

“No, no! Didn’t you see? Brassies on *both knuckles!* Morrie knows how to hit with either hand!”

10

Littlest things. The pock in the kitchen window in the shape of a star, halfway up; we used that as a mark in cold weather. If the window frosted over as high as that star, the temperature had gone way, way down overnight. A snowstorm generally followed. After Morrie's awful episode with Brose Turley, I would look as soon as I lit the kitchen lamp each morning, hoping to read winter's full pedigree there on the windowpane. But the weather stayed obstinately mild, with only a dry chill in the air that carried no promise of snow any time soon.

The last schoolday of that week, in physiology period Morrie startled everyone by holding up the rattle off a rattlesnake and, as if it was the most natural teaching device to be found in the average schoolroom, illustrated the principle of stimulus and response.

Eddie still was sitting out his sentence, so I could not press the question at recess or noonhour. But when school let out I lagged enough to pass by Morrie's desk and, with no one else around, make sure:

"Wasn't that rattle fresh off the rattler?"

"Top mark for observation, Paul. This morning, actually."

Retrieving the item in question from a desk drawer, he cradled it in one hand in the manner of the gravedigger contemplating the last of poor Yorick. In class I had expected Damon to catch on to the unfaded quality of the segmented tail the same as I did, but he'd studiously gazed into the middle distance when he realized Morrie was holding up something severed. And I didn't want Toby fretting about a rattlesnake invading the teacherage. "The reptile was just outside the front door," Morrie was saying as he tapped a fingernail against the horny object. "Remarkable jest of nature, isn't it, the creature carrying toxin at one end and a tocsin at the other."

"For crying out loud, Mor--" I burst out before remembering I was still technically under the rules of the schoolday. "Mr. Morgan," this time it came out of me singsong, I was enunciating so carefully, "it's practically winter."

"I don't see any snow," he pointed out maddeningly.

"You know what I mean. Snakes shouldn't be around. What if Brose Turley put the thing there?"

"What if it's mere coincidence?" Morrie weighed the rattle in his hand a moment more, then stuck it back in the desk drawer. "What if the unfortunate snake simply was attracted by the heat of the house? We mustn't jump to conclusions," he chided, although it didn't seem to me to require much of a hop to reach a good one here. Morrie stroked his mustache appreciatively as if a thought had just arrived to him by way of it. "Incidentally, Paul, don't tell him so just yet, but your father's method works like a charm. A barrel stave is first-rate for slaying a snake."

A snake, I remained convinced, that ought to have been holed up in its den that time of year.

That night, rattlesnakes drove wolves out of my dreams. I was my usual wreck by the time Rose showed up.

“Another off night, Paul?” I swear, she could tell even before she set foot into the kitchen. Quick as a wraith, she was over to the stove to warm her hands and whisper: “I know just the prescription to take your mind from it. Three tubs of water.”

I'd forgotten washday had devolved to Saturday now that she was in command of Morrie's housekeeping as well as ours. “Help me carry the wash water, pretty please,” she set out the terms in her melodious low murmur, “then I'll leave you to your book,” although for once I did not want to be left to that. I put my coat on, each of us grabbed a handle of washtub number one, and we crept from the house so as not to wake its Saturday sleepers.

In the start of daybreak we could see just well enough on the path to the pump. Out around us the barn and other outbuildings loomed as if they were growing with the eastern light. Down at the corral, the horses gazed toward us through little fogs of their breath. I was mad at the weather again--another morning that did not know the meaning of winter, i.e. snow. The wind had not even started up yet, practically unheard of for Marias Coulee. Rose breathed in as if taking the air in the Alps. “How my poor husband loved mornings like this,” she exulted, somehow managing to do it in the same veiled voice she had used in the kitchen. “I can just see him. He would be up and out at the crack of dawn, getting his miles in. Then he would gather me to go to breakfast and--”

“His miles? On foot?” It was enough to make me gasp. If Damon and Toby and I couldn't saddle up Kayo, Queenie, and Joker to go someplace farther than the neighbors within easy sight of us, we didn't go.

“A goodly distance, let's just say,” Rose hastened to correct herself. “But every single morning, if the weather wasn't throwing a fit.” As she chatted on we could have been mistaken for leisurely strollers on a boulevard except for the galvanized tub between us. Ever since that first pre-dawn conference of ours in the

Blindsight. There is nothing like it."

kitchen, several days ago now, it seemed natural to be at this. It intrigued me that in these circumstances Rose's experiences seeped from her, episode by episode, as if they wanted out. Like my dreams.

I listened assiduously as usual as she finished up the particular reminiscence brought on by the feel of this morning, about poor Mr. Llewellynn coming home from one of his constitutionals in the grip of a policeman unwilling to believe that a person would be out that early merely for exercise. "Imagine, that policeman would not even trust me to identify my own husband," she came to the end of the story as we reached the pump. "I had to ring up Morrie to come over and--"

"Rose, you don't have to whisper out here."

"Oh, right."

I voluntarily did the pumping so she could save her energy for conversation. "Such times as the three of us had together," she mused. It was a rare moment of Rose at rest as she stood there, hands quietly pocketed. I had to strain to pick out her words over the racket of the pump. "--and didn't we just think we had the world by the tail. High living. All the comforts. Money growing on bushes. But put such trifles up against real purpose in life and all you come out with is--" She halted.

"Perdition?" I panted.

"Paul, you are a mind reader."

Perdition sounded pretty good to me, out there on the clammy pump handle. The matter at the moment, though, was salvation, namely Morrie's. Rose seemed not to have a care in the world, chattering on as we started back to the house with the heavy tub, but my mind was going back and forth furiously over the dangers represented by Brose Turley. Twice now Morrie had made me promise not to say a word to Father in that regard. But he hadn't said anything about not telling Rose, had he. Halfway up the path we set the tub down to rest for a minute.

"Rose, you better know." Time to go back to whispering. "Morrie is maybe in for it."

"For what now?"

As rapidly as I could spill the words out, I told her the full story. She seemed less surprised about the brass knuckles than I expected. In fact, the only thing that seemed to startle her was my conclusion:

"Maybe Morrie ought to go. Leave, I mean," and I had trouble even saying the word. "On out to the Coast or back where you were or--"

"Oh, I think not," she said quickly. "Life here agrees with both of us."

"It won't be so agreeable if Brose Turley gets hold of him when he's not looking."

"I'll speak to Morrie about being careful, don't you worry," she did her best to soothe me down. "But if this Turley person wants him out of his way, he is going about it exactly wrong." One of Rose's patented pauses ensued. Her eyes always widened when she thought deeply. I waited, leaning her direction as a sunflower will follow the sun, for whatever illumination was sure to follow. At last she said as if it were a secret between us: "Morrie can be contrary at times."

Aunt Eunice seconded that.

"Give that man bread and roses and he'd eat the petals and go around with the loaf in his buttonhole. Oliver, you have taken leave of your senses in turning the school over to him."

Her pronouncement caused Damon to kick the leg of the dinner table until Rae stopped him with a look. He knew it was against his best interest to contradict Aunt Eunice out loud, but here it came: "Morrie is a hundred times better teacher than old Miss Trent."

I leapt in just as recklessly. "Morrie knows something about almost everything."

"Morrie taught me 'rhinoceros,' Aunt Eunice!" Even Toby felt the need to take issue. "R-h-i-n-o--"

"There, you see? What manner of teacher lets the pupils call him by his first name, answer me that." Her tiny mouth pursed full of triumph, she looked around at those trying to have a Sunday meal in peace. George was not uttering a peep behind his nest of beard. I was sure Rae had allegiances with Rose, but did they extend to Morrie? That left Father, as usual, in Aunt Eunice's direct line of fire.

"We don't call Morrie that when school is on," I protested.

"And you had better not let me catch you at it if you ever do," Father said. "Exceptional lamb roast, Rae. You boys: less talk, more fork. You were saying, Eunice?"

"The greenest graduate of The Spencerian Academy"--Aunt Eunice's alma mater, needless to say--"could do a better job of it in that school."

Father kept his head down over his plate but his voice was on the rise. "Eunice, The Spencerian Academy is fifteen hundred miles from here. How was I supposed to pluck up a teacher from there overnight?"

"This is the way of the world any more." Aunt Eunice was addressing a higher invisible audience, maybe heaven. "Try to give someone the benefit of all one's years on this earth and will they listen? No."

Sitting there listening to Aunt Eunice call down the thunder of her accumulated years, I tried to imagine Morrie and Rose right then. Rose was spending most of every Sunday at the teacherage, and chances were he would be putting dinner on the table for the two of them about now. Probably sparrow hearts and three peas apiece, but brother and sister would gaily tuck in their napkins and converse in spirited tones as usual. I could see it as real as anything, the teacherage

a Crusoe isle of calm amid the turbulence of life--if it did not come under assault by snake, fire, fist, boot, and other weaponry my dreams provided. Was Rose having any luck in making Morrie be wary of Brose Turley? Was luck adequate to that?

11

I woke up the next morning wondering why my ear was stuffed with cotton, when I had no memory of an ear ache. Groggily I lay there, my other ear still pressed to the pillow, trying to figure this out. Usual end-of-night sounds--the wind giving the house a last visit if nothing else--were absent; the inner works of my ear held only that plugged silence. I rolled over and the other ear was the same, not able to hear a thing. Deaf in both ears? I sat bolt upright in bed. How could I have totally lost my hearing in one night and not even a dream to warn me? Then the bedroom window's blue-silver light of crystalline reflection that was spread over the still form of Damon beside me and Toby across the room registered on me. The cottony stopper on the sounds of the outer world was snow.

Morrie opened that schoolday as if the six-inch white blanket outside was nothing out of the ordinary. I noticed, however, that he petted his mustache more than usual.

I am not the giddy sort, but that morning I floated somewhere above the eternal desk shared with Carnelia. Over breakfast Father had vouched that a snowfall like this one, damp and clinging, was more than sufficient for tracking and

trapping, and likely would last in the mountains and foothills until spring. Brose Turley would have to go off to the high country now for his winter harvest of pelts. Eddie himself gave us a sure sign of that when we rode into the schoolyard and there he was, a sneering grin on him for the first time in ages, getting in practice to lodge with the Johannson boys by roughhousing with them.

Mine was not the only case of euphoria left behind by the fat lazy overnight storm. Morrie found out in a hurry that the first day of winter substantially altered the classroom climate. Try us every way as he did on arithmetic that morning, there was only one equation on our minds: first snowfall equaled first snowballs, divided by sides. Giving in with grace, he called recess some minutes ahead of time and got out of the way of our stampede to coats, overshoes, and mittens.

Within seconds Grover and I were pelting each other as happily as we had played baseball catch together in the months previous. Snow always turned Damon into a tundra guerrilla; he plastered Martin Myrdal three times before Martin figured out where those deadly snowballs were sailing in from. Toby's age group exploded softball-sized chunks on one another, giggling all the while. In no time, then, the schoolyard scene was as ordained as one of those medieval clocks where a troupe of figurines march out of one side and drive in the troupe on the other: every male from first grade to eighth was in the middle of the playground madly firing snowballs and the girls had wisely withdrawn alongside the schoolhouse to cheer and scold. Skirmishes and ambushes grew into fusillades. Before long there was as much snow being flung through the air as rested on the ground.

Satisfying as the snowball free-for-all was, the god of winter mischief suddenly offered something even better. It came when Nick Drobny, trying to dodge a snowball and at the same time reach down and manufacture his own, slipped and fell flat on his face. The rest of us could not believe our good fortune. Everyone in Nick's vicinity shouted out the opportunity: "Dogpile!"

Knowing what was coming, Nick squealed and tried to scramble onto all fours. He did not quite manage to do so before Virgil Calhoun bellyflopped on him, and Izzy landed crisscross atop Virg.

"Get off me!" Nick was shrieking--shrieking was one of the best parts of a dogpile--when Anton Kratka and Gabe Pronovost added themselves crosswise onto the others, and Verl Fletcher sailed in on top of them.

This already was a highly promising pile, with Nick struggling with all his might to escape the bottom and everybody atop squirming to squash him into the snow until he gave up. Grover and Damon and I and several others cagily circled the heap, gauging when to join in; a good rule of dogpiling was to end up as far on top as you possibly could. Then something beyond precedent happened. In her usual provocateur fashion, Rabrab Rellis had been on the sidelines dishing out remarks. Abruptly she came loping out, brown-stockinged legs long and scissoring, turned in mid-air and slid across the pile of boys on her back, arms wide as if to spread the gospel of dogpile.

Rabrab did not stay there any time at all--that would have been unmitigated scandal--but her teasing flight of passage had a sensational effect on every boy standing there idle. Whooping, roaring, we flung ourselves onto the heap, the whole wet wooly mass of us rolling and growing like a gigantic snowball, Nick still at the bottom.

In the schoolhouse, the commotion must have sounded like murder being done. Morrie hopped out onto the front step, one overshoe on and struggling to pull the other one on, obviously expecting red blood in the snow. If so, though, why were we laughing like junior madmen? He stopped work on the overshoe and peered at the writhing tangle of us. "Nick? Is this satisfactory with you?"

Nick squeaked out: "Just fine."

Morrie went back inside shaking his head and probably mentally counting the schooldays until spring. I sometimes wonder if education has its own omens as the weather does. That day and the next, while the snow was fresh, so was the mood I brought to any school subject, even the ones I already knew by heart. Sitting next to Carnelia as if we were galley slaves perpetually chained to our oar did not even bother me. Then out of nowhere a feeling I could not name came over me, although since then I have observed enough students at that age to diagnose my case as pernicious listlessness. Whenever Morrie wasn't directly drilling us on something the world thought essential to seventh-graders, I drifted into reading of my own or idly killed off the night's homework right there during school. The only thing I felt a serious need to study was the trajectory of snowballs. And it did not help that Damon and Toby and I came down with one of our periodic fits of tardiness, so that each morning we would gallop in at the absolute last minute and there would be Carnelia waiting like the wrath of Betsy Ross, steaming to get the flag-raising over with.

Maybe it was her way of marking our last day of flag duty, but that final morning she worked herself into more of a huff than ever. No sooner had Damon and Toby scooted into the schoolroom and she and I plucked the flag out of its drawer than she giped:

"You'd think people with a housekeeper could get up earlier."

"Don't nag." My tone was as cross as hers. "Next thing, you'll be whinnying."

"Ha ha ha. You are such a pest. Watch you don't drop the flag."

"Look who's talking, Miss Priss. Come on, let's just get this done." We marched to the flagpole as if shackled together. The rope would not behave straight when I untied it, so I had to try to undo that while distracted by her yakking at me.

“Mr. Morgan marked me down on the question *Use logical inference to determine an antipodean analogy of ‘Noel,’*” she was telling me as if that was my fault too. “I said ‘*summer holiday.*’ What did you put?”

“‘*Leon.*’ See, on something like that you need to think backward and that gives you--”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Aren’t you ever going to get over that backwards warrior business?”

“Contrary, damn it.”

“Don’t you swear at me.”

“I’m not. That was an interjection. Look it up.”

If looks could kill, there would have been a double slaying at the flagpole. At least the rope finally was under control. Still glowering at each other, we fastened the flag with fingers that knew the job automatically by now, yanked the rope for all we were worth, and without a backward look finished our civic tour of duty together.

Thank goodness, Vivian Filson was the first that morning to heed the call of nature. When she slipped back in from the outhouse, she headed straight for Morrie’s desk and whispered in his ear. I heard him murmur, “The what, Vivian?”

Just after that, Morrie instructed all the grades to carry on with what they were doing while he made a trip to the supply cabinet. “Carnelia and Paul, help me a minute, please.”

We trailed him out to the cloak room. He turned to us with his arms folded on his chest, never a good sign from a teacher.

“You two are in distress, I take it?”

I give Carnelia full credit. She batted her eyes enough for both of us and was quick with: “Not any more than usual, Mr. Morgan. Why?”

“Then how do you explain this?”

Morrie flung open the outer door. We stared at the flagpole. It was evident that what Vivian had whispered must have been something very like, "The fwag is fwying upside-down."

I tried to contribute: "We were awful busy, uh, talking."

Morrie's expression was steely. "I wonder if you have any notion of the woe that will come down on me, and that I in turn will bring down on the two of you, if anyone comes by and spies Old Glory standing on its head?"

As if in harness, Carnelia and I raced out, hauled down the flag and put it up right in record time. Morrie herded us back into the schoolroom. Only Vivian was paying us any attention and when Morrie put his finger to his lips, she nodded.

Accordingly, I was not prepared at all for the miscarriage of justice--wasn't this called double jeopardy?--at the end of the day when Morrie dismissed everyone else and levied on me:

"Paul, I would like to see you, after."

There was something elegaic about the reaction in the schoolroom: *But oh, my foes, and oh, my friends--* In rapid succession, Carnelia looked panicked, furtive, relieved, and was out the door. Eddie Turley stopped for a good long smirk. Grover pushed his glasses into place as if to reflect full sympathy. Toby was overcome, already staggered with the drama of telling Father "*Paul got kept after!*" Damon went out of the schoolroom looking back at me in mystification, as if he had missed something in me.

I grumpily stayed at my desk. Morrie busied himself at his, squaring up papers and putting away books, for an interminable few minutes. Finally he looked up at me and in what I recognized as his philosophical tone began: "Now then--"

Now then nothing. My outrage could not be held in while he pontificated. "This isn't fair! Why didn't you keep Carnelia after instead of me? It was more her fault."

“Think about that,” he said not unkindly. “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man teacher cannot be alone with a schoolgirl on the brink of womanhood.”

Carnelia?

“Besides,” he left me no time to parse through that, “the flag mishap is not why I asked you to stay after. Paul, it’s your schoolwork.”

This was the one heresy I was totally unprepared to hear. In vain I tried to think of any subject that was giving me trouble. To my astonishment, Morrie bundled them all for me:

“You’re hopelessly ahead in everything, here. You know every lesson before I can give it, and you know you do. No, don’t even try to play dumb on this. It’s not in you.”

He likely had a point there. If I couldn’t feign successfully during school, I probably was no better at it while being kept after. But I needed to mount some kind of defense.

“Maybe once in a while in arithmetic, or I guess grammar, or more like geography, I know a little more than I let on. But--”

“That is exactly the sort of thing I mean.” Morrie spread his hands helplessly. “Can’t you see the position this puts me in? Here I am, a teacher with a pupil who is already chockful of what I am supposed to be teaching him. Every minute of that, I’m holding you back from where an ability such as yours ought to be taking you.” He drew quite a breath to speak the next. “I see nothing to do but skip you past this grade and the next. You are ready for high school.”

“You can’t! I mean, please don’t.”

“Whyever not? You could catch up in high school courses in no time, and you’re advanced for your age.”

The reasons seemed to me beyond numbering. I babbled the first few that came to mind. "I'd--I'd need to lodge in town. I mean, I wouldn't be at home any more. And Father...there are times he needs me for things. Mr. Morg-- Morrie, I'd like to wait. Really I would."

"Well, if I at least were to advance you to the eighth grade--"

"No!" Anything but the jungle of galumphing eight-graders. "Please, not that either." How many dooms did I have to fight off? "Can't I just be in the grade I'm already in?"

Morrie gestured to the vacant half of the double desk that constituted the seventh grade. "You and Carnelia, forever and always?"

"Maybe I could just sort of sit out of the way and read." That sounded feeble even to me.

He folded his arms on his chest, but not in commanding fashion this time, and sat there studying me. At last he said: "You are a challenge, Paul, a palpable challenge." Uneasily I watched the signs in the features of his face, the twitch of his mustache, the lighting-up in his eyes. Morrie's mind was making one of its balloon ascensions. "A teacher would not dare to wish for a more ardent student," he propounded, "on those occasions when something manages to catch your interest. Therefore it is a matter of bringing your imprimatur more steadily to bear-- *ardor vincit omnia*, let us proclaim."

"Wh-what's that mean?"

"You shall see."

12

“This had better not have anything to do with fistfighting or horse-racing,” Father warned as I sidled into the kitchen with Morrie close behind me.

Obviously he’d had an earful of report from Toby or Damon or more likely the duet of them, even though they had no more idea than he did about what my offense might have been. The one other time I had ever been kept after school was the first day in the second grade, for a raging argument with Carnelia over the territorial division of our desk. Now, with Father giving me a look that would have put a blind person on notice, I had some tall explaining to do again. Was it going to make sense to anyone besides Morrie and me? All the long way home with Morrie riding in bouncy dude fashion next to me, as he rehearsed the case to be made on my behalf I sat in my saddle like a zombie. What if Morrie’s enthusiasm was wildly misplaced? What if Father said no? What if I could not live up to this?

"Father, I--" The faces of the waiting audience there in the kitchen outdid my expressive ability. Father was stuck at the stove stirring beans and ham hocks which were more hock than ham, but the distance across the room did not temper the ominous gaze he had fastened on me. Parked front and center at the table were the twin heralds of my detention, Toby owl-eyed, Damon about to faint from curiosity. "Morrie, you tell them."

"Goodness, you two." Rose popped in through the doorway, untying her apron to go home but obviously not before she had her say. "Paul of all people. Morrie, really, you are going too far with this. When boys behave some way that doesn't suit you, can't you make them wash windows or some such rather than keeping them in after? That's what I would do."

Yielding to the trend of things, Father suspended cooking for the time being and drew a chair up for Rose. He shifted Toby into sharing half of Damon's chair and indicated the vacated seat to Morrie, then gravely sat down at his cup-worn spot at the head of the table. I took my place uneasy with the fact that my case had escalated into a conference. Even Houdini padded in from the other room as if taking an interest.

Palms of his hands flat on the oilcloth as if the seance was about to start, Morrie squarely faced Father at the far end of the table. "Unaccustomed as I am to this particular kind of excess in a student," he began, alarming me, but then in reasonably short fashion brought the matter down to how far ahead I was in my studies.

Father looked relieved, but puzzled.

"You're the doctor, but can't you just--forgive me this, Paul--pile more homework on him? Even if he does it in class, it'll keep him occupied."

"That is scattershot, if I may say so," Morrie responded, shaking his head.

"Paul needs aim, he does not need to be dispersed more than he is in several

different directions." I shifted uncomfortably in my chair, wishing this could be conducted in writing. Morrie, however, was just hitting his stride. "From all that I can observe, Paul manages to stay on top of things here at home: chores, and helping you, Oliver, any of that. The ordinary run of schoolwork, I award him absolute top marks there too. But there is a neglected area, tucked away in that mind of his, that it would greatly help him to become fluent in." Here Morrie paused so long for drama's sake that even Rose puckered in impatience. When he was certain he had us all on the edge of our seats, he delivered:

"Paul est omnis divisa in partes tres, if I may slightly recast a pertinent phrase, Oliver. To make best use of that third realm, I firmly believe he must now plunge in and cross the Rubicon."

Enough silence met that to drown a barbershop quartet in.

Shifting my eyes around the table, I could see Rose and Damon and Toby were in need of an interpreter. Father was not.

"Latin? You want him to take *Latin*? But good grief, Morrie, for that he'd have to be in high--"

He broke that off with a glance toward his two other sons. Toby still looked blank. Damon had caught up and then some; his mouth tightened.

"Oh dear," Rose let out, winning even more of my heart. Our early-morning talks together obviously tugged at her as much as they did at me.

The entire room seemed to have been unsettled by Morrie's prescription for me. Looking troubled, Toby whispered something in Damon's ear. "It's like that jabber the Drobny's talk to each other, is all," I heard Damon whisper back.

Morrie tapped his fingertips on the tabletop as if calling the bargaining table back to order. "Not necessarily," he addressed Father's apprehension that Latin would take me out of the household. "My censorious sister notwithstanding, there's always after school."

Father sat forward and turned directly to me. "Paul? You're sure you want to take this on?"

Until that exact moment my mind was not truly made up. 'Divided into three parts' probably understated my condition. I heard my decision along with the rest of them.

"More than anything."

Now came the part that worried me most. Father was all too aware, and I sensed it along with him, that this carried the same sort of financial risk as dealing with postal box 19 in Minneapolis had. "Morrie, straight out, all right? I can't pay you much." He cast a whimsical glance toward Rose, who right then was refusing to meet the eye of anyone but Morrie. "I'm already laying out wages to a housekeeper, aren't I."

Morrie erased that in mid-air. "This is on the house, Oliver. I could stand to sharpen up some, myself, on ablatives and such. If you can spare Paul for an hour after school every day, I'll give him a running start in life beyond Marias Coulee. Fair enough?"

"That's where he's headed, I know," Father said softly. "Fair enough."

Shortly the gathering broke up, Morrie declining to stay for supper with the excuse that he had a sage hen awaiting in marinade and Rose saying she would have a bite as usual with George and Rae. I remember I went through our meal and the rest of that evening in a state of unnatural excitement, as if everything inside me was on tiptoes. At bedtime Father surprised us, Toby most of all, by saying: "Tobe, you don't look that sleepy, nor am I. How about a game of Chinese checkers? Houdini can be on your side."

Damon and I climbed the stairs in tandem, Father watching us all the way. As soon as we were in the bedroom, we halted and stood there face-to-face.

Damon attempted a grin. "You want to go to school *after* school? How loony can you get?"

"I need to, is all." I made a floundering gesture in the direction of where his scrapbooks were forever spread open. "This is something like them. Only in my head." Still looking at me, Damon shrugged, which could have been yes or no. "You're gonna have to be in charge of Tobe, coming home," I blathered. "When it's really stormy I won't stay after, I'll come with--"

"Tobe and me can get by. Paul, it's all right."

It was and it wasn't. We both knew that. When we turned in, Damon rolled to his side of the bed, and I lay there waiting to see where dreams were going to take me now.

13

Days flew off the school calendar from then on. If I could bodily pick up the appropriations chairman and deposit him somewhere enlightening, it would be to our schoolhouse those culminating weeks of 1909. The sun rose and set in the tireless figure at the front of the classroom.

--*"The polka dot bowtie on Jimsy stuck out, as ex--extra--"*

"Sound it out when you don't know it, Sally, remember? One syllable at a time, now try it."

"Ex-truh-vay-gant."

"Very good, merely a little work needed on each *a*. Say it after me: *extravagant*. It means to go beyond the limits of something. That is why *extra* is in there, and *vagant* you can remember by its resemblance to *vagrant*, a person who wanders around. Does everyone have that fixed in mind? Proceed, Sally."

"--extravagant as spats on a rooster. Mr. Morgan, what's 'spats'?"

"Vests for your shoes. Your turn to read, Anton, please."

Even the vendettas of recess were taken in hand.

“--dumb honyock, your folks don't even speak American, they talk that broken stuff!”

“Is that so? Put ‘em up, squarehead!”

“Ah, comparing knuckles, are you, Martin and Milo? If I didn't know better, I would have I thought I heard harsh words while I was sitting inside grading papers. People could get the wrong impression. I'll tell you how we are going to avoid that in the future. See this coin? If the flip comes up heads, Martin and Carl and Peter and Sven hereafter take recess when the rest of us come in. If it's tails, Nick and Sam and Ivo and Milo take recess then.”

And in my case, Morris Morgan dipped me into Latin like a wick into ready candlewax.

I'm convinced Morrie was secretly as relieved as I was that no one else's parents--not even Grover's, and blessedly not Carnelia's--chose to enlist their offspring in our after-school sessions when he offered. Just the two of us every afternoon after Damon and Toby loyally waved as they rode off home together, we went to that other language as if building a bridge across the Rubicon. Morrie had been right. Latin gave my mind a place to go, and make itself at home for a good long while. The danger to this, I realize, was that it fed my pedantic streak. But how much better a pedant Morrie made me, I like to think. “Look to the root, you must always look to the root,” I heard him say whenever I was stumped by some fresh swatch of vocabulary or labyrinthine conjugation, and it caused me to see into two languages at once. *Fabula*, story; and I gaped at the birth of *fabulous* and *fable*. Similarly *school* from *schola*, *recess* from *recedere*--suddenly everything I read was wearing a toga.

Father pitched in heroically. Evenings now, when his finger ran down the listings in the big dictionary, he would pause at captivating Latinate derivations and

enlist
organizing
principles?
morality?

share those with me. But whatever moved me to do so, I waited until I was alone one night to look up the words paired in my curiosity as indelibly as, well, Rose and Morrie. For some reason I had expected *fate* to be Greek in origin. However, there it was, derived straight as a spear from *fatum*. And *destiny* too was as Roman as could be: *destinare*, to make firm.

--"Mister Morgan? It's December already."

I don't mean to award Morrie perfect marks for those weeks, only top ones. He had discovered a central virtue of the one-room school, the porosity between grades so that a lesson given in a good clear voice to one level of students would find its way into others as well. Toby and Inez, I noticed, were all ears now whenever the grade ahead of them did its spelling. But there will always be some who are impervious. The eighth grade, for example. Morrie made real headway on Verl and maybe even a smidgin on Martin, but Milo and Carl had very little more capacity to put to use; and Eddie Turley simply stared toward the blackboard as if it was just another wall. To a remarkable degree, though, Morrie had everyone else in that schoolroom functioning, and it showed in morale.

"December already, yes, Miles, I have noticed that. It comes with ventilation, doesn't it, in Montana. But what brings up this matter of the calendar so suddenly?"

"The Christmas play!"

"The Christmas play. Are we speaking of the Nativity? I see by the forest of nodding heads we are. Very well, someone please tell me how this has taken place in other years. Wait, wait, one at a time. Why do I not encounter so many hands up when the topic is arithmetic?"

Carnelia and I cowered briefly, our memory still raw with our fifth-grade experience of having been cast as Mary and Joseph. For once we needn't have worried. Morrie appointed a play committee which proved to have unusual

theatrical insight. Rabrab, under the stage name of Barbara, starred as a very fetching mother of the doll-baby Jesus. Grover made a distinguished Joseph with his eyeglasses above his dark-dyed cotton beard. On the night, all the parents were there. With the unmissable exception of Brose Turley. It gave me hope that he would stay boot-deep in the distant snows on through until spring.

On the final Friday, Morrie dismissed school on the cheery note that he would see us next year, and with Father at home for a change while the Big Ditch was shut down and Rose and Morrie off to the bright lights of Great Falls on a short holiday of their own, we came to that Christmas.

“Her and her old taffy. Be lucky if we don’t break our teeth on it.”

Scooping up a mittenful of dry snow, Damon tried to pack it into a snowball to hurl at a deserving fencepost and gave up in disgust.

“Remember what Father said,” I warned. ‘Said’ did not quite describe it. He had threatened Damon and me separately--although gently, because after all it was Christmas morn--over the niceties of taking our obligatory gift to Aunt Eunice and thanking her for the jar of barely chewable taffy she handed each of us every year. Sparta and Corinth cannot have exchanged tribute any more grudgingly, but Father was resolutely sunny about our prospects of truce with Aunt Eunice for this one day. “*She’ll be in the spirit of the season, you’ll see,*” he assured us as he turned us out of the house on our gift mission. “*I saw her in her yard just the other day and she gave me her annual smile.*”

“I like taffy.” Toby, always our ace in the hole with Aunt Eunice, was carefully maintaining his arctic route of march between the other two of us as if under escort. “Don’t you, Paul?”

“It’ll strengthen our jaw muscles, Tobe. We’ll be like those circus strongmen who lift anvils with their teeth and we’ll owe it all to Aunt Eunice.”

Damon continued to kick along in the disappointing snow on the section-line road, as if somewhere under the thin skift there ought to exist a chance at an honest snowball. "I still don't see why we couldn't do this when we're at George and Rae's for dinner."

That part had been in Father's briefing to me. "Because this way it makes an occasion for her," I reeled off practically word for word. "She's an old woman and doesn't have that many occasions in her life."

"Huh!" Damon unhappily turtled his head down into his scarf and turned-up coat collar to try to escape the pesky wind. It always amazed us that the Marias Coulee wind managed to be in our faces no matter what direction we were going. "Have to put on a ton of clothes to go sit in her kitchen for ten minutes."

"Fifteen, Damon, damn it, didn't you hear Father? Come on, let's cut across."

The plowed field between the road and Aunt Eunice's place clipped considerable distance off our journey, but now we had furrows underfoot and snow that was even more fraudulent than the stuff on the road. What scrunched under our overshoes as we trudged through the stubble of the grainfield was the nasty mix of moistureless snow and windblown dirt that we called snirt. Except for plenty of wind, ever since that first generous storm the winter had produced no real weather to speak of, only stingy snowsqualls. This day was typical, Marias Coulee stretching around us like a colorless bay beneath a dishwater sky. Even so, this was a brighter Christmas than the year before, which had been our first one without Mother.

The snirty field was heavy going, and Damon was on the mark about one thing, the clothing Father had made us pile onto ourselves--wool pants over our everyday ones and warmest coats and mittens and woolsock-lined overshoes and scarves and caps with the earflaps firmly down. We were armored against the

elements, no question. Surviving the social call on Aunt Eunice was going to be another matter. As we waddled across the field, I rehearsed to myself the version of 'Merry Christmas, Aunt Eunice' I had worked up for her: "*Festum natelem Christi, Amita Eunicia!*" She couldn't possibly pick fault with Latin, could she? Beyond that, a quarter of an hour of conversation with her could well be as up and down as the footing there in the furrows. "*Aunt Eunice, in your elocution class, did you ever recite Shakespeare? Do you know he made up the word 'bare-faced' just because there wasn't one for that?*" No, better not; something that rarefied had Morrie written all over it. Our only safe exponent on anything to do with school was Toby, who still had perfect attendance.

A thin string of smoke that somehow looked querulous was whipping out of the kitchen chimney as we approached Aunt Eunice's place. Just to be on the safe side in the likelihood that she was peering out watching for us, Damon and I let Toby go first as we trooped out of the field into the farmyard. He was carrying our gift for her, a tin of toffee. Father had his own sense of humor where Aunt Eunice was concerned.

As we were passing the long batch of neatly stacked firewood, Damon grinned slyly in my direction. "Don't forget the part about the woodpile."

"Toby gives her the gift, I offer to bring in wood for her. That leaves you to thank her for the taffy, doesn't it, smart guy."

Outside the door of the house, one last thing needed tending to. "Wipe your noses, everybody." I set the example with the back of my mitten. Stamping snirt off our feet, we went on into the mud room, as people customarily did, to kick off our overshoes and then knock on the inner door. Toby, in the lead, was the first to see that the inner door was standing open.

He stopped short at the sight of the wide-open door, Damon bumping into him from behind, and I nearly fell over them both. The three of us stood bunched

there, gawking at the vacant doorway. In weather such as this, no one would let the cold draft of the mud room into the house intentionally.

“Aunt Eunice? We’re here!” Toby uncertainly started toward the doorway and I grabbed him back.

“Merry Christmas?” Damon ventured. “Can we come in?”

No answer arrived except an odd little blurry sound. It took me a moment to recognize it as the sputter of a teakettle nearly boiled dry.

“Take Toby and go get George,” I told Damon. “Quick, run. I’ll stay here.”

The outer door banged behind them as they fled off, and I approached the opposite doorway with slow unsteady steps. Ridiculously, I was carrying in one hand the tin of toffee although I had no memory of taking it from Toby. Stepping up into the kitchen, I was bracing myself to search the house but did not need to look past the kitchen table.

Aunt Eunice was collapsed forward in her chair, her bare thin arms outstretched across the table. She was wearing only a yellowed old underdress-- was it called a chemise, I wondered stupidly? Her head was turned in my direction and her lifeless eyes were open wide, as though to announce *See?* to whomever stepped through the doorway and found her. It was my first time in the presence of death. Mother had died in the hospital in Great Falls. I gulped so hard I choked on it.

I dealt with the dangerously dry teakettle by hooking it off the stove with the poker from the woodbox, then went and closed the door to the mud room. Over on the washstand was the basin of water she had poured from the teakettle. Washcloth and towel, both damp. She had been taking a spitbath to prepare for her callers. A dark dress with a bit of lace at the collar was laid out at the end of the table. Her white hair disarranged by her sprawl onto the table, she still fiercely clutched the

handle of a rat-tail comb in her withered hand. No one could accuse Aunt Eunice of having timidly slept her way out of this world.

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Dead but still formidable, Aunt Eunice hung over the tag-end of the calendar of that year and the incipient leaf of the next.

Her burial, there in the week between Christmas and New Year's, dashed everyone's holiday intentions, and left in their stead a processional of glazed moods. Uncomfortable in his funeral suit, Father wore the expression of a person about have some teeth pulled. Damon had gone blank, staring fixedly down to where the toe of his overshoe dug holes in the snirt at the graveside. Toby huddled amid us, eyes and nose a running spring of tears and sniffles. And we were not even the immediate family: over on the other side of the open grave, George looked positively wrung out. Rae appeared to be holding up just fine.

On either side of them stood Morrie solemn as a visiting statesman and Rose in black satin under her cloak. I noticed she was shivering, and the weather, unnaturally mild, did not account for it. I came down with my own case of the trembles when the pallbearers approached. The handles of the casket as the six dark-suited men walked it to the grave were brass ones exactly as had been in my dream where Father and Joe Fletcher struggled with a casket while we boys could not get down out of the boxcar and Aunt Eunice sat in her rocker and gloated. She seemed to have the last say even there in the Marias Coulee cemetery.

There was one consolation Aunt Eunice surely had not intended, however. All that week we ate better than we had in ages, off the casseroles and loaves and pies Rae was flooded with from sundry neighbors and she in turn sent over with Rose each morning.

The first Monday of 1910, I slouched at the kitchen table, still putting myself to rights after a dream involving three jars of taffy chunks that no one, not even the blacksmith Alf Morrissey, could manage to pry the lids off of. I must have looked better than I felt because Rose did not even remark on my condition when she sailed in for the day. Alas, she was not carrying a dishtowel-wrapped baking pan or pie plate as usual.

“Rae said to tell you sorry, but the condolence food has played out.” Somehow Rose’s whisper sounded heartier this year and her cheeks practically blazed with color. Clearly she had recuperated from Aunt Eunice’s spooky burial a lot more than I had. Now she drew her gloves off, undid her scarf, shrugged out of her cloak, and marched close enough to review me, pretty much all at once. “So, Mr. Half of the Seventh Grade.” Rose had a way of arching her eyebrow that invited a person into a portal where revelations were possible. “Ready to go back to school?”

“Sure. I guess.” Actually what I couldn’t wait to get back to was after-school Latin.

“Have you made resolutions, I hope?” she whispered expectantly. “We always did.” Her face took on the cast of sudden reflection I had come to know, as if she had bumped up against a mirror of the past. “One new year I resolved not to be jealous, ever again. That lasted until the girl across the street was given a Shetland pony.” She startled me with a melody of laugh that got away from itself

into a snort. "I still think that was an awfully unfair test of my poor little resolution."

Livened up by this, I whispered in turn: "What kind did Morrie make?"

"Oh, I don't remember. Probably to memorize the almanac, wouldn't you think?"

That set us both to snorting with laughter, which was how Father found us when he materialized in the doorway.

"Happy New Year, Rose, as it apparently is. And for that matter, good morning." This was not like him, up so early, but for some reason it did not surprise me. I suppose I just assumed the hinge of the year was pivoting any reasonable soul in some new direction, even a natural sleeper like Father. January needed some justification for its existence, didn't it? Now that the holidays were over the Big Ditch would be gearing up furiously for the last lap of canal digging, and Father and the workhorses and the dray would have all the hauling they wanted while that went on. Yet I could almost tell by the look in my father's eye that he left bed that morning ready to tie into chores here on the homestead as well. Harness to be mended, field equipment to be fixed, the consequences of gravity on the granary roof to be dealt with--the list was as long as the will of his arm. For when a farmer comes around the corner into a fresh year, what he sniffs is spring, and plowing and planting. He might not have confessed to resolutions, but there was no lack of tasks ahead for Oliver Milliron to face with resolve. Ruffling my hair companionably as he passed, he stepped around my chair to start alife afresh by way of sound old grounds of coffee.

"Oliver? I want to try an idea on you."

Father stopped short and turned around to Rose. "Silly me. I thought I might actually get through a morning without one of those being tried on me."

"May I?" She gestured to a chair at the table; Toby's, as it happened. This was new. Not even the most urgent housekeeping crisis had necessitated a sitdown conference.

"Of course." Father sank slowly to his own spot at the table, peeking aside at me to see whether I was in on this. I widened my eyes in disclaimer; the feverish look on Rose was as much news to me as it was to him. He faced across to where she sat as if hoping that whatever this was, it wasn't catching. "You seem a bit wound up. Is something wrong, Rose?"

"I would like to buy Eunice's homestead."

Father and I listened slackjawed while everything raced out of her from there. Opportunity took the lead--"Who would ever have thought such a chance would come up?"--and was overrun by optimism--"Really, to think of land and a place of my own after everything was lost!"--and the final relay was achieved by that pair of old reliables, fate and destiny: "Oliver and Paul, I absolutely feel I am meant for this! Your letter in answer to my advertisement, the way Morrie and I have fit in to life here, poor Eunice passing away--" Rose halted for the length of a breath, then resumed at a pace that was sweetly reasonable: "I feel quite on top of things and able to take this step now that I have the house in trim. There, now. What do you say?"

"I'm floored."

With that, Father bought time for strategy, although not much. He glanced in my direction again, but I still was speechless. Rose as a permanent neighbor, in place of Aunt Eunice? Too good to be true. But where did that leave housekeeping? For that matter, where did it leave bookkeeping?

Father was tackling that now: "Have you tried this out on George? Why do I even ask, of course you have. Let me rephrase the question: what's the tab?"

“George and Rae will be content with a wee bit of downpayment,” she replied eagerly, “and, oh, monthly dabs after that.”

Numbers may have been conspicuously absent, but we knew they added up to another hefty draw ahead on housekeeping wages, unless there was some wild miracle waiting out there. Father did his best to summon one:

“Rose, surely you must know Eunice got by on that place on main strength and orneriness. It almost always takes two people to keep up with a homestead.” He swept an arm around so comprehensively I had to duck a little, as he indicated a household near at hand that had needed to call in a housekeeper. “I imagine,” he managed to imagine this with great heartiness, “Morrie is going in on this proposition with you?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

Now Father set his jaw. As calmly as a frustrated man could he pointed out to a listening Rose that her span of employment with us had not yet remotely caught up with the wages already advanced to her. Rose absorbed this and offered the thought that weren't we all lucky to have hit upon such an arrangement? If it were merely to be repeated, that would furnish her the same welcome sufficiency which to the best of her memory had amounted to four months' wages--

“Three,” Father and I said together.

--and in turn she would gladly extend her guarantee of peerless care for our home for yet another year. There, now. Surely that was logical?

I felt like a deaf spectator at a Chautauqua discourse. And Father sensed he was getting onto ground, in more ways than one, where he did not want to be. “A homestead is a farm,” he said testily. “Say you do buy Eunice's place. You're going to farm it how?”

"I was hoping you can see your way clear to farm it for me. On, what's it called, 'on shares'?"

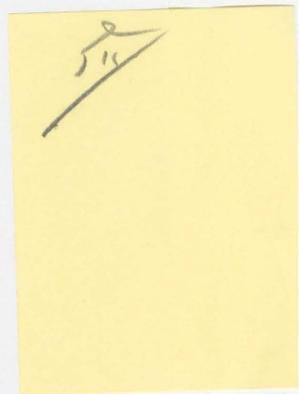
"Whoa right there. Why not let George have the honor of this?"

"His lumbago is getting worse. Rae tells me they will have all they can do to handle their own place."

"That sounds familiar--I have all I can do to handle this one. Sorry, but no farming on shares. " Father shook his head so emphatically that she was taken aback. "Oliver, whyever not? You did it for the previous occupant."

"And just between us, I would happily never set foot in that field again." Father slapped the palm of his hand down onto his end of the table as if that was that. At her end--well, I have been in on my share of cutthroat negotiations in politics, government, and the Gomorrahs between, but I have never seen anyone lean in on a bargaining table more adroitly than Rose did now. Even though I was not all sure this would turn out with any benefit to the Milliron side of things, I felt a tickle of admiration as she planted the tidy bend of her gingham-sleeved arms exactly onto the smudged spots made by Toby's elbows and clasped her hands as if she held something secret in them. She addressed Father with just a wisp of mischief coming through: "I would not want to call poor dear old Eunice stingy. But whatever 'shares' are, surely you could receive a more generous, well, share of them than what she provided?"

That brought thoughtful furrows to Father's brow. It would have to any farmer's. I can't really say he felt the tug of plow reins, with dollars per bushel at the other end, but that's close. Eventually he brushed away something imaginary on the oilcloth in front of him and said, "I'll take the matter under advisement," and I could tell he was a hooked fish. So, by the time Toby and Damon came lurching downstairs to a breakfast even more tardy and hurried than usual, the cross-stitch pattern of the year ahead was as clear as it could get: Rose would work for us in the



house and Father would work for her in the field, wages would fly in one direction and 'shares' would crawl in from the other. No wonder she was whistling one tune after another as she dusted the parlor, while he clanked dishes and utensils as if his mind was anywhere but in the kitchen.

As we saddled up for the ride to school, Damon asked: "What's up?"
"Gobs. Tell you on the way."

Talk about New Year's resolutions; when Rose and Morrie came to a calendar change, they did not just fool around. As everyone swarmed back into the schoolhouse that morning, chattering about what Christmas had brought to them, a brand-new face met us. It was Morrie's, the Marias Coulee student body recognized after a first flabbergasted look. But it was without mustache.

The school had all it could do to take this astonishing facial vista in. Shaved, depilated, denuded, bare-faced, unveiled: no one phrase can capture the transformation in Morrie's appearance now that the magic curtain of whiskers was gone. Until that moment I had no idea of the range of disguise that comes with being human. Years came off him along with the mustache. Yet he somehow looked more clever in the ways of the human race, contradictory as that may sound; a blade in a woolly world, and the gleaming upper lip announcing so. When movies became more common, the alabaster countenance of Valentino always reminded me of Morrie out from under the mustache.

One thing had not changed. He could still talk the air full. Nineteen-ten was ushered in by Morrie in the looping fashion of his inaugural day as teacher, except that those of us in our rows of desks were receiving wholesale introductions rather than providing them.

He told us one rigor of winter was going to be eased; on the wall by the stove now hung two horse collars, one for the boys and one for the girls, for portable warm seating on outhouse outings these freezing days. This innovation seemed particularly pleasing to the girls.

He told us spelling bees were going to be resumed but fisticuffs during them were a thing of the past.

He told us we were about to become scientific.

In illustration, he produced magician-like from under his desk a tubelike instrument and held it high. "Does anyone happen to know what this is?"

There was a stirring beside me. Carnelia, empress at heart but daughter of an agricultural extension agent until duly crowned, thought she had a pretty good idea of what it was. She leaned infinitesimally toward me the way we would do when the prestige of the seventh grade overrode our permanent feud. With all the practice we'd had, we could say barely hearable things to each other without moving our lips. In ventriloquist fashion Carnelia tried out on me: "Pst, pest. It looks like a raincatcher."

"You might be right for once, prissface," I whispered through my teeth. "It's your turn, put up your hand."

Carried away with himself, Morrie was not waiting for hands. He brandished the item even higher and announced heraldically, "It is a pluviometer."

Everyone looked as mystified as before.

"A precipitation gauge," Morrie enlightened us, still fondling the thing. "From the Latin *pluvia*, meaning 'rain,'" he brushed a glance over me which made me squirm that my vocabulary had not reached that far, while Carnelia wriggled in satisfaction. "A simple but effective scientific instrument which will capture nature's every minute," Morrie was soaring onward, "and allow us to read its moist offerings. Along with the roof windvane and these"--here he rummaged out of one

drawer of his desk a foot-long thermometer and out of another a beautiful gilt-bound ledger--“we are meteorologically equipped to set up the Marias Coulee weather station. Need I say, we shall have a new position of responsibility that you shall all take your turn at. Inspector-general of the weather.”

Alternately mesmerized by what he was saying and how he looked, after that all eight grades of us would have followed Morris Morgan anywhere that morning, even into arithmetic. Next, though, he went over by a window and looked up at the sky.

“This is a special year,” he said quietly, the way an orator will when he wants you to listen especially hard. “One that comes rarely. The heavens are going to speak.” Morrie rubbed the palms of his hands together. “In a tongue of fire.”

He was smiling reassuringly, though, when he turned around to us. “Halley’s Comet. So named for the eagle-eyed astronomer who discovered it. A celestial wonder that moves across the sky in a long-tailed streak. It returns only every seventy-six years. That means it was last here before there were such things as homesteads or flying machines or photographs. Think of that.” From the upturned faces of Josef and Toby and Inez and Sigrid low in the front rows, on past the glinting lenses of Grover and the motionless braids of Vivian and Rabrab, to the wall of stares that was the eighth grade, the school did. Morrie held the pause one last perfect moment, then gestured to the windowful of sky. “It will be here with the coming of spring, and,” he sent out a thoughtful look that moved among our young faces, “long from now, some of you may be lucky enough to see Halley’s Comet again.” I did the alarming arithmetic in my head: when we were about as ancient as Aunt Eunice had been.

“So, our second scientific endeavor of 1910 shall be astronomy,” he elaborated. “Closer to the time of the comet I will have quite a lot more to say on that,” he gave a little smile at himself that would never have made it through the

mustache, "you may depend on it." With that, he went off into an explanation of the Julian calendar and why its last several months were all off by two from the Latin numbers they were named after, and that led right into arithmetic.

What a matchless morning of school that was. And what an ordeal that afternoon turned into.

The first hint came when, out of nowhere, Morrie nailed Damon for gawking off into space while he should have had his nose into geography. "I will see you after school, young man," he levied, just like that. There was a malicious grin or two from the direction of the eighth grade, but Carnelia and I and Damon's sixth-grade classmates were dumbfounded. Academically, Damon frequently lived in mid-air; why pick him off, today of all days?

Damon's face fell a mile at this hair-trigger sentencing. Hardly any time later, it was followed by Verl Fletcher's after Morrie singled him out for sharpening his pencil with a jackknife at his desk instead of at the woodbox. "No open jackknives around a desktop, that is the rule. You can keep Damon company, after."

Restlessness rippled through the schoolroom like waves of wind through wheat. A teacher on a discipline rampage can be a fearsome thing, every student ever born knows that. But we never expected that kind of behavior from Morrie. Nonetheless he seemed to go out of his way to pick fault with us that afternoon, scanning mercilessly into one grade after another as grammar period ground along and then a spelling test. Casualties piled up fast. Sam Drobny was caught with his eyes not entirely on his own spelling paper. Five minutes later, Morrie said Nick may as well join his brother after school, it seemed to run in the family. Perhaps to be even-handed among nationalities, Morrie shortly gigged Peter Myrdal, the

youngest of the Swede clan but also the biggest fourth-grader imaginable, for making a face at Sam and Nick.

By now it was noticeable that our instructor had declared war on the race of boys. If I wasn't mistaken, Rabrab began to look somewhat miffed at not qualifying to represent the girls in the army of detention. I could not figure it out, this rash of petty infractions. Something hideous had come over Morrie. I'd read *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, but I thought Robert Louis Stevenson made that up.

There are times when you just know that whatever can go wrong next is about to. I hunched at my desk trying to will against it, through body language and telepathy and nearly semaphore to try to warn the innocent up there in the second row, but here it came. "Toby!" Morrie's voice crackled. "Do you really think this is the time and place for whispering?"

"M-m-maybe not."

"You can stay after and decide definitively," the verdict was dropped on him.

Amazing. Like the Drobny's, the Millirons could practically hold a family reunion after school. Somehow lesson work stuttered on, with Morrie still on the prowl and everybody else on edge.

Then with not more than ten minutes to go until school would let out, the terrible words:

"Eddie Turley. Attitude. After school."

Damon and Toby and I whirled around in our seats, aghast.

At first I thought Eddie was going to faint. But a Turley probably did not know how. Instead, he surged halfway up out of his desk as if about to make a break for freedom, then gulped mightily and sagged back into his seat again. Morrie had delivered the words like bullets and for the life of me I could not see why. Attitude! Eddie's dopey sneer at the world was as natural to him as

breathing; why convict him for his facial muscles, particularly when they were ones inherited from Brose Turley? This clinched it for me. Morrie had turned suicidal. The wolfman of the foothills was going to tromp home someday and when he did--

When school at last let out, after everyone else had fled to their horses and the after-school contingent disconsolately stayed planted at their desks, Morrie showed not a care. Not me. Even though I rationally knew Brose Turley was nowhere in our vicinity, piling up pelts in the distant snows of the Rockies, the back of my neck felt like it had something creeping up on it. As for Eddie, he looked already destroyed.

Morrie absently stroked his lip as if the mustache were still there, looking the prisoners over. "Numerous as you are," he observed as though he had nothing to do with that, "I believe we are going to have a work detail. The cloak room can always stand a tidying. Eddie, I'll ask you to fill the inkwells and then sit out your time at your desk, but the rest of you assemble out there, please."

I didn't like the looks of this. How was I supposed to bone up on declensions with my supposed Latin tutor running a chain gang of sulking boys? I went up to Morrie.

"Uhm, you seem to have your hands full. Shall I just go home and we start Latin tomorrow afternoon?"

"Not at all. *Exercitus ad Galliam iter faciet, carus Paulus*--the army will march toward Gaul, dear Paul, never fear. First, though, I'm going to appropriate you for the work detail"--I gaped at him in dismay, and he simply looked back at me coolly--"and then we can proceed to declensions."

The school's cloak room was like our mud room at home, the catch-all part of the building, only more so. With the nooks and crannies of the supply cabinet along one wall and the overshoe alley beneath the long line of coathooks and some schoolyard playthings that had been brought in for the winter, it was a room that

Rose could have tended to in, oh, three whistled tunes. It didn't require seven boys. It most definitely did not require me.

There I was, though, and I didn't know what else to do but button my lip and get this over with. Morrie handed out brooms to the Drobny twins, and Toby and Peter were given dustcloths, and the others of us were pointed to the supply cabinet. Verl stalked to one end and Damon and I paired off automatically to straighten up shelved materials at the other. Wordlessly we worked shoulder to shoulder. After a while Damon said in a low voice: "Know something funny? You're getting fuzz."

"What? Cut out the kidding."

"No, really, honest. You ought to take a look." He pooched out his own upper lip experimentally while trying to see down his nose. I took the opportunity to pinch his lips together duckbill style in the silencing treatment. All we needed was for Morrie to keep us *after* after-school, for talking out of turn.

Eventually he strode out from the schoolroom, closing the door behind him, and inspected. The bunch of us stood there in a clump anticipating the worst, given his mood of the afternoon, but he seemed satisfied. He turned to the group with an expression of speculation, looking quite a bit more like the Morrie of morning.

"There is one further matter I'm going to ask you to attend to," he had us know. "It's Eddie."

All of us shifted glumly, awaiting one more grown-up's sermon about the necessity of getting along with someone we knew to be a menace. Verl yawned. Even Toby looked halfhearted. Arms folded, Morrie waited until we had to give him stares of attention. Then he said:

"I want you to dogpile him. Right there where he is sitting."

The Drobny brothers' sunken eyes shone. Verl perked up greatly, and Peter gave a happy little hellfire snort that must have come out of his Viking lineage. Damon positively beamed. I have to say, Toby and I balled up our fists in anticipation along with the rest of them. Whatever blue this came out of--and none of us were about to question a chance to get a crack at Eddie, with the authority of a teacher behind it--we were instantly the troops for it. Morrie shushed us and held us back, saying he needed to write something on the blackboard first and then would give the signal.

While the others gathered at far end of the cloak room and buzzed with glee as Damon assigned bodily parts of Eddie as targets for each of them, I edged to the doorway and took a look in. Eddie had his head down on his desk, refusing to look up as Morrie wrote on the blackboard. The chalked sentence stood out boldly until it seemed to hiccup at the end; I had to strain to make out the final three words. Turning, Morrie saw me and put a finger to his lips.

"All right, boys," he sang out, and in everybody swarmed, all over Eddie. Toby and Peter dove under the desk and grabbed a leg apiece. Eddie's upper parts were submerged under Damon, Sam, and Nick. Verl squashed down on him from behind. I hesitated for about a heartbeat, then joined the pile. Only Eddie's head showed out of the heap of boys. "I'll tell! My father--!" he managed to croak out. One or two of the Drobny's and doubtless Damon got their licks in on him with their elbows before Morrie could hover in, ordering us to hold Eddie still. He opened a cigar box he'd had stashed somewhere and took out a pair of eyeglasses, the everyday kind sold in any mercantile. He fitted the glasses onto the struggling boy.

"I don't want them things!" Eddie gagged out. "Get 'em off me!"

"Read the board," Morrie coaxed. "Eddie, *read the board!*"

Eddie peered there in confusion, batting his eyes furiously. Morrie gave it a few seconds, watching him squint, then replaced the glasses with another pair from the box.

“Eddie, please, read the board.”

Eddie stared. Stared some more. At last he slowly recited:

““My name is Edwin Turley and I can read this--” He stopped at the much smaller final three words, confused again. Every one of us wrapped across him held firm, but we all had our heads turned toward those blackboard words.

Morrie replaced the glasses with yet another pair.

Swallowing hard, Eddie read off: ““My name is Edwin Turley and I can read this with glasses on.””

Morrie craned over the pile of us until he was squarely in Eddie’s field of vision. “They are called reading glasses, Eddie. They do not need to be worn all the time, do you understand that? Just here at school, perhaps. If you don’t want to take them home,” he let that sink in on the blinking son of the ogre he and Toby and Damon and I had witnessed ourselves, “they can be kept here in your desk.” Morrie peeled Nick Drobny off Eddie’s chest. The rest of us untangled and fell back in a half-circle around Eddie’s desk. Eddie hadn’t said anything, but the glasses still were on him and he was gawking around like a newly hatched owl. Morrie was breathing as hard as any of us. “The rest of you, Eddie’s reading glasses are to be a school matter.” By which he meant a secret, we knew. “The girls and the others will be let in on it tomorrow. Isn’t there some kind of handshake you swear on in the schoolyard?”

“Spitbath,” said Toby, demonstrating.

15

Eddie edged toward his desk, next morning, after his usual furlough at the outhouse, and took his seat with every eye in the schoolroom on him. Pausing in the recitation of his expectations of us for the day, Morrie waited with lifted eyebrow. Eddie was looking down at his desktop as if it might bite him. Gingerly he lifted it enough to feel around in there and came up with the eyeglasses. He unfolded them sharply, the way you open a jackknife, and for a moment I wondered whether he might snap them in half. However, the earpieces after a couple of tries found his ears, and the lenses bridged his landmark Turley nose; Eddie looked a bit like a collie someone had slipped goggles onto, but he was staring defiantly toward the blackboard as if waiting for Morrie to put up there something worth seeing.

I half expected the schoolroom door to be kicked to splinters and a pinkmouthed wolfer to come charging in to tear Morrie from limb to limb for turning his offspring into a four-eyed sissy. In actuality, Eddie's furtively fixed-up eyes became just one more trait in our mortal bin of them, along with Vivian's lisp and Anton's purple birthmark and Marta's nosebleeds, Rabrab's slyness and Carnelia's haughtiness and Milo's goofiness, Toby's excitability and Damon's

volubility and my odd accents of mind, Seraphina and Eva's dark spirit, Lily Lee's easily hurt feelings, on down through the list of things we learned to simply chalk off as part of one another in one-room life. That is to say, it would have taken more than reading glasses to gain Eddie Turley any adherents. ("*Now he can see to hit better,*" Virgil Calhoun muttered at recess.) When it came to his right to work around a calamity that went by the name of a parent, however, the Marias Coulee school instinct in favor of that was as fully tuned as a Stradivarius.

At Latin, the end of that day, a portion of me refused to stick to the nominative and accusative cases of *pluvia*--Morrie still was preoccupied with the rain gauge, poring over a weather service bulletin on hydrography between my written drills on nouns of the first and second declensions--and circled around the meaning of *I want you to dogpile Eddie* instead. I kept coming out at different places, the more I thought about it. Never in a hundred years would Eddie, on his own, have resorted to something as unmanly as specs; those were for the Grovers and girls of the world. Yet what a tricky gamble Morrie took, in slipping those schoolish lenses onto the son of a man whose living was killing. I knew Morrie's move could not be termed impetuous, because he had to give thought to every bit of it beforehand: the various pairs of glasses, the number of boys to subdue Eddie. Was there such a thing as *petuous*? A word that meant thoroughly thinking a matter through, then risking your neck anyway? Morrie glanced up as I migrated between the Latin and English dictionaries. "Declensions are not done with the feet."

"Just looking something up."

But it wasn't there, in either language.

The morning after that brought something I never could have prepared for. Rose in tears. Awash in them, from the look of her when she drifted disconsolately in through the kitchen doorway, bonnet drooping from one hand.

"Here, sit down," I leaped out of my chair and provided it for her. My voice was husky but I kept it down, not wanting to panic the whole household. "What happened? Did you hurt yourself?"

Her soggy whisper could barely be heard. "It's Morrie."

I knew it. Sooner or later, gambling on outmaneuvering Brose Turley would catch up with him. From the way Rose was carrying on, he must have had the heart stomped out of him. I asked shakily, "How bad--?"

"Just awful," she sniffled. "He is against my buying Eunice's place."

Visions of blood left my imagination, but Rose's gush of tears demanded attention. She dabbed at her eyes with the dish towel I hurriedly fetched to her. "Oh," she moaned, "why did it have to happen? We've always agreed on matters. And for this, of all things, to come between us." She managed to look up at me, red-eyed. "Can you imagine? One minute we were talking about, I don't know, the weather, and the next we were having a--" Terminology failed her once again.

"--family spat?" I filled in without thinking. "They're nothing."

That set her to crying harder.

I scrambled to dig out another dish towel and hand it to her. She fired the damp one onto the cupboard counter. Through the next flood she blubbed out: "You know how he can be. *I am not avid to see you do this.*" For a sobbing woman dealing in whispers, it was a remarkable job of mimicking.

I puzzled over Morrie's verdict. He himself was installed nice and snug there in the teacherage, apparently as proud as a pheasant in a parrot cage. Why wouldn't he want Rose to have a place of her own? Was it my imagination, or did the behavior of grownups become more baffling the nearer I grew to membership? Another freshet of tears came from Rose, and I sidled toward the doorway. "I'll get Father in here, why don't I."

“Wait.” She blew her nose and blinked back tears for half a minute. With a gulp, she began, so low I had to lean in to hear: “Paul, I am sunk if your father were to have second thoughts about letting me draw ahead on my wages to make the downpayment. I’d rather he not be told about Morrie’s and my--difference of opinion.” She smiled weakly and made the cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die gesture over her breastbone. “Pretty please?”

At the rate secrets I was sworn to were accumulating, I’d soon need one of Damon’s scrapbooks to keep track.

“Wh-what do you want me to do, then?”

Her chest heaved, and she looked around the kitchen like someone trying to find her way out of the woods. When her gaze came around to me again, Rose seemed marginally steadier as she confided: “I just need to talk to someone with a head on his shoulders. To see if I sound like a total fool about Eunice’s place.” Suddenly her whispered tone turned fierce. “I am trying to make something of myself, and I’m not always sure how much I’ve got to work with. Bright as you are, I don’t suppose you ever feel that way, but for me--”

“Sure I do. Half the time.”

“Half--?”

“The school half. When I’m around Morrie.”

A few minutes later Father surged in, stretching and yawning, and asked me: “Where’s Rose?”

“Hanging some dish towels out.”

Rose and Morrie patched their quarrel up somehow. People do, sometimes. I know she spent the next weekend in a frenzy of housekeeping at the teacherage, and in turn Morrie moved furniture endlessly when the day came that Rose took possession of the cold empty house left to this world by Aunt Eunice.

We all pitched in, Damon and Toby and I racing across the snirt field as early as was decent that Saturday morning, and George there for moral support while Rae stayed home and cooked a feast for us all, and even Father showed up promptly enough after his chores at our horse barn.

By the end of that long-ago January day, Rose was officially our neighbor as well as our housekeeper, Father was her sharecropper as well as her employer, and Morrie, I could tell, was determined to stay good-natured on the subject of Rose's homesteading fling, almost always the worst way to go about it.

Winters were the tree rings of homestead life, circumferences of weather thick or thin, which over time swelled into the abiding pattern of memory. Everyone still spoke of the big winter of 1906 with its Valentine's Day blizzard that kept us out of school for a week and eternally drifting snow that mounted under the eaves of houses until it reached the sharp hanging curtains of icicles. By any comparison, our weather of 1910 came into the world in the same fashion it had left 1909, puny. Only the wind showed some spirit.

Day after day on our ride to school, high thin moody clouds kept the sun dim, and we and our horses scarcely had shadows. With nothing in nature in the way of his perfect attendance record, Toby bounced in his saddle those dusky mornings as happy as if he was on a carnival pony ride. Even so, the three of us and the Pronovosts were continually looking over our shoulders at the weather, given strict orders from home to take shelter at the nearest house, anybody's, at the first smudge on the horizon that signaled a blizzard coming. Everyone in Marias Coulee was used to that kind of winter behavior. But the sky of this young year never did turn threatening, only stayed stuck on disagreeable. The few times it ever snowed Damon still could not make the dusty stuff hold together in a decent snowball, and if he couldn't, no one could.

From the ground up and the sky down, then, that set of school weeks stands in my memory as one of the strangest of seasons. Long indeterminate days as though each one was stretched by the wind blowing through it, and yet not nearly enough time to follow everything.

The schoolroom whizzed with things to think about. There was the surprise right under my nose when Verl Fletcher and Vivian Filson developed a raging crush on each another; I trace it back to the day Morrie decided to enliven a spelling bee by having people choose up teams, and Vivian's first pick was loud and clear enough: "Werl." *Oh oh*, I thought, and justifiably so, because with his desk right behind mine and hers directly in front of me, there I was in the Cupid seat between. Luckily, I suppose, the generalized lust of a teenager was late in developing in me, and at the time I viewed such matters with comparative detachment. Still, I must have passed a hundred smitten notes back and forth for the lovebird pair that hothouse winter.

There was also the considerable challenge, as much for Damon and Toby as me, of becoming honorary Drobny's. Up until then in our school career, the Drobny twins, swarthy Nick and Sam in one case and even more swarthy Eva and Seraphina in the other, never paid much heed to us either way, probably figuring the best thing that could be said for our type was that we were not Swedes. After the bunch of us together swarmed Eddie Turley for that optical fitting, however, the Drobny clan all but made us blood brothers. This was an unnerving development. Recess took on gypsy overtones. Apparently Damon and I and even Toby possessed black arts we hadn't known of. Maybe Damon's generalship in the cloakroom did it, or maybe it was by virtue of my voluntary dive into the monumental dogpiling at Eddie's desk; but I suspect it was Toby fearlessly grabbing a drumstick on Eddie that day that sparked a glitter in sly Drobny eyes.

Now we were regularly greeted on the playground with stinging whacks on the shoulder and Nick or Sam growling a comradely "Howya?" and hanging at Damon's elbow or mine like pint-sized bodyguards. For their part, Seraphina and Eva dealt vigilante justice to anyone who so much as brushed against Toby; when he got into a mild spat with Emil Kratka over turns at the swing, they pinched poor Emil purple. Friends like these distinctly narrowed our social circle. For one thing, it was rumored that the Drobny's were sewn into their long underwear at the start of winter and never took it off. Ruthless and foreign and sinister as they were, though, I still think fondly of those twofold hardskinned twins every time I need to ambush some legislative foe of my department.

There was always Eddie himself, way up there on the mental roster of that winter. Every time I checked over my shoulder to the back of the room, he was looking wary behind the eyeglass lenses, but at least looking. I hardly dared to believe it, yet Morrie's gamble on salvaging Eddie by fixing his eyes seemed to be paying off. Helped along, significantly, by the fact that Morrie did not happen to make an appearance during the particular recess when Eddie flattened Milo for teasing him about wearing sissy peepers.

There was no sign of Brose Turley--so much for my powers of prediction--except in my dreams.

"Does anyone happen to know what this is?"

This time, Morrie was holding aloft a contraption of sprockets and gears and small round objects on metal arms of varied lengths and a crank sticking out of its bright enameled hub.

Carnelia had learned from the example of the pluviometer. Her hand shot into the air and she did not wait for Morrie to call on her before blurting:

"It's a planet machine."

“Close,” Morrie said generously. “A mechanical model of the solar system, actually”--he could not resist giving the crank a twirl to send the orbs whirling around the enamel sun--“and planets, our own among them, of course predominate. Technically, Carnelia and everyone, this ingenious device”--another indulgent turn of the crank and Pluto chased Neptune in beguiling orbit and Jupiter romped neck and neck with Saturn and so on--“is called an orrery.” And so the Earl of Orrery’s invention joined Halley’s predictable comet in our season of celestial science. Before he was done, I could tell, Morrie would have us staying up nights to run our fingers across the stars.

At the time, though, another part of me desperately hoped this was not a case of Morrie chewing more than he could bite off. A glance at the practically virgin Westwater Mercantile calendar on the side wall told how far his enthusiasm was racing ahead of the actual machinery of the cosmos. Halley’s Comet wasn’t due until well into spring. Was our prophet of science going to exhaust everything skyward, and wear us out on the topic, before the fiery visitor even appeared?

Hardly. As I watched, Morrie craftily set aside the orrery, right then while every one of us in that schoolroom itched to turn that magical crank and send the solar system on its merry-go-round, reached into his bottomless desk drawer and pulled out an apple. He took a significant bite out of it, munched it thoroughly while we all sat gaping and then, shades of Aunt Eunice, he was reciting in full voice:

*“When Newton saw an apple fall, he found
in that slight startle from his contemplation--
'Tis said (for I'll not answer above ground
For any sage's creed or calculation)--
A mode of proving that the earth turn'd round
In a most natural whirl, called 'gravitation';*

*And this is the sole mortal who could grapple,
Since Adam, with a fall, or with an apple."*

In conclusion, Morrie dropped the apple to the floor with a *thunk*.

It worked. Did it ever. An epidemic of grins broke out around the schoolroom, infecting even the brighter portion of the eighth grade. The moment set the mark for Morrie's excursions into the science of the cosmos; if he had to go to Eden to show us the field of gravity, he would.

"Gravity is everywhere around us," he informed us next with the aplomb of a ringmaster, "from the heavens to the ground under us. It is a force utterly consistent in its steadiness, on all items great and small. Watch."

Scooping the apple into his hand again, he borrowed Josef Kratka's much-bitten pencil, held the objects out equally at shoulder height and let both drop at the same instant. When apple and pencil struck the floor precisely together, Marias Coulee school blinked with interest. Morrie immediately produced a copper penny and a silver dollar, and dropped them to the same result. "Your turn," he challenged, and grade by grade we madly tested the fidelity of gravity. A ball and an empty lunch pail fell at the same rate. So did a ball and a full lunch pail, we found to our amazement. An overshoe and a pen nib. The yardstick and the blackboard eraser. Damon and Grover came up with the most fiendish experiment, a gunnysack with as much coal as one of them could lift and a needle delicately held poised by the other. The law of falling objects held true every time, and from that foothold in gravitation, Morrie took us up and out, session by session, into the wonders of the universe. "Copernicus," he would say as if remembering someone he once knew, "now there was a person who saw to the center of things," and conjure the master of heliocentrism back to life for us, and Kepler and Galileo, and peculiar Tycho Brahe, and lead us into the lenses of their trembling telescopes, and outward to the silver pinpoints of constellations. Heaven's wanderers, he took care

to warn us another occasion, in superstitious times past had been no more welcome than tramps on earth. "An orbital comet foretells only itself, not the end of the world. Halley's has come and gone two dozen times that we know of, and the world seems to still be here, doesn't it." We had to grant the truth of that, but he punctuated it anyway by nailing up a framed Delacroix print of Halley's Comet streaking benignly over the heads of terrified peasants in their fields. *The Star Dragon*, it was titled. "Quite a nice likeness of the comet," Morrie estimated.

If only I could bottle it for every teacher under my jurisdiction, the fluid passion Morrie put into those class hours of cosmic science. Naturally I would like to think it was the whetstone of daily Latin with me that sharpened his teaching mentality to razor-edge those times, but that's awfully near-sighted. Much more likely, given the coming of the comet he simply performed up to the role he had been handed, the way a stand-in might deliver better than his best when allowed onto a hallowed stage. Whatever accounted for it, in those winter weeks when the dragontailed satellite was racing across its millions of miles toward us, Morrie teetered on the astronomical highest wire, some days more than others, but never did he plummet.

"I did away with the wallpaper in my parlor last night," Rose typically would report in our hushed dialogues these mornings. She practically crackled with energy now that she had another house to maintain--counting her attention to Morrie's teacherage, this made three. "I took exception to purple flowers as big as cabbages."

"They reminded me of squashed bats," I whispered back. Damon and I were convinced Aunt Eunice decorated that parlor as a chamber of horrors for boys.

"Paul, do you know, I'm ever so glad I bought the homestead," Rose rushed on. "There is one thing, though. May I ask you something?"

"I--I guess so." I sat forward in my chair at the table, tensed for what deluge might come.

"Plowing." When whispered that way, it did sound mystifying. The isthmus between her eyebrows scrunched into a tiny wrinkle as she reported her perplexity. "The ground just sits there. But every time I ask your father how soon he will start plowing my field, he gets a funny look on his face. So, tell me--when does plowing occur?"

"When you can't see frost on the ground by the light of the first full moon after the equinox."

"Oh."

"Paul, PAUL, *Paul*." Morrie resorted to this only when my translations were at their most dire.

It was a Friday, and both of us had already had another strenuous week of school. Daylight was lengthening by leaps and bounds now--looking out at the snowless prairie, a person might have declared winter was waning, except that this winter had been on the wane from the start--and the after-school classroom was not quite as cozy with dusk as it had been. Nonetheless, Morrie soldiered on with my Latin just as if he wouldn't have preferred to be over in the teacherage with his feet up. "Let's try it again. Listen for the footsteps of the language, all right? *Veni*."

"I came."

"*Vidi*."

"I saw."

"*Vici*."

"I was victorious."

“No!” He slumped at his desk. “Why oh why, *why* would you follow two active verbs with an auxiliary verb construction?” Possibly he had a point. I shrewdly switched to:

“I got the better of the fight.”

Pain entered his expression.

“But why not?” I defended. “You keep telling me to look to the root, and *victoria* means ‘victory.’”

“Perfectly reasoned,” he said tiredly, “except that you are resorting to the root of a noun when we happen to be dealing with a transitive verb. *Vinco*, *vincere*, etcetera--as in *invincible*--in case it has escaped your attention?” I brooded. This had the flavor of Father negotiating with Rose. Try to be logical, and the next thing you knew, terms had shifted shape and left you pawing the air.

Sympathy was not in Morrie’s repertoire today. Something like a groan came either from his desk chair or him along with his next instruction to me. “The pertinent verb. Look it up.” I made the trek to the Latin dictionary one more time and came back.

“Conquered,” I conceded. “Morrie?” We had arrived at the arrangement that I did not need to call him “Mr. Morgan” in the after-school sessions if no one else was around. “Have you ever been to Rome?”

“Hmm? Rome? Yes, twice or was it three times,” he said absently. As if reminded, he glanced up at me. “The leather trade involved travel, you know.”

The thought of going to the Roman heart of things made me breathless. “Did you see the Colosseum and all?”

“Of course. It is a few thousand years past its prime, but still impressive. You can feel the layers of time there,” he mused. “Antiquity is a strange commodity. Dilapidation adds to its worth.” He caught himself. “We are getting

off the topic here.” Pulling my pages of homework to him, he did a rapid appraisal. “Conjugations do not particularly bother you, do they?”

I shook my head. *Amo, amas, amat*, all that--much easier playmates than the Drobnys, as far as I was concerned.

“And,” he cast a glance over last night’s assignment again, “you seem to be quite up on declensions.” I nodded. I gobbled those.

Morrie sat back in his chair and the indeterminate groan came again. “Then why are your translations stiff as a corpse?”

The answer to that was out of my reach. Novice that I was, I didn’t fully comprehend he was galloping me through Latin at such an intensive pace that my vocabulary was always being left in the dust. With Father’s help, I was learning ten new words a night. Morrie could spring that many on me in just a couple of his damnable sentences to be translated.

“Here’s one for you.” I thought I caught an impish gleam in him as he stepped to the blackboard and wrote it out. *Universum lux desiderat*. It did not look hard, which made me suspicious. “It is one of my favorites,” Morrie was saying. “Quite a nice Copernican line.” Copernicus was not there to decipher it into English, I was. Morrie looked at me sternly. “A hint. It does not have to be translated into precisely three words, nor does it need to be cumbered up with auxiliary verbs and whatnot into a dozen or more. There’s a lovely balance in the middle, to this one. Translate away, Paulus.”

I worked on it for some while. Knots of language entranced me even then, even through my fumbling and bad splices and hauling in heavy bowlines where I should have been threading slipknots. Finally, I cleared my throat and spoke: “Everything has to have light.”

Morrie pursed his lips, lifted his eyebrows, and eventually shook his head.

“Uh, ‘wishes’ it,” I backpedaled, “‘needs’ it, ‘wants’ --”

“Latin is the subject you are purportedly studying at this moment, I believe, Paul, not guesswork,” he closed me off. “I want you to keep at this line, it will do you good.” Morrie pinched the bridge of his nose, one of his thinking postures. “Now remember, in translating always work outward from the word to find its best equivalent in English. You must appropriate another sense of the word if necessary--”

“What’s that mean anyway?” I was grouchy by now, tired of getting ambushed by words of both languages. “You told me you were ‘appropriating’ me when you glommed onto me for the cleanup crew for the supply room, and now it sounds like it means you want me to grab off one word for another. I thought ‘appropriate’ was nice manners or something.”

“It is a homonym, something spelled the same as another word but with a different meaning.” He considered for a moment. “In fact, when all is said and done, I suppose it is a multonym.” *Oh, fun*, I despaired to myself, now a word could have any number of meanings. This was just the kind of thing that always lit Morrie up. “Appropriate behavior, yes,” he was merrily counting off on his fingers, “and as a verb of possession, to claim for one’s own use, or maybe better, to take possession of. ‘Glom onto’ is not a bad colloquial rendition, actually. And, not to forget--” He dug in his pocket and flipped a penny to me. “Here, yours to keep. What have I just done?”

“Given? Donated? No, wait, I get it--an appropriation, like Congress does with money?”

“Top mark,” he granted and for the first time all session vaguely looked satisfied with my progress. “Now then, back to *Universum lux desiderat--*”

“WHOA.” The command was accompanied by the harness jingle of the dray team pulling to a halt at the front of the school and the familiar screech of the handbrake being set. “Slack up, Blue, old fellow.” Father always used a

stentorian tone on the horses. "Steady there, Snapper." This was a *finis* to our Latin session neither Morrie nor I had anticipated. Well, at least I had gained a penny on the day.

"Young Cato's chariot awaits," Father announced as he joined us in the schoolroom. "I thought I'd swing by and give Paul a lift home."

"Always glad to see the president of the school board," Morrie greeted him. "Among other glories of office, in charge of replenishing the coal bin, am I right?"

Father found something in a pocket to write *coal* on, and they visited man-to-man while I went to my desk and gathered my books. I was more than ready to go, but Father was gazing around the room as if visiting a museum. "By the way, Morrie. I don't seem to recall an orrery or a rain gauge in our school budget."

Morrie was grandly dismissive of that. "Don't give it a thought. I have provided them myself. Oliver, you are looking at me crossly."

"It's irregular, to say the least," Father was plainly uncomfortable, "for the teacher to be dipping into his own pocket for classroom equipment. You could have come to the board and--"

--Walter Stinson would have wanted to know the total history of the orrery and of the solar system as well, and Joe Fletcher would have wondered if a tin can wouldn't catch as much rain as a pluviometer. They are good men, but gradual in making up their minds, aren't they." Morrie gestured upward, his customary field of interest. "Halley's Comet and the attending science coincide like this only rarely, as you know. I cannot wait on budget considerations." All at once a helpless smile played across his face. "I have been accused before of being impecunious. It's not a hanging offense."

"Something has been bothering me," Father came out with, and the way this was going, I set my books back down. "This school and our children are absolutely the best thing Marias Coulee has to offer, but it's plain as day you're

used to a higher mental plane.” Father’s gaze probed around the schoolroom again until coming to rest on the man at the teacher’s desk. “Yet here you are. If you don’t care a fig for wages or other attainments, what do you gain from this?”

“I’m surprised you need to ask,” Morrie responded, indeed blinking a bit. “A job of this nature is a preventative.”

Father’s turn to blink. “Against what, may I ask?”

“The acid of boredom. Surely you have experienced something of the sort, Oliver. Manitowoc?”

Father became aware I was closely following this back and forth. I much wanted the debate to go on--Latin had whetted my appetite for verbal thrust and parry--but he called a halt. “Speaking for the school board,” he accorded Morrie, “we’re lucky you find life here unborring enough. We hope you’ll take the school for us again next year.”

Morrie looked pleased enough to purr, although he only said: “The possibility exists.” I was way ahead of him on possibility: Greek from him, after-school next year!

“Paul,” Father broke in on my thoughts of conquering Athens after Rome, “get yourself together, we’d better be on our way.”

“Before you go.” Morrie rose and beckoned Father over to the weather ledger. “I have something I must show you.”

With Father reading silently over his shoulder, he paged through the weekly precipitation readings since the start of the year. I knew it was dehydrated arithmetic in more ways than one. My turn as inspector-general of the weather had not come around yet, but Damon said he could have spit more than the pluviometer held during his.

Morrie flipped the last page and said in the expectant tone he used when he called on one of us in class: “Oliver?”

“It’s not news that this is a dry year, so far.”

“I would say more like arid.”

“Now, now, Morrie. Any land agent worth the silver in his tongue will tell you aridity is insurance against flood.”

Morrie’s expression conveyed that if Father wanted to jest his way out of this, that was up to him. He clapped the weather ledger shut. “I confess I can’t read Montana seasons,” he said with a grunt, “they all seem to be one long brown patch. Exactly when do you plow?”

The lunar law as recited for Rose was recited again. “Fascinating,” was all Morrie said.

Father was quiet on the wagon ride home. I enjoyed the privilege of sitting up there in the dray seat beside him, and the day decided to put on a show as the sun went down, a seep of golden-orange between the strata of clouds over the white, white Rockies. It seemed singularly unfair to me that the irrigation project was hogging all the water--the snow there in the mountains to fill its dam and canals--but I didn’t think Father cared to hear that from me right then.

Home was hardly soothing when we got there, what with the maelstrom of Toby and Houdini wrestling on the parlor rug, and Damon all over the kitchen table making flour paste and butchering newspapers for his scrapbooks. Snatches of whistling traced Rose’s route elsewhere in the house as she busily closed up her housekeeping day. Father slung the gunnysack of comestible and postal goods onto the cupboard counter and shook out the makings of supper. Ham hocks and beans again, I foretold with a sigh, and claimed a corner out of Damon’s clutter to deposit my books. With water on to boil, always the first step in Milliron cuisine, Father settled to his place at the table and thumbed into the mail. He still seemed preoccupied.

Not Damon. He gave me a full devilish grin while scissoring the next sports article out of his newspaper heap. "How was *dusty fiddles* today?" He had been calling Latin that ever since Christmas, when I'd made the mistake of citing the linguistic birthright of "*Adeste Fidelis*" to him.

"Only the brave survive it," I told him in Roman fashion. "Who's this mug?" A beetle-browed prizefighter scowled straight up at me out of Damon's newsprint litter. "I'd hate to meet him in a dark alley."

"Stanley Ketchel." Damon spun the scrapbook to show me the freshly pasted headline: **Ketchel Holds Crown in Middleweight Slugfest**. "He's 'the Ashtabula Assassin.' That and 'Killer Ketchel.'"

"Swell." The multiple murderous nicknames of Damon's rogues' gallery reminded me. "Father, we need to look up *multinym* tonight."

He did not hear me. The reading finger was going over a letter.

"Damn."

From Father, this was volcanic.

Toby and Houdini stopped their din. Damon let the scissors drop.

"Oliver?" Rose called and along with it appeared anxiously in the doorway. "Is something wrong?"

"The inspector is going to pay us a visit."

"Inspector?" Rose shot a look around the room as if a phantom was on the premises. "Inspecting--?"

"The school, what else."

Morrie flapped a hand at the letter the next morning, Saturday. "Oliver, forgive me, but I see nothing in this that specifically pertains to my tenure as teacher. The '*unusually high level of turnover*'?"

The whole bunch of us were in the teacherage en masse. Rose had ridden over with us, and Father could not in good conscience leave Damon and me and therefore Toby out of a matter that all but screamed *the school!* Now, as if it were an inconsequential bit of arithmetic, he alluded to Morrie's query. "Ah, that. Marias Coulee has had--what is it, four different teachers now in four years?"

"Five," Damon corrected him, while I pointed out, "You're forgetting to count Morrie."

"Miss Trent was the worst," Toby announced as if he had just decided, evidently still stung by the memory of the ruler slap on his knuckles for the misdemeanor of whispering.

"They keep getting married off." Father passed a hand in front of his face helplessly. "We figured we had that cured with Addie Trent." He cocked a glance at Morrie in sudden suspicion. "I didn't think to ask. You don't happen to have a fiancée in the wings in Minneapolis, do you?"

"I am not matrimonial at the moment, am I, Rose?"

"Not that I've ever been aware of."

Morrie deposited the letter on his table and we all stood back looking at it as if it might be rabid. Across the years since, any number of such letters have gone out over my signature, and I am never unaware of the impact of the title of office, Superintendent of Public Instruction. This time, innocent of office-holding, I merely stared at the dangerous piece of paper with everyone else.

Morrie rallied first. "At least this does not sound imminent." He peered and read off: "*Due to a backlog of schools to be inspected, a member of our staff will visit Marias Coulee School on a schedule yet to be determined.*" I can tell, Oliver, you still do not welcome the prospect. Why?"

"For openers," Father drew the kind of breath needed for recital, "a state inspector can grade a teacher out of a job. *Lack of competency.*" He said it like an

epitaph Morrie might not want to be buried under. "And worse than that, the Superintendent of Public Instruction can dissolve a school board."

Morrie, and for that matter Damon and I, gave him a look. Father was nowhere near finished, however. "That's only the half of it. The state can do away with a school, like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Close the school?" Morrie spoke the shock of all of us. "Just like that?"

Father could recite it all too well. "It takes a 'finding,' they call it, by the state superintendent. But yes, in a worst case, he can take over a school and shut it down if he finds it's not up to the mark. What they do then is skim away the state supplemental appropriation for the school and put it to a dormitory in the nearest town instead--move the kids in there for schooling. They've resorted to that over east in the state, Ingomar and those places. Indian kids, they do it to them wholesale."

Dormitory. To Damon and me, it sounded like Alcatraz.

"Well, then, Oliver," Morrie tweaked his shirt cuffs as if he and Father were sprucing up to go out and slay the dragon, "you and I had better be at our best for that inspector, hadn't we."

"That goes without saying," came the bleak answer, "but we're not his only consideration. It's also a matter of the Standards."

"The--?"

Father grimly enlightened Morrie. "The standard state tests. To see how the students measure up against all the other schools."

"Oh dear," Rose said for us all.

"If old Inspector gives Morrie any trouble, we can sic Nick and Sam on him," Damon half-joked as we crawled into bed.

“Worse, Eva and Seraphina,” I said dreamily.

A week tiptoed by, however, and another, and still the school inspector bogeyman did not descend on us. Imminent peril has difficulty staying imminent if it doesn't at least show a glimpse of itself. Father began to have other things on his mind. All of them had the same meaning: springtime.

The school came down with it, too. At recess one clear blue day, Grover and I broke out the spongy baseball. (Sam and Nick hung around our first game of catch for a minute or two, then tagged off after Damon to the horseshoe pit and the satisfaction of iron striking iron.) Rabrab was the earliest of the girls to show up in fawn-colored stockings instead of winter's elephantine gray leggings. The air itself changed as robins on their sharp errands hurtled past the schoolroom windows.

And our kitchen window was free of frost the morning Rose bustled in and huskily asked: “When do you think--?”

“Won't be long now,” I whispered back.

Sooner than I knew. Father had quit sighing heavily every time the words “plowing on shares” came up, and I suspect was secretly looking forward to it. So, with spring officially on the calendar that coming Sunday and the weather perfectly mild and the moon within a parenthesis width of being full, he rolled out the plow and sharpened the plowshare.

The whole menagerie of us circulated in the yard of Rose's homestead that Sunday morning. Rae came over to provide Rose female companionship, and George to hem and haw that he wanted to see how Father's plowing went before he started on his own. The ground looked less dubious than George did. Thaw had taken the last muddy remnants of snirt, and the bare brown soil now had the thin crust common to dry-land farming. A person could never be too sure about the mood of dirt, though. We all watched Father walk out into the field the philosophic

way farmers do, and kneel to one knee to lift a handful of earth and rub it between his palm and his thumb as though it were the finest of fabric. Satisfied, he came back wreathed in a smile. "I'd say it's begging to be plowed."

"Earliest I can remember," one of George's observations as obvious as his beard.

"One thing about an open winter," Father said as if he had been through a hundred such seasons, "a person can get into the field. How about giving me a hand with the moldboard, I'm going to go for broke and set it in the deepest notch."

The scene is etched forever in me. With spring flirting on the tattered arm of winter that fine morning, the women chatted bareheaded in the sun and the men grunted and clattered things as they adjusted the cut of the plow. Damon and I also served, standing and waiting. We had helped to harness Blue and Snapper and there the team of big horses stood, hitched to the riding plow. Father had instructed Damon to hold the reins--Snapper and Blue were the most patient horses there ever were, but reins still had to be held--and he self-consciously grinned at me with the mass of horse might in his hands. With my loftier organizational skills, I was entrusted with the toolbox and the oilcan and the water jug and other sundries that would become a small depot for Father as soon as he singled out some mysterious spot at the edge of the field for it. Only Toby was exempt from agricultural duty, and he was busy manhandling Houdini and trying to keep track of his hat. We passed hats along as we outgrew them, and as another mark of spring Toby had graduated to Damon's old but still nice one, although it was big on him and he kept running out from under it in his jousts with the dog. I made a mental note to stuff a folded ribbon of newspaper under the hatband for him when we got home. I knew it was my imagination, but clear as anything I could hear Aunt Eunice saying "*Poor tyke, has to go around in a hand-me-down that fits on his head like a bowl.*"

Morrie showed up. I knew he would. How could he not? He had topped off the school week with a whirlwind session on the vernal equinox, and here it was, about to guide the plow. Not that attending our ground-breaking festival was without risk, because Toby and his shadow, Houdini, nearly collided with him as they gamboled past with a yelp and a happy growl. I called after Tobe to take it easy, but hat and tail were disappearing around the plow on their next orbit. "Living proof that perpetual motion is possible," Morrie remarked. Father and George greeted Morrie to the extent their wrench work under the plow would let them, and he wisely joined Rae and Rose. I knew he and Rose had made up, but it struck me this was the first time he had set foot on the homestead since the day she moved in. Perhaps because of that, they gave one another long serious smiles before saying anything.

"You're looking lovely for a toiler of the soil," he at last arrived at.

She linked her arm through his. "Who would ever have thought it?"

"Not I, obviously." Morrie gazed at Rose's field as if trying to read a map in a forgotten language.

"Oh, it's a dream come true." Turning her head my direction, she laughed and wrinkled her nose for celebrating anything nocturnal around me. "If you'll pardon my saying--"

Toby's scream ripped through us all.

17

First I saw the hat, where it had rolled beneath Blue's belly and Toby must have tried to swoop it out, stepping too close in under the horse's flank at that unluckiest moment when Blue resettled a rear hoof. The toe of his shoe pinned under the hoof with nearly a ton of horse atop it, Toby stood shrieking for his life on the other side of the workhorses from us all, out of reach. Houdini's frenzy of barking did not move Blue, trained to stand still no matter what the commotion.

Damon turned out to be the savior. By the time any of us could bolt to Toby's aid, Damon tugged on the reins just enough to make the team of horses back up a step or two. The instant Toby's foot was freed he keeled to the ground, howling out his pain. Morrie reached him first, scooping the broken-looking boy away from any more hooves. He cradled Toby there in the bare dirt of the farmyard and I flew in on my knees to grab Houdini and keep the agitated dog from wallowing Toby.

"Tobe! Tobe!" By then Father had leaped the tongue of the plow and surged to us. Rose was there in a flash, too, looking nearly as stricken as Toby did. Damon's pale face hovered in next; past him, I could see that the reins were in George's mitt of a hand now. Rae was the most practical one of the bunch of us,

twirling her handkerchief into a tight twist of cloth and making Toby clamp it like a bridle bit between his teeth: "Bite down on this, Toby, you hear me? It'll help against the hurt. Bite as hard as you can, that's the boy, bite it good." As he gritted down on the rolled handkerchief his sobbing was muted but he still quivered from the pain.

All of us were aware of the blood darkening the leather of his shoe.

Morrie looked sallow and somber and--I had never seen this on him before--helpless as he tried to cuddle Toby in some way that would ease the agony. Father had to make our decisions, and his voice came choked but definite as he did so. "We need to get him in the house here. Old bedding." Rose and Rae rushed toward the door of the house. "Damon, run to our place and saddle Joker for Paul. Jump to it." As Damon hurtled into the stubble of the field between Rose's place and ours, Father got a grip on Houdini with one hand and my shoulder with the other. "Get yourself out of those workshoes and put your riding boots on--one horse accident is enough. Then go like blazes to the Big Ditch camp. They have a telephone there. Tell the doctor we don't know how bad this is, but there's a crushed foot involved, understand?" He set me loose and aimed me in the same motion, and I was plunging after Damon's tracks in the field toward home.

I was too consumed with the responsibility that had been put on me to break down in any way until I was in the saddle and Damon let go of Joker's bridle and reeled out of our way as if letting a charging bull pass. By the time Joker's pounding gallop brought us to the section-line gate, I was crying. I flung myself off and fought the taut wire gate open and danced Joker through. Horses can express surprise, and I felt the tremor of confusion up through the stirrups as I spurred him toward the Westwater plain instead in the direction of school. We clattered up the long straight road leading toward the Big Ditch. Somehow amid the weeping I crooned the necessary praises to Joker, over and over telling him "Good

horse, Joker boy, keep it up," as I worked him into a cruel lather. Gates, gates, gates were in our way; there were three more after the first one and I hated each worse than the others. Between those barbed-wire barriers I rode in what seemed a waking dream, seeing Toby curled like a wounded creature on bloody bedding in Rose's bedroom back there. In Aunt Eunice's old bed. In the house where I had seen death. I cried until I was out of tears. Then, after forever, we topped the rise to the Westwater plain and the long snout of the steam shovel stood in sight, the brown cut of the canal arrowed across the prairie ahead, the tents of the construction camp were clustered like an oasis.

Red-eyed and snuffling and shrill, I alarmed the nearest foreman enough that he grabbed onto my saddle strings and ran alongside Joker, heading us to the office tent at the supply dump. He hustled me inside to a handcrank telephone. He could tell by looking I didn't know how to work it. The crank received some mad twirls from him and he pulled me in next to him close to the mouthpiece. "Central, there's a boy hurt," he shouted down the line as people did then, "cut me through to the doctor. I'm going to put someone on who'll tell him how to get there."

The doctor from town was like Westwater itself, young and feeling his way. He bustled in as his Model T gave dying coughs in Rose's yard and immediately assumed she was Toby's mother. No sooner was that straightened out than it took him somewhat too long to grasp that Father was the homesteader from next door, not simply some tongue-tied farmhand who worked for Morrie. His bedside manner wasn't much better as he clucked to Toby about "that bad horsey." Toby, who had logged more miles on horseback than that shavetail doctor had ever seen, was too terrified to take offense at toddler talk but Damon and I were outraged for him. It did not help that while the gore was being swabbed off the monstrosly swollen purplish foot, Toby yelled bloody murder.

Father was wild with worry and off-balance as he always was around anything medical. I am convinced it was the presence of Morrie, someone well-dressed who could phrase a pertinent question about metatarsal bones of the foot, that put the green young physician on his mettle. After an examination full of "mmm" and "hmm" he took Father and Morrie aside--Rose and Damon and I right at their heels--and announced that all the toes were broken and significant other bones as well, but possibly things could be made to knit straight.

"'Possibly'?" Morrie spoke the word as if wringing its neck.

The doctor frowned. "There's extreme swelling and the foot is one mass contusion. I just have to do the best I can in feeling out breaks."

He etherized Toby, then began setting bones. We waited in the kitchen. Even after Rose's scourgings, to me it still had the faint vinegar presence of Aunt Eunice. I couldn't tell if Father felt it too, but he stood staring wordlessly out the window to where George, lumbago and all, had taken over the plowing. Rae was home fixing food for us. That much of life had to go on. Rose had said she needed some air--she still was pale--and Morrie went out with her. Alone with ourselves, Damon and I sat at the table like persons incarcerated. Every so often we traded white-eyed looks; neither one of us had any doubt that our lives had changed along with Toby's. We just didn't know how much.

When the doctor was finished and all of us were allowed to look in on Toby, his left foot was colossally bandaged and splinted. It stuck out of the bedding so starkly it was hard to be in the same room with it. Father stared at it, one hard swallow after another bobbing in his throat, then he wheeled on the doctor. "What are we looking at, ahead?"

"Mmm, weeks. Maybe a month, maybe two, before he--"

"That's not what I meant," Father spat the words. "Is he going to be crippled?"

For the first time the doctor sounded gentle. "There's a decent chance he won't be if complications don't set in. He needs to keep that foot in bed, nice and still, for a good long while."

"Can we take him home?"

"I don't see why not. Now might be a good time, before the ether wears off."

"Rose, I don't know how I'm going to manage this."

"I do."

Already life was so out of kilter in the household that the four of us were marooned at our kitchen table in the middle of that fine bright first afternoon of spring. Toby had been installed in Father's bedroom down the hall and was fitfully dozing his way through the aftereffects of the ether every time one of us checked on him. The day's victim who was stark awake and distraught was Father. He had two farms on him, and Big Ditch freight staring him in the face, and an injured son who needed day-in and day-out care, and clearly more wheels had come off his world that day than he knew how to deal with. If some people thought the Milliron family was "bad off" before, they should see us now. Damon and I tried our best to sit up straight and show Father we could shoulder our share of things, but we still amounted to schoolboys. The more Toby's bed-ridden circumstances sunk in on me, the deeper my mood went with it. It did not take much figuring out of what was ahead for our household to know I had seen the last of after-school Latin.

Minutes before, Morrie had taken his leave of us, fervently offering: "If there's anything I can do, *anything*, just say the word." The only word presenting itself in any of us at the moment was that doubtproof 'do' from the lips of Rose. It made Father peer across at her as if wondering where she got a monopoly on such certainty. Occupying Toby's spot at the table, she had her elbows planted on

the oilcloth and her hands clasped neatly as a locket. I had the feeling this was something I had seen before.

“It sounds like you’ll let me off the hook on the ‘shares’ proposition, then,” Father was saying, a whiff of relief in his strained voice, “and that will free me up to--”

“Not enough, it wouldn’t.” Rose sounded so perfectly reasonable it took the three of us a little time to realize she was had no intention of yielding on the plowing arrangement. “You already need to be out of the house on all your other work this time of year,” she was laying out to Father nice as pie, “so you are up against being two places at once even if you didn’t farm for me, aren’t you. Then you may as well, wouldn’t you say?”

Rearing back in his chair, Father was about to protest the heartlessness of that--I was, too--when Rose trumped everything. “I’ll care for Toby. I’m here anyway all day.” She drew a breath as if steeling herself. “Dust will just have to accumulate if it wants to.”

“You’d do that? Take this on for us?” Father looked like a man reprieved. “Rose, the boys and I would be grateful beyond--”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” she said as if she did this sort of thing every day. “Don’t you worry.”

For some moments the other three of us sat there taking up space. Somewhere beyond etiquette and just short of moral imperative, something more needed to be said in a situation like this. I knew it and squirmed with it, Damon knew it and kicked the table leg with it, most of all Father knew it and had to summon the words from down around his shoetops. “We’ll figure out some way to sweeten your wages a bit.”

Rose waved her hand as if that was inconsequential. However, she did not turn it down.

"That leaves nights," Damon spoke what I was thinking.

"I'll be night nurse, of course," Father went to work on that with a frown.

"We'll have to rig up something for me to sleep on, in there with him."

"Father?" I saw no need to let anything this hopeless go on. "You're quite a sound sleeper."

About three heartbeats after that, Rose offered:

"Oliver? I can stay over. With Toby. At night."

By the expression on Father, the reprieve seemed to have been yanked back halfway. I watched him glance at Damon and me and then toward the hallway in the pattern that sent boys upstairs, then give up on it. The issue was quite clear, whether or not the two of us were there to gawp at it. A man and a woman, unsanctioned by wedlock, under the same roof night after night, all of that. Father already had shrugged off plenty of community opinion where Rose was concerned, but how much shrugging did he have left in him for something of this nature? Now he mauled the edge of the oilcloth with a thumb while he tried to find the right words to put together, and finally he hunched forward to the table. "That's an even more generous offer, and I appreciate it, Rose. But I don't think it's a good idea for you to be--"

Damon and I were looking at each other.

"I'll go," I said after a moment.

"I could, I guess." He nibbled his lip at the thought.

"You couldn't either," I scoffed. "You'd sleep through breakfast. You'd sleep through *school*."

"Go where?" Father asked in exasperation. "What are you two running off at the mouth about?"

"To Aunt Eu-- To Rose's house, to sleep. We can haul Toby's bunk down to your bedroom, so she can be in there with him. You can have my place, with