

Carol's comments from May '05 ms reading

(attached pp. are my fixes of what she noted, & some changes I made before mailing ms to NY)

bot. ~~49~~ - "... and up rent the new curtains...."

~~76~~ - 2nd use of Toby - DAMON

bot. ~~112~~^{top}/~~113~~ - repetition
(you lose a line here. OK w/ pagination?)

bot 131 - comma

~~192~~ - sp. schoolroom

~~201~~ - each other

~~219~~ - structure?

~~251~~ - eight?

~~254~~ - we've

~~260~~ - structure

~~266~~ - sp.

~~279~~ - delete ☺

~~302~~ - omit sentence?

~~328~~ - New scene?

~~379~~ add ☺

So it was with the episode that had everyone at the Sunday table cocking an eye at me now. Dreams--at least mine--are scavenger hunts to anywhere, but I could sort out some of the sources of this one. When we arrived west on the train of emigrant cars and the boxcar next to ours was unloaded at the Westwater siding, out came a casket, empty; we never did know if it represented some settler's pessimism or was merely in shipment or what. The version of it delivered in my dream was not empty, and Mother was missing, and Damon and I and Toby--who did not exist at the time--were by ourselves in the doorway of another boxcar, one so high off the railroad bed we could not figure how to hop down. Sitting out there supervisory in the buffalo grass was Aunt Eunice in her rocking chair. Father and, for some reason, his fellow school board member Joe Fletcher were laboring to lift the coffin onto the unhitched dray. "*They forgot the horses,*" Damon kept fretting as we toed the brink of the boxcar, wanting to go to the aid of the men. Aunt Eunice was the only person around who could help us down, but she wasn't about to. "*Don't let those boys,*" she bossed the men struggling with the casket's brass handles. "*They'll drop it.*"

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

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

This commotion took some while to settle down, Toby first sobbing the front of Father's shirt wet and then Rae's blouse. I suspected Aunt Eunice of being secretly pleased, but outwardly she showed only impatience as she at last directed: "Oh, for heaven's sake, let me have the child."

on the longest ride home of any of us was a daily lesson in bravery. Meanwhile, details such as starting line and finish line and exact interpretation of "wrong end to" were being worked out by Damon and Martin. Edgy as I was about the outcome of the race, a part of me had to admire the level of conniving that went into it.

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

On the home front, so to speak, morning by morning Rose arrived with some new plan of attack on the house. Now that our bedding and underwear and even hankies were as fresh as a garden of lilies--a shrewd boost in our morale--she chose her battles with professional elan. Every stove was scraped out and polished, and every stovepipe emptied of soot, before she moved on to sweeping and scrubbing the floors. The day after that, windows were washed until they sparkled and new curtains went up that she had prevailed on Father to fetch from town. Offhand miracles occurred, too: lamp chimneys suddenly were clean instead of smoke-darkened, Houdini no longer was a canine disaster area thanks to his

pond romps with Toby. I mean it when I say the house positively breathed in a way different from before, for among all the other exhalations of wonder that our housekeeper provided, Rose was a woman who whistled at her work. About like a ghost would. That is, the sound was just above silence. A least little tingle of air, really, the lightest music that could pass through lips, yet with a lingering quality that was inescapable. I tell you, there is nothing quite like stepping into a seemingly empty house and hearing the parlor--Rose's tidying was often so swift and silent that the tune was the only sound--softly begin to serenade you with "*Down in the valley, valley so low.*" More than once I saw Father stop whatever he was doing and cock an ear in curiosity toward some corner of the house, and clearly none of the rest of us had expected a housekeeper with a repertoire. But for all we knew, whistling was the housekeeping anthem on Lowry Hill in Minneapolis.

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

We ate as we had always eaten, haphazardly and dully. Father right then was busier than ever with his hauling sideline, freight for the Big Ditch stacking up at the depot daily. For his part, Damon was so immersed in the scheming for the upcoming race that he didn't badger Father about the cooking situation. My mind was so crammed with scenarios of galloping backward--all that week my dreams featured Eddie Turley jeering at me from a secure perch between the humps of a racing camel--that I was useless for any other purpose. And filled with our secret the way he was, Toby went around looking like he was going to burst at any minute, but fortunately putting his energies into learning to whistle like Rose.

abruptly he was across that platform in a flash, pulling up just short of a small table with a pitcher and a glass on it, as he trumpeted: "From borning to burying, cradle to grave, the Bible is your only ticket out of Hell!" Pausing there to deposit the Good Book--somehow his pause seemed as loud as his preachment, and the congregation didn't lose any of its sway--he picked up the pitcher and glass and poured. Toby had timidly slipped his hand in mine, something he hadn't done in a long while.

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

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

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

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

"Let us fight the holy fight

On the wild Montana bench--"

Here the congregation chorused in:

"Lord, oh Lord, lend us might!"

"Paul, look, there's--"

"Toby, shhh, I'm trying to listen."

Damon took the more direct approach of lightly squeezing Toby's lips together like a duck's bill, a reminder we used on each other when someone gabbed

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

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

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

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

It was late in the day and the day was late in the season. The pewter cast of light that comes ahead of winter crept into the schoolground as I performed the last of my water errands, shadows growing dusky instead of sharp almost as I watched. [From the feel of the air, night would bring our first hard frost. The

watched. From the feel of the air, night would bring our first hard frost. The schoolyard seemed phenomenally empty as I crossed it this time. I could scarcely hear my own footsteps on ground that was stamped across at each recess. Around at the front of the school where the pump stood next to the flagpole, I slung the mop bucket into place under the spout, but for some reason did not step to the pump handle just yet.

I suppose it was the point of life I was at, less than a man but starting to be something more than simply a boy, that without warning set me aware of everything around, as though Marias Coulee school and its height of flagpole and depth of well were the axis of all that was in sight. I remember thinking Damon and Toby might come around the corner looking for me any minute, and if I wanted this for myself I had better use my eyes for all they were worth. So, there in the dwindling light of the afternoon I tried to take in that world between the manageable horizons. The cutaway bluffs where the Marias River lay low and hidden were the limit of field of vision in one direction. In the other, the edge of the smooth-battered plain leading to Westwater and the irrigation project. Closer, though, was where I found the longest look into things. Out beyond the play area, there were round rims of shadow on the patch of prairie where the horses we rode to school had eaten the grass down in circles around their picket stakes. Perhaps that pattern drew my eye to the other, the one I had viewed every day of my school life but never until then truly registered: the trails in the grass that radiated in as many directions as there were homesteads with children, all converging to that schoolyard spot where I stood unnaturally alone.

Forever and a day could go by, and that feeling will never leave me. Of knowing, in that instant, the central power of that country school in all our lives. It somehow went beyond those of us answering Morrie's hectic roll call that first day, although we were that clapboard classroom's primary constituents, its rural

minnows much in need of schooling. Everyone I could think of had something at stake in the school. For Father, all the years he spent as a mainstay of the school board amounted to his third or fourth or fifth line of work at once, depending on how strict the count. Along with him, the other men of Marias Coulee had built the snug teacherage with their own hands the summer before, and the graying schoolhouse itself back when the first homesteaders came. The mothers dispatched their hearts and souls out the door every morning as they sent waist-high children to saddle up and ride miles to school. Somehow this one-room school had drawn from somewhere Morris Morgan, walking encyclopedia. Now Rose had come onto the teacherage scene and dust would never be the same in the vicinity of Marias Coulee School. We all answered, with some part of our lives, to the pull of this small knoll of prospect, this isolated square of schoolground.

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

“I was about to send a search party,” Rose met me with as I lurched in with the heavy bucketful of water. After she put it to immediate use--she could mop a floor while most women were thinking about it--Father reappeared from whatever he had been doing at the wagon and stood inside the doorway surveying the scrubbed teacherage and its fresh occupant. Absently stowing silk socks in the rude

pinewood dresser, Morrie looked as out of place as ever. Father swallowed, as a man will who has stuck his neck out quite far, then took care of the last of business for the day. "Morrie, is there anything else within the less than infinite power of the school board that we can provide for you?" He checked his jottings. "So far, it's curtains, fresh ticking for the mattress, draft excluder, and lamp wicks."

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

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

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

Over his shoulder Father called out, "Damon, quit that, you're going to wear out every drawer in the place." With a quick glance apiece he rounded up Toby and me. "Get your coats on, the lot of you, it's time we weren't here. The thrill of supertime is waiting at home. Rose, are you going to ride back with us?"

Morrie snapped to as if he had just thought of something. "Stay for supper. I insist."

The Milliron family in its entirety halted in its tracks.

Father was the first to find power of speech.

"You can cook?"

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

“I need some air.”

Carnelia and I had one thought between us: the possible wrath of the hairy mammoths of grade eight descending onto grade seven. But the change of procedure was entirely a teacherly doing rather than ours, a fact we would plead to high heaven in the schoolyard if we had to. Duty having blindly singled us out, she and I squared ourselves up in what might have been flagbearer fashion.

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

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

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

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

Carnelia and I of course knew the folded flag was kept in its own special drawer at the cabinet end of the cloakroom. In we went, took it out as if we were handling dynamite and, neither of us quite certain of protocol, carried it between us, each using both hands. Eddie trailed after us in a kind of slinking way that uncomfortably reminded me again of wolves and wolfers.

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."

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.

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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Throwing up," he murmured.

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

"Yale," Morrie answered with towering dignity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Having seen Rose at this before, I planted my elbows as if anchoring myself into the table top. Damon sat as restlessly 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. A serious indent took place between her eyes. Damon and I waited, skeptical, apprehensive, everything.

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, did it.” 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

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 whispered confidences, 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.

I must not show my hand too soon. First it will require an enabling 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; I must make sure to call it that in honor of Rose. Something that can be read more than one way. *Regarding contingent appropriation within the purview of 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 crucial root, so that while the chairman thinks I am fiddling ineffectually with the rural school appropriation funds lingering in my budget, I will be in fact appropriating--yes, taking; glomming onto, in the translation even Morrie approved of--the sole say for the continued 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 apt stretch of the imagination to do full justice to the chairman and his ilk in the political infighting. 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 prairie schools and rise in front of that gathering and toss away my prepared remarks, I can now say to them the best thing in me: that I will sleep on the question appropriately.

#

always been rather shy of showing his paces before a fight to the casual public, but I am inclined to think that the policy at Manhasset was really adopted for the purpose of mystifying not only the American public but the opposition camp.

There is always something upsetting or disturbing in the unknown. I think it probable that Carpentier got the idea of the closed door from a play written by his great friend, Mæterlinck, the Belgian poet and author. In this play an extraordinary sense of terror was created by the employment of a closed door. To the actors on the stage, and the audience, all sorts of horrible imaginings were encouraged by the sight of the closed door. A clever pair like Carpentier and his manager, Descamps, who have always keenly studied the psychological side of the boxing game, would of course readily appreciate the possibilities of the idea in their plan of campaign. So far as Dempsey was concerned, however, the closed door held no terrors for him. Closed or open, they are all alike to the world's champion.

CHAPTER VI

"SECONDS OUT"

It is very important for a boxer that he should have a good second in a fight. Seconds can do a great deal for their man in the way of winning a bout, but constant attendance at boxing matches has convinced me that the gentle art of seconding is very rarely carried out as it should be. The functions of the second are to support a man through his fight and to give him such advice as to how he should carry himself in the fray, according to circumstances. Not often do clever boxers make good seconds. Jimmy Wilde was one of the worst you could imagine, for obvious reasons. The genius looks at things from the mountain top, you see. It is quite useless for him to try and make the common or garden mortal see things as he does. Wilde could never bring himself to envisage a fight as it would appear to the ordinary boxer. He would advise his man to do things that would be only possible for a man of his own skill, and his own uncanny orthodoxy.

The position of the second varies from the Second in Command, so to speak, down to the humble and subordinate attendant who flaps the

towel. In his capacity of Counsellor he shoulders a great responsibility. That is, providing his man is one who will take advice. Some boxers are rather impervious to the whisper between rounds. Joe Conn would take no advice from anyone as to how he should carry on, and the famous fighter, Battling Nelson, would never allow anybody to give him the least suggestion during a fight. The first time that ever Nelson permitted a second to do so he lost the match.

Jack Johnson showed the real chieftain spirit inasmuch as he always kept his seconds in their proper place. When he fought Frank Moran in Paris he had a regular swarm of attendants. Too many seconds are mere excrescences and should be dealt with as such, but in a championship match the entourage of the boxer is invariably enlarged for the occasion. One has to allow for what the French call "coquetry," or, as we should call it, "swank." Johnson's cohort was splendidly drilled for the match referred to. It is the custom of the seconds during the interval between the rounds to gather round their principal and hide him from sight as far as possible. Johnson never allowed one of his attendants to obscure his view of Moran between the rounds. During the minute's interval no man was permitted to stand in front of Johnson. Without an instant's wavering the negro kept his glittering black eyes focussed on his adver-

sary. I pity the second who had the temerity to obtrude himself on the clear line of vision.

I have known seconds to lose the fight for their man by giving him the wrong advice at a crisis. Sometimes a fighter will land a good punch that renders his man groggy. A little judicious enterprise then may enable him to finish off the encounter. Possibly, however, the situation is not so clear to the fighter himself. The looker-on sees most of the game, you know, and in such a situation as this a good second will urge his man to "slip himself," as they say in the profession. I am inclined to think that Billy Wells might have done better sometimes, if he had not had so many seconds to talk to him and puzzle him. Twice in big fights I have seen him land a blow that sent his opponent staggering, and then, forsooth, a sapient second shouted out from his corner: "Stand back, Billy!" Wells, being a very obedient chap, did as he was told. The opposition thus got a second or two's very welcome grace for recovery, and the neglected tide of opportunity turned for Wells, who subsequently lost to the very man he had got practically beaten.

One of the best seconds I have ever seen was Jim Driscoll. He was not only a great genius as a boxer, but, what was still more remarkable, he had the sympathetic vision to help a man less gifted than himself, and the knack of imparting good, sound advice of the right sort. Never was

sharp-eyed referee ought to have spotted the matter, you would think, but, for ways that are dark, some of the crafty schemers of the pugilistic world take some beating. The curious point about this incident is that the offending second's boxer protested against the use of the liniment, but went on using the gloves all the same, so that his gesture on behalf of the morality of the game did not stand for much.

Sometimes a second is justified in taking risks with his man. Once when the 'flu was very prevalent, Frank Moody, the Welsh boxer, came to town to box at the Ring. He was in the throes of the common enemy and possessed of a high temperature. Just before the combat he was given a double dose of quinine, which was so strong that after a round or two Moody could not see his opponent. It was a hard fight, and the spectators were astounded to see Moody stumbling about the place like a drunken man. Up to the tenth round the Welshman was in a sad way, but after that action gradually purged the dope from his vision. In the fifteenth round he had won, the referee stopping the fight after he had knocked his man down several times.

Seconding is a more reasonable business in the States than in this country. Here the usual routine is observed, irrespective of what type of man the boxer might be. He is rough handled just the same, whether he be a hefty heavy-weight, or a little bantam midget, who ought to

be labelled "fragile." Eddie Kane, the manager of Mike Gibbons, was much impressed with this aspect of the game when he came here a few years ago. "In America," he told me, "we do not believe in letting the seconds be quite so busy as your men are here. The minute's interval is for the boxer's rest and reflection. How can he rest if he is being pulled all over the place by men whose "rubbing" is mostly done in the wrong way? Massage is a very delicate science, but how few seconds there are who really know the mere ABC of it. As to fanning a man," said Kane, "when he has gone to his corner, it is ridiculous. A boxer who has been fighting for three minutes has got his blood up and is heated. It is also most absurd to start waving a towel at him directly he sits down, or to throw icy cold water over him."

"Under these methods the boxer gets chilled, not refreshed, mind you, and when he starts the next round it takes him half a minute or more before he can get properly warmed up and into his stride again. Meanwhile, something might happen to him during this period, just because his seconds had foolishly taken the edge off."

As for the second who throws in the towel, he is too often arrogating to himself a privilege which is not often free from suspicion. It will be remembered that when Joe Beckett was knocked down at Olympia by Carpentier, his brother, George, threw in the towel for him.

the difference in seconding more emphatically illustrated than in the match between Jimmy Wilde and Joe Lynch, which took place at the National Sporting Club with the Prince of Wales as one of the spectators. Driscoll was the inspiring second in command in the Britisher's corner, and the American fighter had his own countryman, Eddie McGoorty, to advise him.

In the earlier stages of the bout, Driscoll found that when Wilde waited for Lynch to lead, he was usually beaten to the punch, so he made Jimmy force the fighting, with excellent results. Later on Wilde got very tired through his efforts in this respect. Towards the end, he received a punch that appeared to affect him so much that most people who were present wondered why it was that Lynch did not follow up his advantage. It subsequently transpired that McGoorty was suspicious of a trap. All too wrongly he counselled his man to play for safety and to take no risks. The result was that Wilde won the match, although I think most people agreed that he was rather lucky to do so.

There you have an instance where the advice was wrong, but sometimes the maladroit second can do his principal still more harm by his actions than by his tongue. Tommy Noble, the old bantamweight champion, a product of the Bermondsey school, which has turned out so many good men, was fighting in Wales once when he had his ear burst through the too

vigorous ministrations of a second. Jim Sullivan, another Bermondsey man, by the way, was badly served by an assistant when he fought Harry Reeve, at the Holborn Stadium some four years ago. Reeves had punished him severely on the ribs, where the skin was crimson red in consequence, yet the second massaged the painful spot with a sinful zeal until a more observant colleague pulled him up sharp for so doing.

At the same ring I saw the Plymouth boxer, Young Joe Symonds, after being badly fouled by an opponent, slung unceremoniously over the shoulder of a tactless attendant and carried from the ring. Considering the nature of his trouble, the hapless boxer needed the most delicate attention, and it did not require any special knowledge to perceive that the treatment he received might intensify the injury. As a bottle-holder, and towel-flapper, the average second has his uses. As an adviser and director of tactics, or an exponent of first aid, he often falls sadly short of the ideal.

Once I saw a fighter put out of action by a too excitable second who shook some smelling-salts into his eyes. The tragedy of the situation, from the point of view of the sufferer, was that he was winning easily until the *faux pas* occurred. This was a mere matter of clumsiness, but what shall be said of the second who put some strong liniment on his man's gloves in order that the other man might have to retire almost blinded? A

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The action gave rise to certain criticism, and the boxer's cheque was withheld after the fight until investigations had maintained the bona fides of the situation. In this case the arrival of the towel, which had no bearing on Beckett's complete eclipse, was attributed to the indiscretion of a too excited subordinate.

Jimmy Wilde would never allow anybody to throw in the towel for him, and in Australia the boxing authorities not only do not recognise the practice but it is absolutely forbidden. Hughie Mehegan, the lightweight champion down under, was once taking a terrible hammering out there from the American boxing freak, Milburn Taylor, whose arms were so long that he could hit out with the right hand and the glove passing round his opponent's head would land on the right ear! To save Mehegan further punishment it was suggested by a spectator to his second, Duke Mullins, that the towel should be thrown in. "Not me," said Mullins. "He'd kill me if I did."

Two notable seconds at the National Sporting Club were Bill Baxter and Arthur Gutteridge. They were both very shrewd, wily old birds too. What they did not know about the game would not be worth troubling about. Baxter's son, Charlie, was taking part in a contest at the Club once and he came back at the end of a round and said: "Father, I cannot see out of my left eye." The only reply he got was: "Well,

what's your right eye doing?" The sort of reply you might expect from the old 'un, who was one of the gamest warriors the ring ever knew.

Relatives are not always the most sympathetic people. When Jimmy Britt, the world's old lightweight champion, met Packey McFarland, he was seconded by his brother, Willus. Presently he was knocked down by McFarland, at which his brother shouted out excitedly: "Get up and fight! What are you doing, quitting? If you don't get up I'll beat you myself, later!"

Apart from the merely technical progress of a contest there is always a lot of human nature at a boxing match. The observer with a taste for philosophic reflection can generally find some material at a scrap for interesting afterthoughts. The under currents of the sport always appealed to me. The various sidelights of the noble art are, perhaps, often the better appreciated from the critic's chair than elsewhere. There are motives to be watched for and studied. There is a profound delight in studying the foil and counterfoil of temperament, the interplay that goes on behind the scenes, the foibles of promoters, the vanities of principals, the weaknesses of seconds, the fickle emotions of the crowd: in fact all the hundred and one features in connection with a boxing contest, that makes it a microcosm of the sporting world at large.

possible sequence

Eddie accepts glasses; Rose & Paul;

Latin; summary of how Morrie is doing as teacher; student quirks (change to Paul 100% obituary)
Paul cries

Rose moves in to Eunice's place

ornery; astronomy, constellations; idea for comet program
inspector's letter?
school suddenly prepares to be tested (Toby: only one who's never missed a day of school)

theme:
school prepares/gives for inspection

Toby's toe (wild card)
- Rose nurses leg.
- Paul learns to cook
- withers in his dreams; giant horses?

theme:
Rose becomes part of Million household

Brose shows up at schoolhouse; takes Eddie out of school (during schoolday) (wild card)

Morrie is low; roused by inspector coming, tests learning
Taggart arrives
Paul raises test percentile
harmonica band at comet program

theme:
school inspection to comet

- Oliver decides on marriage
- " takes Toby to dr. (George & Rae going to tm - no run for Paul & Damon)
- Rose spills story (wild card)

Brose (and Eddie) threaten Morrie/Paul ("Light is the desire of the universe") (wild card)

theme:
Paul wonders what to do

Paul confronts Morrie

Rose-Oliver wedding? (swans at Lake District; whistling)

finale

sec. #16
10 pp. min.?
(17 pp.)

sec. #17
15 pp. min.?
(18 pp.)

sec. #18
20 pp. min.?
sec #19

sec. #19
12 pp. min.?

possible sequence

✓ Brose shows up at schoolhouse

✓ washday (Saturday): Paul asks Rose if Morrie shouldn't leave

✓ Aunt Eunice (Sunday dinner?)

^{show} summary of how Morrie is doing as teacher; student quirks

*Eddie kept out for hide work
Brose in Paul's dreams*

Paul & Carnelia raise flag upside-down; Paul kept after school

Latin

- lupus

*cut or
move →*

Xmas program looms; inspector's letter arrives; "Rose is musical"

inspector arrives

Xmas prepns - "Noel"
harmonica band at Xmas program

✓ Aunt Eunice dies

first grade

Josef Kratka
 Maggie Emrich
 Dora Rellis
 Alice Calhoun *Stinson*

second grade

Toby Milliron
 Inez Pronovost
 Emil Kratka
 Louisa Stinson
 Sigrid Peterson

third grade

Vivian Pease
 Jacob Rellis
 Einar Peterson
 Sally Calhoun *Emrich*

fourth grade

Gabriel Pronovost
 Karen Myrdal
 Anton Kratka

fifth grade

Eva Drobny
 Seraphina Drobny
 Marta Johannson
 Peter Myrdal
 Adele Stinson

sixth grade

Damon Milliron
 Lily Lee Fletcher
 Isidor "Izzy" Pronovost
 Ivo Stoyanov
 Grover Stinson
 Phoebe Calhoun *Rellis*
 Nick Drobny
 Sam Drobny
 Sven Johannson
 Virgil Calhoun

*Barbara
 Kratka*

seventh grade

Paul Milliron
 Carnelia Craig

eighth grade

Eddie Turley
 Verl Fletcher
 Milo Stoyanov
 Martin Myrdal
 Carl Johannson

scene of Moe meeting his students, each popping to his/her feet and reciting name (and something else?). This can provide a way to characterize each family.

"Magick them back," the king ordered...
isn't supposed to

"'Magic' doesn't have a k on it," I ~~said~~ pointed out.

"Not in these swift times of ours," Moe answered. (he shows Paul euphonic
alphabet newspaper?)

"Go to the root," Moe directs his schoolkids about language.

*** "Language moves with the times," Moe said. "Even spelling."

--"Maybe it was more kingly, knightly (to have the k)

Mami: "Why did I take ship for Tasmania?"
ship out

Paul has stayed on at the schoolhouse as usual, studying Latin(?), until his father passes by ~~x~~ for him on his way home from canal work. Kids of another family are playing outside while waiting for their parents to come and take them to town. Ultimately the parents burst in on Moe, livid. *** "Paul Miliron, close your ears," the father directs. "Sing that song," the father commands. "Not you," to Moe, "them. So we can all hear the filth you're teaching them." "We--we need the music," one of the kids protests. The father hums tune of "Men of Harlech." Moe picks up his harmonica, plays the tune, then, mystified, directs them and they sing:

"Men and harlots, chumming.

Men and harlots, CHUMMING!"

"It's a hymn," Moe protests, "men of Harlech..."

Paul puts in: "They were out (absent from school) when we learned it.

Remember, OO?

*** One stomping around with stick for a sword while his sister marches after him. When they see their parents' buggy arrive, they hurry to it, still singing and giggling. There is a moment of commotion, and then the buggy turns in to the schoolyard.

Moe: "Do I want to know how you know?" Maybe not,

Paul & Moe after Paul figures out Moe is not Rose's brother:

"I have to tell."

"You don't at all."

"You and she--"

"--have done together what men and women do. That's so."

...What if I were to tell you my life is in your hands?"

"Is not!" Hot tears...

(Moe says he is going away)

Paul: "Rose will think--"

"I'll straighten it out with her. The crooked shall be made straight,
Paulie."

or, Paul stipulates: "I want you to give her away." (at wedding)

2

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

The wrinkled calendar on the parlor wall stops me in my tracks. It of course has not changed since my last time here. Nineteen fifty-two. Five years ago, so quickly, when the Marias Coulee school board begged the vacant old place from me for a month while they repaired the roof of their teacherage and I had to come out from Helena to go over matters with them. What I am startled to see is

yesterday

that the leaf showing on the calendar--October--slyly stays right across all the years:
that 1908 evening of "Paulie, get out your good pen and paper," the lonely
teacher's tacking up of something to relieve these bare walls so long after that, and
my visit now under such a changed sky of history.

The slyness of calendars should not surprise me, I suppose. Passing the
newly painted one-room school, our school, this morning as I drove out in my state
government car, all at once I was again at that juncture of time when Damon and
Toby and I, each in our turn, first began to be aware that we were not quite of our
own making and yet did not seem to be simply re-warmed tovers of our elders
either. Ready or not, we were being introduced to ourselves, sometimes in a
fashion as hard to follow as our father's reading finger. Almost any day in the
abodes of childhood we passed back and forth between, homestead and school,
was apt to turn into a fresh puzzle piece of life, something I find true even yet.

How could I, who back there at thirteen already realized that I must
struggle awake every morning of my life before anyone else in the house to wrest
myself from the grip of my terribly remembered dreams, be the offspring of a man
who slept solidly as a railroad tie?

waystations



And Damon, fists-up Damon, how could he derive from our Quaker mother?

move to
⊗

It is Toby, though, large-eyed prairie child Tobe, whom I sensed most as I passed the small old school with its common room and the bank of windows away from its weather side.

move
newly
part

Damon or I perhaps can be imagined taking our knocks from fate and putting ourselves back together into approximately what we seemed shaped to be, if we had started off on some other ground of life than that of Marias Coulee. But Tobe was breath and bone of this place, and later today when I must go into town to give the rural teachers of Montana's fifty-six counties my edict, I know it will be their Tobes, their schoolchildren produced of this soil and the mad valors of homesteaders such as Oliver Milliron, that they will plead for.

The news of our housekeeper-to-be galloped to school with us that next morning, or rather, charged ahead of Damon and me in the form of Toby whacking his heels against the sides of his startled little mare, Queenie.

2

If I have learned anything in a lifetime spent overseeing schools, it is that childhood is the one story that stands by itself in every soul. As surely as a compass needle knows north, that must be what draws me to this jilted old house and all that it holds, even empty. The badly wrinkled calendar on the kitchen wall naturally has not changed since my last time here. Nineteen fifty-two--five years ago, so quickly--when the Marias Coulee school board begged the vacant house from me for a month while they repaired the roof of their teacherage and I came out from Helena to go over matters with them. But I am startled to see that the leaf showing on the calendar--October--somehow stays right across all the years: that

drops caps
needs
drawing

paradoxical

gladly
what
meat

1908 evening of "Paulie, get out your good pen and paper," the lonely teacher's tacking up of something to relieve these bare walls so long after that, and my visit now under such a changed sky of history.

The sliness of calendars should not surprise me, I suppose. Passing the newly painted one-room school, our school, this morning as I drove out in my state government car, all at once I was again at that juncture of time when Damon and Toby and I, each in our turn, began to be aware that we were not quite of our own making and yet did not seem to be simply re-warmed tovers of our elders either. Ready or not, we were being introduced to ourselves, and almost any day was a fresh puzzle piece of that time of life. I wonder at it even yet. How could I, who back there at twelve already realized that I must struggle awake every morning of my life before anyone else in the house to wrest myself from the grip of my terribly remembered dreams, be the offspring of a man who slept solidly as a railroad tie? And Damon, fists-up Damon, how could he derive from our Quaker mother?

It is Toby, though, large-eyed doubtful Tobe, whom I sensed most as I passed the small old school with its common room and the bank of windows away from its weather side. Damon or I perhaps can be imagined taking our knocks from fate and putting ourselves back together into approximately what we seemed shaped

crucial

Old as I
am getting
to be

change
"doubtful" →

2

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

The wrinkled calendar on the parlor wall stops me in my tracks. It of course has not changed since my last time here. Nineteen fifty-two. Five years ago, so quickly, when the Marias Coulee school board begged the vacant old place from me for a month while they repaired the roof of their teacherage and I had to come out from Helena to go over matters with them. What I am startled to see is

that the leaf showing on the calendar--October--slyly stays right across all the years:
that 1908 evening of "Paulie, get out your good pen and paper," the lonely
teacher's tacking up of something to relieve these bare walls so long after that, and
my visit now under such a changed sky of history.

The news of our housekeeper-to-be galloped to school with us that next
morning, or rather, charged ahead of Damon and me in the form of Toby whacking
his heels against the sides of his startled little mare, Queenie.

"I bet she'll have false teeth, old Mrs. Minneapolis will," Damon
announced as we rode, wherever he got that from. "Bet you an arrowhead she
does."

"Father doesn't like for us to bet."

Damon just grinned.

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

We could see

After all, a dozen years apiece in this world--together we amounted to a responsible
age, or should have. But Samantha and I were the entire sixth grade of the Marias
Coulee school, as we had been the entire first, second, third, fourth, and fifth, and

wrest myself from the grip of my difficult dreams, be the offspring of a man who slept solidly as a railroad tie? And Damon, fists-up Damon, how could he derive from our Quaker mother? As for Toby, it must have more mysterious yet for him to be

So, for a moment think of that prairie as a vast tabletop, with these tiny figurines scattered on it by the tens of thousands--sodbusters, honyockers, pilgrims, dreamers, cranks, Jeffersonian yeoman agriculturists, greenhorns, most of them new to the land, perhaps as many as one in ten of them single women (schoolmarms, unmarried sisters or aunts or daughters), out there with their shanties, their breaking plows, their flax seeds, their Sears Roebuck catalogues, their buckboards and their Model A Fords. There they all are, on that thirty-million-acre table of earth, and a great many of them, we know now, sooner or later teeter at the edge of that weather-whipped and economically-tilted table. Some will jump, some will fall, some are pushed. It is all, I am here to tell you, blood-ink for the writer.

Those homesteaders came on various wings and prayers:

Hunger
to start
school
us
solid

To wait
me will
off for
large-eyed

I suppose it is what brings me here again, to this jilted old house, this dust-carpeted kitchen that was at the start of it all. Passing the school, our school,

So, for a moment think of that prairie as a vast tabletop, with these tiny figurines scattered on it by the tens of thousands--sodbusters, honyockers, pilgrims, dreamers, cranks, Jeffersonian yeoman agriculturists, greenhorns, most of them new to the land, perhaps as many as one in ten of them single women (schoolmarms, unmarried sisters or aunts or daughters), out there with their shanties, their breaking plows, their flax seeds, their Sears Roebuck catalogues, their buckboards and their Model A Fords. There they all are, on that thirty-million-acre table of earth, and a great many of them, we know now, sooner or later teeter at the edge of that weather-whipped and economically-tilted table. Some will jump, some will fall, some are pushed. It is all, I am here to tell you, blood-ink for the writer.

Those homesteaders came on various wings and prayers:

Good weather--Montana had unusually good farming weather during much of that era.

Bad advice from railroads and other land promoters. The Montana town where I went to high school, Valier, was based on drawing people in to farm what had been buffalo prairie and then cattle range, and I have a piece of promotional material from the time meant to assuage any neophyte farmer's concern that it's an area which historically averages only about 14 inches of rainfall a year: "Aridity is insurance against loss by flood."

Avenues of immigration--an entire neighborhood from Belgium, eighty people in one bunch, packed up everything and came to settle in the Valier area, and fifty years later I was still going to school with kids from "the Belgian colony." On the football team, they were always the linemen--slow, squat guys built like Belgian bricks--and as a running back on our frequently overwhelmed team, I wondered why couldn't a race of giant Swedes have settled around here?

Urges to leave the old country, misconceptions about the new country-- those are just a handful of many, many reasons behind that extraordinary homestead influx, but I'm going to stop with only that many because they're probably the main ones which magnetized my people, the Doigs, to that land on Spring Creek.

On my way to here I drove by the depot where Rose arrived to the waiting four of us, and brought with her the turning points of our lives.

more usual:
stepped from
Gallop
Goose

impose
turning pt -
charging w/ her

to: waiting
four of us.

When I visit the back corners of my life again after so long a time, littlest things jump out first. The oilcloth, tiny blue windmills on white squares, worn to colorless smears at our four places at the kitchen table. The vigorously boiled coffee which our father gulped down from suppertime until bedtime and then slept serenely as a sphinx. The Montana wind, the one thing we could count on at Marias Coulee, whistling into one cranny or another of this house as if invited in.

That night we were at our accustomed spots around the table, Toby coloring a battle between pirate ships as fast as his hand could go while I was at my schoolbook, and Damon, who should have been at his, was absorbed in a secretive game of his own devising called domino solitaire. At the head of the table, of

course, the presiding sound was the occasional turning of a newspaper page. One has to imagine our father reading with his finger, down the column of rarely helpful want ads in the *Gros Ventre Gleaner* that had come in our week's gunnysack of mail and provisions, in his customary search for a colossal but underpriced team of workhorses, and that inquisitive finger now stubbing to a stop at one particular boldface heading. To this day I can hear the signal of amusement that line of type drew out of him. Father had a short sniffing way of laughing, as if anything funny had to prove it to his nose first.

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

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

Can't cook but doesn't bite.

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

“Aridity Is Insurance Against Flood”

1

When I visit the back corners of my life again after so long a time, littlest things jump out first. The oilcloth, tiny blue windmills on white squares, worn to colorless smears at our four places at the kitchen table. The vicious coffee made by our father which he gulped down from suppertime until bedtime and then slept serenely as a sphinx. The Montana wind, the one thing we could count on at Marias Coulee, whistling into one cranny or another of this house as if invited in.

That night we were at our accustomed spots around the table, Toby coloring a battle between pirate ships as fast as his hand could go while I was at my homework, and Damon, who should have been at his, was absorbed in a secretive game of his own devising called domino solitaire. At the head of the table, of

dreadful
viciously
served -
which

motorious →
volcanic of
paint
peeling
erased up
jaunt
old

"Aridity Is Insurance Against Flood"

1

When I visit the back corners of my life again after so long a time, littlest things jump out first. The oilcloth, tiny blue windmills on white squares, worn to colorless smears at our four places at the kitchen table. The vicious coffee made by our father which he gulped down from suppertime until bedtime and then slept serenely as a sphinx. The coulee wind forever causing some part of this house to creak.

*whistling in stovepipe
in as if invited in*

That night we were at our accustomed spots around the table, Toby coloring a battle between pirate ships as fast as his hand could go while I was at my homework, and Damon, who should have been at his, played a secretiv

his own devising called domino solitaire. At the head of the table, of cou

("a worked pot never boils" was his stated principle for its parent residence & cohabitants)

...mysterious creaks of mine that we were never able to find or fix forever trying to saw the way into the house

produced by our father on his principle that "a worked pot never boils" & which

stopping

*It was so long ago, yet strong a
mightily trying to saw the way into this one house in its path, ~~longstanding~~ ^{ably not}*

2

Five that
One story stands by itself in every soul, and that is childhood. If I have

learned anything in a lifetime spent overseeing schools, it is the spell cast by those singular years when, ready or not, we are introduced to ourselves. No doubt that is what draws me each time to this jilted old house and all that it holds, even empty.

The badly wrinkled calendar on the kitchen wall of course ~~never~~ changes: 1952,

has not since last time

five years ago already, when the Marias Coulee school board begged the house

vacant

from me for a month while they repaired the roof of their teacherage. I am

surprised to see that the leaf showing on the calendar--October--somehow is right

stays

across all the years: that 1908 evening of "Paulie, get out your good pen and

crucial

** I came out from Helena to sign their piece of paper go over matters w/ them.*