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The letters, old air-mail ones, were from the last six months of her life--last half-year of World War Two. They, and the book, begin in Arizona, where my father worked in a defense plant, and we lived in the Alzona Park defense housing project on the outskirts of Phoenix--we'd left Montana to see if the milder winter in Arizona might help my mother's perilous health, her lifelong asthma. The five chapters of the book carry us through our ricochets to five different places in five months--Arizona back to Montana--from February to June of 1945. (To make a long story short, my father--whose health wasn't that great either--fell ill in Arizona, and my mother, understandably spooked, wanted to come back to home country--heart earth--in Montana.)

Fifteen years ago this fall, This House of Sky was published, and the first bookstore to aske me to come in and sign copies was here in Missoula--Julie Goulding's late lamented store, The Fine Print. What I'll be reading from tonight is a new book, Heart Earth, which is a kind of companion to This House of Sky--one of those unexpected, out-of-nowhere opportunities a writer sometimes lucks into. Heart Earth grew out of a packet of family letters I didn't have, for the writing of Sky; and when they finally surfaced a few years ago, they gave me the chance to base a book into the one life that was missing from This House of Sky--my mother's.

Glad to be here again.

Just how glad, I'll tell you in a minute, but one bit of housekeeping first. The section of Heart Earth I'm going to read to you tonight, I've found is not conducive to questions afterward, so I'd like to reverse the usual order of things and take some questions from you before the reading. So if there's something you'd like to ask, get it ready and I'll think out loud about it, pretty promptly here.

First, though — when writers go out in public like this, there's a kind of Grand Prix circuit of bookstores that sponsor their readings — The Tattered Cover in Denver, Black Oak in Berkeley, Kepler's in Palo Alto, The Hungry Mind in St. Paul, Elliott Bay Bookstore in Seattle. Classy places where the writers' words are invited to come to life. It's typical of Mary Jane — and her staff — that they figure the way to mark an anniversary is to start a reading series which puts the Country Bookshelf in the company of those other first-class bookstores.

In one of my books, a Montana woman who keeps working at her work - it's coincidental that she's ranch-born - and has long hair - is asked, "How good are you going to get?" And she answers, "How good is there?" Mary Jane seems to have asked that of herself, and this store, the past 20 years straight.

Well, in that spirit, I had better get to work, too. Are there some questions...?

The first audience HEART EARTH ever had was here at Elliott Bay, when I read a piece of it from manuscript, two or three years ago, and tonight I want to give you--I think the book wants to give you--A ~~its~~ finale: scenes from its final chapter. ~~Just a bit of background before the book itself begins speaking--~~

hill much from Moss Agate, but his has. Her mother, tough as a grindstone against her father and yet putting up with all the allowances asked by the Norskie. And her mother and Charlie, scarcely able to be civil to each other. Berneta knows too well she is at the heart of that situation, daughter-wife tug of war, but can't see much of anything to be done about. Charlie Doig and Bessie Ringer neither one is ever going to be quick to give in, and a person had better charge it off as one more price of family. You can pick your clothes/you can pick a rose/ but kin and nose/you can't pick those. ~~Includes brothers, who're somehow both easier and harder than parents.~~ Paul, closest to her in age and outlook, but a distancer and being made more so by the war; there in the army in Australia, he has married a Queensland nurse and ~~gives every indication he may stay on there after the war.~~

The elderly table, scarred and stained from extra duty as a butcher block, at least presides at the proper window, the west one which lets in a good view of the willow course of the creek. Across the room, the canned-goods cupboard for once is huge enough, homemade logic of someone who, like her, has needed to store away most of a season of groceries at a time. And she is glad of the smaller cool cupboard, the outside cabinet of shelves handy beside the door and tinned against rodents; left-overs will keep for a day or so in there, and for longer term, butter and cheese and any grouse my father manages to hunt can be sealed in jars and coldstored in the creek.

Could be worse, her kitchen veteran's appraisal ~~and our recent history of the drab White Sulphur Springs house and drabber Alzona Park both say~~ says. At the other

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(1)

PACE

6

POSTMARK:
MAUDLOW
JUNE 15, 1944

Dear Wally—

The herder we had planned on lost 30 lambs in about 10 days, so at that rate we'd have to buy him another band of lambs by fall.

When my father shouldered open the door of that cabin of then, packhorses and wife and child and twenty-two hundred sheep at his back, a mouse nest fell down onto the brim of his Stetson. Ceiling paper drooped in shreds. The greenblinds on the windows were speckled with mashed flies, the floor was soiled with mouse droppings and pack rat leavings.

The place was a sty, but not for long. The floor of a housing project cubicle on the factory outskirts of Phoenix, maybe Berneta would wash with tears. But this cabin on the summer mountain she launched into with soapy water. Led by the hurricane broom of my father, who cocked a look out every window he swept past to check on the behavior of the sheep.

To dream us this last time, into the twists of June, I harbor there at the very first hours of the swabbed cabin.

And watch Berneta as she gives her mop a conclusive wring. On the go, beds and plenty else to be seen to, she brushes by the foot of the scant cot beneath the southmost window and sings out, "Ivan, look how you'll just fit." I inspect, solemnly bob my head, and claim the bunk with my tarp-wrapped bedroll. A corner of my own, all I ask. My parents will share the plank-sided bed in the opposite corner, snug for two but they do not seem to

mind the prospect. No pillows to this sheepcamp existence, so Berneta mounds our three mackinaw jackets at the head of her side of the bed to prop herself against asthma in the night.

Bleary windowpanes to be washed next. Berneta debates to herself whether to do away with the nasty greenblinds—nobody for five miles around to see in on us—but ends up scouring the fly matter off them. Blank windows have never seemed right to her.

Even though the morning outside is wearing its summer best—*hasn't rained the last 2 or 3 days, really seems good to see some sunshine*—I tag after Berneta there in the cabin. Follow her eyes while she inventories this domestic side of the sheep deal, the three-month one-room future. The cookstove is frankly puny, a midget two-lid job not much more than kneehigh even on her, but it will fire up fast and then not hold hot through these summer days.

My father tromps in with a heaping armload of firewood, goes to dump it in the woodbox, lets the wood thunder down next to the box instead of into it. "We're going to have to get after the pack rats, first thing," he declares as he scoops out of the woodbox yet another junk

trove accumulated by them. Marauders so quizzical, swiping a torn handkerchief one night, a thimble the next, you had to wonder if they did it from sense of humor.

The trapper Berneta kids him, "So if I catch them, think that'll make them easy enough for you to shoot?" Two scabbards are slung on my father's saddlehorse. In one, the .22 rifle that is the shooting machine for pack rats and grouse. In the other, his .30–06 coyote artillery.

"Other way around, any I shoot first ye can sneak up and clamp a trap on, can't ye," he gives her back and starts lugging in the contents tarp-wrapped on our pack saddles.

Groceries to the big cupboard, enough to last until the Morgan camptender begins weekly provisioning. Our change of shirts and pants onto tenpenny nails spiked in

a row on the wall next to the door. Washbasin, floursack towel. Frying pan and tin plates and pair of cooking pots and a dishpan. Utensils and box of wooden matches and lantern. Luxury item, a flashlight. Habitation is 95 percent habituation, so the cabin begins to seem familiar as soon as our own clutter is in place. Rexall drugstore calendar to keep track of the days. Small pane of mirror on the washstand for my father to shave by, Berneta to groom by. Our own galvanized bucket for our drinking water, because there's no telling what has visited any bucket you find in a disused cabin.

~~My father, everywhere today, is at the barn unsaddling~~ the horses. I hesitate. But Berneta too has reached a last chore, stretching to arrange her writing materials on the top shelf of the tin-lined cool cupboard, the only place where stationery and black little bottle of ink and her inscribed fountain pen can be safe until the pack rats are dealt with. I unmoor from the completed cabin and speed out toward the saddle side of things.

Dogs, we're rife with dogs again.

Sheepdogs, at least in theory; Flop with a wonderful half-mast ear that begs affection and Jack with the pale eyes, barely blue, of a born chaser.

Even my father can find no grounds to object to their instant conversion by Berneta into housedogs, because it just as fast becomes plain that only one or the other can be used on the sheep each day. When the two dogs are worked together, they add up to less than one. Jack sulks whenever Flop is sent around the sheep with him, Flop takes a yipping fit any time he is held back from a mission with Jack.

"Whoever invented dogs," my father appraised this nerved-up pair, "has a hell of a lot to answer for."

But perhaps our prima donna canines figured they were putting in their shifts just as much as anybody else. *Charlie has been watching the sheep early in the ~~morns~~* MORNINGS *. late in the ~~eves~~* EVENINGS *. while the herder gets his meals*, ran Berneta's latest report ~~to the Auld~~. The sheep deal had advanced to a phase known as tepee herding. Day-and-night sentry duty with the band of sheep because of coyotes and the tough terrain, it amounted to. Occupied enough with settling us in at the ~~Rung place~~ CABIN and trying to gauge Berneta's hardiness and readying for shearing ~~and thinking over a big haying contract that was being dangled~~ (*Walter Donahoe wants us to put up the hay on the Loophole*—back in the White Sulphur Springs country—*~~again, but don't know whether we will be able to take that on~~*), even my father couldn't find a second twenty-four hours in the day to spend with the sheep and was resorting to a hired herder. The one who came recommended didn't seem to be any whiz—~~"I wouldn't call him the greatest,"~~

Dad left it at 9 but he trooped through the day with the sheep as required and bedded down on the mountain with them every night without complaints. Except for those turns at sheepwatching while the herder fed himself, we had only to move the herder's tepee to a new bedground for each night and generally supervise.

"Pretty easy living," Dad has to admit as he and I bounce back into the cabin, day of our own yet ahead, after a morning shift with the sheep.

"About time you tried some," Berneta ratifies with a pleased look up from the letter she is writing.

This lasted an entire week and a half, until the morning my father and I found a lamb gut-eaten by a coyote practically at the doorflap of the herder's tepee.

The instant the sheep shaded up at midday my father

was sifting his way into them on a walkthrough count of the lambs. Tricky to do, step by ever so slow step, negotiating a route without roiling the sheep. Low at his hip, his right hand flicks its little stroke of arithmetic at each lamb he tallies, and every time a hundred is reached his left thumbnail gouges a mark in the soft wood of his pocket pencil.

His walkthrough marks out at twelve hundred lambs, thirty short of what we had handed over to the tepee herder just ten days ago. (*At that rate we'd have to buy him another band of lambs* . . .) This herder is a scenery inspector, idling away under tree or tepee while the coyotes have been using the band as a meat market.

My father wheeled, strode over to the herder and snapped, "Roll your damned bed."

The next herder, escorted in by the ~~Morgan~~ camptender, my parents immediately dub Prince Al for his rapidfire consumption of Prince Albert tobacco. When he isn't smoking the twisty shreds from the red can, he chews the stuff. Brown parentheses of snoosejuice, apparently permanent, hang at the corners of his mouth, but what really catches attention are the tracks of his roll-your-own habit down the front of his shirt, the burn specks where dribbles of ash fall from his handmade cigarettes. My father is heard to mutter we'll be lucky if this one doesn't burn down the mountain and the sheep with it.

Dad and I are barely back from moving the herder's tepee the first morning when rifleshots break out on the mountain behind us. *KuhWOW! KuhWOW-kuhWOW-kuhWOW.*

~~Naturally I was all in favor of any form of bombard-ment, but~~ my father the coyote marksman listens skeptically to the herder's fusillade. If you don't knock over a coyote with your first shot you're probably wasting your lead.

Berneta appears out of the cabin to cock an ear at the uproar. "Makes you wonder if the coyotes are shooting back at him, doesn't it."

When the three of us ride up that evening, we see that the sheep and Jack the dog are as jittery as if they, not the coyotes, have been under barrage all day. Not that any casualties can be counted among the coyotes. Prince Al, it develops, has the philosophy of touching off a shot whenever a stump or a shadow looks as if it conceivably *Might* be a coyote. My father tells him that's an interesting theory, but how about saving his ammunition unless he's goddamn-good-and-sure about the target.

The next morning, Dad and I just reach the cabin when a new salvo of *kuhWOW*s thunders from the mountainside.

Very soon the Jack dog comes arcing across the meadow in a neurotic slink, belly to the ground as if begging us *please don't blame me please I simply can't take any more of that commotion* until ending up, inevitably, under Berneta's merciful petting hand.

She and I watch my father with apprehension.

He, though, seems downright gratified to see the deserter dog. "We'll just let Mister Prince Al have a day of handling those sheep without a dog. See if that slows him up on the shooting."

By that evening, having chased sheep over half the Bridger Mountains, the herder was the frazzled one and the cannonading was cured.

But a few more days into Prince Al's term of herding, on the fifteenth morning of June, my father comes into the cabin disgusted. Right there with him as usual, I'm excited, a bit traitorously, by this latest bulletin.

"Can ye believe it," he lays it out for Berneta, "that scissorbill of a herder has to have a trip to town already. Compensation papers of some damn kind he needs to fix up."

She too is getting her fill of wartime sheep help. "Quite an imposition on these herders, isn't it, to ask them to actually herd."

My father steams out the choices. Deny Prince Al the trip and he'll most likely quit the job. Or much worse, sulk for several days of misbehavior with the sheep and *then* quit. Hang onto Prince Al until shearing if we can, is the least nasty conclusion. The only virtue evident in him is the one that counts, he isn't losing lambs left and

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"I better take the sheep tomorrow," my father brings himself around to the necessary, "while you run him in to Bozeman, BERNETA, how about." She has done this endless times before, ferrying a hired man so that a toothache or a case of boils or, as now, a pesky piece of government paper could be taken care of; for any ranch wife, as usual as a can of coffee on a grocery list. A day away from the ~~Rung place~~ CABIN, medicine against monotony, it provides too.

My father is going on, "It'll give you your chance at the mail and some fresh goods, and while you're in there do something nice for yourself and shop for —"

//He stops. Berneta is shaking her head.

I'll play sheepherder tomorrow.

"What, HE SAYS, instead of making the trip to town? How'd ye get that in your head?"

I'd rather herd than to take him in. The roads in this country get my goat.

My father rethinks. A possibly slippery drive through the Maudlow mudholes, versus a horseback day with the sheep for her. "That's what you'd really rather, is it." Then the central concern: "You're sure ye feel up to that?"

"I can get by with the herding," she reassures him. "The horse and the dog will do the most of it. Don't worry none, I'm not about to walk myself to death chasing after fool sheep."

She cheerfully turns to the matter of me. "Which for you, Ivan? Playing sheepherder or into town?"

I blink. It had never occurred to me the town trip might not include me. By now I am practically the child gazetteer of towns, Phoenix to Maudlow. Later it dawns on me, too late, that going herding with her would have been an entire dreamday aboard my own horse. But instead I choose horsepower, the Ford, habit of journey and whatever obtains: "Town, I guess."

The next morning my father and I and Prince Al slewed our way ~~first of all into Maudlow. Maudlow gumbo a bum go, Maudlow~~ ON THE MAUDLOW ROAD → TOWARD BOZE. Whipping the Ford's steering wheel this way and that, my father comes up with the sarcastic theory that the only reason the railroad was routed through ~~this~~ THE SIXTEEN country was because the mud is thick enough to float a train. Prince Al, chawing away, mutely doesn't get it.

~~Six miles of slip and slide, and we tromp into the tiny~~ Maudlow post office to collect our backed-up mail. Wally is heard from, Winona, Anna and Joe, of course my

Where indeed, given our road record since the Ford was loaded and aimed to Arizona last November. But my father flaps a wrinkle out of the newspaper he is reading and encompasses everything from the root years of the Doig homestead to the Morgan summer range of the moment. "We're out here on Sixteen—"

intense

Sixteen kinds of weather a day this year, I can imagine Berneta saying to herself as she unties the yellow slicker from behind the saddle and slips it on. Knots the saddlestrings firmly down on the mackinaw jacket she'd been wearing since she left the cabin and climbs back on the horse Duffy to ride through the sun shower, freshet of rain about the size of a sprinkler can's but thoroughly damp. Makes you wonder why June days need to be so unpredictable.

—

Ahead of her the trail zigs and zags up the mountain like a carpenter's rule unfolding. A quarter of the way up the mountainside, no, already more like a third of the way up, a mob of wool is expanding in many too many directions at once, helter-skelter. Say for Prince Al that he started the sheep out onto the big slope decently enough this morning, but their behavior is disintegrating in a hurry, and she and the horse and dog have to get right at it to head them off. She'd decided first thing to leave Jack leashed at the cabin and use Flop for the day, eagerness over temperament, and the bent-eared dog flirts sideways at her in gratitude as they travel the trail.

Ten minutes' hard climb by the saddlehorse carries Berneta through the rain climate—off with the slicker, back into the mackinaw—and up to where she feels she can start dealing with the herd situation. The sheep are full of run this morning. Every second minute, the lead ewes have to be turned, bent back from their abrupt mania to quit the country, stream out across the mountain just to be traveling. You'd think the fools had appointments somewhere. Here and there a bunchbreaker erupts, a solo sheep dithering off toward the tall timber with forty lambs following like a tail on a kite. The worst vagabond, a haughty high-headed ewe determined to stomp off back to the bedground, Berneta slings the ring of cans at and has the satisfaction of clouting her in the

rump and causing a panicked veer back to the protection of the herd. Don't dare do much of that, as it means the exertion of climbing off and on the horse to retrieve your noisemaker, but it shows the old biddies you mean business.

She uses the dog to take the run out of them, directing him with backhand sweeps of her arm as if clearing away a curtain of air. "Go around them, Flop. Around them, boy." The dog races ahead of the sheep in short arcs, stopping every fifty yards or so to give her an *enough*? look. Ewes still are stubbornly squirting off in tangents of their own on the other side of the band from the dog, so Berneta keeps sending him on his rainbow dashes until he's circled the entire band. Just as obstinately as they'd been scattering to the four winds, the sheep now keg up, huddle there in a half-acre knot of wool blinking at her and the dog.

She catches her breath and, ugly though a noneating band of sheep wrapped around itself is to any self-respecting herder, she waits. And waits some more, facing down the twenty-two hundred saturnine sheepheads. Let them grow tired of being bunched up, the lunatics weren't gaining any grass into themselves anyway cantering off across creation the way they'd been.

The sheep mill a little in an unruly circle, eyeing the dog problem. All at once the whole bunch catches the inspiration to mother up with their lambs. The epidemic now is ewes sniffing furiously to make sure the offspring is their own, lambs diving to their knees to suckle. After the session of this, the band of sheep begins to graze up the slope as polite as you please.

Even when sheep are on their best behavior you don't simply lollop across the countryside with a band of them,

especially if the country is as mountainy as this. Eight thousand eight hundred hooves to control, in a more or less simultaneous pursuit of grass, while avoiding coyotes and bear and deadfall snags and poisonous weeds and any other assassins that shadow the travels of sheep. Berneta sheds the mackinaw—coat on, coat off, that kind of day—and takes stock. Today's grazing territory is from the gulch on up the flank of Hatfield Mountain toward the timberline, then down again. "Bring them into camp tonight, let's do," Charlie had formulated with her. "Halfway up along there is a great plenty for the day, then swing them back down. I ought to have that geezer of a herder back here by the time you head them down." Which will mean, for her, seeing to it that the band grazes as far up as the halfway point on the mountainslope before shading up, then easing them in a half-circle turn

back down this afternoon, toward the upper end of the cabin meadow for the night. Getting sheep to do anything by halves goes against their nature, but she hired out to herd for all she's worth, didn't she.

"That includes you, Duffy," she converses to the horse. "Let's go, boy."

As the horse answers that and the dig she gives him with her heels by grunting his way up the slope, Berneta is glad her body is becoming accustomed to the saddle again. Getting toward toughened in, although not entirely there yet. Already, this early, she can notice that horsework is work for the rider too. She always marvels at Charlie. Beat up as he is in various parts of himself, he can climb on a horse and go at it all day without ever feeling an effect.

The sheep fan out a little as she wants them to, their interest perfectly where it ought to be, one clump of grass

27

to the next. She reins up beside the hooved cloud, her horse pointed upslope a certain neck-bowed way, herself posed attentive to the moment a certain way, and it happens. The years peel away and she is the photographed horsewoman again, arch of a mountain framing her. Some differences; there always are. Here, she is dressed not for the camera lens but for the job; workshirt, workpants, work*shoes* that she knows she must be careful not to thrust through the stirrup when climbing on even imperturbable-seeming old Duffy ~~one of Charlie's worst poundings hit him when his horse shied at a snake as he was mounting and the stirrup snared his foot through to the ankle, dragging him like a gunnysack alongside the kicking hooves of the runaway.~~ Nor is she quite the hatbrim-shaded leather-chapped cowgirl

whispery

OF HER ~~TEENA~~ TEENAGE YEARS

cometing against the stone sky of Wall Mountain any more. No leg-swatting sagebrush grows at this altitude, and the best that she could find for headgear to herd in is Charlie's winter cap. But in wanting to be herself on horseback; in the neighborhood of high eye-opening earth; in June dreamscape of her own; in the solitary essentials of her outline today, she is enough like that picture of girl-turning-woman again.

BOZEMAN

"Sixteen Creek. Sixteen Creek." The barber contemplates with his comb still trying to find some natural order to my hair. "Never been up into that country. Can a man catch a fish there if he holds his mouth right?"

"Oh-it's-so-so; the-water's-pretty-riley; ye've-got-to-fight-brush," my father guards the stream which is all but tossing trout into our frying pan.

The scissors are starting to operate around my ears.

"Hold still, Sunny Jim," the barber warns me. To my father again: "Suppose we about have this war won? What do you think of this man Truman?"

KEEP

~~Affairs of world and nation get pronounced on while~~ I goggle out the barbershop window at all-business Bozeman. Women and more women beeline into the shops and stores. An occasional calcified male goes creaking past to a bar. Cars have the street in frequent but not frantic use. This is neither martial Phoenix nor windy-orn White Sulphur Springs, this is a sound-as-a-dollar little city catering to its plump valley.

Here comes the part of barbering I really hate, the hair tonic. This of course is a barber who likes to slosh on the pooh-pooh water, positively dousing a person's scalp with the smelly stuff and rubbing it in like analgesic. Gabbing a mile a minute while his fingers mess around up there: "This'll fix you up for the Fourth of July, got your firecrackers picked out yet?"

Now it's my father's turn under the scissors. You have to look at him twice to figure out that he only slimly has the majority of a head of hair left. The sides from the temples back are perfectly full, and the stand of hair in the middle of his head is still holding strong; it is either side of the middle that has thinned away, widow's peaks that kept on going. He has had his glasses on for reading the Bozeman paper, and looks abruptly younger again with them off.

"Always have to have the noon news," the barber announces, and turns on the radio.

Broadcasting the sheep, Berneta's patient activity now is called, in the original sense of the word. Casting them

broad across the range, in a scatter so that there is maximum grass for each.

"So far so good, Flopper," she says aside to her dog partner.

Their morning pandemonium forgotten, the ewes and their copying lambs have drifted comfortably up the mountain nearly to timberline; this far up, stray jackpines stand dark against the otherwise open slope, drifters from the belt of timber. A slow-motion gamble, letting the band scatter from-hell-to-breakfast this way, but the best kind of herding if you can manage to do it. Doesn't take much tickle of the imagination to see the lambs putting on pounds as they nibble along. Keeps the herder and horse busy, though, riding a community loop around the wide-spread band to watch against all the things that sheep can get into and that can get into them. Even prettiness serves as a poison to sheep, the standing white

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blossoms which Berneta charges into atop Duffy and *hyaahs* a bunch of lambs away from. Fight them away from death camas in spring bloom, and away from lupine when it forms peas in autumn, you have to.

shape hood

As broadcaster of sheep her mind is free to go while the rest of her has to ride the horse, and she dreams ahead now. Wouldn't know it to look at her this instant, but she is tired of being portable. She and Charlie have talked things through, the evenings in the cabin when dusk lasts in the air for hours, and reached their decision against contracting hay this summer. Stay here at the ~~Rung place~~ CABIN IN THE BRIDGE instead, is the impulse they both have. Take on the herding themselves once shearing is out of the way, using the cabin as their camp. Charlie could stand a slow summer of mending his health some more and, truth is, so could

she. She can't account for it, how much better she feels in mountain circumstances, but that's the physical how of it. Not easy traveling, this rifleshot country, but you can't beat it for grass, scenery, verve of the mountain air. The rest of June and July and August here, on their own, will be a rhythm she and Charlie have not had since Grass Mountain. Even the Maudlow road can't stay muddy all summer.

THEIR HONEYMOON SUMMER ON

Beyond, though. After August when the sheep deal is over, she and Charlie are going to have to quit thinking in seasons. Settle down and stay settled a good long while. *With Ivan starting school we are going to have to stay in one place*, Wally has been confided in, the wish told to him more than once lately. *Some place of our own.*

(in letters

Blat is in the echoes now, the sheeps' medley of a thousand calls of *baa* bouncing here to there on Hatfield Mountain as the ewes are mothering up their lambs. They're ready to shade up, and Berneta too drops down for a rest. Army of mothers, encampment of wool at the top of the mountainslope. Berneta unwraps her sandwiches for lunch and gives Flop a share.

Out of the barbershop Dad and I march, shining at the back of the neck, and hurry through egg salad sandwiches at the lunch counter of the drugstore. The day is going and, last bite down, so are we.

Onward to conspiracy. This is the part that is secret from Berneta. My father had confided it to me as soon as we turned Prince Al loose. I outright dance to the idea, and my father looks like he could spring down the street in a burst of jigsteps himself.

At our destination, though, two of the women shoppers who seem to be the occupying force of Bozeman are passing by, one shaking her head and telling the other: "You ought to just see the prices they've got in there."

" 'Spensive?"

"Awful. I walked in and walked out."

The Doigs are not daunted. In we plunge, my father's jaw geared forward into determination.

Shelves, counters, racks, boxes. Storeload of stuff, and the saleswoman is busy with a woman customer buying something whispery. We're on our own and glad of it.

"What's it a present for?" I'd asked my father when he unveiled this intrigue of his.

That threw him for a moment. Nearly three months yet to Berneta's birthday, and their wedding anniversary had been six, no, already seven weeks ago.

"The first day of summer," he resorted to. "Approximate."

This was good, though. My father feeling relieved enough about the arc of the sheep deal so far, about cabin life and the summer range, to think in gift terms. Berneta has been through a lot, this hobo quintet of months since he fell sick in ~~Alzona Park~~ ARIZONA. Time for her to have a surprise of the decent sort.

My father zeroes in on the merchandise he has in mind. Picks one up and eyes it as if trying to see through it. COLORBLIND

"What color would ye say this is, Ivan?"

How to define that it has a kind of off-reddish tint, neither quite one color nor another, stumps me until I think to declare: "Hereford."

"That's no good to us then," he puts it sharply down. "We want straight brown, so it'll go with anything."

I manage to single out undiluted brown, my father decides on the fanciest style, and we're already halfway in business. Away we swagger to another section of the store, for the other item of splurge to go with this one.

There, the saleswoman catches up with us. We feel we don't noticeably need her help, but she seems to think otherwise.

"This brown is close enough to the other one," she undertakes to show us, "to go together nicely."

"Close enough isn't what we're after," my father lets her know.

Down cascade more boxes of the item, the saleswoman displaying one after another until I exercise our proxy on the precise same color.

Dad names the size, and the saleswoman wonders if that doesn't sound too big. My father gives no ground. He knows the size of everything Berneta wears, and barely keeps from telling the snooty salesclerk it was all volunteer arithmetic, too.

The saleswoman wants to know what other assistance she can render us. My father informs her the spree is over, how much are the damages? She adds up the set of purchases, he flips his checkbook out and writes the figure as if it was pocket change. Away, rich in gifts, we go again.

Groceries next, by the boxload. The trunk of the Ford swallows it all away and my father looks twice at his wristwatch. All we need now is Prince Al. Naturally he has not shown up, here at the hour Dad absolutely instructed him to.

My father starts to stew. The thirty-five-mile drive yet ahead, mudholes in ambush; ~~a stop at the Morgans~~ KEEP to tell them we've done our own camptending this week;

tarping the groceries into slingpacks behind our saddles; the three-mile horseback ride from the mouth of the gulch up to the cabin—he doesn't want added into all that a door-to-door search of Bozeman for Prince goddamn Al.

"Daddy, are you going to can him?"

"To even do that we need to find the sonofabuck." As much to the lengthy main street of Bozeman as to himself or me, he addresses: "Where do ye suppose a bird like him would hang out?"

Choices are plenty, although all in one category. Just from where we stand I can read the twinkling signs of several nominees—the Crystal Bar, the Rocking R Bar, the Park Bar, the Stockman Bar.

My father casts another glance, this time at the sun, midway down the afternoon sky, and starts us toward the nearest of the bars at his racing pace. "Bastard him anyway, we don't have the time—"

Time to head down out of here, Berneta can tell from her glance at the sun; start the sheep moving down the mountain toward the place for night.

The sheep, contrary old sisters that they can be, have forgotten their earlier affection for the bedground and want to keep on stuffing grass into themselves. Words fly out over the mountain: "Around them, Flop. *Way* around them." While the dog makes his rounds, Berneta adds whistling and a clatter chorus of cans. Grudgingly, the ewes shift around and mince slowly down the slope, their lambs skittery at their sides. It will be a push, to make them move down to the cabin meadow before dark.

(93)

46

The horse and dog both are showing themselves tired and, message from her body, BERNETA she is getting seriously that way, too. Stay on the horse, she again reminds herself. Riding is work, but walking this vast sidehill is more so. She spurs Duffy closer to the herd.

quicker

"Of-all-the-goddamn-times-to-have-to-herd-the-god-damn-herder," my father tells the world. He and I ransack the drinkeries on the south side of the street first, Dad giving a description of Prince Al which grows more blazing with each bar. But the bartenders shake their heads, chorus that they sure haven't laid eyes on any such specimen. ~~We even resort to the Oaks Cigar Store, on the chance he's in there stoking up on chaw.~~

No luck. "Worse mess, if we go back out without him," my father reminds himself by stating to me, and we begin canvassing the north side of the MAIN street. OF BOZEMAN.

Now

Who would have thought it of scruffy gopher-cheeked Prince Al? He was ensconced in the cocktail lounge of the swanky Baxter Hotel, the absolute last place to look, pickling himself with mixed drinks called Brown Bombers.

"Got your compensation fixed up, it looks like," my father begins with mere sarcasm, then he really lights into him. Takes the hide off him for breaking his word about meeting us on time, for going off on a bender, for general misbehavior while a woman has to handle his sheep for him. Yet not quite firing him. We still desperately need a herder, even one of this candlepower, until shearing.

Without a word, Prince Al follows us out and folds himself into the car.

45

48

// The route from the Maudlow road up to the cabin was beginning to take on familiar features, like a caravan run. Sixteen Creek ~~The creek~~ dodged through the thick brush, every ripple purring in hiding. Yellow shaley rock cliffed out wherever the gulch broke at a bend. Ahead, overhead, Hatfield Mountain topping out in its thatch of timber. At the halfway point, the sudden stand of low-branched cottonwoods to watch out for or they would slap you half off your horse.

I nod along in the dreamslow rhythm of the ride, perched, lulled, being carried by event. But go to my father and he is remaking the day, casting away the delay

and lateness, churning worry into reassurance: if it would only stay churned. Holy-J.-Christ, his mood runs, how-can-ye-ever-figure-it-all? Prince Al possibly would've behaved himself, not gone off and got plastered, if Berneta had been the one to take him to town. Yet, couldn't really blame her for not wanting to fight the Maudlow road; lucky enough that my father didn't get us stuck himself, in those mudholes that would swallow a person's shadow. Besides, maybe Prince Al would've fallen off the wagon even if a dozen Bernetas had taken him to town, maybe he was just that kind. But oh damn the weather that we were always having to try to sneak past, outguess, make muddy choices. If it'll only let us settle in; the ~~Rung-place~~ is restful when it's not a day of commotion like this. The sheep deal will pay off in just a couple more weeks, at shearing. Then there'll be the lamb money this fall,

CABIN LIFE, THE NEW MOUNTAIN,

and even a bit of profit at selling the ewes too; money enough to set us up for a good long time. We can see if Berneta will try Arizona again, that ranch country around Prescott. Or if she can get by in Montana as well as she has this spring, maybe that's as much as can be asked. Ivan in school this fall, we'll need to place ourselves and we will. Not far now to the cabin. Damn-it-all-to-hell-anyway, how late in the day it's gotten to be. But her stint with the sheep ought to have gone well, browsing them a little way up the mountain like he had laid out for her. And the weather hadn't been terrible, which qualified it as good. And she is veteran at all this, after all. Knows the country, Berneta does. Knows herself, better even than he's ever managed to. What was it she'd said? "Don't worry none, I'm not about to walk myself to—"

deliberate but intense

Dearth of activity at the meadow, the cabin, as we file up out of the tangly gulch.

It is nearing dark. The sheep are bedded at the upper end of the meadow, where my father had conveniently sited the herder's tepee that morning. Prince Al, sobering up grumpy, heads his horse toward the tepee.

Duffy, still saddled, is grazing in the high grass alongside the barn. Berneta is nowhere in sight.

My father stands in his stirrups, suddenly tiptoe with the strain of trying to see behind the cabin windows slurred with dusk. "Berneta, we're home," he shouts almost as if it were a question.

The cabin.

The barn.

The bedded sheep.

Nothing answers him except echo.

Then in the frame of the cabin doorway, just distinct. Wiping her hands with a sack towel, she calls out:

"Back the same day, are you."

The sheepdogs appear, one on either side of her, yawning from their cozy cabin stay.

Burden of worry off him now, my father clucks his horse into faster pace across the meadow. I bounce on the back of Star, trying to keep up.

They've all kissed and gone on to generalities about the day by the time I slide down from my horse. My mother hugs me and calls me her Boze*man* Ivan, laughs that Dad and I don't seem to be cut out for town barber-

ing, we've come home looking like a couple of scared preachers.

My father does a necessary asking. "How'd ye do with the sheep?"

Her day on the mountain revolves again. The sheep when they were pigheaded, the sheep when they were perfect. Varieties of weather. Taste of the sandwich lunch, sound of ~~the~~ grouse. Exasperation, exaltation, sufficiency of each. Common day in the week of life.

She sums it as she will for Wally, in transoceanic ink, in the morning:

I got along okay.

The mail and groceries have to wait. First out of the pack are the conspiratorial boxes for her. This, my father the cowboy suitor could perform blind. "We happened to bring ye a couple little somethings, dear," he pronounces and flourishes the first box to her, then with a grin hands me the other one to hand to her.

51

"What have you two been up to?" She gazes, as captured with surprise as we could wish, back and forth at my identically grinning father and me.

"Try 'em on," my father says with acey-deucey confidence.

Publicly done, as everything is in the single room of the cabin. She slips the first item on, exclaims to us about the perfect fit, which of course we knew. She peeks in the second box.

Lifts out the other half of the outfit with an "Oh, I ought to send you two to town all the time." Puts it on by ducking down to adjust it just-so in Dad's shaving mirror.

Turns to us, rigged out new from head to toe.

52

Charlie and Ivan brought me the nicest pair of brown boots and a big hat, HER LETTER REPORTS ~~*X*~~ TO WALLY THE NEXT DAY.

So I am a combination/cowgirl sheepherder now.

#