

swinging him up behind my saddle every morning, and Morrie did the same for him before hoisting him aboard behind Damon for the ride home--and every time we trotted back into the yard as dry as when we had left. Always threatening and not delivering, the aggravating weather kept on like that all week. I thought to myself Friday night, *Damn. It's going to do it to us, isn't it.*

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

“There’s going to be trouble,” I predicted, not bothering to keep my voice down.

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

“HE’S NOT GONNA COME, IS HE?”

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

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

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

When we reached there, Damon had floundered over to Toby’s bed, dragging most of the bedclothes from his and mine on the journey, and was sitting

with his arm draped around Toby blearily reciting "What's the matter, Tobe? Tobe, what's the matter?" although the reason was right out the window.

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

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

"It just isn't fair, is it," Rose at once pitched in, kneeling to dab away his tears with her handkerchief; a stylish monogramed RL one, I noticed, rather than the

old yellowed thing Aunt Eunice had always put to the same purpose. "But the doctor will come the first minute he can, I know he will."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Get Damon in on it. Maybe it’ll get some of the excavating out of his system.”

From tulle to gingham, Damon and I peered in confoundment at our mother’s wardrobe in one end of the closet in the downstairs bedroom, when Rose

had finished her other chores for the day. I won't say we all put off the task, but none of us were eager for it. Already I had the feeling I would see these garments again, in many a dream.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I believe that turned the last corner for all three of us. While Rose busied herself carrying the wedding gown over to lay it out for folding, Damon keenly dug into the dresser drawer where Mother had kept handkerchiefs and sachets and such. In my case, enough load was off my mind that my thoughts started to roam. They



marched into that timeless procession of men and women coming down the aisle together--in my view of history, from Rome on down. "*Nuptiae primae*. Sorry. Your first wedding, I was thinking about, Rose. I bet you had a spiffy gown like that, too, didn't you?"

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

Silence came down on us like an eclipse.

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

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

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

“He was! I can tell he was!” Damon’s eyes went to the size of turkey eggs.

My own probably were no smaller. “Rose, why didn’t you ever--”

The answer hit us both at once.

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

“Tell us.”

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

“The ‘leather trade’?” I pressed.

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

“Casper traded punches with the best of them. You could call it a bit of a fib if you want, but--”

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

“You’re on the run.”

“Paul, Damon, please, it’s not like that.” She drew herself up, then slumped. “Well, it is and it isn’t. Some people were after me, or at least the betting money they thought I had, and it just seemed best to, well, evaporate from that situation and come out here and--Paul?” She broke off fearfully, seeing the look on my face. “What is it?”

“Where does Morrie stand in all this?”

A tiny shade of relief passed over her, I saw, to have someone else brought into this besides her and her fight-fixing spouse. She pressed her lips together in quick thought. “Morrie, oh well,” she gestured a little as if that would help with what she was saying, “Morrie is in the clear, never fear. He was just a, what would he call it, a general factotum. A hanger-on, the fight crowd would say. The thrown fight was something Casper and his manager cooked up.” As if realizing that sounded too pat, she took some onto herself. “Naturally Cap let me in on it,” she said tiredly. “He knew I always could read him like a book, and so when he came to me and said, ‘Rose, boxing is a tough way to make a living but I know how we can make a killing,’ I went along with it. When you think about it, didn’t it serve the gamblers right for--” Listening to herself say this, she gave up.

“Father is not going to like this,” Damon said.

He could say that again. There was a side of Father--maybe any man--that did not like to be made a fool of, even in his own best interest. If the sum of Rose's fibs upset him (and why wouldn't it) and he felt compelled to go to the cemetery for another conversation with Mother's grave, he readily enough could come back with the opposite conclusion from last time. Three faces there in the bedroom all knew that.

Whatever Capper Llewellynn had been, Rose was a fighter who did not quit. Appalled as I was at the catastrophic story she had just owned up to, I had to admire the combative light that came into her eyes as she looked squarely at me and then at Damon, and at me again. "Conference? In the kitchen?"

Wordlessly the three of us filed downstairs and to the kitchen table.

Having seen Rose at this before, I planted my elbows as if anchoring myself into the table top. Damon sat squirming as if he had caught it from Toby. Together we looked across at the woman who we were ready to have as our new mother five minutes ago, and now sat there with her past spilled all over her.

Rose scrubbed a thumb on a windmill in the oilcloth while collecting her thoughts. When she had her words lined up, her voice dropped to the vicinity of the whisper she and I always used.

“Damon is all too right. This would not look good to your father at this late date. But when would it ever have? **‘Housekeeper On The Run Seeks Hideyhole’?** That kind of an advertisement doesn’t inspire much confidence, does it. Then once I was here, it never made any sense to tell on myself.” Her hand came up from the table in a helpless little tossing gesture. “Paul, Damon, really, truly, I didn’t set out to get your father to marry me, it wasn’t like that at all. I’d had enough husband. But your father and I grew on each other and--” There was the helpless gesture again. “He is beloved to me, please believe me. I wouldn’t hurt him for all the world.”

“Never mind the lovey-dovey,” I said harshly. “Rose, can’t you see? You can love Father to pieces, and there’s still a problem here. Isn’t the law after you?”

“Of course it isn’t,” the prim defense again. “The gamblers were the only ones who ever figured out the fixed fight”--she fanned the air dismissively as if shooing those off--“and that was only because they were stupid enough to guess right.”

Hard as that was to follow, somehow it put a different light on things. Drumming in my head ever since the words *the betting money* came into this conversation was Aunt Eunice’s prophecy that household help always stole. But

that had no way of coming any further true in this case, did it? Whatever temptation had done to her in the days of fight-fixing perdition, no one as smart as Rose could possibly be out to swipe a dry-land homestead. Something else grappled in me. If Rose hadn't had one slip of the tongue, Damon and I and Toby--Toby!--would have gone right on prizing her to take Mother's place, and Father would never have need to doubt that he had given his heart to the right woman. Were all our lives supposed to trip over that? Honesty maybe was the best policy, but was it ever costly.

"Any of that, back there," Rose plunged on, "there's no chance of anything like it happening ever again. I know that wouldn't necessarily make it sound any better to some people"--we knew the one she meant: Father--"what Cap--Cap and I--were up to. But he paid for it with his last breath. And I climbed on that train for good, all that behind me. Paul," she rounded on me, recognizing that of the two stones at the table I was the bigger, "the people in this room are the only ones who would ever let this out."

Suddenly Damon clucked his tongue sympathetically. He appealed to me with an agonized gaze. I could not have put it into words then, but some part of me grasped that a scheme of necessary silence about Rose's past, if I would go along

with it, would become an organizing principle for him from then on. He would do whatever it took, leagues beyond any spitbath handshake there ever was; utter secrecy for what he believed to be the right outcome. I could see in my brother's face that for him, Rose was too much to let go of.

And what did he read in mine?

I sat there with my brain nearly cracking, working so hard to think through what was right and what was simply righteous. Damon squirmed some more. How did the two of us get in this situation? The desperado Milliron brothers, One Punch and Slick. There was the distinct possibility we were way, way in over our heads, plopped there negotiating a marriage for our father or not, a step-mother for ourselves or not. Yet the power of word had fallen to us, out of somewhere.

High color in her cheeks, the warm brown eyes a little misty with all the emotion she had poured into this, Rose never looked more memorable as I studied her, trying to make up my mind.

"You mean it, about putting all that behind you? You swear?"

"I do."

"Up, down, and sideways?"

“May lightning strike me twice if I don’t mean every word. Paul, what more can I say?”

Damon practically wheezed in relief. “That’s settled, then. Don’t you worry, Rose, we know to keep our traps shut. Right, Paul?”

I nodded the slowest nod of my life.

Next we had to deal with the barn. Every now and then a raindrop big as a half dollar pocked the dust in the yard, just enough to make us put on our slickers but not delivering any true moisture, as Damon and I trudged there from the house.

“Sonofabitching weather,” I spat out. Damon kept watch on me from the corner of his eye.

Neither of us spoke while we mucked manure out of the horse stalls and freshened up the straw on the floor and, last thing, climbed to the haymow. Damon pitched his hay delicately straight down into the manger and I did mine practically a stem at a time, all the effort in me still on the question of Rose and Father.

Accuracy plainly was on both our minds when we met in the middle of the haynow and resigned from our pitchforks. I kicked together a mound of hay and sat in it.

“Let’s think this out, some.”



“We better,” Damon agreed. “Capper Llewellyn, holy smoke.” He savaged the air with a pantomime left hook that would have sent the Capper opponent through the barn wall. “Practically in the family. How about that.”

“Damon, the man was some kind of crook.”

“Well, yeah. Except for that.” He sobered. “Morrie found out they fixed that fight, right?”

“For crying out loud, he’d have to. A person’s sister can’t be married to the next thing to lightweight champion of the world who throws a fight and gets knocked off for it and that person not find it out.”

“That’s what I thought,” Damon said defensively. “But then why didn’t he--when I showed him my scrapbook--”

“I don’t know why that didn’t set him off. I wish I did. But you heard Rose: he’s in the clear. That’s what counts.” A thought occurred to me. “Where was the short pier, anyway?”

“I think Chicago.”

“Lake Michigan, brrr. But there, you see? Morrie and the University of Chicago and all--” I peered intensely out the loft door of the haymow as I could see all this written on the clouds. It still was not raining to amount to anything, and at

this rate never would. "He's there, Rose tells him she needs his help because the gamblers are after her, they get away to Minneapolis. They hole up, but she's still got to quit the country because the guys who took Casper on the long walk might track her down back there. Morrie watches over her while she waits to hear on her advertisement, then he comes along with to protect her. That's how it must have been."

"You always hit the nail on the head, Paul," Damon marveled.

We had been so busy at this we didn't hear the surrey until it was almost to the barn door. Toby came bounding out of the carriage, which told us even before he could shout it:

"Paul, Damon! I can ride! My foot's all healed." He bolted for the haymow ladder to join us.

Father wrapped the reins and swung down from the surrey, smiling up at Damon and me. "I hope you counted the raindrops for Morrie's weather ledger," he bantered to the two of us, just as if a little dry weather was the only thing doing mischief to his destiny.

The wind came up in the night and the house groaned with it like an arthritic creature turning over. I writhed in bed. It had been an emotional day, there was no getting around that; but Damon and I had done what we hoped was the right thing, hadn't we? Rose had promised up, down, and sideways she was honest now, hadn't she? Morrie had been the noblest Roman of us all in shepherding her out here and sticking with her, hadn't--

Somewhere in the dizzying revolutions of all this in my mind, I dropped off to sleep.

In the immense annals of my dreams, that night's even yet stands alone. Everyone in Marias Coulee, it seemed like, had come to gawk at a short pier. The pier was over the Big Ditch--my notion of a pier was rather approximate at the time--and a boxing ring had been set up on it. A figure in fighting trunks and gloves stood waiting at the far side of the ring, his arms resting on the ropes. And on the near side there Father was, in charge of sending out our boxers, how ever that came to be. I did not know whether to cheer or not when Eddie Turley, squinting like fury, advanced on the other boxer and was dispatched with one blow, *wham!* "Will you look at that!" people kept saying, and I was trying, but it was hard. Because while all this was going on I was being quizzed by Frank

Taggart, the school inspector. "*Pay attention, bucko.*" I was trying to, in all directions. I had a black slate on my lap, and I chalked words onto it as Taggart reeled them off to me. *Universum. Lux. Desiderat.* "Nasty," I heard Taggart say, and I looked up to see Milo, the next knockout victim, being dragged out of the ring feet first by Father. Where was Rose? How could she miss something like this? Suddenly Father hovered in front of me, looking distressed. "*Paul, we need you in the ring. I know what I told you about fighting. But it would be just one punch.*" Taggart folded his arms and went into a huff. Damon came and put the boxing gloves on me, left one first for good luck, he told me. Anxiously looking past him, I could see the other boxer was bigger than I was, but not as much as I expected. Damon gave me a push out onto the pier and through the ring ropes. "*The next challenger, Paul Milliron!*" an announcer somewhere was saying. "*Versus the lightweight champeen of the world!*" His back to me, the contender shadowboxed at the end of the pier. He resembled somebody but I couldn't quite see who, until he threw a final flurry of punches and then did a very odd thing. He shucked off a boxing mitt, then the other. Still turned away from me, he dropped the gloves off the pier into the water. Where he got these I don't

know, but now he ever so casually slipped some gleaming things past his fingers onto either hand. Brass knuckles.

"*Morrie?*" something cried out in my mind, and I sat bolt upright in bed.

Cocoa didn't help, that shivery extra-early hour in the kitchen. Pressing my brow against the night-cold glass of the window as I tried to see out into the unfathomable world beyond Marias Coulee didn't either. The clouds had blown away and if I hadn't been so disarranged in my head I would have been thrilled to see that the comet was back, lower in the sky but still a phosphorescent fireball against the dark. How was it possible for something a million miles from earth to be clearer than anything within my mental horizon? *Morrie? He couldn't be--*

By then I had been up for what seemed an uncountable amount of time; when you break out of a dream like that, usual rules of existence need not apply. My mind absolutely refused to clear. How could Casper Llewellyn be dead, entombed in blackest newspaper headlines that I had seen with my own eyes in Damon's scrapbook, and yet be up and around in the recognizable figure of Morrie? Was I losing my mind? Had my dream habit finally delivered me to the crazyhouse?

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sleep is  
coming back.

Blindsight,  
hindsight,

The kitchen clock chimed softly, and I took a frantic look at it. Half an hour, at the most, before Rose showed up for the day. I couldn't face her one more time blind to whatever she and the late Mr. Llewellyn--if he truly was late rather than current--amounted to. I had to know. I flung myself out to the mud room for the bullseye lantern.

It took me a couple of shaky tries to light it, but my nerves steadied a bit as I started upstairs. The stairs were no problem, I had such long acquaintance with their every tread and creak. The tricky part waited at the bedroom. There I needed just enough light to find Damon's scrapbooks but not so much that it would wake either of my brothers.

I sneaked up on the bedroom doorway as though it might run off. With excruciating care I set the lantern down outside a corner of the doorframe, its bullseye pointing to the floor so there was a cast of glow for me to go in on, like a throw rug of light. So far so good, but I was not really anywhere yet, was I. Damon's scrapbooks were a logjam atop the dresser. I crept in, trying to breathe silently. Not for the first time I was grateful Damon was basically a hibernator; Toby was the concern. If he shot awake and asked what I was doing, and that

roused Damon, and the commotion that would follow that brought Father up here grimly demanding explanations as only a father could do, everything was sunk.

I was within a foot of the dresser when Toby snuffled, rubbed his nose with the palm of his hand, and yawned. Frozen on tiptoes, I waited. After forever, Toby turned over and went back to rhythmic breathing.

One by one, I lifted the scrapbooks up next to my eyes, peering desperately in the dimness to pick out right one. Making out the typeface letters on the pasted-in newspaper articles was like trying to read an eyechart in a coal mine, but thank goodness boxing headline writers so loved **K.O.** Mentally apologizing to Damon, I slipped from the bedroom with his prizefighting scrapbook.

Back at the kitchen table, I paged madly through for any article with **Llewellyn** atop. Even so, I almost missed the pertinent one.

**Wolgast Upset Winner Over 'Capper' in Last Round!**

My eyes swept past the headline. The photograph of the boxing ring at the end of the fight, the victor with an arm raised gladiatorially and the vanquished climbing down through the ropes in the opposite corner, his face half-turned away, only mystified me all the more. That indistinct figure in dark boxing trunks looked

so much like Morrie--build, height, weight--but was the hair quite the right color?

A black-and-white picture on newsprint isn't much for tint.

I blew out an exasperated breath and sat there no less baffled than I had been. Any print put in front of me will find its way to my eyes, so before I knew it I automatically was reading down through the story of the fight and on into the fine print of the round-by-round scoring of the judges. Even below that, I saw, there was a crowd of type, about like there would have been for baseball boxscores. What I did not know about prizefighting would fill a newspaper page, obviously. Father would not have been alone working the ring corner in the dream, I saw right away; it took quite a population of cornermen and officials. Here were the judges' names. The referee. The timekeeper. Wolgast's manager and seconds and trainer and so on, listed first now that he was the champion. Then like the lead sinker at the end of a futile fishing line, the paragraph clump of ex-champion Casper Llewellynn's retinue. I didn't really imagine a factotum brother-in-law rated inclusion, but my finger trailed down anyway. And stubbed against the last tiny irremovable engraving of type.

**Manager: Morgan Llewellyn.**



## 21

“Now then, Paul.” Morris Morgan, so-called, brushed the day’s chalk dust off his hands and settled to his desk, looking like a man with nothing in the world on his mind except Latin.

*How does he do it?* I wondered from behind what bastion I had, my desperately propped-open primer. *Names are mighty things.* Hadn’t he brazenly said that himself, the first morning he stood there at the front of the room taking roll? What a bundle of meaning the shift of one word carried, I was finding out. Morgan Llewellynn as far inland as he could get from fate’s short pier; a world of difference, between that version and the pretended one stepping down from a train at Rose’s side with apparently no more at risk than his hat. I’d gone through that entire schoolday with my head on fire. Her loving brother, hah, what a stunt that

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“Now then, or did I say that. Paul, I do not see *Universum lux desiderat* standing out among these translations.”

“I--I’m still working on it.”

Paul

My heart thumped so hard I was afraid he might hear it. As badly as I wanted to jump up and down on the cool-tongued masquerader parked there at the teacher's desk, masking my own emotions was the first order of business. Rose was at stake in this; that much was clear to me if nothing else was. I had to watch my step if I didn't want to cost Father a wife. And cost Toby and Damon--and there was no denying it, the part of me that was always going to be smitten with Rose and her whispered confidences--a new mother. The prospect of disaster hammered in me alongside my heart. One wrong word to Morrie and everything could go to pieces. All day now I had been watching him for any sign Rose had told him the cat was out of the bag about the Capper and her, at least to a pair of us. But no, I finally figured out, why would she? As long as Damon and I stayed pledged, it was to her advantage to keep Morrie in the 'brotherly' pose, wasn't it, so no ugly questions would raise their heads to Father as they were sure to if her devoted sibling inexplicably disappeared back onto that train. All safely quiet on that front, I was convinced, as Morrie at last glanced up from my sheets of homework. Poker-faced (I hoped), I stayed bent over my Latin primer.

"Paul, I am naturally concerned about this situation." The gravity in his voice forced me to struggle into a more upright position at my desk and face him straight on. "If word of this were to get back to Chicago --"

He sighed so heavily it catapulted me up even more. Good grief, had I underestimated him again? Could the man somehow read my mind?

"--my old mentors at the university would question my supposed proficiency in the classics." He critically held my homework up to the light as if that might improve it, while I whooshed a breath of relief. "In my day, I was credited with quite an ability at translation," he continued. "Why then have I not been able to transmit that knack to my prize student? Here, watch."

helplessly

Abandoning his chair, he whipped off his suitcoat--it was almost summerlike in the schoolroom these late spring afternoons--and hung it on the picture hook that held the comet woodcut. Next he pulled his shirt cuffs back a fraction and adjusted his sleeve garters the same minute amount; his version of rolling up his sleeves for blackboard work. I had watched him do this any number of times in our Latin sessions together. This was the first time I thought to myself *Pretty fastidious for a fight fixer.*

"Let us consider *Caesar omnia memoria tenebat,*" Morrie called over his shoulder as he rapidly chalked the sentence on the board. "You have rendered it, *Caesar held it all in memory,*" chalking that below in elephantine letters. "I grant you, that is grammatically correct. But you needn't be so literal if the meaning can be brought out better another way. Why not say," the chalk flew again and the words emerged white and compact, "*Caesar remembered everything.* It's stronger," he made a fist to show so as he turned to me. "It carries the point more forcefully, yet has a nice easy ring to it. I am at a loss, Paul, as to why someone with your imagination wouldn't come up with that?"

"Maybe it's because I'm not really good at pseudonyms--I mean, synonyms."

Morrie never so much as blinked.

Shaking his head, he trudged to his desk and sat down in the sad company of my homework again. "Substitute words exist for a purpose, there are times they fit the context better." I could agree with him on that. Readymade words such as *impostor* and *fraud* wore out in a hurry in my fit of anger with him, and I had sat there most of the day mentally trying more elaborate ones on him (*prevaricator* and *mountebank* and *casanova* were a few) off the great spelling list of deceit. He was looking back at me in his usual tutorial fashion. "I want you to put that imagination of yours to work on Caesar tonight."

How many  
times have  
I told you,

translation

"I'll try," I said listlessly.

"You know, Paul, you seem a bit out of sorts today."

"Spring fever."

"In that case, I know just what to prescribe." Reaching for his edition of Caesar's adventures in Gaul, he pulled up short. He tipped his head to one side. "Is your father stopping by, for some reason?"

That sat me up straight as a rod. "Not that I know of."

"That's funny. I thought I heard--"

*Smash!* Morrie hardly had started up out of his desk chair to check outside before windowglass shattered and something flew into the room, plummeting into one of the rows of desks between us. A sage hen, the most blundering bird in the world, popped to mind. But the loud clatter of the thing across the floor instantaneously said different. The rock spun to a stop against the far wall of the schoolroom.

I was gaping at the broken window, and Morrie was not much better off, when the door crashed open. Pink gums in a furious face, although no sound issued from Brose Turley. He was as fast as he was big. He pounced on Morrie, the desk chair going over backward with a thud like something dead. Grappling Morrie up as if he weighed nothing, in an instant Turley had him pinned against the blackboard, a skinning knife an inch from his throat. It all happened before I could get halfway down the aisle toward the two of them.

"Stand still, teacher man." As an alternative to having his throat cut, Morrie stayed perfectly motionless. "Don't you get any ideas, boy," Turley spoke to me as if I was the merest kind of an afterthought. "Go put yourself against that wall."

I backed away toward the part of the wall where Morrie's suitcoat was hung. If I could reach around to the brass knuckles that I hoped were in the pockets--

crystals  
grains of  
glass  
crunching  
under  
my  
confused!

A hammerlock around my neck answered that. Eddie's voice nuzzled my ear.

"Daddy just needs to ask him something. Hold still and behave, and nothing much is gonna happen to you." Nothing much? What did that amount to when a knife was loose in the room? I tried to struggle, and Eddie simply squeezed the attempt out of me.

"All right, hoosier," Brose Turley spoke into Morrie's frozen face. "You listen to me now." The knife twitched to suggest what would happen if he didn't. Turley drew a ragged breath and licked his lips, the sentences an obvious ordeal for him. "Nothing's right, for this time of year." The words tumbled from him in his chomping way of speaking. "Grass goin' brown already. Creeks are low. The wolves ain't come down to the river bottom yet. I been here my whole life and I never seen that before." He leaned in harder and Morrie winced. I made a strangled protest and Turley's head snapped around for an instant. "Keep hold of that kid, can't you," he rasped to Eddie.

"I've got him," Eddie answered a little resentfully. Maybe it was my imagination, but the pressure of his arm around my neck seemed to have let up a bit since my gurgle.

Brose Turley hung his whiskery contorted face practically atop Morrie's clean-lipped one. "You answer me straight. There's anybody knows, it ought to be you." He licked his lips again, and I realized it was from fear. He was breathing heavily through his opened mouth, the hard-used teeth atop and the bottom gumline showing like what was under a snake's fangs. I became even more afraid for Morrie. The knife threatened again at the very surface of his throat as Turley demanded to know:

"That comet do this? The world endin' in fire? *Is it?*"

"We came out of. not no for first time, of everything's changed"

Weather can't make up its mind to rain

Hearing that, I just knew we were sunk. If Brose Turley was crazed with the notion of Judgment Day, the instrument of judgment was apt to be that skinning knife. Eddie still had me in a clinch to the point of helplessness, but I could feel him trembling, the same as I was. Wide-eyed as could be, we both watched the white-faced figure rigid against the blackboard.

Pinned there stiff as a dried pelt, how Morrie managed it I will never know. He choked out:

“Light is the desire of the universe.”

I was thunderstruck. I prayed Morrie would not go on, fatally pedantic, and utter to an unlettered wolf hunter teetering on the brink of insanity, “*Or as the Romans would have said, ‘Universum lux desiderat.’*”

There was not a movement in the room and the only sound was Eddie’s heavy breathing in my ear. At last Brose Turley blurted:

“Meanin’ what?”

Morrie mustered mightily for a person whose toes were barely in contact with the floor. “You carry a lantern when you go into the darkness, don’t you? The traveling bodies of the cosmos do the same. The impulse to illumination somehow is written into the heavenly order of things. The sun, stars, they all carry light, that seems to be their mission in being. Are you with me so far?”

“That comet ain’t any of those,” Turley said ominously.

“It is a celestial body nonetheless,” Morrie literally risked his neck in contradicting his interrogator. “One that happens to follow a course we see roughly once in a lifetime.”

“Why’s it come now, then?” Turley raged. He hulked over Morrie, the knife always ready. “The country burnin’ up along with it!” Bits of spittle flew as he shouted into Morrie’s grimacing face. “None of this happened before you showed up. And you and this hoodoo kid, whatever you’re up to with ungodly

more abt  
Eddie

3 times  
more I had  
seen him  
open in  
solid hours.  
Surely no  
one expect to  
survive that.

languages. Maybe it'd turn things around if I rid the world of the two of you." At that, Eddie's gripping arm tightened on me, although I couldn't tell if it was voluntary. "Toss what's left of you in the badlands when I get done," his wild-eyed father raved onward. "I know places there, people never would find you."

"Mr. Turley, the world is not ending, believe me," Morrie panted out. "The comet sends us light, not fire. It's too far away for the earth to feel any heat whatsoever from it--you can see a lantern for miles but you have to be up next to it to catch any warmth, am I right?" He paused infinitesimally in the hope that would sink in, then plunged on. "This area is in a drought, true. The dry spell set in months before the comet showed up--Eddie can tell you, the school has measured the precipitation all winter and there's hardly been any. That is merely a matter of weather, not the heavens on fire." Morrie's voice still was a bit high, but steadying all the time. "The comet, you will see fade as it passes by the earth. In a couple of weeks it will only look like the flare of a match in the sky. A night soon after that, it will vanish. And then you will never lay eyes on Halley's Comet again."

Turley licked his lips, more slowly this time. He eyed Morrie dubiously. "How can you tell the way it's gonna behave?"

"Books as old as the Bible," the answer cascaded out of Morrie. "They tell of the comings and goings of this comet, regular as clockwork. The ancient Greeks, the Romans, medieval monks--the record is long. The period between reported sightings is infallibly seventy-six years. That is how Sir Edmond Halley was able to deduce--"

"Shut your gab." Turley seemed to think over the idea of a regular messenger of light from the universe, not the easiest thing for a man constructed of instinct.

"Daddy?" Eddie's voice startled us all. He sounded as if he was forcing the words through a trap door in his throat, but they came. "Could be the truth. He

is a record of  
sightings of  
Halley's  
1111  
1



told us in school the thing in the sky won't come back practically forever. Showed us on the machine"--Eddie meant the orrery--"where it goes. It'd take a while." His mouth was so near to my ear, I could hear the depth of the gulp he took before saying the next. "No need bothering with the teacher and Milliron then, Daddy. End of the world is one thing--dry weather's another. We got no call to get rid of people just for that."

"Maybe not." No two words ever came more grudgingly. Probably Brose Turley did not loathe the schoolhouse pair of us any less, but he had to take a fresh run at it. He sent a lightning glance over his shoulder at his son and me, then back to the sleeve-gartered figure pressed against the blackboard. "Maybe these're just educated fools. Couldn't make anythin' happen if they tried." He twiddled the knife next to Morrie's Adam's apple one more time for good measure. "For sure it's going away?"

"If the comet does not, Mr. Turley, I will slash my own throat."

Turley gave a strange acknowledging growl. Over his shoulder he ordered: "Bring him over here."

Eddie frogmarched me over.

Brose Turley jerked his head toward the blackboard, and the next thing I knew I was standing plastered against it next to Morrie. Turley backed away from us a couple of steps. He glared from one to the other of us and underlined it with a kind of snort. Evidently by long habit, he wiped the knife on the thigh of his trousers before putting it away. "Wouldn't say anything about this, if I was you two."

Morrie straightened his tie, possibly to make sure his neck was still there. "Fear not," he said as if he was addressing a question of etiquette, and I wished he didn't talk that way. "Paul and I know when discretion is the better part of valor."

Brose Turley's hand moved back to where he had sheathed the knife, hovering there. He took a step toward us and I held my breath. Seconds dragged by as he stared at Morrie, mystified. Then he spun on a booted heel and headed out the door.

Backing toward that doorway on one slow foot after the other, Eddie gave us a last long look--was it beseeching or simply squinty?--and followed his father.

The schoolhouse felt suddenly bigger. A bit of a breeze whisked in through the broken window. It was going to take more than that, though, to revive me. I was so drained I could hardly shove away from the blackboard. I lurched over to the water bucket. Gulped a dipperful, then retched it right back into the slop pail.

Morrie pounded my back with the flat of his hand to help me through the gagging and coughing. I made it to my desk with his support. When I had told him enough times I was all right, he gave me one more pat on the back and went to his own desk, righted the chair, and collapsed into it. I watched him draw a heaving breath that seemed to come all the way from his shoetops. Then he squared himself up in his chair. In a scratchy voice he said, "I think we will adjourn Latin for the day. We have a window to board up, don't we."

My own voice was none too steady but I had to get the words out if it was the last thing I ever did.

"Morrie? You managed really well. He could have skinned us alive."

After a moment he gave his mustache some strokes, if it had been there. "I may need to have Rose iron my stomach out, but other than that--thank you, Paul. It was nothing."

"No? Maybe not for a fight manager."

His face went as immobile as when Brose Turley's knife was at his neck. Our eyes locked across the rows of desks. If his redoubtable watch had been out on his desk, a good many seconds would have ticked into the stillness. As things

were, there was not a sound in the schoolroom until at last Morrie let out wearily: "Paul, I do believe you are the oldest thirteen-year-old in captivity."

That wasn't how I felt, with everything churning wildly inside me. There were so many ways this could go wrong, I simply sat there and let them race one another behind my eyes, under the shield of what I hoped was a gladiatorial glaze. Finally Morrie nodded, a short dip of the head that I somehow realized was a salute, and spoke again as if trying out the words to himself.

"My destiny is in your hands now."

"I didn't ask it to be!" Hot tears flooded my eyes.

"Invited or not--" He let that trail off. "So. Time to tot up. My beloved talkative sister-in-law--"

"Rose didn't tell me. Who you really are, I mean." I stopped. How could I tell him I had pieced together Morgan Llewellynn from a dream and a flyspeck line of type?

"This may be worse than I thought," Morrie was saying, glancing toward the door as if he might bolt for it. "Who else--?"

When I told him Damon had caught on about the Capper and Rose but that was all, something sparked in his gaze.

"I have to say, kudos to Damon and his pernicious scrapbook," Morrie or Morgan or some nominal combination in between managed to husk out. By now he was thinking furiously, I could tell. I blew my nose and wiped my eyes and waited. At least he still was sitting there instead of making a dash for his saddlehorse and the Westwater train depot.

He did however cut another glance toward the doorway where Brose Turley only minutes ago had reluctantly left our lives behind. "We came through by the skin of our teeth once already today, Paul. Let's not be precipitous now just because we have the blood left to do it with." I braced. He was reaching his

Paul, Paul,  
Paul  
from p. 208

pedagogical tone of voice. Looking intently at me, he put up three fingers and began counting off on them.

“Number one. I recognize that I have not been able to entirely shed the identity of Morgan Llewellynn, although Morris Morgan has been a marked improvement in quite a few respects.”

I couldn't quibble with any of that, so I nodded.

He moved on to finger number two. “By some manner of calculation that ought to be beyond anyone of your years, you have figured out who I am.”

I nodded harder.

The final finger, he paused over. “Then, of course, there's Rose. Far be it for me to see into that head of hers. But from what you say, for reasons of her own she is not breathing my real name even to you.” He glanced at me for confirmation and I gave it with body English.

He folded that third finger down. Leaving the two, side by side, there in the air. “Given our relatively few numbers, isn't it possible that we might negotiate our way out of this uncomfortable situation?”

“Not until I know the whole thing. From the start.”

Morrie sat there so long and so still that I was afraid I had messed up entirely. Then he rose from his chair, trailing his fingertips across the desk as he stepped away from it. “That's what I'd say in your place,” he granted with a slight slant of smile. There at the front of the classroom, he walked the tight little turn of route, back and forth, where his flights of inspiration had so often taken off from. I waited, achingly hoping he would reach for the last resort of the guilty, the truth. When he began, “The prospect of that much money turned the three of us as crooked as a dog's hind leg,” I heard the words with a strange sense of relief.

As he talked on, chimes of midnight out of a tale by Poe could not have resounded more fully in me. “My brother was a thing of beauty in the ring,”

Morrie or rather Morgan said at the outset. Quick as greased lightning, from the sound of it, and a natural left-hander who trained to fight as a righty. Sometime in the course of a bout he would suddenly shift stance and out of nowhere would sail a wicked left hook. It was generally good-night for Casper's opponent after that. Twenty knockouts in twenty-two bouts, and capping off his fights that way-- "Sportswriters fell all over themselves to be the first to dub him 'the Capper.'" Morrie shook his head as he paced the schoolroom floor. "He was the kind of brother I wouldn't have traded the world for, or wanted any more of. On the street, people could scarcely tell the pair of us apart, the dandified manager and the fancy-dan boxer. There were times, though, when the reflection in the mirror was our only resemblance." As he said that, I guiltily thought of some of my times with Damon.

Making the acquaintance of Rose was one of those cloudy times between brothers. "Casper could have had his pick of swooning socialites." From the slight smile on Morrie, he seemed to be reviewing the parade of them. "But no, he has to walk off a case of nerves before the Swenson fight in Minneapolis, and there's Rose on her day off. On the shore of Lake of the Isles, tossing rusk to the ducks."

"It was love at first wink." His pacing slowed thoughtfully. "You can guess the rest. I tried to cool down Casper with older-brother advice--I sounded as creaky as Polonius, even to myself--but in no time he and Rose were holding hands in front of a justice of the peace." He cut a sharp look at me. "Please believe me, Paul, I had nothing against Rose herself. She was delightful. Too delightful for a man to keep his mind entirely on becoming lightweight champion of the world, was my concern. But I soon came around from that. In every way but one, she was good for Casper."

"The perdition part?"

That stopped him in his tracks. "One might say so," he said drily, "and I gather Rose already has. So, yes, I am afraid extravagance was our middle name there for awhile. She and he went through money as if it came with the morning newspaper. I have never been able to find the handle on a dollar myself. It didn't matter as long as the purses kept growing while Casper fought his way up."

Then came the top rung. The fight between top-ranked lightweight contenders, Casper Llewellyn versus Ad Wolgast. The fixed fight.

"It was Casper's brainstorm, to throw the bout to Wolgast the first time they fought. And then wipe the floor with him in the rematch." Morrie wore a speculative expression. "Oh, we thought we knew the risk. Wolgast was no slouch. But Casper never doubted for a moment he could handle him, in any fight that was on the level. The oddsmakers were of the same mind. Casper was a 3-to-1 favorite when we started getting our bets down. Rose achieved most of that with a trip back to Minneapolis"--the reminiscent little smile twitched on him again-- "where every housekeeper on Lowry Hill placed money on Wolgast for us."

"Casper put up enough of a scrap to make it look good." One Punch Milliron could barely even imagine such a surplus of fistfighting prowess. I listened with my every pore. "We collected the payoffs on our bets, hand over fist," Morrie related. "I began making noise to the newspapers about the public's burning desire to see a rematch, as a good fight manager does. We seemed to be home free." His voice was tight now, reined in hard. "The one thing we didn't count on was how touchy the gambling mob turned out to be. They had no proof the fight was thrown, but they decided suspicions would do. And so they set out to make an example of Casper."

"You and Rose, though," I whispered. "How'd you get away?"

1/2 wt champ

He smoothed the good cloth of his shirt and finicked with his sleeve garters again. "Haberdashery saved our lives, would you believe." His constrained telling of it has stayed with me with the crazyquilt logic of a dream.

The money burning a hole in her pocket, Rose is at a dress fitting; for some reason I see her in sky-blue silk.

Bird of the same feather, Morrie simultaneously visits his tailor.

Freshly outfitted and doubtless whistling, Rose alights home and finds the place in shambles, with Casper conspicuously missing. Frantic, she rings up the tailor shop, catching Morrie as he is about to stroll out the door.

They duck for cover, bombarding the police and newspapers with telephone calls but refusing to show themselves; in Chicago, according to Morrie, the underworld and civic sentinels tend to merge. That precaution proves necessary; in no time, the mobsters take the Capper for his long walk, his last ever, off the short pier.

Morrie broke in on himself. "Paul? Do you know the saying about how an imminent hanging wonderfully concentrates a person's mind? Casper's fate had that effect on Rose and me. We decided we had to stick together, come what may."

Knowing they are running for their lives now, they hop a boxcar out of town. To Minneapolis, where sanctuary awaited, under the wings of those housekeeping staffs of Lowry Hill.

"Rose was a whiz at catching on at her old haunts there," Morrie concluded the tale, "but we knew it would be healthier to have more distance between us and Chicago. Montana seemed to abound in distance." He shrugged. "I believe you know the rest from '**Can't Cook But Doesn't Bite.**'"

"You changed your name. Why didn't Rose?"

"She absolutely would not." He flung up a hand in exasperation. "Casper had insurance. If matters were ever to settle down and she could prove her identity,

she might be able to claim it. I repeatedly pointed out to her that the entire gambling mob and probably half the Chicago police department will need to go blind, deaf, or deceased for that to happen, but you know how Rose can be.”

“The bezzle. What happened to that?”

“The--? Ah, the loot from embezzlement, you mean. Top mark, for looking to the root.” He gazed into space, contemplating my choice of word. “Technically, however, what Casper and Rose and I were engaged in does not qualify as embezzlement, I believe. ‘Theft’ probably says it better. A charge of fraudulence could be thrown in, no doubt. Felonious conspiracy might be on the list in some jurisdictions.”

If the list was any longer, he would need to count off on his fingers again. My leaden stare must have finally registered on him. He sighed.

“What’s left of the money is moldering in a biscuit tin somewhere. Casper did not trust banks. When he took over the swag, to call it that, because Rose and I were spending it like water, we lost sight of it for good.” Morrie sat forward suddenly. “You must understand. The money was merely what might be called the proximate cause of our scheme. Oh, we enjoyed what you call ‘the perdition part,’ no mistake. But Casper and Rose and I all three mostly liked the plan for its own sake.” He pressed his palms against the top of his desk, firming himself to say the rest of it. “When I’m tripping over myself like this it may not sound like it, but we meant no harm to anyone who didn’t willingly put that money at risk. The prizefight game draws gamblers as syrup draws flies.” He paused as if thinking back. “The prizefight game. I suppose we got carried away with that last word.”

The acid of boredom. I sat there trying to comprehend how it had eaten into those three people, so near the tiptop of everything. Maybe a nightly jolt of dreams was no bad thing.



Shadows had lengthened across the worn wood of the schoolroom floor and the window smithereens. "It's late," Morrie said, barely hearable. "Your father will be coming looking for you."

"Let him." I had to finish this, all the way. "Morrie?" I made myself look at him, although I was seeing beyond to Oliver Milliron and the world he thought he was gaining in the person of Rose. "I have to tell."

"You don't at all."

"You and Rose--"

"--have done what a man and woman do. That's so. Nights are long here." His eyes steadied on mine. "But we are not--what you might think, together. Paul, listen to me. Rose is genuine in the feelings she has for your father." That fact seemed to make him restless. The next thing I knew, he was on his feet and plucking up a piece of chalk from the blackboard. Only his nerves had anything to say with it, though, as he juggled the stick of chalk in a little one-handed juggle while he paced the front of the room. "Let us consider one possible outcome. If you were to keep silent, matrimony would take its course and your father and Rose would gain the considerable pleasure of each other's company unto eternity. And Toby and Damon and you will have a mother." He gave the wan smile once again. "Although the Milliron household now may have to quit paying a housekeeper and hire a cook." The chalk took a higher hop in his hand, was caught and clenched. Morrie went perfectly still as he looked at me over his gripping hand. "As for me, I would finish up the school year and move on."

I said the hardest thing I ever had. "I--I think that's a good idea."

He exhaled, gave me the kind of nod he did when I got a difficult conjugation right, and deposited the chalk--in pieces now--at the blackboard. Before he could move from there I called out:

"There's one thing more."

She is made  
me know  
that.  
That's a  
match I have  
not, on level

A

I said the hardest thing I ever had. "I--I think that's a good idea."

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Before he could move from there I called out:

"There's one thing more."

Slowly Morrie turned around to me, the lightning-rod glint in his eyes. "I swear, you've caught something from reading Caesar's tactics."

"I want you to give her away. At their wedding."

His mouth came open, but before he could manage words I said:

"And you have to mean it."

And so, as Rose would have said. What stays and what goes. Doctors who work in the mind may offer explanations why certain watershed events do not leave us--a first love, death of a parent, leaving home. Nothing explains the other molecules of time that endure. At the end of that afternoon, tuckered out yet vibrant with purpose, I rode away from the schoolhouse more than half aware that I was traveling into the next chapter of life of us all.

Where Rose and Father very soon stood in front of a minister and spoke the vows that lasted them the rest of their lives.

Where Morrie gallantly kept his promise and gave Rose away and then in that whirlabout way of his was gone from us for good, or better just say forever; Tasmania, if the telegram from a Pacific dock a few months later could be believed.

Where, far-fetched as it then seemed for young centaurs like us, in the fullness of time Damon and I and even Toby would end up tamed and married, napkined and patriarchal.

Those stand like continental divides in my rumpled mind, yet no more clearly than this. That day, I came down through The Cut and out onto the section-

line road across Marias Coulee still trying to gather myself, to put on the face--the one that has lasted to this day--behind which I could seal away Rose's past, and Morrie's, for the sake of the next of life for all concerned. The sky was bare blue; it would be a good night for the comet. There was just enough wind to lift Joker's mane for a peek now and then. I let Joker have his head most of the way home, until suddenly the reins came alive in my hand and I headed him at a gallop out into the field between Rose's homestead and our own. At the spot where I could see to the pothole pond, I pulled up. There at the Lake District, a flurry had replaced the stillness of the water. A commotion of wings, a dapple of white against the prairie. The swans had come in their seasonal visit. Beautiful as anything, I could hear their whistling.

Even when it stands vacant the past is never empty. In these last minutes here, in this house with its kitchen doorway that overheard so many fervent whispers, with its calendar that holds onto Octobers forever, something has found its way into a corner of my mind. A finding, in more ways than one. For it has come to me, amid the many jogs of memory today, that the contingency authority which we so feared from school insector Harry Taggart, back then, still exists. I cannot even guess how far back from modern times it was last used, but there it stands, I am sure of it, obscurely tucked away in the powers of my office. And so: what if I now were to resort to the political instincts and administrative wiles--and, admittedly and immodestly, the reverse--that have kept me in office all these terms, to freshen up that dusty capacity of the superintendent of public instruction to take charge of a rural school in trouble? And if the appropriations chairman is determined to treat Sputnik like the starter's gun in a race to the schoolbus, I would have no qualm in issuing a finding that all rural schools in the state thereby are in trouble, would I.

Wonderful

I must not show my hand too soon. First it will take a clause, a phrase, innocent as a pill with the potion deep in the middle, put before his legislative committee. A housekeeping measure, I will say when I present this; yes, I'll make sure to call it that in honor of Rose. Something that can be read more than one way. *Regarding <sup>c</sup>ontingent appropriation <sup>to be deployed by</sup> ~~forthcoming~~ from the Department of Public Instruction pursuant to the matter of 'findings', perhaps. Or In matters of appropriation pertaining to rural schools, the Superintendent shall determine...*

Some verbose foliage of that sort above the root, so that while the chairman thinks I am fiddling ineffectually with the rural school appropriation fund <sup>s</sup> in my budget, I will be in fact appropriating--<sup>yes</sup> taking; glomming onto, in the translation even Morrie approved of--the sole say for the continuing existence of those one-room schools; my schools. I can see the slack faces of the chairman and his pack even now, when the matter goes up to the state supreme court and I as the author of the troublesome meaning can quite happily testify that I meant *appropriate* as the verb of possession.

Oh, there is still a touch or two needed to perfect this, some conclusive <sup>inspired</sup> ~~concluding~~ stretch of the imagination. The dream kind, that goes in for brass knuckles. That, too, will come, I know it will. As surely as night.

And so my course is clear and my heart is high. When I pull in to Great Falls to the convocation waiting for word from me about the fate of their <sup>praise</sup> schools and rise in front of that gathering and toss away my prepared remarks, I will tell them the best thing in me: that I will sleep on it appropriately.

The End

Slowly Morrie turned around to me, the lightning-rod glint in his eyes. “I swear, you’ve caught something from reading Caesar’s tactics.”

“I want you to give her away. At their wedding.”

His mouth came open, but before he could manage words I said:

“And you have to mean it.”

“And you have to mean it.”

He went perfectly still.

“Can you go that far with me?”

“Rose will think--”

“I’ll straighten it out with her. The crooked shall be made straight, Paul.”

“I fear that for a woman to be married to me would be like holding a lightning rod.”

“Do you know the saying about how an imminent hanging wonderfully concentrates a person’s mind? Casper’s fate had that effect on Rose as well as me. I dare say she will walk the straight and narrow, where your father is concerned. And you’ll have a mother.” He gave the wan smile again. “Although the Milliron household now may have to quit paying a housekeeper and hire a cook.”

Can you go that far with me?”

“Rose will think--”

“I’ll straighten it out with her. The crooked shall be made straight, Paul.”

“I will be moving on, at the end of the school year.”

"You've caught something from reading Caesar's tactics."

"I want you to give her away." (at wedding)

"And you have to mean it."

"Done."

"Where's Morg--Morrie?"

He came and went like the comet, in our lives.

Across the field there was a flurry at the Lake District, a commotion of wings. The swans had come in their seasonal visit. I could hear the whistles of them where I stood.

telegram. Tasmania. For the next few weeks I went down to the Westwater public library and read every newspaper. I never did find the story of a Tasmania-bound ship going down. I wondered if Father similarly was reading, with his finger.

Dreams, episodes, fragments of lives...they add up to years, to having lived.

"There's one thing more."

"You've caught something from reading Caesar's tactics."

"I want you to give her away." (at wedding)

"Where's Morg--Morrie?"

He came and went like the comet, in our lives.

Across the field there was a flurry at the Lake District, a commotion of wings. The swans had come in their seasonal visit. I could hear the whistles of them where I stood.

Dreams, episodes, fragments of lives...they add up to years, to having lived.

We have all ended up married and settled, napkined and patriarchal.

I am prepared to use all the political instincts and administrative wiles--and, admittedly, the reverse--that have kept me in office all these terms. I don't have any doubt that I can carry the day. Only that the burden is worth it.

Impact of  
nothing has  
been forming  
in me.  
It is not yet  
firm, but  
oo enough



If I know anything, it is how to layer cotton words over hard facts.

It is there, I sense it. It only needs enough thought. And the right bit of dream.

when I tell them the best thing I can: that I will sleep on it appropriately.

The End