice new kangaroo-brown Stetson hat on an indicative forefinger.

“A terrible misunderstanding,” Rose rushed to tell us in a low but musical voice. “We were under the impression that our tickets would take us all the way to here. But when we had to climb onto this”—she waved a disparaging hand at the branch-line train—“and that man came around demanding fresh tickets, goodness gracious, we had only enough for my fare. And so he grabbed—”

“—confiscated as collateral—” Morris Morgan interpolated as if interested in the philosophy of it.

“—my poor brother’s hat. Mr. Milliron, I hate like everything to ask. But might I draw ahead a trifle more on my wage? Just enough to cover Morris’s fare?”

Now it was Father and Damon and I who looked around nervously, to make sure no one was overhearing this. He had soundly counseled the pair of us not to mention to anyone the outlay for a housekeeper we had never laid eyes on, while Toby had got it into his head that sending money to her saved her the trouble of stealing it from us, satisfying Aunt Eunice’s warning.

You can’t leave a man hatless in the middle of Montana. But Father did say, “If this keeps on, Mrs. Llewellynn, you’ll have the house and we’ll be in your employ.” He counted out the exact fare and handed it to Rose.

Noticeably she did not hand the money onward to her brother, but marched over to the conductor and liberated the Stetson herself.
“Now then,” Father was determined to take charge, “Mrs. Llewellyn will ride out with us,” nodding in the general direction of Marias Coulee, then inclining civilly but definitively toward Morris Morgan, “and you we can drop at the hotel.” He paused as the newly hatted figure drew himself up straighter yet and pulled out a pocket watch, one of those the size of a turnip, at the end of the gold chain.

Looking at Father instead of the time, he asked: “Does Westwater boast a pawn shop?”

“Not yet,” Father was forced to admit.

“Oh dear,” said Rose.

I was the one who came up with:

“George and Rae have that attic room.”

Even I cannot fashion the kind of extreme dream that Rose and Morrie, as we were calling him before long, must have felt themselves caught up in as our wagon wheeled away from a clapboard depot that slumbered back into the prairie twenty-three and a half hours of each day. Westwater then was one of the newest spots on earth, and possibly the most far-flung. A solitary substantial building, the brick hotel, towered three stories over the downtown intersection where buffalo had been the only traffic not many years before, and saloons had been shooed into one section of street north of the railroad tracks, and there were three rival livery stables known as the White Barn, the Green Barn, and the Red Barn--but otherwise, the raw town rising out of the open plain seemed to be a mirage missing many of its vapors. Streets as long and open as boulevards arrowed off through the grassland, with only a sporadic house in evidence on each thoroughfare of dirt and weeds. The impression of civic scatter continued out to the flatland horizon, where isolated homestead shanties sat like potted plants. A few dabs of Westwater still lay here
and there around us as Father smacked the horses into a mild trot, but pretty plainly our wagon had long since passed the city limits of our passengers’ imaginations.

_Bang!_ went something. Rose and Morrie each jumped an inch out of their Minneapolis hides.

Even from behind, the three of us relegated to sitting on sacks of coal and oats in the back of the wagon could tell Father was starting to relish this. Grownups had games of their own, Damon and I already knew and Toby would catch onto in his own good time. “Westwater does boast a shoe emporium,” Father was saying past Rose to her disconcerted brother. “If you happen to be equine.” With that he threw a wave to Alf Morrissey in his blacksmith shop, and Alf lifted his hammer in salute before tonging a red-hot horseshoe to a new angle on his anvil and giving it another thunderous _bang!_

The road to Marias Coulee put the railroad to shame for straight intent, and by the time Father had clipped off the first mile by giving the horses their head and his captive audience the benefit of his wisdom on several matters, Toby had bounced from sack to sack until he was sitting practically on the coattails of the adults. From that close range, he could not resist. When Father stopped to draw a breath, Toby had his question ready for Rose:

“How’d you get so many pretty names?”

Swift as anything she looked at him over her shoulder. “So many?”

“Uh huh. Rose and Lou and Ellen.”

When all of us but Toby had had our laugh, Rose—smiling that effective smile once again—turned half around to him. “My poor husband always said Llewellyn is the Welsh way to spell Jones, there were so many with his same last name. Here, I’ll write it into your hand. That way you’ll always carry it with you.”
Toby blushed with pleasure as she recited each letter and traced it with her finger into the palm of his small hand. I could tell Damon had been itching to ask something, too. But he simply nodded to himself as if Toby had taken care of it all.

"Now shut your eyes, say kafoozalum, and close your hand tight." Toby did as she instructed. "There," Rose proclaimed. "You won't ever forget me now."

"You're going to have an admirer there, Mrs. Llewellyn," Father said with a wink at Toby.

"Oh, could you make it 'Rose,' please, sir. I try not to use the other, it's just too--" She let that trail off to wherever things too sad to talk about end up.

I watched Morris Morgan fasten a a considering look onto her, then give her a pat as though he was remembering her travail.

"'Rose' it is, then, if you'll denominate me 'Oliver,'" Father concurred.

"While we're at it we may as well make it unanimous." He shifted the reins to his left hand and thrust his right toward Morrie for a confirming shake. I see them yet, each settling back on the seat of the wagon after that handclasp performed under the warm gaze of Rose. Father's weather-tanned face, with its work wrinkles running down his cheeks, like a copper coin a bit melted. Morrie smoothing his mighty mustache as if it was newly found. Neither of them possessing any notion of all they were being introduced to with that first-name basis.

Maybe it was the loosening of address, like a necktie tugged free of its knot. Maybe it was Morrie's way of listening with monkish attention as though comparing the vocabulary of the next monastery over with his own. Maybe it was utter relief that at last we had a housekeeper, at least aboard the wagon. Or all of the above. Whatever was brimming in him, Father was expansive as he now speculated, "Morrie, I suppose you're traveling on through, once Rose gets established? I hear things are booming on the Coast."
“Actually, I thought I might seek something here.”

“Ah?” said Father, clearly thrown. Homesteaders came in every shape and size, but Morris Morgan plainly was the exact opposite of agrarian. “What are you good at?”

“Intriguing question, Oliver,” Morrie commended as if it had never occurred to him to undergo such self-examination. In a thoughtful tone he proceeded to do so for us now. “Whist. Identification of birds. A passable reciting voice, I’m told. Latin declensions. A bit rusty on Greek, but—”

“Oliver surely means your recent field of work,” Rose took over. “The leather trade,” she identified it as if Morrie’s own job description might elude him. Quick as a whip, though, he put in: “I handled the kidglove end of things, didn’t I, Rose.”

“Our family enterprise,” she said sadly, “it—” She gave her head that little shake. “After my poor husband—” This time she drew a chest-heaving breath. “Everything went.”

Morrie rapidly followed that with:

“Oliver? You have provided for Rose most generously.” Drawing a breath of the same dramatic dimension as hers—could something like that run in the family?—he went on: “We were hoping you could be of assistance in my depleted situation, too. I am not afraid of work.”

Father waited warily, to see if the ancient tagline might be coming: “I can lie right down by it and go to sleep.” But Morrie seemed to mean what he had just vowed.

Finally, doubtless feeling the eyes of the audience in the back of the wagon on him, Father said only as much as seemed prudent: “I’ll ask around.” But the next thing we knew, here came his laugh by way of his nose. Damon and I and probably even Toby recognized one of his moments of inspiration. “On second
thought,” we heard him say. “I happen to know someone who needs a few cords of wood cut to see her through the winter.”

“Oh,” Rose exulted enough for both her and Morrie, “just the thing!” Damon nudged me. Aunt Eunice and her woodpile both: Morrie was going to need his courage in the face of that work.

Shadows were growing long by the time we crossed the Westwater plain and came into sight of our homestead and the Schrickers’. Whether or not Rose and Morrie took it as a greeting, Houdini came out to meet us at the section-line road, barking so hard he staggered in circles.

“Upkeep,” Rose declared as she cast an eye over our lodgings first thing the next morning. “That’s every secret of a pleasant household, regular upkeep.”

The bunch of us, Father in the lead, trailed her from room to room. She had shown up before we set off for school or Father made his way out to the horse barn—truth be told, before Toby had his shoes on or Father had his first dosage of coffee in him or Damon had the sleep wiped from his eyes or I had pulled myself together after a dream involving an eternal wait at a depot. So, the surprise knock on the door that early in the day froze the four of us until we remembered we now had a new standard of life, waiting to be let in. And everywhere Rose’s gaze of inspection alit, ours following hers a bit apprehensively, some shortfall of housekeeping stood revealed like a museum exhibit of bachelor habits. Underfoot: we swept occasionally, but mopped never. Abovehead: spiderwebs and soot clouded together in a way Shakespeare could have made something of. The upstairs bedroom where Damon and I fitfully shared the big bed and Toby nested in his corner bunk displayed the private clutter of each of us. If anything, we practiced downkeep. Damon’s scrapbooks lay around open when he was working on them and he was always working on them. Over in his nook Toby had a
growing assortment of bones from the buffalo jump we had discovered, secretly hoping, I suspect, that he could accumulate a buffalo. My books already threatened to take over my part of the room and keep on going. Mother’s old ones, subscription sets Father had not been able to resist, coverless winnowings from the schoolhouse shelf, whatever cargoes of words I could lay my hands on I gave safe harbor. All three of us had arrowhead collections; Rose must have divined instantly that it wasn’t safe to put a finger down on any surface without a good close look first.

Still, people on Lowry Hill in Minneapolis must have had their own dusty corners and scatterings of things, mustn’t they? Filing after Rose on her march through the house upstairs and then back down, we waited hopefully for her to say something such as _I have seen worse._ She didn’t say it.

Instead, as her eyes took everything in, we could tell she was building a mental list of some length. But nowhere on it, so far, was the one chore in the one room in the house that would do us some instant good. Maybe my stomach rumbled at me, or maybe I was merely determined to find out whether `Can’t Cook But Doesn’t Bite` meant what it sounded like or not. Maybe I did it to head off Damon, who tended to come awake like a bear out of hibernation, hungry and cranky. Or maybe I figured Toby deserved some morsel of reward for his overflowing adoration of Rose. In any event, after Rose pinned down Father on how long it had been since the chimney flue in the parlor was last cleaned, I was the one who said brightly, “The kitchen gets pretty hard use from us, doesn’t it, Father.”

He sent me a warning frown, but too late. “It’s right in here,” Toby charged to the doorway and eagerly looked back over his shoulder for Rose. She said, “Then let’s have a look,” as if we were all going to the zoo.
Functional clutter is perhaps the best description of how we managed in the kitchen. Provisions such as bags of flour and sugar and an arsenal of canned goods stood on the counter so we would always know where things were. Likewise certain frequently used pots, pans, butcher knives, large spoons, and dishes. The table showed only a passing acquaintance with meals; one entire end of it was permanently stacked with Toby’s crayon drawings, Father’s archive of newspapers except for the ones Damon had eviscerated for his baseball and football and boxing scrapbooks, even more of my books, and the like. As a person looked around, it was clear that culinary skills were not our strongest point as a family. In point of fact, the main ingredient of our mealtimes was disarray. Father had many knacks, but when by necessity he turned his hand to the cookstove, always running late, never versed in preparations, his results almost invariably came out boiled, soupy, lumpy, or tough as shoe leather. We truly dined only on Sundays at Rae’s table; otherwise we subsisted. Surely Rose would read our condition and be moved to say I can fry up some eggs and bacon and hotcakes in a jiffy, wouldn’t she? Damon and I waited tensely and Toby plopped down at his place at the table as if the issue was already resolved. Hopes soared as Rose hesitated in the middle of the room, then stepped toward the cookstove.

“Does the reservoir hold good hot water?” she asked Father, and, studiously not looking our way, he said he guessed so.

Hot water! We were capable of that ourselves. Rose moved on past every foodstuff and utensil we possessed with no more than a glance, seeming to be an absolute tourist in this part of the house. The one item she did pause over lay stretched beside the kitchen stove.

“Houdini, if I recall. Whose claim to fame is--?”

Turning in that direction, Father asked in a confidential tone, “Houdini, what do you think of William Howard Taft as President?”
The dog's ears went up. He pushed himself up by his front legs, let out a howl, then rolled over and played dead.

"Quite the performance," Rose had to admit, though still eyeing him with the professional housekeeper's suspicion of a sizable hair-shedding animal.

"Wait till you see him catch a jackrabbit," Toby told her.

"Father?" By now the clock was in my favor in bringing this up, and I used it ruthlessly. "Look at the time. Hadn't we better think about something to eat?"

"Ah." Plainly he had not anticipated dealing with this issue this soon. But even more plainly, the other three of us were voting with our stomachs. Taking a deep breath, he squared around to Rose and began: "We haven't had breakfast yet and wondered if--"

"Oh, I never touch it, thanks very much anyway." With that she disappeared out to the roughed-in front porch known as the mud room to continue her assessment of the household.

"Around here, it's always mush," Damon called despairingly to her departing back.

Father gave us a defensive look and turned to the cookstove. He fired up his coffee first, then began boiling up oatmeal as we glumly watched. Rose soon was back in from whatever she had been in search of. "Washday," she said decisively. "That would be a start."

"Paul's your man when it comes to water," Father said, not without a glint of retribution as he set aside my oatmeal bowl and nodded me toward the pump in the yard. Indeed I was in charge of the waterbucket, doing the dishes, and Saturday night baths. With a groan I got up from the table to help Rose with the wash water.

I showed her the trick of operating the pump by wetting the leather piston with a couple of quick half-strokes, then the long downstrokes that brought water
The pothole pold Father called the Lake District was in the field between our place and Aunt Eunice's.
gushing. She and I hefted the full washtub onto the stove to heat, then went back out to fill the rinse tub. As she worked the pump handle, she said only loud enough for me to hear:

“Here’s a thought. Mind you, this is merely a suggestion. But washday could include Houdini.”

“Doesn’t work,” I told her crossly, still out of sorts from lack of food. “You can’t get him within a mile of a washtub.”

“Didn’t I see a pond? Hold your mouth right while you toss a stick in it, and perhaps Houdini will give himself a bath.” She gave me a look with a hint of conspiracy in it. “Toby might even volunteer for the chore, do you suppose?”

“I’ll get him on it, after school,” I conceded although I never liked being maneuvered.

My mind was mainly on breakfast, and as soon as we had the wash water going, I tore into my bowl of oatmeal, which of course was turning gluey. As I spooned the stuff into me and Father slapped together not particularly appetizing cheese sandwiches for our lunch at school, Rose swooped through time after time, either half-buried under a mound of our bedding in her arms or hefting a heaped dirty-clothes basket on a practiced hip. Toby was upstairs in pursuit of his shoes, but Damon, I could tell, was waiting his chance for something. When Rose disappeared again in search of any more fabric to wash, he whispered urgently across the kitchen: “Aren’t you going to ask her?”

Startled, but not so much so he didn’t remember to keep to a whisper in answering Damon, Father fired back: “Young man, I would like to handle this my own way, if you don’t mind. When I think the time is right, I’ll of course put it to her about the cooking—”

“No, no, the milking!”

“Ah, that. Right.”
When Rose sailed into the room again under another billow of sheets to be washed, Father began laying out to her the logical connection between the churn and the origin of the milk, therefore--

"I rather thought this might come up," Rose interrupted him. "It’s been a while, but I can milk a cow." She studied Father for a moment. "Are there any other duties that come under the Montana definition of housekeeping?"

Father brightened. "Actually, there’s another skill allied to all your domestic ones we had hoped to call on. We could even add a bit to your wages if absolutely necessary. It would help like everything, Rose, if you could handle the kitchen--"

"--scraps for the chickens," Rose concluded with a knowing wag of her head. "Inevitable. Poultry are not my favorite creatures and a slop bucket is never pretty, but all right, I can feed the chickens for you and I suppose gather the eggs while I’m at it." Now she peered at Father with mortal seriousness. The top of her head only reached the tip of his chin, but there was no shortage of stature in her tone when she spoke up like this. "Oliver, I must tell you--I take exception to pigs."

"Put your mind at rest, we’re hogfree," Father said with an expulsion of breath. He noticed the riveted audience of the three of us. "Don’t you have a schoolhouse waiting for you?"

"We’re going, we’re going," I said, reluctant to tear myself away. Damon grabbed up the schoolbooks he had brought home but of course had not opened, Toby pecked Father on the cheek as the other two of us manfully watched the daily goodbye kiss we had outgrown, we chorused a parting to Rose, and off we went.

That October sky was as deceptively clear as this one. Across the crisp grass of autumn Toby and Damon and I spurred our horses with a verve we hadn’t had since before Mother left our lives. Great gains came seldom, in our experience,
but we could already count ours up since Rose’s arousing knock on the door a mere hour ago. Damon was liberated from the milk pail. I no longer had to ferry our every stitch of clothing to Rae’s washdays. And Toby had a name engraved on his heart, as he always needed, and it read Rose Llewellyn. All that, plus the fact that the disheveled house was in for the cleaning of its life. True, we were no better off on the matter of meals yet, but we had to trust that Father would find some way to win Rose over on that. As we rode to school, the shadows of our horses lively behind us, the world as we knew it in Marias Coulee seemed to shine with fresh promise. The Pronovosts had loyally waited for us at the section line fence, late as we were, providing us the earliest possible audience about the marvels of housekeeping. Father had harnessed his team of workhorses in record time and already could be seen on the haul road to the irrigation project with the dray, waving jauntily to us across the fields. Perhaps most miraculous, the slow song of a saw from the direction of Aunt Eunice’s place indicated Morrie was gainfully employed. He had asked Father, “What exactly is meant by a cord of wood?” “Four feet wide, four feet high, and eight feet long, that’s a cord,” Father recited in surprise. “Intriguing,” said Morrie. “I wonder whether Shakespeare was working that in, there in the line: “Oh, the charity of a penny cord.”” “I have a hunch he was merely threatening to hang Falstaff,” Father responded. “Now then, do you know how to use a splitting maul?” In short, on a morning when even those two fussy autodidacts were in tune with the tasks of this earth, every prospect pleased.

But that afternoon at recess, I slugged Eddie Turley.

Damon of all people pulled me off him. Probably more in surprise than charity toward me, the Swede boys held Eddie back as he raged to get at me. Odds were that it was the only punch I would ever land on him, but it had been a good one, a clout to the jaw that knocked him back a step or two. That swing of my fist created an instant sensation in the schoolyard, of course. “That’s it, Paul, lay it to
him!” Verl Fletcher yelped in encouragement, as if I hadn’t just delivered my best. “Ooh, your poor hand,” issued from Barbara Rellis, a sixth-grader but already catty. Carnelia’s head popped out of the outhouse. I caught sight of Toby in the circle of smaller kids, looking amazed. Everything escalated with the speed of sound. Grover Stinson and Virgil Calhoun were talking back to Eddie and his outraged contingent, and since the Swedes happened to be over there on Eddie’s side, the Slavs automatically formed up on mine and chimed in. The history-book chapter on the Congress of Vienna had nothing to show us about balances of alliances.

My immediate adversary, however, was not Eddie Turley but my brother. In the strictest sense, Damon and I saw eye to eye. He had caught up to me in height, validating—in his own mind, at least—his passion for every kind of sports over my bookishness. Now he had me in a lasso-like armhold across my chest, and if I hadn’t been so mad, it should have occurred to me what I was in for from Eddie if even Damon could so easily handle me. Our faces nearly touched as we traded savage whispers.

“Have you gone crazy? He’s too much for you.”

“I don’t care. I’m through taking it about the housekeeper.”

”What’d he say?”

“He asked me if she fed us from her tit for breakfast.”

“Why didn’t you hit him harder?”

“Thanks all to hell, Damon.”

Suddenly everyone became aware of a sound like a woodpecker on glass. Miss Trent was rapping on a schoolroom window, squinting as she tried to decipher the commotion. She only came outside on these occasions if she actually could see fists flying. With long practice, all of us in the schoolyard dissolved from the scene of the fracas but stayed within range of catcall.
Eddie was staring blue murder at me and for that matter Damon. He had the right pedigree for it. Ambrose Turley hunted wolves and coyotes for a livelihood, and he and Eddie lived not much better than beasts themselves in a ramshackle place on the Marias River bottomland. People went out of their way to leave Brose Turley alone as he scavenged the countryside setting traps and collecting pelts. His nearly man-size son looked perfectly capable of collecting mine.

Damon was undaunted. "Let me," he insisted in my ear. "I'll get him off the notion of beating the jelly out of you, all right?"

"Thanks all to hell again. How--"

Damon already had stepped over toward the Turley faction to parley. "Just Paul and Eddie--the rest of us keep our noses out," he negotiated with Martin Myrdal and Carl Johansson, eighth-graders who were Eddie's most sizable lieutenants. The Swede boys cast hard looks to where the Drobny brothers and the several Stoyanovs were close behind me, but also on our side of the matter was Verl Fletcher, an eighth-grader like them who was all long arms and knuckles.

"We don't mind watching Paul get what he's got coming," Martin finally sealed the bargain.

That quick, Damon sprung terms on Eddie. "No fighting it out. You're so much bigger than Paul it isn't fair. He'll take you on, but another way. Loser has to leave the other one alone the rest of the school year."

Eddie could not believe what he was hearing. He sputtered, "He hit me first!"

"That evens up for the time you hit Grover, and that time with Milo, and how many times has he done it to you, Martin?" Everybody knew Damon could have kept on naming off schoolyard victims who had felt a clout out of nowhere from Eddie Turley, including most of the girls.
It sunk in on Eddie that this was not the jury to complain to about unfair treatment. He switched to bravado. "I ain't scared of no Milliron. You name it, I'll clean up on him."

"Paul will race you," Damon stayed in charge. "Horseback."

Eddie sneered. "That the best you can do? Any sissy can sit on a horse."

Damon had him where he wanted him. With a wicked grin he specified: "Wrong end to."

Which one of us had come up with riding backward in the saddle in our constant races with each other I can't really prove, but my money would be on Damon. It broke the monotony of the ride to and from school. For a few years there, in good weather Damon and I pretty much rode daily doubles against each other. Whoever lost in the first gallop only had to say "Wrong end to, this time" and off we shot again, crazy jockeys clinging atop the horse's hindquarters. Now that the bulk of age is on me, I can barely imagine ever being that nimble in the saddle--shucking out of the stirrups, scooting up and around on the seat of our pants, and ending up reseated as if we were going one direction and the horse the other--or that my roan Joker or Damon's pinto Kayo put up with it. We didn't race wrong-end-to as much after Toby started going to school with us, as he didn't need any encouragement in the direction of breaking his neck. But every so often, the three of us would reach the stretch of the road to school that couldn't be seen from any house, one or the other could not resist flinging the challenge, and the Milliron cavalry would be flying down the road, back pockets first.

But those were races for fun. The ante was sky-high in the contest with Eddie. "He has that steel-gray, remember," I pointed out to Damon, promoter of all this. Brose Turley in his occupation of running down wolves possessed a saddle
string of deep-chested rangy horses, and Eddie rode a grizzled brute of a steed that looked like it could run a gazelle to death.

"Joker’s not bothered, are you, boy." Damon reached over from his own mount and rubbed the mane of my bownecked sorrel saddle pony. Then held up a fist to me like John L. Sullivan striking a pose, grinning behind it. "One Punch Milliron. Gonna have to put you in my scrapbook."

"Bam!" Toby, riding on the other side of me on our way home from school, was even more exultant about the haymaker I got in on Eddie. "You really gave it to him, Paul!"

I glanced at Damon, and he at me. Ahead of us, down the long gumbo hill toward home, a field of white linen had sprouted in front of our house and Rose could just be seen out there taking sheets off the clothesline. We both reined up, and I reached over and halted Toby’s horse as well. "Tobe, listen. You can’t tell anybody. Anybody, got that? The fight and the race and all, this has to be a strict secret." I spat in the palm of my hand. His eyes large, Toby did the same and submitted to the first binding handshake of his life.

Damon set the race--naturally, the whole schoolyard had to be in on it--for Friday after school. As every kid knew, parents somewhat lost track of the clock at the end of the school week, and we had our set of proven tactics to take advantage of that lapse. It was not unusual for an entire pack of us to jaunt off after school to a coyote den someone had discovered, so you could just bet that across Marias Coulee that Friday the excuse for late arrival home would be a mumbled chorus of "looking for coyote pups." Beyond that, the kids with farthest to ride made a flurry of staying-over arrangements. Virgil Calhoun would overnight with Grover Stinson, the Kratka boys would become honorary Swedes for a night at the Myrdals’. Lily Lee Fletcher quietly took in Vivian Filson, whose lone small figure on the longest ride home of any of us was a daily lesson in bravery. Meanwhile,
details such as starting line and finish line and exact interpretation of “wrong end to” were being worked out by Damon and Martin. Edgy as I was about the outcome of the race, a part of me had to admire the level of conniving that went into it.

And nobody blabbed. That was the incredible thing. I cannot say a word to anyone in my department without it ending up three floors away. But the schoolchildren of Marias Coulee kept as mum as the pillars of Delphi. Oh, Miss Trent knew something was up, definitely. She trooped around the perimeter of the schoolroom in her cloppety shoes even more than usual, suspicion in every jiggle of her bumpy build. Once she even came out at recess to try to figure out what the sudden giggles and excited clusterings were about. Our pact of secrecy resisted her best effort, though. Not even Carnelia, who ordinarily would have gone a mile out of her way to tell on me, let out a peep about the race; after all, there was every chance Eddie Turley was going to make me look like the fool of all time. So, that week built and built, two clouds of anticipation in the opposing climate zones of the schoolyard, toward Friday.

On the home front, so to speak, morning by morning Rose arrived with some new plan of attack on the house. Now that our bedding and underwear and even hankies were as fresh as a garden of lilies—a shrewd boost in our morale—she chose her battles with professional elan. Every stove was scraped out and polished, and every stovepipe emptied of soot, before she moved on to sweeping and scrubbing the floors. The day after that, windows were washed until they sparkled and new curtains went up that she had prevailed on Father to fetch from town. Offhand miracles occurred, too: lamp chimneys suddenly were clean instead of smoke-darkened, Houdini no longer was a canine disaster area thanks to his pond romps with Toby. I mean it when I say the house positively breathed in a
way different from before, for among all the other exhalations of wonder that our housekeeper provided, Rose was a woman who whistled at her work. About like a ghost would. That is, the sound was just above silence. A least little tingle of air, really, the lightest music that could pass through lips, yet with a lingering quality that was inescapable. I tell you, there is nothing quite like stepping into a seemingly empty house and hearing the parlor--Rose’s tidying was often so swift and silent that the tune was the only sound--softly begin to serenade you with “Down in the valley, valley so low.” More than once I saw Father stop whatever he was doing and cock an ear in curiosity toward some corner of the house, and clearly none of the rest of us had expected a housekeeper with a repertoire. But for all we knew, whistling was the housekeeping anthem on Lowry Hill in Minneapolis.

All that week long, then, one breezelike song after another on her lips, Rose seemed to brighten with the house. Upstairs, downstairs, the mud porch; she moved with authority through every room except the kitchen.

We ate as we had always eaten, haphazardly and dully. Father right then was busier than ever with his hauling sideline, freight for the Big Ditch stacking up at the depot daily. For his part, Damon was so immersed in the scheming for the upcoming race that he didn’t badger Father about the cooking situation. My mind was so crammed with scenarios of galloping backward—all that week my dreams featured Eddie Turley jeering at me from a secure perch between the humps of a racing camel—that I was useless for any other purpose. And filled with our secret the way he was, Toby went around looking like he was going to burst at any minute, but fortunately putting his energies into learning to whistle like Rose.
Friday morning, in my dazed state I opened the door to Rose’s now familiar knock and stood there blinking. Along the line of her right shoulder hovered a startling mustache, like a hairy epaulette.

“Paul!” she exclaimed as if delighted that I still was in existence. “Look who’s with me!”

“Uh, morning, Mr. Morgan,” I managed.

“Needless formality, Paul, especially at this ungodly hour of the day,” he protested as if he had come all the way over to our place on this matter of manners. “Let’s make it ‘Morrie’.” He stepped from behind Rose and provided me the necessary handshake.

The sound of Morrie’s voice brought Father straight out of the kitchen, cup in hand. Before he could get in a word, Rose was combining explanation and congratulation:

“We’re in luck, Oliver! I’ve conscripted Morrie to clean the chickenhouse. It’s really quite—” The way she wrinkled her nose said the rest.

Morrie raised a hand as if to fend off any objection from Father. “Gratis. A token of thanks for the new lease on life you have provided Rose. And for that matter, me.” By now Damon and Toby were charging down from upstairs, all ears. Morrie acknowledged their presence with as much of a smile as could make its way through the mustache. Then sped right on: “Montana seems to agree with me. Hard labor—that is, strenuous exertion such as cording up wood was just what I needed to draw me out of dwelling on the recent plights of life.”

Was? Father was startled by that, we all were. “You worked yourself out of a job already?”

“Three cords of freshly split wood, measured to the inch,” Morrie attested. “The Parthenon is not built more exactly than Eunice Schricker’s winter woodpile.” He swung his arms slightly, evidently restless for more labor. “I believe destiny is
fueled by momentum, Oliver. Once launched upon a fresh turn in life’s path, a person ought not to slack off.” He gazed at his sister as if to give credit where credit was due. “Rose never slacks off.”

“Destiny has led you to our chicken coop, has it,” Father said, an uncommon glint in his eye. “Maybe you ought to fortify yourself with a swig of coffee first.”

“Gladly,” Morrie accepted, missing Rose’s shake of her head to warn him off.

Damon and Toby and I were in a dilemma, antsy to reach school and endure through the day to the big race, but reluctant to tear ourselves away from Morrie’s debut at shoveling chicken poop. Our compromise was to scamper upstairs to get ready for school and at the same time strain our ears to pick up every word from the coffee klatch in the kitchen.

“What’s ‘gratis’?” Damon asked me.

“For free.”

“Really? The chickenhouse? Ugh.”

“I have to say, our chickens usually don’t have such elevated company,” Father’s voice drifted up. “Isn’t there some other trade you want to take up, more on the town side of things? Westwater could use a good glover.”

There was a rattle of cup and saucer, which we figured was Morrie putting Father’s version of coffee a safe distance away. “By ‘glover,’ you mean—”

“Workgloves, lady’s suede, sled mittens,” Father hypothesized. “Someone like you who knows the leather trade, a glove store would seem a natural opportunity. Or were you and Rose and the late Mr. Llewellyn not in retail, before?”

Morrie sounded pensive. “International trade was more our line. When catastrophe came down on us as it did, frankly I lacked the heart to return to that
kind of endeavor. I decided to seek something more, well, fundamental. Basic, no more of the frippery that we had made our name by. And so, when Rose--” He broke off, in that mannerism he shared with her, as though the rest explained itself without being said. Toby’s shoelaces were giving him trouble and I was working on those, while Damon searched everywhere for his belt. As if in accompaniment to our efforts, Morrie suddenly resumed: “I might cite you Santayana--‘matter is the only reality.’ I don’t mind telling you, Oliver, I find those words have considerably more meaning here in the West than they did in the ostensible halls of learning.”

“Where did you take your degree, Morrie?” As a proud graduate of Manitowoc Technical School, Father was always interested in educational pedigree.

“Knox.”

“In Illinois? A fine college, I’ve heard.” Father caught on. “Or do you mean ‘hard knocks’?”

“A feeble jest, Oliver. I apologize. But it was at an Illinois institution--the University of Chicago.”

Damon stopped what he was doing and his eyes widened. I didn’t follow football as he did, but even I had heard of that school’s unbeatable teams under its titan of a coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg. Even Toby had absorbed snippets from Damon’s constant attention to the teams in his sports scrapbooks. In excited recognition he whispered now, “Damon, the Baboons!”

“The Maroons,” Damon hissed back at him. He looked longingly across the room. “I have to show Morrie my scrapbook.”

“Not now, you’re not,” I told him. “Come on, let’s get this day over with.”

But I was the one who veered off at the bottom of the stairs to track down Rose whistling up work for herself. Next to where she hung her coat I noticed the
itty-bitty sack of lunch she brought every day. Morrie had brought nothing at all. What did these people exist on?

"Morrie better find out where the pond is," I murmured to Rose when I found her. "He's going to smell to high heaven after he spends a day shoveling chicken matter."

Her lips twitched. "Houdini and I will share the secret with him, depend on it."

Father materialized in the kitchen doorway. "The last I knew, school still existed. Aren't you characters--"

"We're going," I blurted, Damon and Toby tumbling into line behind me to get out the door.

The ride to school was a blur, my mind on Eddie Turley and his steel-gray horse, while Damon pelted me with last-minute advice and Toby was as wound up as a music box. When we reached there the schoolyard was a mass of anticipation, everyone hanging on outside watching for us even though Miss Trent always wanted us all in our seats by the time she was done beating on the triangle.

It was barely into arithmetic time, when the sixth-graders were at the blackboard working on division problems she was giving them, when Miss Trent wheeled around with surprising quickness for someone of her shambly build.

"Tobias Milliron."

Every head in the schoolroom snapped up at her tone. "Perhaps you would like to share with the rest of us what you are so busy confiding to Sigrid."

"N-n-no, ma'am" Toby replied in all honesty.

"Do it anyway," came the icy command.

Next to me at our desk Carnelia snickered, until she realized that if Toby was nailed for whispering and had to tell what about, it meant no race. Up at the blackboard, Damon abruptly turned as pale as the chalk in his fist. He and I traded
helpless looks. I didn't dare try to draw Miss Trent's attention away from Toby; she already had been eyeing me suspiciously ever since I had turned into a center of attention at every recess.

Besides, there was the question of whether Miss Trent had it in for the Milliron family.

Oh, she was punctilious enough toward us in the classroom. Damon was not put on this earth to make life easy for any teacher, but Miss Trent was careful not to keep him after school any more often than any other classroom sinner. In my less obstreperous case, she drilled me on each subject as tonelessly as if going down a menu, and that was that. (The saving grace was that she didn't seem to care much for Carnelia either.) But if Miss Trent had her doubtful side toward us, we were doubly suspicious of her. Damon and I were convinced she was husband-hunting, quite possibly in Father's direction. Pickings were not plentiful in Marias Coulee; a handful of old bachelor homesteaders with not the best habits, a too-long-on-the-shelf widower like Brose Turley, and just a few eminently eligible ones such as Vivian Pease's dad and, naturally, Father. On last year's last day of school, when the entire school board and all the parents were on hand for the graduation of the eighth-graders, Miss Trent had made eyes at Father to the best of her limited ability. To our relief, he had not reciprocated. We trusted Father, but you never knew what a school board member could stumble into where a teacher was concerned. Damon and I simply could not countenance the thought of that familiar figure from the classroom dominating the rest of our hours too. High rump, low bosom, Miss Trent was rather bunched in the middle, accentuating the scary extent of her limbs. But the worse part was her customary bothered expression, as though she had something stuck in a back tooth. If she was even more out of sorts than usual--peeved at coming across an unmalleable Milliron anywhere she looked, say--Toby truly was in for a hard time from her.
Clop clop. She was advancing on him relentlessly. Toby sat there paralyzed with terror that he would be kept after school and miss the race. The rest of us squirmed.

“Tobias? We’re waiting.”

Damon was frantic. But sometimes he got his best ideas while in that state. Behind Miss Trent’s back now, he lifted his elbows and flapped them like wings. Toby gathered that in and put it all into one grand expulsion of breath:

“A man from the University of Chicago is cleaning our chickenhouse. For free.”

Miss Trent’s new expression revealed that she had not anticipated an announcement of that sort, evidently somewhere on the mythic level of the Augean stables. Plainly, though, this was not anything Toby could be making up.

“That is no excuse for whispering it to your neighbor,” she said in not altogether convincing fashion. “You know the penalty, a taste of the ruler.”

With that she gave Toby a swat on the hand and a warning that cured him for the rest of the day.

“Meet you at The Cut.”

That was the watchword, when all of us piled out of the schoolhouse at the end of that interminable day and sprinted to our saddled horses.

The usual homeward group of us and the Pronovosts, with the various Drobnyss and Stinsons and Virgil Calhoun trying to look innocently tacked on, traveled at a just fast enough clip to get ourselves out of sight before parents started looking out of windows. We didn’t want to wear out my horse. Joker’s ears were sharply up, probably from wondering about all the patting and rubbing of his mane by so many strangers.
We came down the gradient from the higher ground exactly at the same time as the Turley bunch galloped in from the north gulch they had circled around to.

"The suckers," Damon said to me, confident enough for both of us.

He had to be, because I wasn’t so sure. I remember my heart beating at what felt like twice its usual speed, while the last few preparations for the race seemed to take forever. The excited chatter of the gathering--Toby was letting loose everything he’d had to save up all day in school--reached me only dimly. We needed to kill time while the rest of the kids filtered in, and as they gradually popped into sight from every direction, I stared at that waiting stretch of road as though Joker’s hoofprints and my shifting shadow had not gone back and forth over it every day of the past seven school years. If Marias Coulee possessed a creek, it instantly would earn promotion to valley. However, as if nature was rehearsing for something larger, the long wrinkle in the land here south from the Marias River more closely resembles a sunken prairie, gentle enough in its gradual vee to attract the first adherents of dryland farming who ever set eyes on it. The neighboring benchlands along the river and the broad Westwater plain extend around it like an upper floor of the earth, and Marias Coulee fits at the base of the geographical stairs, complete with landing: the gumbo hill up from our place breaks off into an eroded claybank area, where the road runs flat and straight for about half a mile before climbing again to the Westwater plain. This was The Cut, it was the ground I had known as long as anything in my life, and its bare beaten dirt looked as foreign and forbidding to me at that suspended moment in time as the Sahara.

Finally the Kratka brothers, the last of us and with the most roundabout route to sneak past nosy parents, came spurring madly in from the river end of the coulee, and Damon got things underway.

"We have to make it fast, before somebody comes along. Martin? Is Eddie ready to eat dust?"
For answer, Eddie stomped up to the starting line leading his snorty high-
shouldered mount. That horse looked like it could step over the top of Joker and
me. The terrible taste of doubt nearly did me in. I must admit, I was within the tip
of my tongue of saying uncle, of finding some wild excuse to forfeit the race. But
that would doom me at school even worse than losing to Eddie. And the dreams
that would beset me--

I gave Joker a last pat and led him out onto the road beside Eddie’s big
steel-gray.

There we stood, at the line scratched in the dirt. Eddie always wore one of
Brose Turley’s old hats that seemed to have been fashioned out of the dried skin of
some major beast. I pulled my mail-order catalogue Junior Stetson lower over my
eyes and tried to concentrate on the road ahead. The race track, to call it that,
arrowed off from the starting line to a single marker, distant and shining, in the
middle of the road. Here was where the genius of Damon came in. At his
insistence, the course was a loop, to the far end of The Cut and back.

“Flat-out, here to there,” Martin Myrdal understandably had tried to hold out
for when the two sides were negotiating the ground rules. A horse the size of the
steel-gray could build a lot of velocity when simply aimed straight ahead.

Damon was pitiless. “What, Eddie can’t steer that cayuse of his around any
kind of a corner?”

“I’ll race your squirt brother around in circles, if that’s what it takes,” Eddie
had snapped up the bait.

Most of us carried small lard pails as lunch buckets, and Damon and Martin
now had stacked several of those, with a rock in each for stability, until they made a
silver pillar. I understood why Damon demanded the momentum-breaking marker,
but I still fretted about it. Rounding it, if the horses were close together, would be
no easy stunt. On the other hand, if the steel-gray was half a dozen horse-lengths
ahead of Joker by then, traffic at the marker was going to be the least of my problems, wasn’t it.

Damon stepped forth to hold the bridle of my horse, and Martin did the same on the Turley horse. Verl Fletcher had been picked to be the race caller because he was the one eighth-grader other than Eddie who wasn’t a Swede or a Slav.

“Everybody back, give ‘em room,” he directed, and there was a collective groan of saddle leather as thirty horseback school children moved off into the badland cutbanks on either side of the road to spectate.

"Riders up,” Verl called.

Eddie was watching me from the corner of his eye and I was doing the same to him. It hit me: he wanted me to be the first to get up there backward in the saddle, so he could see how. I planted myself like a post until Verl said to us, “You gonna ride ‘em or walk ‘em?”

Eddie lost patience, stuck his other foot than usual into the stirrup and with a mighty grunt heaved himself upward toward his horse’s rump, barely clearing the peril of the saddlehorn as he wishboned over, then felt around behind him like a blind man for the reins Martin was attempting to hand to him. I swung into my saddle the right way, took control of Joker’s reins, then shucked the stirrups and scooted around on my fanny so that I too was established in the leather basin of the saddle wrong-end-to. Eddie glared across at me as if I had just shaken a ballet tutu in his face.

Damon, though, rose on tiptoe beside Joker’s mane to ecstatically whisper up to me:

“He hasn’t practiced! The dope! Can you believe it?”

“Damon, that horse of his doesn’t need any practice,” I whispered back.

“You worry too much.”
“Gonna give you a count of three,” Verl let us know.

Those next moments have stayed with me with the clarity of a clockface. My belt buckle brushed against the cantle of the saddle as I leaned in the direction of Joker’s flanks. The reins were wrapped double around my right hand, held as far behind me as I could reach so as not to tug on the bit of the bridle differently than Joker was used to.

“One,” Verl chanted.

There was not a sound from the entire mounted legion of Marias Coulee school, from either Eddie’s adherents or mine. Clans of centaurs must have watched with similar appraisal when match races were run in the groves of Peloponnesus.

“Two.”

Joker’s tensed ears were really sharpened to a point now, and probably mine were no better.

“Three, SPUR ‘EM!”

Eddie was the only one dressed for that, sporting a pair of silver jinglebobs sharp as can openers that likely were everyday equipment in the Turley family business of encouraging saddlehorses to run down wolves, and certainly that first jab of the spurs commanded the steel-gray’s attention. But not quite as Eddie had intended. The big horse hurtled into action shying right and left, fishtailing down the road as it tried to figure out the wishes of the unbalanced rider on its back. Nor was Eddie the master of handling reins behind his back yet. Joker and I managed a perfectly nice orderly start when I pressed my shoe heels against his ribcage and gave the reins the flick he recognized, but it didn’t do us any immediate good.

Whatever lane of the road we tried, there was a wall of gray horse in our way, one instant the veering rump of the thing, the next practically a sideways view of Eddie as he tried simultaneously to stay upright and to saw his horse’s head around to the
right direction with that reversed grip on the reins. Over the hoofbeats and horse
snorts I could hear cheering and shouts of equestrian advice from the onlookers up
in their vantage points in the badlands, but none of it registered long enough to last.
When I wasn’t having to keep an eye on Eddie’s galloping wrestle with his horse,
I was aware only of the road flying at uncommon speed beneath me. It is surprising
how near the hard ground seems when there is only a horse’s tail between you and
it.

Time whirled away like our dust. As well as I could judge ahead over my
shoulder, we were about to reach the halfway point of The Cut. By that stage of
the race the steel-gray had covered at least twice as much road as Joker and I, and
still it led us by a full length. Apparently that grizzled mass of horseflesh could hurl
along like this all day long. I didn’t have time to think of it then, but Morrie’s point
about the preponderate role of momentum in life was unfortunately holding true so
far.

I collected my wits, at least those that hadn’t been shaken out of me by the
jolts that come from riding backwards in the saddle. It was time to make the one
maneuver I was capable of. Then or never, and maybe it already was too late.
Damon had worked this out with me. “Don’t let him see how to use the cantle until
you have to,” my brother the race promoter had counseled. “Pretty good chance
old Eddie won’t have brains enough to figure it out for himself first.”

So, until right then I had stayed more or less upright in the saddle the same
jouncing way Eddie was, both of us loosy-goosy in the seat as we held on to
stirrup leather or saddlestrings or whatever we could find to grab in the absence of
the usual saddlehorn. Now, though, when Eddie’s horse made another of its
spooked tangents toward the far side of the road and Joker was able to close the gap
just enough, I dropped down lower than any jockey and grabbed the curved back of
the saddleframe in a bear hug with my left arm. I’d be lying if I said the cantle was
the most appealing thing I ever hugged in my life. But right then it served its purpose. As one or another of us—probably the natural daredevil, Toby—had discovered in our wrong-end-to races, if you bent over far enough the width of the cantle steadied the base of your chest, and, swooping up hip-pocket-high on a person sitting the normal way in the saddle, it provided something substantial to hug onto. And this move greatly streamlined matters for the horse. With a crouched-over jockey now atop him, albeit one tucked in not the usual direction, Joker gained some on the skittering steel-gray.

Eddie had his hands full just with his horse, let alone the concept of affection for his saddle cantle. It must have been bad enough, glancing over and finding that I was clinging secure as a cockleburr on the back of my horse while the back of his was like a hurricane deck. Worse, surely, was the realization that Joker was steadily sneaking up every time his hard-to-rein steed careened across the road.

By now we were thundering down on the turn marker, the pillar of pails. The view over my shoulder told me what I already knew, that the road was not wide enough for both horses to make the turn at the same time. Here the advantage went back to Eddie. The way the steel-gray rocketed back and forth across our course anyway, Eddie only had to make sure the horse kept going a little farther than usual in its next veer in front of Joker and me, then rein it around hard to loop into the turn. All I could do was to keep us from getting run over by the gray, and somehow try to catch up after the turn. Joker was just far enough behind the other horse that I saw the flash of motion as Eddie set to work on shouldering into our way. He did what riders like the Turleys do on brawny hardmouthed horses. He resorted to his spurs to enforce his reining.

As Damon and Toby and I could have told him, spurs actually were not the best idea while riding wrong end to. When you think about it, if your heels are in the vicinity of the horse's shoulders where your toes usually are, the rowels of your
spurs are going to hit the horse up front there in the withers, aren’t they, rather than where he expects it in the flanks.

Eddie must have jabbed in an off-balance way, too, raking his horse more sharply on the off-shoulder. The big gray animal flinched away from Eddie’s intended direction and abruptly angled off the opposite way. Straight into the turn pillar.

There was a tinny thunder as the steel-gray breasted through the stack of metal, and it rained lunch pails.

Ducking, I let Joker gallop on past where the pails were clattering down, then tugged hard left on the reins. Joker did not manage to make a sharp turn of it, huffing around like a laborious imitation of a cutting horse, but at least we were eventually turned and headed back down the course toward the finish line. That was more than could be said for our opposition.

What an advantage riding backward in the saddle provided at that moment: I had a great view of Eddie bouncing away into the badlands as his horse kept going and going. The claybank formations there north of The Cut gradually fell away into a maze of eroded shapes that in a mile or so reached the Marias River. The runaway steel-gray showed every sign of taking Eddie for a swim.

Joker imperturbably was racing by himself until I checked ahead and saw Verl waving his arms and calling, “Eddie flubbed the turn! Paul wins!”

Other shouts and hoots and whoops of congratulation filled the air as everyone headed their horses down onto the road for a better look at Eddie’s situation. By the time I hauled Joker to a halt and got myself right side around in the saddle, Damon and Toby were beside me, each more giddy than the other over my victory, and we watched together as the steel-gray disappeared behind a mudstone hump. When it emerged on the other side, the saddle on its back was empty.
None of us were as worried as we maybe should have been about harm coming to Eddie. If wolfpacks could not do the Turleys in, probably they were impervious to lesser creatures such as horses and humans, that line of thinking ran. Still, the entire Marias Coulee school body plunged into the badlands in a loose cavalry charge to the aid of Eddie.

Before we could get there he limped out from behind the mudstone, shirt torn, hat gone, chin a little bloody, scrapes on every patch of skin that we could see.

“This backwards stuff,” he complained as we rode up, “is harder than it looks.”

I felt a foot taller when I flung open the door to the next morning’s knock and piped out cheerfully, “Morning, Rose.”

“My! You must have got up on the right side of the bed.” Pert as a picture herself, she swept in past me, untying her bonnet with one hand and carrying in her other the tiny lunch sack as usual but also a larger bag, doubtless more housecleaning weapons. Today the mud room, where we flung overshoes and hung all the seasons of coats and hats and caps and stashed anything else that was loose, was going to meet its match, she had forecast.

Dying to tell her about the race and simultaneously aware that confiding something like that to any grownup would indeed amount to suicide, I heard myself say in seesaw fashion:

“You know what?”

“No. What?” She paused and peered at me as if to see what kind of spell had come over me.

“I, uh, I had a really good night’s sleep.”
That was only half of it. The night’s dream had everybody honoring me—my triumph the day before was earthwide; the person who caught Eddie’s horse and deposited the reins into his skinned-up hands as if dropping a penny to a beggar was Carnelia—by marching up to my desk at school with cakes. Angelfood. Poundcake. Forbidden rumcake. Chocolate with vanilla frosting. My stomach was growling with the delicious memory of it.

“I’m glad,” said Rose, still giving me a strange look.

“Good morning, Rose.” Father came yawning down the stairs and made his automatic turn toward the kitchen and coffee pot. It was Saturday, so Toby and Damon were sleeping in.

Rose headed him off before he could reach the kitchen doorway. “Oliver? There’s something I must tell you.”

“Is there.” Apprehensively Father turned around to her, and I filed in by his side, since her tone seemed to merit a full audience.

“It’s about what happened yesterday.”

My heart skipped a beat. Father rubbed his chin, trying to think what so distinguished that day from any other of this whirlwind week.

Rose drew in a declamatory breath that Aunt Eunice could have found no fault with, and launched. “I’ve been thinking about what Morrie said about destiny. That man. After all these years, I still learn all manner of things from him.”

“He’s an education, that’s obvious,” Father granted.

“But back to destiny,” she persevered. “This.” She pointed a finger straight as a pistol barrel at the floor, then up to the wall, then and around and across the ceiling, our eyes hypnotically following the orbit of that finger. “This is where I am meant to be,” she declared. “At honest labor, in a household of people
with their feet on the ground. All the--the airiness of our life before, Morrie’s and mine, this is the cure we needed. You have done wonders for us by bringing us here, bringing us out of--”

The emphatic forefinger had ended up aimed in the accusatory direction of Minneapolis. By now we were used to filling in blanks in any conversation with Rose, so we both jumped a little when she unexpectedly did it for us:

“--perdition!”

Father cleared his throat. “Let me try to follow this a little more closely if I can. Yesterday seems to have struck quite a chord with Morrie and you. Am I right that in your minds, Morrie’s rather noble gesture of cleaning out the chickenhouse is somehow tied into a replenished sense of destiny? Happening along at the right time like a Good Samaritan, something like that?”

“Exactly! Oliver and Paul, I think you know that a chore of that nature is not the sort of thing Morrie has been used to in life. The woodpile either. Yet he rallied himself to it yesterday when I asked it of him, getting right in there with that shovel, tackling a task that evidently no one else has ever wanted to touch, not even minding that he ended up smelling like--”

This time she didn’t finish the sentence. She squared her shoulders to face the conclusion all this had led her to. “I looked up destiny in your big dictionary before going home yesterday, to make sure. ‘One’s lot in life.’ That seemed rather short shrift, so I tried fate and that was better.” Rose took another reciting breath. “‘That in the nature of the universe by which things come to be as they are.’ So. Call it either, but Morrie buckling down as he did to a nasty chore handed to him by a quirk of fate--well, me--surely is proof that one’s destiny can be shouldered in an unceremonious new way that makes up for the old. Wouldn’t you say?”
“Just between us, I was simply going to move that chicken coop,” Father said. “It’s on skids.”

“Oh.”

“Now then.” The kitchen beckoned Father more than ever. “Was there anything else on your mind before I make my escape?”

“It seems like there was,” Rose pondered, “before I got off onto— Yes. The kitchen reminds me. I’m to provide food, aren’t I.”

At last. We had waited and waited, and Rose finally had acknowledged our cooking plight. Father and I traded amazed gazes, both our faces lit up. There was an unprecedented tingle in me from my dream of all those cakes. At the time I would have had to look up premonition, but whatever it was, it had done its work.

“Food, food, food,” Rose was thinking out loud as if trying to remind herself. “It’s around here somewhere, I know it is. Ah.” She vanished, but not in the direction of the kitchen. And came back with the larger sack she had brought with her today.

“There now,” she said with satisfaction, “I’ve done my duty of delivering, you’re my witnesses,” our spirits falling with her every word. “Rae sent it over. Lunch for tomorrow, I think she said? I gather that you’re all off to the whatsit, the Big Ditch?”

“We are,” Father confirmed in his flattest tone and took the lunch sack. Then said with emphasis, “Rae is a culinary treasure,” before turning away toward the kitchen.

“Oliver?”

Like someone in a game of grandmother’s footsteps, Rose had moved appreciably nearer by the time he faced around to her again. She had on her slightly conspiratorial expression. “Could you stand some passengers? Morrie and I would be awfully interested to see the Big Ditch.”
“It’s a freight run,” Father dismissed the notion. “We’ll be on the dray, it rides like a pogo stick on these roads.”

Rose had her second round of ammunition ready. “Morrie has no more fear of freight than he does of a chickenhouse.”

“Somehow I can believe that,” Father had to face up to. “All right, I can always use an extra helping of elbow grease in the freight handling. We’ll swing by for you about nine.”

I lingered after he disappeared through the doorway and while she was busily putting on her housecleaning apron and warming up for the day with some little barely audible aria of whistling. Consumed with curiosity, I no longer could resist asking:

“Rose? Lunch and all. What, ah, what is it you eat?”

Plucking up the miniscule bag, she displayed it to me as if it were the trophy of a hunt. “I always bring a nice slice of rusk.” She pulled out what looked like a piece of toast overdone to brittle. “Here, try a bite.”

I can still taste it. It was like eating a shingle.
The Big Ditch. Rose and Morrie were not its usual brand of tourists. Even on a Sunday, the haul road to the construction camp was plumed with dust from various rigs coming to see about something at the incipient grand canal; land fever knows no Sabbath. We encountered a horse trader from over by the mountains whom Father was acquainted with, leading a freshly broken team of work mares behind his buckboard, and he lifted his hat straight in the air in tribute to Father’s big horses, Blue and Snapper. Several speedy surreys passed us by, with Toby and Damon and I making a game of who could be the quickest to identify which of the livery barns in Westwater each was rented from—wheelspokes of red or green or white, after all. We could tell by their bullwool black suits and odd-collared shirts that the surrey passengers were the latest of the Belgian colony drawn a third of the way around the world by the promise of the farmwater the Big Ditch would bring. Near the end of our trip there was what Morrie might have called an instance of momentum of the automotive sort when a Model A, not a common sight yet, was met up with, to the hazard of both our dray and the little vehicle bouncing around in the ruts.
I would say Rose took everything in as though this were a spin in the park, although a bumpy one. She wore yet another silky dress, this one the color of her name. Morrie was more thrown together, in some of George’s old workclothes a couple of sizes big for him. Could it have been cologne, or did he still carry a faint smell from his chicken house adventure? I noticed Father glance every so often at this pair of sightseeing passengers and the three of us who had pestered a Big Ditch visit out of him, as if wondering what had happened to the simple business of drayage. But he never had any trouble holding up his end of a conversation, so matters chattered along. Until we topped the gentle rise at the north end of the broad Westwater benchland.

“My!” Rose issued.

“Good heavens!” Morrie let out.

I suppose every person ever born has gasped at meeting up with the latest earth-changing contraption coming over the horizon. But that it is a common moment stitched into fate or destiny or whatever other name Morrie might have put on it has never lessened my memory of seeing that mammoth dragline steam shovel at work on the prairie. Surely the biggest thing to come to the vicinity since the dinosaurs roamed, the long-necked steam shovel was visible from miles off in its digging of the irrigation project’s main feeder canal, which was to say the Big Ditch. The raw banks of the canal stretched behind the machine for miles, like the wake of some bewitched ship capable of sailing on solid ground. On our journey toward the monster this day, as Toby gabbed over Rose’s shoulder and Damon continued to pepper Morrie with questions about the gridiron exploits of the University of Chicago Maroons and Father was occupied with the reinwork it took to keep the dray out of the most jolting ruts on the haul road, I simply fastened my eyes on the rhythmically digging steam shovel, growing ever closer, until it could
be seen that each of its bites into the ground pulled out what must have been at least a wagonload of earth.

My spell was broken by Morrie. When Damon momentarily ran out of either breath or football players, Morrie leaned ahead on the wagon seat to say across to Father:

"Oliver? I am no agriculturist. But don't I detect somewhat conflicting concepts of farming, between this"--he inclined his head sagely toward the Big Ditch and its incipient network of diversion canals designed to feed water to seventy-five thousand acres of new fields--"and Marias Coulee?"

Father still was back and forth between gratification at having Morrie as a verbal sparring partner and consternation that the bouts seemed to be steadily getting more frequent and going more rounds. I could hear what I knew was not the best tone in his voice as he retorted to Morrie's question:

"Here I thought you were a city slicker, and already you can tell the difference between irrigation and dryland." He softened that a bit. "There's really no conflict to it. If crops were whiskey, it'd be a matter of chaser or straight, is all. We drylanders like ours undiluted."

"I am still stumped," Morrie persisted. "If it takes all this," he again pointed with the crown of his hat to the miles of hydraulic engineering of the irrigation project, "to grow anything here, why don't you need something comparable for your fields?"

"Our formula is r-a-i-n."

But Morrie knew how to drive a point home when he had to, too. Saying not a word more but lifting his brow inquisitively, he put out his hand as a person would to decide if an umbrella was needed. Of course, not a drop of precipitation had fallen during his and Rose's time in Montana.

Father had to deal with that or fold his cards.
“Dryfarming stores away rain when it comes,” he cited the gospel of his generation of homesteaders. “A man of your astuteness will have noticed how deep the furrows are in Marias Coulee fields, surely? That’s to catch runoff and keep it in the ground.”

“For a fact? The soil can act as its own reservoir? Why then do deserts exist, do you suppose?”

“As far as I know, deserts are not plowed.” Father evidently decided that if Morrie was looking for enlightenment about farming, he was going to receive it. Rose, sitting between them, pulled back a bit to make room for debate.

“There’s considerable science to dryfarming, never fear,” Father was letting Morrie know. “The state has tested it out for years on end, the county agent gives us all the latest from their experiment stations and holds deep-plowing institutes and so on. What it comes down to is that we get perfectly respectable crops on so-called arid land.”

“Interesting,” Morrie conceded or maybe not, “that one implement such as the plow can tame nature that way. And history, for that matter.” One more time he indicated to the Big Ditch and its promised acres. “I would think”—when Morrie thought out loud like this, you somehow could hear an idea taking flight, much the way the wingbones of the snow goose can be heard sawing the air as it passes low over you—“I would think that in all the centuries for which there are records, people have sought to coax water to their land.”

“Morrie, have you been listening to yourself?” Father was good-natured now in respect to Morrie’s thought process. “We’re coaxing the wet stuff to Marias Coulee, too, but the sky is our ditch. Now, except for one year, let’s see, that would have been ‘04, our crop yields have been right up there with—”

Naturally the trio of us being bounced in the back of the wagon were letting most of this go in one ear and out the other. A child’s world too needs maintenance
from inside, and we each were off in our own as the dray journey drew to its end. In his general enthusiasm for existence Toby could no more sit still than a jumping bean could have. Damon was somewhere in the private scrapbook of his self, and I still was in saddle heaven as the premier wrong-end-to rider in the known universe. We all were excited about visiting the Pronovosts, even though it had been only the day before yesterday since we had last spent time with Izzy and Gabe and Inez. But a taste of what life in a tent was like, a chance to poke around the Big Ditch construction camp with kids our age, one more opportunity for the bunch of us to crow over what had happened to Eddie Turley in the wondrous race—we thought we could not have designed a better holiday.

Life again outdid us, however. As our dray lurched into the hurly-burly of the construction camp, Damon was the first to interpret the cloud of canvas looming beyond the encampment of the workers’ tents and interrupted the grownups with a yelp:

"You didn’t tell us there’s a circus!"

"Not the kind you’re thinking of," Father said over his shoulder as he headed the dray toward a waving foreman at the supply dump. "It’s that traveling preacher and his minions. Brother Jubal, he bills himself as. Short for Jubilee, I’d guess." Father was not strong on religion, and he could tell by looking at Rose and Morrie that they more than likely weren’t either. He leaned their way a bit to elaborate on Brother Jubal. "He finds pretty good pickings at construction camps like this. A fair amount of hangovers and other symptoms of sin after a Saturday night, don’t you suppose? Wages here aren’t bad"—Father all but underlined this as a hint to Morrie—"and that can’t hurt his collection plate any."

"Speaking of collecting," he turned his attention to us, poised to leap down into the attractions of the Big Ditch encampment. "I don’t want to have to track the pack of you down to poke lunch into you. Behave yourselves at your friends’ and
be back here at noontime, hear?" We promised, cross our hearts and hope to die, not to be late.

We jumped down, leaving Rose presiding on the wagon seat like a jaunty figurehead above a cargo wharf, and raced off in search of the Pronovosts. Set loose at the Big Ditch! Whatever Coney Island was, how could it match this? The construction camp more than met our expectations, with swearing teamsters and laboring horses and agitated foremen everywhere, the whole place as loud and dusty as any set of boys could want, and over it all the derrick boom of the steam shovel clanking and whirring as it ate into the prairie. "This beats a circus, doesn't it, Damon?" Toby gave his estimation as we rounded the cooktent and looked for the Pronovosts' house of canvas where Isidor had told us to. Sure enough, ahead was the tent flap open in welcome. But what we could see inside caused all three of us to halt hard. Something was wrong. The Pronovost kids were dressed up.

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

"You want to get yourselves a look at the Holy Willies. They're sure somethin'."

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

"What about it? We gonna go see?"

"Father didn't tell us not to, did he," I reasoned.

"Not that I heard," Toby contributed.
"O sinners, stop and think before you further go! Turn, and turn now!"

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

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

"The Bible!" Brother Jubal was shouting as he brandished that item. "I ask you, brothers and sisters, the one question that shall be asked at the gates of salvation: what use have you made of this powerful book? If you can only answer that you have held it over your head to stop a nosebleed--well, then, I'll tell you, friends, you are in everlasting trouble." As he restlessly paced and stopped and pivoted, I kept trying to think who Brother Jubal reminded me of. When he spun into profile in one of his pirouettes with the Bible, I figured it out: although not so old and not so paunchy, he was a spitting image of William Jennings Bryan, whom Father would have voted for in every presidential election forever and practically did. Same Roman brow, same coal-chunk eyes. Similar undertaker suit and scrawny tie. I would say he doubtless outdid W.J.B. in acrobatic ability, though. On the balls of his feet for as long as we had been watching, abruptly Brother Jubal
was across that platform in a flash, pulling up just short of a small table with a pitcher and a glass on it, as he trumpeted: "From borning to burying, cradle to grave, the Bible is your only ticket out of Hell!" Pausing there to deposit the Good Book--somehow his pause seemed as loud as his preaching, and the congregation didn’t lose any of its sway--he picked up the pitcher and glass and poured. Toby had timidly slipped his hand in mine, something he hadn’t done in a long while.

Damon whispered in my ear: "I bet you it’s panther piss." Whether or not the pitcher held that notorious local brand of moonshine, Brother Jubal resorted to it for a good long swig.

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

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

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

"Let us fight the holy fight
On the wild Montana bench--"

Here the congregation chorused in:

"Lord, oh Lord, lend us might!"

"Paul, look, there’s--"

"Toby, shhh, I’m trying to listen."

Damon took the more direct approach of lightly squeezing Toby’s lips together like a duck’s bill, a reminder we used on each other when someone gabbled too much. Meanwhile, in operatic fashion Brother Jubal swelled his chest and sang on: