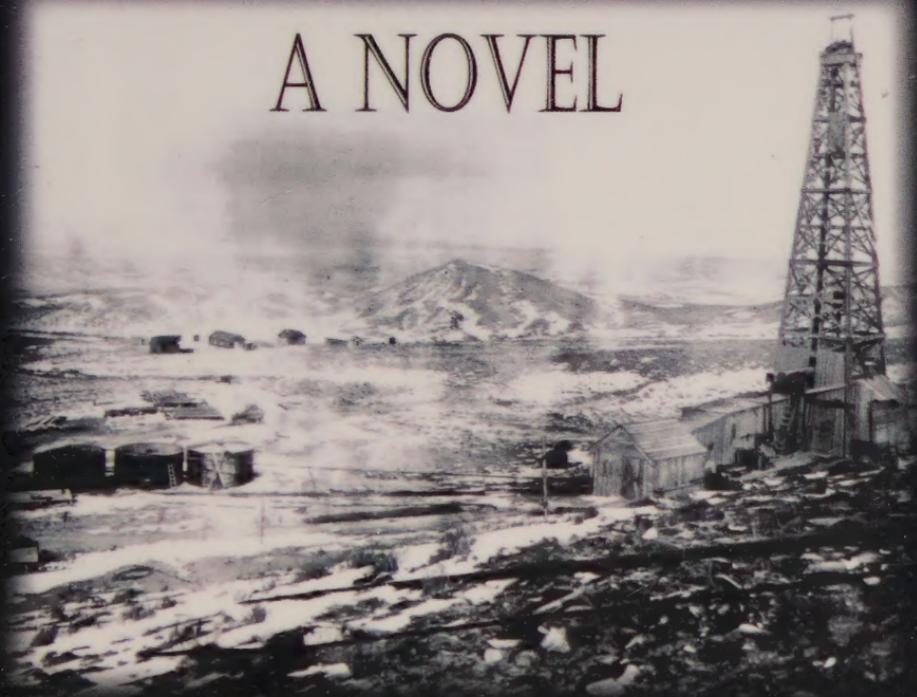


TOM  
WEDDERBURN'S  
LIFE

A NOVEL



THEODORE JUDSON

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*By Theodore Judson*



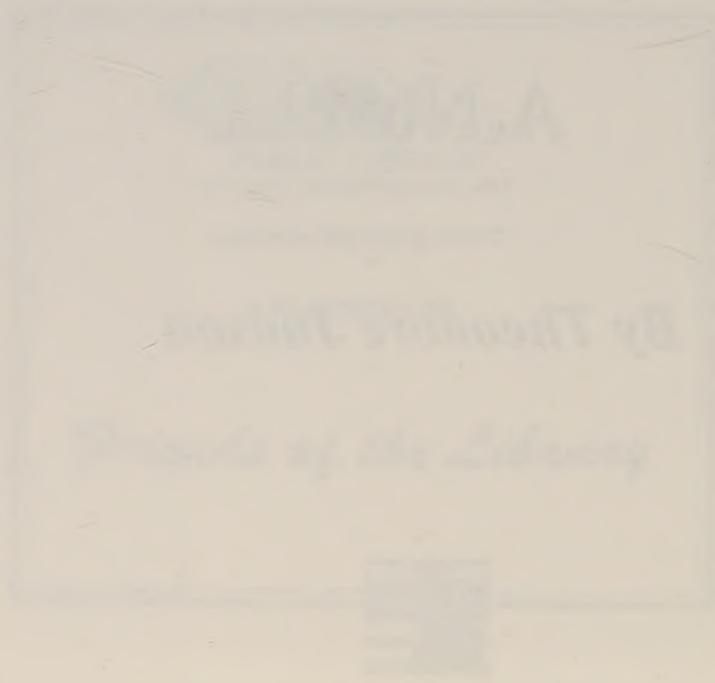
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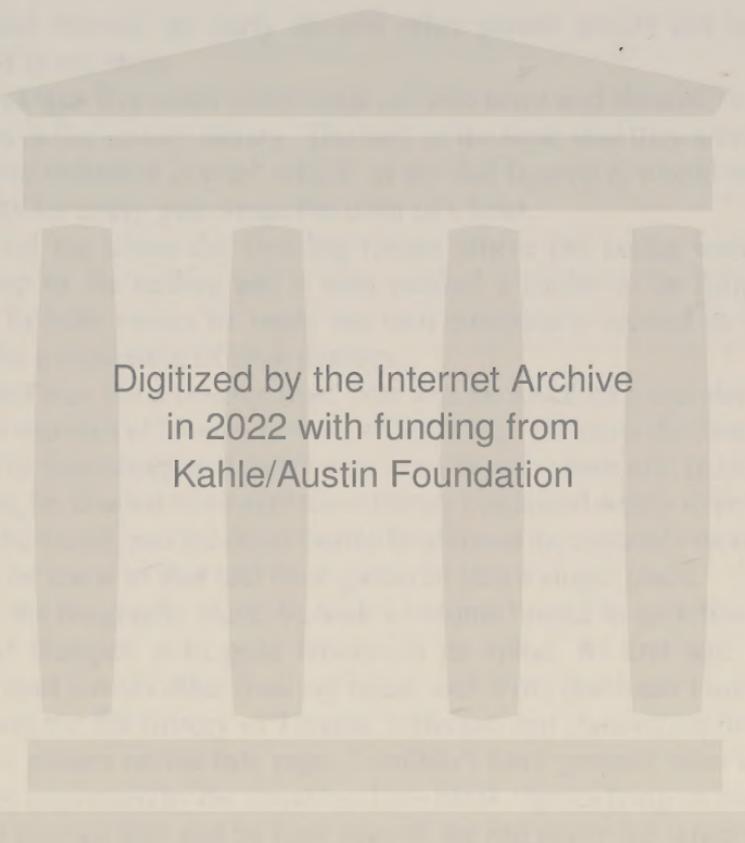
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## Why I Am Writing This

My dad warned me early on that other people would not be interested in my story.

When I was five years old he took me into town and showed me the books in the county library. The lady at the desk said they were almost four thousand in total, which, as my dad figured it, would be two books for every year since the birth of Christ.

Dad led me about the two big rooms where the books were stacked up to the ceiling and a man needed a ladder to be fully learned. In both rooms he made me turn completely around so I might take a reckoning of their number.

My dad was not a reading man. Nor was he much of a traveler. He never was east of Omaha or west of Salt Lake. He knew the farm and how to raise sheep and didn't care what the wise men say. In his ignorance, he fancied this small town library contained nearly every book in the world, and the dusty books he showed me certainly were the most he knew of that had been gathered into a single place.

From the biography shelf, he took a volume bound in dark blue cloth and stamped with gold letters on its spine. At that age I couldn't read a word other than my name, and if my dad hadn't told me this was the life history of Thomas Jefferson and showed me the old man's picture on the title page, I couldn't have guessed what it was. I was impressed by the countless little black figures lying on the page like pressed ants and by how smooth the old paper felt when I ran my hand over it.

"Jefferson was the most famous American ever to live," said Dad. "It was him made the first plow and founded the original country. Now, look: in this whole place there's only this one book about him. Mr. Frank Elder is the most famous man in this entire county, and there ain't one page in here telling about him. So what do you figure are the chances of anybody ever writing a book about me or you?"

He explained, in his own words, that a natural order rules the

world and the things in it: bears are bigger than dogs; the Rocky Mountains are higher than the hills back east; the oceans are wider and deeper than a lake; and some men matter, while others are just here to walk the earth.

“You and me are like animals what can talk,” said my dad. “We’re here. We eat; take up space. That’s about it. People out in the world are about as interested in us as they are in some horse out in a pasture. They can stand to look at us for a second or so; then, that’s about it. The lesson to it is this, Tom: when you get into someplace big, to sell sheep or something, or if you ever have to go into the service, don’t talk to other people about yourself. It’ll either put them to sleep from the dullness of it or it’ll make them angry. People want to hear about the folks that count, or else they want to hear about themselves. You got to talk to them like they want.”

As he said this he bobbed his head forward like a chicken pecking at another bird; this was his signal to me to pay particularly close attention because he was saying something very important, something I should remember.

Sixty-five years have gone by me since that time. My dad and the library are both gone, and I could not tell what happened to either of them. I only know the last time I saw them. The last I saw of the county library it had been turned into a boarding house for oil field workers; then in the 1930’s it was abandoned and soon thereafter moved by truck to some place on the Reservation. Today the place it stood in is part of a parking lot next to a supermarket. Where the books telling of the great men were stacked to the ceiling is now an empty block of air with an asphalt floor. The last time I saw my dad was in August 1928. He came in from the sheep during the middle of the day and said he was going to Miller’s store to buy some cigarettes. “I could use a smoke,” he told my mom. Before he left he put his hand on my shoulder and bobbed his head as if he were about to say something I needed to remember. But he didn’t. He instead took a hard look at the black clouds rolling in from the mountains. “We could get some rain,” he said to me. Then he got in the flatbed truck, and since then the place he used to be in has likewise been an empty space.

His ignorance and his shiftless nature notwithstanding, my dad told me the truth when I was five: my story probably is not important

to other people. Not counting the time I was in the Marines, I have been no more than a Wyoming shepherd, which was the same profession—if it deserves so fine a title—as was my dad's. I leave no works of art behind me, no scientific discoveries, no property beyond my bank account and part interest in two flocks. The world knows that Stanley, the only child who came close to bearing my name and my sole claim on the future, is not really my blood, so my name, for what little it's worth, will die with me; and it will die a lonely death because I leave no wife to mourn it. I haven't even cut much of a figure in my lifetime; I'm skinny and slouched like my dad was, and I limp so bad from my war wound I scare every new dog I get for the first year I own her.

Yet while I may be nothing to other men, I know for a certainty that I have not felt less during my life than the great have felt in theirs. It is knowing that fact and the belief that I will soon not be here and no one will remember what I was that make me want to get this down on paper before it's too late. I woke up a fortnight ago with a pain in my side that has since traveled down my bad right leg and now has attacked the arch inside the sole of my foot; the muscles in the leg stiffen at night and I have to stick the foot out of the covers at the side of the bed because the stiffness pulls it in that direction. Something in me whispers that when this happens or when I get to feeling cold and light headed while I'm walking with the sheep and I have to sit down until I feel warm again that it is death telling me he is coming. I can't tell if he's near or if he's a year or two away, but I can sense him coming for me as surely as I can sense the first snowstorms approaching in the fall of the year when the prairie is still green in places and the days are still long but the cold wind arising from the west at sundown is a visitor for the middle of winter.

Other than the possibility of being forgotten, no longer being on this earth is not a very frightening prospect for me. I've seen a lot of people die in my time, and it's been my experience that death is sometimes not nearly as frightening as surviving. Take for instance the time I swam in from my landing craft off Iwo Jima: a thousand dead or more must have been floating in the water around me or lying on the beach up ahead, and what stays with me now about that terrible experience was how serene the bodies—those that were in one piece—seemed as they bobbed slowly in the tide in contrast to

the living beings thrashing through the water towards the land; the breathing men were covered with panic, and the dead were calm in their separate sleeps, not one of their faces showing the smallest sign of terror. Dying is like that, I believe. A man lets go of himself, and everything terrible is past. After that we become God's responsibilities, and His Judgment or mercy follows.

The one thing troubling me is I know that if I die before I finish writing this book nobody other than God will know I walked the earth like other men and I will be forgotten: which is more than being dead, it is the same as never having been. To consider that the world and the people in it will keep on going for thousands of millions of years and not once will anyone stop for a few seconds in those endless centuries of future time to think of Tom Wedderburn would be too much for me. No doubt it's the leavings of an old man's vanity that makes me feel this way; I'll let a higher court than my conscience judge me on that score. I can only say writing this comforts me.

As I'm sitting on my wagon steps putting this on paper, the sun has settled amongst the highest peaks of the southern Wind River Mountains. It is a fine sight to look on: the tallest mountains have turned from blue to black, and the light sliding down the face of the range sets a halo on all the lower hills on the eastern slope. A couple minutes ago, when I first saw this panorama, I considered writing that the high peaks are like the great men in the old biography section and I am like the lesser hills, and I was going to argue that the world is not a simple matter of great men and tall peaks, but another thought has crossed my mind. Somewhere in the great pile of books I've read there was a poem about sunsets; I recall the sentiment of it, if not the exact words the poet used. Sunsets, the poem said, remind us of home, of the long road that brought us to where we are now, and of the dead who cannot witness the ending of another day with us.

This evening, as too often happens, my thoughts at sunset are with a particular soul amongst the dead, a woman who, I am sorry to confess, never loved me as I loved her. I am writing this for her too, and for the feelings I once had for her. It may seem a ridiculous boast, but the love I bore for her was as worthy as any man, even the great, ever had for a woman, and I want that love to live on in this

*TOM WEDDERBURN'S LIFE*

book long after I am taken to Sterton and, as provided in my will, buried in the small cemetery at the base of Griffen's Hill in the grave next to hers.



## My First Sheepwagon

I was born on the morning after Valentine's Day in 1917. Since I arrived so close on the heels of the lovers' holiday, my mother sewed a red heart on my original set of baby clothes. I know this because she saved everything from my first year in a paper bag she kept beneath her bed, and often showed them to me when I became grown. I came the fifth of seven children. Three sisters and a brother were older than I, and one sister and one brother were born at a later time. My dad's people came to Wyoming from Missouri, where the respectable members of his family had been farmers and Baptists and the rest of his kin had been good shots. My mother's maiden name was Rafterry. People of that name still are living in this part of the country, although I have never had contact with them as they cut my mother out of their family after she married my dad. I've been told that I'm Scottish, which means next to nothing to me. I've never thought of myself as being anything other than a citizen of Wyoming, and as far as I'm concerned God might as well have placed the Wedderburns on the high plains ten thousand years ago and kept them here ever since.

My first real memory was of standing at the window of my parents' sheepwagon, watching my dad burn sagebrush. The smoke from sage is the thickest and the blackest sort in creation; in calm weather it clings to the ground like fog, and the smell of it gets into everything and lasts for an eternity. Twenty years later I could still smell that black smoke in my baby clothes with the Valentine hearts stitched on them. The sage had to be burned before the land could be sown with alfalfa seed. The country was still rough in those days because it had only been since 1906 that water had been taken from the Wind River for irrigation. Just the bottom land close to the stream beds had been cultivated before the First World War; the rest of Elder County was it had been in Indian times: treeless, dry, and free.

I realized from the beginning that central Wyoming is the most

beautiful place on earth. Blue mountains that resembled thunderclouds surrounded the horizon in every direction of the compass, and the prairie around us rose and fell in a crazy pattern of hills, buttes, and canyons that seemed changed each time I gazed at it. In June the rains came and turned the grass green and made purple splotches on the leeward hillsides where the larkspur bloomed. By August the land was dried up and gone to a pale yellow; antelope and mule deer came down from the hills and ate inside the flood plains along side the sheep. In winter everything was a white haze pushed along by the west wind; fields of snow banks, laid out as regular as ocean waves, formed across the prairie, and spider threads of ice pushed inside the wagon and made crystal lace on the inside of my window. I'll grant that it was a hard place to make a living. The soil was thin and tore up the blades on my dad's plow when he tried to turn the ground. Had it had not been for the rabbits my older brother Carl hunted in the evening and the few vegetables we got from my mother's garden the country would have let us die. In spite of that and in spite of the long winters, the place was lovely, and the picture of cloud shadows drifting over the sagebrush hills, making the sandstone outcroppings blink first grey then gold, is something I will always carry in my head as a standard by which I measure other beautiful things.

When I was a little bigger I had a dog. She didn't have a name; it wasn't our fashion then to name animals like people do now. She was part Border Collie and part something else, and a badger had broken her right front leg, so she carried it tucked underneath her. My dad wanted to shoot her since she wasn't quick enough to help herd the sheep hobbling along on three legs like she did, but my mother wouldn't let him because the dog was such a strong favorite of mine. The dog and I used to lie in the shade beneath the wagon on hot summer days. I stroked the black fur on her back, and she licked my bare feet in return. It was quiet and peaceful with my dog underneath the wagon, which it sometimes wasn't in the wagon itself on account of my dad's drinking. I told stories to my dog as I petted her, silly children's stories I made up whole cloth out of the next to nothing I knew as an illiterate boy. In my stories I imagined two creatures that lived on the prairie; they looked like mice but acted like humans. One creature, I named him Chugwee, was naughty and

was again and again almost killed by the hawks and the ferrets, but the other creature, Pancan by name, was well behaved and wise and he always came to the rescue of the wayward Chugwee. I lay beside the dog and whispered my stories into her ear. My better judgment should have told me this was a stupid thing to do, for given the cramped space we all had to live in there was always the chance someone else in the family could overhear me.

My older sisters and I were sitting on a canvas tarp and eating salted raw potatoes for lunch one day when my mother was inside the wagon and our dad was far away with the sheep, and Mary, my second oldest sister, cut two pieces from her potato and set them in my lap and said: "Now you can give one to Chugwee and one to Pancan."

They began giggling, and I knew at once they had put their ears to the wagon floor while I talked to the dog. I was furious and ran at Mary to strike her with my tiny fists, forgetting in my anger that my head only came about as high as her waist. She sprang up and ran ahead of me, laughing as she went around the wagon in a circle. She would stop and shake her skirts at me, and I fear I must have gotten very red in the face as I chased after her, for my other two older sisters were rolling about the canvas tarp, laughing at the show I was making.

At last my eldest sister Marilyn snatched me up and kissed me on the face. "Red as a blood beet," she said and shook me like a doll.

Marilyn was seventeen at the time, nearly a grown woman, and a red-haired comely girl, except for the faint marks the smallpox had left on her cheeks. I couldn't be angry with her and the other two for long. She ordered my quiet sister Myra to come kiss me and then told Mary to do likewise. Good Myra obeyed her readily enough, however Mary stuck her tongue out at me and called me a weasel.

"I won't kiss the little brat," she said. "He'll give me fleas from his dog."

"Then I guess I'll have to throw him to the coyotes," said Marilyn.

She rocked me back and forth in her arms as if she were preparing to heave me a great distance.

"Unless he says he's sorry for losing his temper," she said, "this will be the last we see of Tommy."

She tossed me higher than her head and caught me before I hit the ground. My stomach felt like it was floating about inside my throat.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and for certain I was.

“You had better be,” said Mary, who then kissed me as well. “We wouldn’t want to poison the coyotes with spoiled meat,” she added.

Although they teased me like this many times, I knew they adored their little brother and that they would soon make a gift of some sort for me to make up for their tricks. Sure enough, a week later I was about to pull on my trousers one morning when I found inside the hip pockets two dolls that resembled small mice; they were made of terrycloth and stuffed with rags; one had a large letter “C” stitched on his breast to mark him as Chugwee, the other bore a large “P” for Pancan. My sisters let on that it was something akin to the tooth fairy who put the two dolls in my pants, but I knew it was their doing and that it was probably quiet Myra who did most of the needle work, as she was gifted in that art.

The great blessing of my childhood was having sisters who loved me, seeing as how we lived on top of one another in the little sheepwagon and that matters would have been unpleasant for me if they had felt otherwise. Our situation was such that the four of us had to sleep together at night; the three of them lay lengthwise with their heads on the pillow and I lay crossways at the foot of the bed. I was a warm sleeper as a boy, a head-sweater is what they called me, and Mary went so far as to declare that I felt better on their feet than a hot water bottle.

I should point out that the entire family, excluding Carl, slept in the wagon in the years before the farmhouse was built. My older sisters and I were in one bed, and my parents and the two little ones in another. As for my older brother, he slept outside in a tent, rolled up with the dogs. My dad treated Carl badly, Carl being the oldest of the lot and having the most expected from him. The story will get back to him later, but for now I’ll say Carl had to raise himself and he grew up wild as a consequence. I don’t mean he became uncontrollable or did terrible things; I mean he was a strange young man, a person distant from other people and more comfortable with his hunting dogs than he was with us.

The great sorrow of my early years was the loss of my dog. I went outside on January day and found her gone from under the wagon. I

called: "Come here, girl!" to the snowy countryside, but she didn't come. The day was too cold for everything but the sparrows and the starlings, and they were silent and huddled next to the wagon and anywhere else they could find a windbreak. White haze made the western horizon blurry, a sure indication that a storm was headed in our direction.

"She's gone off to die," my dad said. It's nature's way. Now we got one less mouth to worry about."

A child doesn't think of the possible dangers. I was no exception. As soon as my dad went to check on his sheep I took off walking towards the first hill to our north, from where I figured I could get a better view and maybe spot my dog. That first hill led to another hill and another after that, and still I couldn't see her. I had lost sight of the wagon, but I wasn't at an age or in a state of mind to care about such details. I discovered some tracks in the snow that resembled dog tracks, though now days I would recognize them as coyote markings. I followed the tracks across the prairie, until they crossed similar sets of tracks that led in other directions.

I didn't realize I was lost or what time of day it was getting to be. I called for my dog and promised her everything would be fine once she returned.

"You can sleep inside!" I shouted. "You can eat my food! I don't want no food ever again!"

The wind came up in the middle of the day. It crept up from the ground and moaned like a rusted gate as it passed over the rough country. By afternoon the wind was roaring hard enough to make me stumble, and while I continued to call for my dog no one standing ten feet from me could have heard me over the storm.

I crouched behind a sandstone boulder and wept. I wasn't afraid for myself; it was my dog I grieved for. She was lost out in this cold blizzard, and I couldn't save her.

I was still crouched behind the boulder when Carl and his dogs found me. He didn't speak to me; he just picked me up and carried me home. My dad was in a terrifying rage when we got back to the wagon. He beat me with a coit that night and the next day tied me to the wagon so I wouldn't go trailing off again.

I thought I would never get over losing that dog. I didn't know then that a person can endure anything he actually survives. Feeling

bad about the dog was a waste of time and energy, because my life was going to continue no matter how bad I felt.

## The Great Frank Elder

In the summer of 1924, when I was seven years old, a curious event took place near our home. Some local ranchers claimed they were losing cattle to a pack of wolves in the upper Wind River Basin, and they set in motion a vast scheme to destroy the guilty predators. A posse of three hundred riders were to fan out in a wide circle that reached from the Owl Creek Mountains in the north to the Sweetwater River eighty miles to the south and from Crowheart Butte in the west to the Gas Hills eighty miles to the east. The men intended to ride hard for two days, hollering, and now and then shooting their pistols, and thus drive the wolves before them. The three hundred riders would come together at Sterton, in the exact middle of their circle; there they were going to drive the wolf pack into a stock corral and shoot them dead in front of a group of newspaper men from Cheyenne. This slaughter was to take place on the afternoon of July Fourth, before the evening fireworks and after the Sterton Rotarians presented a living tableau depicting Wyoming's role in the Age of Science on the county courthouse lawn.

Young men from around the state came to chase the wolves for the simple glory of the adventure. My brother Carl was among them. He saved enough money from tanning hides to buy himself an Indian pony that stood a short thirteen hands high, and he proudly brought the horse to the sheepwagon for the family to see. As tall and lanky as Carl was, he should have been much too big to ride his new mount; still, he rode as well as he hunted and he stayed on the poor beast like he and it shared the same body. My sister Mary, who was quick to note the ridiculous, thought Carl looked a fool in the saddle, what with his long legs reaching almost as far as the pony's hooves.

"Why doesn't he take his feet out of the stirrups and run with the horse?" she whispered to Marilyn. "Six legs are surely faster than four."

Marilyn told her to hush. "Don't talk so," she said. "We shouldn't make fun of him. It's good Carl is taking part in something."

"The bunch of you are out of your heads," said my dad to Carl. "You can't herd wolves like they was tame livestock."

"We'll do good," said Carl. "Wolves don't take to ground; they just run."

To me Carl had long appeared to be a man who might go live with the wolves rather than hunt them. As usual, he was hatless and his tangled blond hair and long narrow face were open to the wind and the other elements. His black jacket and pants were shiny from the filth they had accumulated since the last time he had cleaned them. He and God knew the last time he'd bathed himself. As he spoke, he would turn his face toward one of us, but never his eyes; always his eyes were glancing toward the prairie, to the places he wanted to be.

"Come and see us in Sterton," Carl said to the girls and me. "We'll put on the show," he added as he turned his pony in the direction of Crowheart Butte and rode away.

It was rare for Carl to be so talkative. We could tell the big event had worked him into a fury, and we expected the Fourth would be a day to remember. Parnell Keary, a hay farmer who owned some good land next to the river and could afford to drive a Model A car, gave our family a ride into Sterton the night of the Third, and we slept under the railroad bridge like most of the country people did and went window shopping in the morning.

Sterton in 1924 was a coupe hundred wooden houses, the Methodist church, the courthouse, the stockyards, the Teton Hotel, the Hays General Store, and seventeen saloons; the whole of it stuck into the angle formed by the Little Wind River meeting the Big Wind. The cottonwood trees of the town blended in with the cottonwoods lining the river banks, and from a distance I had to squint my eyes to tell if it was a town or a small forest we were approaching.

My sisters and I promenaded down the wooden sidewalk in front of the Hays Store on the holiday morning; Marilyn said she wanted to look at some striped cloth, though there happened to be a group of young men idling about the store front, and my sisters didn't seem to mind checking them over as well. I recognized one dark haired

young fellow who had his hat cocked back on his head and had silver toes on his boots as Bob Williams, a beau of Marilyn's I had seen before around the sheepwagon. He whispered something to his mates that made them laugh as Marilyn walked past. She blushed crimson but wouldn't turn to him. "Meow," he said, and his friends laughed again.

"I declare," said Marilyn: "Sterton doesn't even try to keep its streets clean of filth."

"Hey," said one of Bob's friends and elbowed him in the side. "What do you say to that?"

"I'd say she should know filth when she sees it," said Bob.

The crowd of young men said "ooh" in unison. "Pretty good," said Bob's friend.

My sister Marilyn waited for the men to stop hooting. She looked directly at Bob, her hands on her hips.

I know filth when I see it," she said, "because I know you, Bob Williams."

The young men whistled and clapped at that. "She beat you there," said Bob's friend. Bob knocked his friend's hat off and mumbled something under his breath. Marilyn curtsied to him, and triumphantly led me by the hand into the store.

The Hays Store was a grand spot for a boy, in spite of it being confined indoors. It smelled of bay leaf and roasted coffee; the same scents my seven-year-old mind believed the explorers encountered in the heart of the African Jungle and in the other uncharted regions of the world. Along the counter fronts were glass jars filled with blue and green gumballs, plus a couple more full of fat green pickles and another that particularly disgusted my sisters because it contained boiled eggs that resembled disconnected human eyeballs. In one corner was a wooden Indian, his face painted a dark purple color: in his right hand he held a cutting box men used to clip the tips of their cigars and in his left was a bar of chewing tobacco from which a person could cut a solid plug. Over in the material section, the part of the store my sisters congregated in, were hung big spools of different kinds of patterned cloth; a customer could pull down as much as she wanted, measure it on the cutting table, and snip it from the spool with a pair of scissors hanging by a string fastened to the end of the table. I annoyed my sisters by jumping up to touch each

of the hanging spools, and they sent me off to browse elsewhere in the store.

The Hays brothers, both dressed in green velveteen jackets complemented with matching cravats and white carnations in their lapels, were busy at the back of the store with a tall, old man who was looking at the saddles and tack. They weren't paying attention to me, so I pinched the wooden Indian to make certain he wasn't a real person standing very still like Mary one time told me he was. The Hays brothers were really bowing and scraping to the old man in the back.

"Yes, sir," I heard one of them say. "As you say, sir. Quite right, very poor quality. But the economy is such that, sir..."

They didn't see me run my hand over the row of glass jars on the front counter or catch me when I put my face up to the pickled eggs and tried to make eye to eye contact. I drifted into the grocery section and took a shot at guessing what was in the various containers on the shelves. White meal had the picture of white corn on it; yellow meal had a yellow ear of corn on it. I forgot what the pretty girl on the white rock projecting over a lake stood for. I did know that I approved of the girl in the picture because she reminded me of Myra, and it was easy to imagine the girl was pleasant and gentle like my sister. I sniffed at the apples stacked in an open bin and felt hunger pains in my stomach. Breakfast time had passed without breakfast, and the apples were cool and red. I imagined the meat inside them was white like ivory and as crisp as ice water. I glanced at the Hays brothers. The old man was walking away from them, and they followed him at his heels like two cats who needed to be scratched behind the ears.

"By next week," they were telling him. "Certainly. We will have an entirely new stock. Much better. Handmade quality."

I was pondering the risk of stealing a few bites of apple and was carefully watching the Hays brothers when I noticed some peculiar objects in the neighboring bin. They were rounder than apples and had a color somewhere between yellow and red. Without stopping to consider the danger, I picked one up and sniffed it. The odor was terrible; onions gone to mold couldn't have smelled worse. Maybe, I thought, it smells bad because it isn't something to eat. It had a hide like leather, so perhaps it was a sort of ball. I dropped the round thing

to see if it would bounce, and it hit the floor with a solid 'thud' and stayed where it fell.

"It's an orange," said a voice behind me.

I spun around and beheld the old, tall man standing over me. He was an impressive sight, close up. He was grey from his hair to his boots, not a speck of dust on him. His eyes were pale blue and appeared to have seen everything and to have made a settlement on their own terms with what they saw. Before I could make a peep, he reached around me and picked up the orange, keeping his balance as he bent down and making only one brief sigh to show that he was indeed an old man and bending down should have been an effort for him.

"From China, originally," said the old man, rolling the round fruit in his hands. "These come on the train from California."

He lifted up one eyebrow and examined me, and I felt as small as the orange in his hands.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked me.

"Oh, Mr. Elder," the Hays brothers whined. "We try to keep them out. They sneak in."

They were fussing over him like two hens around the rooster.

"We're so sorry if the boy upsets you," they said. "Please—"

The old man waved them off.

"The boy wasn't bothering me," he said. "Now, what was your name?"

"Tom Wedderburn," I said, my voice squeaking a bit.

The old man frowned.

"You would be Daniel Wedderburn's boy," he said.

Like a lot of adults, he apparently disapproved of my dad.

"And these would be your sisters?"

He raised his hat in turn to Marilyn, Mary, and Myra. They blinked and curtsied to him like three sandpipers bobbing up and down on a sandbar. They weren't mocking the old man like Marilyn had done when she curtsied to Bob Williams; this was genuine respect mixed with fear.

"Mr. Frank Elder," Mary whispered so softly I had to watch her lips to tell what she was saying.

"You have beautiful sisters, Tom Wedderburn," he said. "Were you aware of that?"

“No,” I said, “I didn’t know. But then I didn’t know these were oranges either.”

A gentleman less grave than Frank Elder would have smiled at my innocence. The great Frank Elder merely nodded and did not change his expression.

“I suppose you would like to try some of these?” he said.

He ordered the Hays brothers to fill two sacks with the fruit and gave them to my sisters.

“And the young ladies need some fabric,” he added.

The Hays brothers scurried around the cloth section, cutting off bolts of cloth from every spool Marilyn pointed towards.

“Doesn’t your father give you shoes?” said Mr. Elder to me, for he had seen my bare feet.

“It’s summertime, you see,” I said. “I only need shoes in the winter when it’s cold.”

“Wild animals go unshod, Thomas,” he said. “People wear shoes year round.”

When Mr. Elder spoke it didn’t sound like he was making one side of an argument. He was a man used to being right, and his word was going to be the last word said on the matter. He had the Hays brothers show me their boys’ boots, and I selected a pair of pull-ons that had snakes tooled on their shanks and silver toes like Bob Williams wore. Mr. Elder next said my sisters should pick out some new shoes. Myra hesitated because, she said, it wasn’t right to accept gifts from strangers, not even from famous strangers; but Mary said she didn’t care if Mr. Elder turned out to be the King of Hell, new shoes were new shoes, and Myra shouldn’t be such a stick in the mud. In the end all three of them put on new laced shoes and spent a half an hour admiring themselves in front of a full-length mirror, giggling and turning about with their skirts hoisted above their knees.

“This is better than Christmas,” said Mary.

“Is there anything else in here you might like to have, Thomas?” asked Mr. Elder.

“Come to think of it, sir” I said. “I sure would like to try one of those pickled eggs.”

The Hays brothers fished one out for me, and I popped it in my mouth expecting it would be the best treat I’d ever had. I soon adjusted my expectations. It tasted like a lump of salt that was part

mush and part slime, and as soon as I had it on my tongue I knew it was not going down my throat. Mr. Elder, ever grave and watchful, waited for me to swallow. Unfortunately, the egg and I were at an impasse. I looked up at that immobile face and wondered if this old and celebrated man knew what it was to be a foolish boy with a mouth full of rotten egg.

Mr. Elder went to the counter and brought back a silver spittoon that he held before my mouth.

"Put it in here," he said.

I obliged him, in a manner that was less than comely. Marilyn apologized to Mr. Elder, Mary declared I was a disgusting little idiot, and Myra hid her face.

"It's nothing," said Mr. Elder. "Those things always are more interesting when they're still in the jar. You will enjoy the oranges more."

He nodded "goodbye" to us, and without another word he paid the Hays brothers in gold coin and left the store. The crowd gathered on the sidewalk outside parted before him. The lighthearted young men were suddenly solemn, and touched their hats to Mr. Elder and glanced at one another as the man they had heard so many stories about strode past them.

My sisters and I sat in the city park opposite the courthouse and ate the oranges from the two sacks. The fruit was warm and delicious; and since every sensation is best when it's brand new, I have never again enjoyed eating oranges as much as I did then. As we ate, we had a contest to see who could spit the seeds the farthest; it was Mary's idea and it was Mary who won by sending a seed over thirty feet and bouncing it off a gentleman's straw hat. Across the street the living tableau was taking place. A fat lady in what was supposed to be a Greek toga but actually was a bed sheet climbed atop a papier-mache podium marked "The Future" and declared: "I am the goddess Electricity! I bring light, justice, and wisdom to a darkened world!" A little boy carrying a cardboard lightning bolt ran from underneath the lady's podium and rammed his weapon into a doll-house, inside which a light bulb immediately was illuminated. The crowd on the courthouse lawn and in the park cheered for the little boy, whom Mary tried to hit with an orange seed, but he fortunately was well beyond her range.

“They say,” said Marilyn, as she licked the juice from her hands, “Frank Elder has killed enough men to dam up the Wind River for a year.”

“He’s rich,” said Mary, and she tossed an orange section into the air and caught it in her mouth. “I’d marry him in a second.”

“He’s an old man,” said Myra. “It would be wrong to marry somebody that old.”

“Maybe,” said Mary, “but he’s pretty nice. Besides, how much longer could he live? After he was dead I’d have his house and his ranch and enough money to buy me three or four young husbands.”

Between the courthouse and the living tableau was a statue of a cowboy leaning on his rifle. It didn’t look much like the real Frank Elder, but it was supposed to be him. Today it is not there anymore. Its place on the steps is taken by a twelve-foot high chrome spike, commemorating the state’s first women voters. The old statue, that was intended to represent Frank Elder, was made by an artist from back east, who disliked how Mr. Elder looked and preferred to use the actor Douglas Fairbanks Sr. as his model. The county commissioners at first objected to having a movie star in the town square, especially one as scandalous as Mr. Fairbanks, but the thing was paid for by the time the commissioners saw it and it did remind the citizens of Sterton and Elder County that one among them was a great citizen of the world. And that great man was Frank Elder: pioneer, lawman, Indian fighter, captain and hero in the Fifth Wyoming Cavalry—which the rest of the world knows as the Rough Riders—surveyor, rancher, the builder of railroads and irrigation canals, and the last survivor of the wild old days, the man whose portrait was hung between Washington’s and Lincoln’s at the front of every Elder County classroom, the man who killed the outlaw Harry McPherson and brought in Big-Nosed George DuPree for hanging, the man who drove the Wild Bunch from the Union Pacific line and the Sioux from the Bozeman Trail, the old man who dressed in grey and was all our history and our literature in a single pair of boots.

“They say,” said Marilyn, “Frank Elder’s big horse used to belong to Red Cloud. The chief gave it to him personally after Mr. Elder whipped him at the Wagon Box Fight.”

This was surely a fairy tale, one of many told about the famous

man and not the most fantastic one either. No horse living in the time of the Wagon Box Fight could've been alive more than sixty years later, but even people who knew about horses never objected when the story was told. Stories about Mr. Elder didn't have to be true to be believed; for us it was sufficient that they were about him.

After the living tableau broke up, my sisters and I drifted with the crowds down to the stockyards to await the riders from the wolf hunt. A few men from the southern side of the wide circle had already arrived and were attempting to explain to the people around the corral fence why they hadn't brought in any wolves.

"We had them pretty scared, I'll tell you," one young rider was saying. "Probably those wolves ran clean past Sterton. The other fellas will be bringing them back shortly."

"Maybe you had some gaps in your line," said a townsman. "Maybe those wolves got away."

"Maybe," said Mr. Keary, our neighbor from the river, "and maybe there weren't any wolves to begin with. I haven't seen a wolf or wolf tracks since the Indian days. Probably it was coyotes what killed those cattle, and coyotes take to ground. You boys would have ridden right over them without knowing it."

The crowd strenuously disagreed. Several young men challenged Mr. Keary to fight then and there.

"Friend," said a rider with revolvers strapped on both his legs, "I've today seen at least five hundred wolves before me! So take care what you say around me!"

Nearly everyone agreed there must be thousands of wolves within a forty mile radius of Sterton; undoubtedly more lived in Elder County than did people. There were more than cattle and sheep put together, said an elderly lady. A townsman told a story of how a wolf carried a human child right off a front porch.

"It was one of those people that used to live up on the hill," he said. "I can't think of their names. Started with a P."

"Yes, those people," said the elderly lady, who remembered the same incident.

My brother Carl and the other riders from the west of town came rolling down Main Street and into the stockyard corrals while we were listening to this terrifying tale. They were shouting and slapping their reins on both sides of their horses' necks, and before them

were two frightened jack-rabbits. The rabbits ran into the corral with their ears down and left as quickly via the spaces between the wooden slats. A boy of about twelve tried to catch one of them outside the fence, but the rabbit ran straight into his arms and knocked him head over heels. The last we saw of the two rabbits they were tearing towards the cottonwood trees along the river and soon disappeared within the undergrowth.

“Awful small wolves,” said my sister Mary.

“Poor Carl,” said Marilyn. “He won’t get over this right away.”

About an hour later we learned that Carl’s group had done better than the riders from the east. That bunch arrived in town covered in yellow dust and had nothing to show for their two days of work other than some chaffed backsides.

The crowd stopped talking to itself. The young riders were either studying the ground or else they slipped away for a while and came back to the stockyard on foot and pretended they had never been on the wolf hunt. The belligerent rider who had been wearing the two revolvers stole away and then returned to the corral in a clean suit and tie. “They sure made fools of themselves, didn’t they?” he whispered to a pretty young woman standing next to him.

The riders from the northern side of the wide circle came into Sterton last. Some daring boys and my sister Mary climbed up a cottonwood tree and spied them approaching town at about five o’clock. The riders were grouped in a crescent formation and moving slowly. Some men in the stockyard crowd predicted that someone in the northern group must be hurt because they were coming in so late.

Three quarters of an hour passed before the riders reached Federal Street. They were pressed close together as they swept into town; some of them rode on the wooden sidewalks in order to close the holes in their ranks. In front of them was something that resembled a big, grey dog; it was scrawny and had long matted hair hanging from its underbelly, and on its left front shoulder was a red streak of bare skin that had been left by an old wound that hadn’t healed. The poor exhausted beast’s tongue hung from its mouth. Weariness forced it to move slowly, and the riders were forced to move at the same pace or else they would have trampled their prize. When the corral gates swung open, the solitary wolf trotted inside willingly, then sat on the sandy ground and began to howl at the spectators who

had climbed atop the wooden fence.

"It's hard to believe," said the elderly lady who had earlier been telling stories, "that one wolf could've done so much damage."

The townsman who had recalled the time when a wolf had eaten a child declared that this definitely was the guilty wolf. "I recognize the mark on his shoulder," he said.

The young rider in the suit and tie was suddenly once more a wolf hunter; he said that this was the wolf he had seen that morning south of town. "He's a clever devil," he told the pretty young woman next to him. "He can run all over in front of you and make you think there's hundreds just like him."

The crowd grew noisy again. Yes, they said, it was this one wolf that killed those cattle. He must be a terrible demon. Thank God, they said, someone had thought up this hunt. Think of the livestock the ranchers and herders would save next year.

Mr. Keary nudged me and pointed to the wolf's muzzle. "You see the grey bristles around his mouth?" he said to me in a low voice. "That wolf is older than most of these young fellas. And he's crippled. He's a scavenger. Ain't killed anything wild or tame in years."

Five men took their ropes from their saddle horns, and from their separate places on the corral fence they lassoed the wolf from five different directions. The wolf went through the motions of struggling to escape, but he was simply worn out from his long journey that day. His teeth gnawed at the rope about his neck, and he arched his narrow back and made a sustained moaning cry to the unsympathetic crowd. He might yet have been thinking of roaming free on his sagebrush plains and of the feel of the kill and of his companions in his long dead pack; the fight in him, however, was gone and he accepted that this was his end, unseemly as it was. The five men tied their ropes to their horses and were fixing to pull the wolf's body into five different pieces.

"He don't look so mean now, does he?" shouted the elderly lady.

It was when the wolf was suspended from the ground that Frank Elder walked into the corral and told the men to let go of their ropes. They gaped at him and at the carbine he carried in his right hand, and they untied their ropes from their horses and tossed the five loose ends into the corral. The wolf regained his feet and stood facing Mr.

Elder; the animal was panting hard and his long tongue again fell out the side of his mouth. The two of them faced each other for a time: Mr. Elder was expressionless as a stone, and the wolf had his open mouth fixed into what a human would assume was a smile. When the moment felt right to him, Mr. Elder cocked the carbine and shot the wolf through the heart. The beast grunted once in a quick response of surprise and fell on its side. Mr. Elder took the ropes off the dead wolf and threw them back to their owners.

“The circus is over,” he told the crowd.

He ordered two of his hired men to carry the wolf’s carcass to his ranch and there he buried it, hide and all, on the open prairie.

That was the last wolf anyone ever sighted in Elder County and the only wild one I ever saw. July 4, 1924 was also the first and last time I met Mr. Frank Elder. He kept to himself in his later years; rarely did he leave his Big Sugar Ranch to visit his neighbors or to go into Sterton. As everyone in the area knows, he died five years later, at home in his bed.

## Three Weddings

In 1925, the year after the great hunt, we moved into a permanent house. Mr. Alexander Muir, a man I will speak of later in this book, built us a balloon frame house containing three bedrooms, a kitchen, an attic, and a space outside the kitchen we used as a parlor. We had a coal stove for that tiny parlor and a wood-burning oven in the kitchen, but like most of the other homes in the countryside we lacked indoor plumbing and electricity. The house cost my dad three hundred dollars, and as a bonus Mr. Muir drilled a good well twenty feet from the front door. The house's outside was painted yellow, and it had white trim beneath the awnings. The roof was a steep "A" shape shingled with rough wood and interrupted by the two chimneys attached to the stove and the oven. Viewed from a couple hundred yards away, the house looked prim but tiny, set as it was in the midst of the vast prairie. When I think back upon it I have to wonder how the nine of us fit in there.

I suspect the year we moved into the house was the best my mother had known in her marriage. Mr. Muir had covered the interior walls with a soft creamy paper that was decorated with blue fleur de lis, which he told my mother was the symbol of the King of France. We children were not allowed to touch the wall or so much as get close to it. Mother planted tulips around the front door to add some color and a double row of Russian olive saplings on the western side of the house to make a barrier against the wind. Mr. Muir built my mother beds for each of the sleeping rooms and two benches and a table for the kitchen; he was a fine carpenter and everything he made sat square upon the varnished floor. Mother was extremely proud of the new house and the furniture in it. For the first time I could remember she had other women over to visit, whereas before, when we in the sheepwagon, she had preferred to pay visits lest some other farm wife see how badly we lived. She scrubbed the new place down three times a week with bleach and hot water. Each time she finished cleaning she would open the two doors and the seven windows, and stand in the parlor and breathe in the cleanliness.

Mother called it “her house,” as opposed to the hay fields and the sheep, which she allowed belonged to my dad.

I shared a bedroom with Carl and our younger brother David. My three older sisters slept in a separate room, as did my parents and my baby sister Sarah. The time had come in my life when I realized that females were better company than other men, for at nights I felt lonely without my sisters around me. Young David cried all night and wriggled till he tied the bed sheets into knots, but he was a small burden to bear compared to Carl. My brother Carl smelled rank like dead meat, and he snored as loud as a hornets’ nest no matter how he positioned his long, slender body across the bed. He had the additional bad habit of running while he slept; his long arms and legs would flop about, knocking me awake, and he would call out: “Here, here, bring it here!” which was how he summoned his favorite dog when he was in the field. My guess is he was dreaming about hunting. David and I were greatly relieved when the weather was good and a full moon was out, because that meant Carl would spend the night along the river searching for game with his hounds, and we could get some rest.

My sisters each had beaux now. Bob Williams, the cowboy who owned the fancy boots, re-appeared on the farm. His hair was greased down and his shirt had been ironed. He and Marilyn stood in the front yard one June night and shouted insults at each other.

“You’re not smart enough to know you’re stupid!” Marilyn told him.

“I’m smart enough to know you’re stupid!” he told her.

She picked up a handful of rocks from the ground and threw them at him.

“Git!” Marilyn commanded. “Don’t ever show your ugly face around here again!”

Two weeks later they were married. The ceremony took place in the Sterton Methodist Church, and the reception that followed was held beneath the trees in the City Park, the spot Marilyn considered the most romantic place in Elder County. Every man in the wedding party drank more than was prudent, albeit that prohibition was then in effect and bootleg Canadian whiskey cost an arm and a leg in a portion of the country as remote as the Wind River Valley. One of Bob’s cousins and an uncle of his got into a fist fight with my dad

and Carl; the cousin got knocked into the one layer cake, and Carl would have smacked him over the head with a dead tree branch if Marilyn hadn't intervened in the fracas. She got in front of Carl and declared that everyone had to go home immediately or else she would cut our family off the same way Mother's family had done to us. The young couple departed for a week of camping in the mountains, and the two groups of relatives parted as enemies. I overheard my dad tell my mom as we drove back to the farm in the flatbed truck that in his estimation the marriage wouldn't last longer than two years.

But the bond between Bob and Marilyn did last longer than two years, approximately sixty-one years longer. Only death itself kept them from being together forever on this earth, as I do not doubt they currently are in Heaven. Bob Williams became a respectable farmer, and Marilyn enjoyed playing the part of an obedient wife, a role that required some skillful acting from her. They settled in the new irrigation district north of Ocean Lake, where land was granted in homestead allotments, and in return for a quarter section a farmer had to live on his claim for seven years. I expected Bob to have saved a little money working as a cowboy during his bachelor years; what none of us knew was that Marilyn had managed to amass two thousand dollars of her own. Since she had only worked as a hired girl on neighboring farms she must have saved every penny she earned since the time she was a small child. Two thousand dollars was a lot of money back then. The newlywed couple was able to have Mr. Muir build them a house bigger and better than my mother's, a house that contained running water and flush toilets and was connected to the new electrical power line and the telephone exchange. There were five bedrooms in Marilyn's house. Whenever I stayed with her and Bob I was given a separate room for just myself and I slept on clean cotton sheets and had a white enamel bathtub filled with hot water awaiting me in the morning. That house looked like paradise to the rest of us in the family: every item in it had a place it needed to be put in and no one was allowed to shout or run fast or walk on the carpets with muddy boots: it was exactly how rich people in Denver must have lived. One could assess the prosperity of the family by cataloging the things they kept: they had mirrors and hair brushes and mother-of-pearl combs and porcelain tea cups from

which Marilyn drank real tea and an RCA Victor radio in the living room and a cloth-covered sofa and matching loveseat that had doilies on their arms and stainless steel tableware and an electric toaster and an electric lamp that said "Niagara Falls" on its shade and two framed pictures of African violets and a toy poodle named "Suzie" and a thousand other knickknacks that made the rooms seem crowded even when I was there by myself.

Throughout the good and bad times Marilyn and Bob remained prosperous. Bob worked as hard as an entire chain gang, and Marilyn was clever enough for the both of them. Years of seeing how not to manage money had taught her how to keep her family a mile ahead of the creditors. In their early years together she decided she and Bob should raise Columbian sheep, and when the winters killed the less hardy livestock on other farms their flocks survived until the spring market. Two years before alcohol was re-legalized, Marilyn had the foresight to buy barley seed dirt cheap, and when the demand arose again the breweries in Colorado and St. Louis were willing to pay any price for the grain Bob harvested. After the war, she and Bob were the first to grow Buffalo alfalfa, and the other folks in the valley were amazed when she and Bob sold the registered seed at three dollars a *pound*!

People in the valley said it was love that made an affluent farmer out of Bob Williams the cowboy. Love was part of it; the rest of it was something else. Marilyn told my sisters that Bob had come home falling down drunk one night a month into their marriage. Marilyn chewed him out, so he hit her across the mouth. "Do what you want," she told him. When he went to bed she waited until he was asleep, then she tied his hands and feet to the bedposts and took a bullwhip to him.

"After I'd tanned him good, and he was yelping and feeling real sorry for himself," Marilyn told her sisters, "I said: 'Listen, you son of a bitch: if you want to see the sun come up you're going to promise me you'll never take another drink or raise your hand to me again.' He did, and from then on he's been a perfect gentleman."

One of the things I have come to believe in my old age is that character never changes; it instead is revealed over time. I suppose, if I follow that line of reasoning, Bob must have always felt a secret need for a strong hand to guide his life, and he couldn't have found

a woman with a stronger hand than Marilyn's. I allow they seemed happy. To see them going arm in arm to church on Sunday mornings, when Bob would be scrubbed so clean his ears were red and Marilyn would be in her white dress that had pink roses embroidered on the sleeves, they looked almost too pleased to be living in an out of the way place like the valley. Things must have been fairly tolerable in their private life too, for they did have five children, and children don't just fall from the sky. I myself would not have chosen to live Bob's life, but I cannot say which of us did better. Both of us only lived as we had to; choice had nothing to do with the destiny of either man.

My sister Mary was also married in the summer of 1925, largely because she was jealous of Marilyn and wanted to have a husband for herself. She picked out a man two decades older than she, a jack-of-all-trades named Loran Nels, a big, powerful man equipped with the loudest voice I had yet heard. Loran originally came from Nebraska and had been working on the railway as a gandydancer when the two of them met. He was overflowing with stories about the country as seen from a boxcar and about the foreign nation of France, where he had been during the First World War. I didn't like him. He tried too hard to please everyone in the family and was constantly carrying on with me as if he were my long-lost uncle. He gave me the foolish nickname "Tom the Fox," on account of my hair being as red as a fox's and because I pondered things more than most children did. When he was at my mother's house he would take time to visit with me and sometime in the course of our talk he would muss my hair or insist I arm wrestle with him. Sarah and David, my younger sister and brother, liked his rough housing enormously. I was at the wrong age to share in their enthusiasm for him: I was old enough to want more for Mary than a middle-aged drifter and too old to be amused by his antics. To Mary he must have seemed an adventurer from the wide world outside the Wind River Valley, to me Loran was an out-at-the-elbows Swede who know more lies than other men and was afraid of growing old alone. I wished then, as I wish now, that Mary had chosen a local man cut in the pattern of Marilyn's Bob.

If longevity is the measure of a marriage, then Loran and Mary succeeded as well as Marilyn and Bob did. They were together when Loran died in 1954, and they would have been together much longer

had Loran not been so old. If, however, stability is the standard for a husband and wife, then the union of Loran and Mary was a disaster. Loran was a restless man; he could not stay in one place or at one particular job for very long. He tried his hand at being a cowboy up north on the famous Pitchfork Ranch near Meeteetse; after he tired of that he went back to the railroad, then to the oil fields in west Texas, then to working on the vagabond harvest crews that travel yearly from north Texas to southern Canada, and by the time he died he was back in Wyoming and running a rock shop in Muddy Gap. He never saved a dime he earned, and Mary and he never lived in anything besides a rented apartment or a hotel room. Everything they owned fit in the back of his pick-up truck, which was a point of honor for Loran, as he said property was a curse.

“All property is theft,” he told me once when I was an adult. “Owning things slows a man down. It’s on his conscience like guilt.”

As was the case with many of the drifters out west in that era, Loran was a Wobblie. He had picked up that ideology from the railroad crews after the First World War, when a man needed an I.W.W. card to ride the rails in safety. He admired Lenin and Stalin and hoped the day would soon arrive in America when the old order would be laid low and a new class, led by talkative working men like himself, would establish a socialist state. Perhaps there was some reason and even a shred of justice in his beliefs, and certainly no one could blame Loran for hating the world as it was and still is, but in my opinion Loran preached the Wobbly gospel because it justified his failures. He had no property of his own, therefore he thought everyone who did was a thief. If he was a thoughtless husband and a poor worker, in his mind it was because a clique of powerful capitalists had poisoned the American spirit. Life was to him a trick the strong played on the weak; luck had made him one of the weak, and as far as he was concerned it was wrong to blame poor Loran for what stronger men did to him. “I do the best I can,” he would say. “The bastards keep driving me down.”

He and Mary broke up many times. They would have terrible fights—usually over money, which they never had enough of—and Mary would run away from him, sometimes returning to the valley and home and other times wondering off into a part of the nation she had never been in before; thereafter would come a period of letter

writing and reconciliation; and finally would come a day when Loran would show up on her doorstep, wearing a sheepish grin and his old blue workshirt and holding a bouquet of lilacs he had stolen from someone else's yard, and the cycle would begin again. Each time he came back to her it was going to be the last time they parted and the beginning of Loran's reformation: he would get a stable job, or he would go to college, or he would start a small business with this friend of his he knew, if only he could find the money and the time and the right opportunity, for the one thing he really lacked, he said, was the one lucky break. Mary was too strong willed either to admit she had chosen the wrong man or to give up her hopes of changing him. Loran was too wrapped up in being Loran Nels ever to become anything different. Each of them was a disease the other kept catching anew, and neither had a cure for the other person.

In their knock-about marriage they managed to have one child, a boy they named John Reed Nels. He somehow survived his childhood and grew up to become a banker in Denver and a committeeman in the Republican Party. After Loran's death in 1954 John would not come to Wyoming for his father's funeral nor to this day does he ever visit his mother.

October's cold winds returned to the valley after the summer weddings of Mary and Marilyn. The river grew smaller as the snowmelt lessened, and inside the flood plain the receding water left behind isolated ponds in which swarms of trout were cut off from the main channel. My brother Carl and I went out in the cool evenings and tried to catch the fish by hand before the winter came and iced over the ponds. We had no net; our method was to chase the trout into the patches of shallow water and while they were struggling through the rocky streambed, their backs above the surface, we tried to flip them onto the dry land. Because I was the smaller, Carl decided I was the one who should wade into the ponds and scare the fish into the shallows, and he, being the larger brother, should have the easier job of flipping the fish out. Implausible as our plan was, we did put a few fish on the shore, and some of them didn't flop back into the water once they were out but had the good grace to stay caught. Most of the trout were either too quick for Carl to get his hand under them or they would turn back into the deepest parts of the pond and hide in the thick moss that flourished in the stagnant water

and resembled green cotton candy.

Carl was gathering the catch we had taken on one of these efforts, and I had walked out of the water, and had taken off my wet britches and covered my legs with my coat when he decided to tell me his plans for the future.

“How would you like another wedding?” he asked me.

He was bent over the fish. I thought he might be talking about Myra. She was keeping company with a townsman named George Sullivan. I didn’t think he was good enough for her because he had yellow teeth and stomach problems, and I was hurt to think she would let Carl know she was taking a husband before she told me.

“I don’t like George,” I said. “I think Myra could be better.”

He looked up at me; on his face was the same foolish expression he had worn when he announced he was going on the wolf hunt.

“Who’s talking about George and Myra?” he said. “I was talking about myself.”

The question I wanted to ask him straight out was: “Who in the world would marry you?” I instead played it safe and said: “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. He held one of the captured trout close to his face and sniffed at it. “To Luanne Aldpack.”

The last name of his bride-to-be said everything I needed to know. I had seen my first Aldpack three years before when I was crossing Nebo Creek in the truck with my dad, and we spied an old man hunting rabbits. The old fellow was dressed in a crusty coat and pants, and a bunch of cottontails were dangling from a line he slung over his shoulder as he walked along the cow paths that run double to the creek. My dad waved to him, and the old man shook his single-shot rifle at the truck and let go at us with a furious line of abuse.

“Bastards, lousy bastards...” I could hear him shouting at us as we drove away. “Bastards got no... bastards.”

My dad told me that this was the oldest living Aldpack, who had come to the Wind River country when it still belonged entirely to the Shoshones. He said the old man had married a squaw named Forkfinder and had lived in a log house beside the Big Springs ever since. He and his immediate family were never seen in the nearby village of Burntover or in the town of Sterton, though on occasions people saw him and his half-breed son walking on the open prairie,

where they hunted for agates and set traps for coyotes. My dad warned me to stay away from them.

That old man was the forerunner of an entire clan that bore the name Aldpack. Others had followed where he had led, the majority of them coming to Wyoming from the hill country of eastern Oklahoma and Texas, and they were all members of an outfit that shunned the hard work of farming and preferred to forage and trap or steal everything not nailed down and small enough to carry. In the days before trailer houses, the Aldpack homes were shacks of scrap wood and corrugated steel they covered with tarpaper to seal out the wind. Their yards were crowded with rusting tractors they had never used and with broken pick-up trucks they couldn't afford to repair. The fields the government had given them under the Homestead Act grew sunflowers and kosha weeds, and their sheep were left to wander off and die of bloat in their neighbors' alfalfa, for the Aldpacks followed Nimrod's profession in preference to either Cain's or Able's.

We called the wild dogs that run about the countryside at night "Aldpack pets," and the sorry housing the Bureau of Indian Affairs set up on the Reservation is still called "the Aldpack Estates" hereabout. Whenever we saw a deputy sheriff's car anywhere near the Big Springs area we would say the Aldpacks were going to have visitors soon. (And that was no exaggeration. Few months passed in which an Aldpack was not arrested for stealing something from a neighbor or for committing some manner of violence against a close relative, although my dad said the only thing criminal about the later sort of crime was that the victimized Aldpack usually lived.)

Everyone in the valley, even the Indians and the poor folk like us, were superior to the Aldpacks, but in a community as small as ours was, where we were too few to live separate lives and were inevitably forced upon each other despite our differences, a person could not separate himself from the Aldpacks. They were forever with us. We pretended we didn't see them on Saturdays when a gaggle of them would camp in front of the Hays Store, and their dogs and their dirty children would stray into Main Street as if it were the open range. They were always there, a step beyond a person's circle of real acquaintances, rubbing against us like a loose dressing on an old wound. We had to nod "hello" to them when they got close

enough. At times we had no choice but to exchange a sentence or two with them concerning the weather or the next election. They rubbed and rubbed and rubbed on everyone until I fear no one in the valley felt anything towards the Aldpacks other than a yearning for them to be transported elsewhere. After a time no one even noticed how pathetic they were.

That was the mob into which Carl was marrying.

I can't here write a lot about Luanne Aldpack, the individual person he was making his wife, because I never got to know her. She and Carl kept their distance from us after the wedding, and both of them became two more faces in the Aldpack herd.

They were wed by an evangelical preacher, in a clearing near the cottonwood thickets which surround the Big Springs. The wind sang in the dead tree branches, and the shorthaired hounds the Aldpack kept by the hundreds swarmed through the wedding party much like the wasps did about the sugar cake.

"Some of these dogs are better looking than Luanne," said my dad to Mother.

It was a nasty remark for him to make, and I was later angry with myself for snickering when he said it.

"Course, some of these dogs have been taken better care of than Luanne," commented my dad.

Carl and Luanne were twenty feet from us, standing side by side before a table that served as an altar. Carl's bolo tie was fastened crooked around his neck, its loose ends flapped in the wind, and his long dry hair was hanging across his narrow face. Luanne was about as tall as Carl's chest. She was brown from living out-of-doors and wore a faded blue dress that had no particular shape, and atop the peak of her head was a dark blue veil that formerly had been one of my sister Marilyn's doilies.

"I pray they will be happy," said Marilyn, who was in attendance with her husband.

Most other family members, like my dad, thought the ceremony was a grand joke, but not Myra and Mother. Mother was looking at the squalid tar-papered houses we could glimpse through the trees and at the dogs and the troops of unwashed people who were now our relatives. Long before the rite had ended, her eyes were full of tears.

*TOM WEDDERBURN'S LIFE*

We each went through the reception line, and Carl took my hand when I came to him and he told me: "When you get the chance, we'll go hunting again sometime."

I said I would take him up on the offer, but I was lying. I never seemed to have the time to visit Carl. After he married Luanne, he was swallowed up by the Aldpacks. If I thereafter chanced to see him, it was from a passing vehicle and he was a distant figure hunting game along the cow paths that run double to Nebo Creek.



## My Early Education

In 1928, as I've already written, we lost my dad. For a couple weeks we waited for his return, and I ran the farm as best I could, which wasn't nearly well enough. After it became clear that he wasn't coming back, Mother had to make provisions for the family. She leased the farm, the machinery, and the livestock to our more prosperous neighbor Mr. Keary, and she and David and Sarah, my younger brother and sister, moved into rented rooms in Sterton. Mother took a job in a laundry that catered primarily to railroad men; her wages combined with the rent she received for the farm were adequate for her and the two smaller children, but would support no more than them. Myra, who would marry within the year anyway, went to live as a hired girl to the Palmerstons, a rich family that owned a ranch at the foot of the mountains. I was sent to live with Mr. Alexander Muir, the man who built balloon frame houses, and his wife Nora. From Mr. Muir I was expected to learn the carpenter's trade while I helped him work his small farm two miles west of Sterton.

The Muirs had no children of their own and let me have a room to myself on the second floor of their big, quiet house. On weekends I could walk the short distance into town and visit Mother, or when I had the energy and felt sufficiently lonely, I would walk the twenty miles to the northwest and see Marilyn and her family. My room on the second floor overlooked Mrs. Muir's garden and part of what was then the new cemetery the city had placed next to the Muir's farm. In summer I remember the hummingbirds came in the early morning to drink with their long bills from Mrs. Muir's hollyhocks. If I moved very slowly, I could approach the open window above the garden as they dined. Their bodies were suspended before the flowers, and their beating wings were invisible to the human eye. When they were sated, they were gone like yesterday; they zipped back over the fence to the secret places beneath the tall grass only

hummingbirds know.

Living with the Muirs would have been an easy experience for me, had I not been separated from my family. They had married late in life and were already in their sixties when I knew them. Alexander was tall and had an enormous blond head and busy eyebrows of the same color, and Nora was as diminutive and as sweet as one of those hand-made figurines some women keep as collectables in their china cabinets. The Muirs were comfortable with themselves and with the world and its changing particularities. The day I came to their house I had a place at their table during dinner, and I sat with them and they treated me like an old friend and not their inferior.

“Don’t be afraid of Alex,” Mrs. Muir told me as she patted my hand. “He simply has his own manner of doing things.”

I never did understand why she would talk so about her husband. Other than my sister Myra, Mr. Muir was the gentlest, most easy-going person I ever met. Anybody who was afraid of him would have feared his own grandmother. He had been born in Pennsylvania and had been an officer in the Army before he married Nora, but he didn’t bear the mental scars that were common to men of my generation after we came back from WWII. Nora was a minister’s daughter and a college graduate, and upon marrying Mr. Muir they both had lost every ambition other than being happy with each other. Mr. Muir was proud of his carpentry and building skills, but he wasn’t serious about his forty acre farm: farming was a hobby to him, and he conducted odd experiments on his land, such as growing a hybrid breed of roses he hoped would thrive in cold weather (but didn’t) and raising two shaggy Highland cows which he kept until they died of old age because sending them off to market would have broken Nora’s heart. He gave me five dollars a week in wages, plus room, board, and my clothes, but I worked very little. If Mr. Muir caught me thinning the weeds from the garden or setting canvas irrigation dams in his pasture, he would call me over and give me a dollar.

“Go to town and get me some pipe tobacco,” he would say. “I’ll take care of this. And keep what change is left. I hate to carry all that rattling change in my pockets.”

I wore good clothes and proper shoes while I stayed with the Muirs. I ate better than I had before; the variety of their table was

greater than what I'd known and there was more of it. Whenever I was sick, even of just the flu, they took me to the doctor in Sterton.

As I said, I was meant to learn the carpenter's trade from Mr. Muir, but he was indifferent to teaching me.

"That's a vocation, Tommy," he told me. "A vocation is something a man needs to learn after he chooses it. You've got other things to learn before you worry about that."

He made me attend the Sterton grammar school five days a week, whereas before, when I was at home, I had gone only twice a week at the most. Before I had hated the grammar school because I was one of what the rich town children called the "raggedy boys," and I had been in my share of scrapes with the snotty rich boys on the playground because of how they teased me. I had managed to make one good friend in school, little Shorty McVick; and he and I had played hooky together on the warmer days and fished in the river rather than study our numbers or diagram sentences. When I lived with the Muirs I wasn't a raggedy boy any more, but was turned out as well as any of the town swells. I no longer got into as many fights and studied more often, since I had the free time for it now and because it pleased the Muirs and Mother when I brought them good grades. Shorty McVick and I remained good friends, my improved status aside; I shared my money with him at the Hays Store, and we sat beneath the water tower in the evenings and ate licorice whips and discussed the future, although I gave up playing hooky with him as I felt that type of behavior was now beneath me.

I should say that I had already learned to read and to do simple mathematics when I still lived at home. Most of the other early learning hadn't stayed with me. To make my situation worse, when I was nine years old I had disgraced myself in front of Miss Casey, our teacher, which made me uncomfortable in her presence. What had happened was that, as odd as it may seem, I had come to have strong feelings for her. She was young herself, perhaps twenty or so, and she was tidy and very pretty in a seemingly wholesome way. Her dark hair was cut short in one of the helmet cuts that were then the fashion, and she came to school in a pristine white blouse and a long black skirt. She was fond of me in the beginning; she called me "Sometimes Thomas," on account of my spotty attention record. Whenever Miss Casey needed the erasers dusted or wanted the rug

shook outside on the school porch, I was the one eager to do it for her. She would smile at me and pat my hair when I did her these favors, and she would tell me: "I wish my Sometimes Thomas would work as hard with his head as does with his back." We remained close friends until an evening after classes when I saw a strange man enter the schoolhouse at the same time the students were leaving. I waited outside in the yard for the stranger to come out again, for it worried me to think of Miss Casey being inside with him. A long time passed. I snuck around to the side window and glanced inside the school: the man had Miss Casey pinned against the blackboard at the front of the room; I could only see his back and that his hands were moving all over her. She seemed to be pushing against him, as though she were attempting to break free. I ran around the building and jumped in the front entrance.

"Let go of her!" I shouted at the man.

He stepped away from her. They were both staring at me; their mouths wide open. A couple moments passed before I noticed that Miss Casey's blouse was open and her breasts—as white as milk and capped with pink nipples—were completely bare and were softly rising and falling as she breathed.

"Thomas," she said.

I didn't stay to hear her explanations. I ran outside and straight home. I didn't return to school for a month after that. When I did come back I couldn't be near Miss Casey without feeling confused about the incident. She took me aside and tried to sooth the matter out between us.

"Thomas," she said, "the man you saw me with, Mr. Cudworth, is someone I love very much. When you get older, you will understand how we feel. Are you listening to me, Thomas?"

I didn't care for her excuses. I wanted to be as far from her as possible.

A better day dawned for me after I came to live with the Muirs because Miss Casey left our school and was replaced by a cold, small man named Mr. Owens. The other children hated him: he didn't tell them funny stories or bring them baked goods as Miss Casey had done, and he gave five strokes with his cane to anyone who whispered or chewed gum while class was in session. He was mean, but I knew where I stood with him. I worked hard for Mr. Owens,

and he—I thank God—left me alone and vented his anger on the slower and less obedient students, like my friend Shorty McVick.

I learned next to nothing from Mr. Owens, but while I was laboring under that teacher's authority Mr. Muir helped me make the important discovery that learning can be more than drudgery. He took me into his private reading room and showed me the great books he kept, books that were better than any printed work I had previously known.

"The mind's its own place," he told me. "You can think yourself anywhere you want to be."

He presented me with a green leather book called *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. The thing was written in a different dialect from the fifteenth century. I couldn't simply sit down and read it as I would a normal book; I had to struggle through it two pages a day with a dictionary close at hand. But Sir Malory's story was worth the effort. Reading his book was the same as being sent into a strange, ancient land in which the impossible and the merely possible can take place simultaneously. Unlike people in everyday life, who get through a day and then prepare for tomorrow, the men and women of King Arthur's Camelot lived to cover themselves in glory. Saracens were defeated, quests were fulfilled, and evil—for a time—was frustrated in the blessed realm of England. I loved nearly all of Sir Thomas' characters, even the bad ones like King Mark and Mordred, because they didn't pretend to be anything other than what they were: jealous, unforgiving scoundrels. The only people I couldn't stand were Arthur's wife Guenever and his deceitful friend Sir Launcelot de Lake; they were frauds, and frauds are the most dangerous of human creatures. The two of them pretended to love King Arthur and to uphold the virtues of his court when in fact they were betraying him from the moment Launcelot entered Arthur's service. Sir Thomas kept writing how noble and good the two deceivers were, but I couldn't see it. I think Sir Thomas was far too easy on them; they should have suffered for what they did, and Arthur and his knights should have been allowed to kill the French traitor rather than let him and his cheating mistress die peacefully in old age.

The second book I read from Mr. Muir's study was George Chapman's translations of the Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which

stand highest among the great books and are so perfectly written that I won't comment on them. I will only say that I loved that book enough to carry it with me when I was in the war, and I will note too that I was intrigued by Ulysses more than the other characters, because he was the person most unlike myself, although I loved the unfortunate Hector the most because he was the bravest man.

I also read Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, *The Song of Roland*, *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, *The Letters and Poems* of John Keats, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickenson*, Shakespeare's *Tragedies*, Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, and Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. This isn't the place to give my evaluation of literature, but for the sake of revealing something about my tastes I will write that I remember feeling let down by Virgil when I compared him to Homer; Virgil is obviously mixed up in the politics of his own day and that involvement distorts his view of the world; his characters are consequently more political animals than they are heroes. I loved the rest of the books, excluding *Orlando Furioso*, wherein the Italian Ariosto tried to make a frivolous courtier out of the semi-barbaric Roland. The best of the lot was of course the *Meditations* of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which I likewise carried throughout the war and own a copy of this very day. I was impressed that a man with the entire world at his feet would write:

"One can live well even in a palace."

Which I changed for my own purposes to:

"One can live well even if he is a sheepherder's son."

Out of the modern literature, the one book Mr. Muir had that moved me was the *Poems* of William Butler Yeats, which kept my attention even when I didn't comprehend it. There is much in Yeats' writing, especially the poems he wrote early in his career, that are obvious in their meanings, and being of a literal mind, these were the poems that attracted me the most. I memorized "Down by the Salley Gardens" and "When You Are Old" and would recite them to myself when I was alone in my room or out walking in the hay fields around Sterton. The two poems made me feel sad, and being sad somehow

elevated me above the sentiments of the common run of people. A third poem of Yeats' I memorized was "The Fiddler of Dooney," a happy piece about how a musician brings joy to other people. The poem inspired me to learn to play the violin and, as I will tell, I would become a fiddler and bring joy to people at hundreds of dances in Elder County. Mr. Muir bought me a violin in Casper, and once a week I went to see a Mrs. Lovelace in Sterton for lessons. Mrs. Lovelace taught me the classical method of bowing and how to read music. On my own I learned to make the fiddler's movement, which is one note for every bow stroke. I learned the old songs they played at the dances, and as I practiced a stanza of Yeats' poem kept running through my head:

"For the good are always the merry,  
Save by an evil chance,  
And the merry love the fiddle,  
And the merry love to dance."

As I became more intense in my practicing, the stanza in my head would reduce itself to the single line:

"Save by an evil chance."

Which I would repeat in thought as a yogi repeats his mantra when he is trying to concentrate.

I so loved Mr. Muir's books I would sit in bed and read by the light of the kerosene lamp until I fell asleep. Mrs. Muir got into the habit of coming into my room when she thought I had fallen asleep at my books and turning down the lamp and tucking the covers under my chin. I was not so deep a sleeper that I failed to notice her presence in my room. I spoke to Mr. Muir about Nora's habits. I said, with no offence intended to Mrs. Muir, that I could turn down my own lamp and that tucking me in was a task only my mother should do. Alexander passed the word on to her, and from then on Nora would only open the door a small ways and peek in to make certain I was all right. She never again entered the room altogether while I was sleeping.



## When I Met Julia

Ordinary people have surprised me throughout my life. Take the time I was sitting under the water tower with Shorty McVick on a summer day, and he said to me:

“Did you know my real name’s Alfred Allen McVick?”

“No,” I said.

“I hate it,” said Shorty. “Know something else? Guess to who I’m related?”

“To whom?” I said.

I was proud to have mastered English grammar more thoroughly than my friend had.

“Guess,” he said.

“No, tell me.”

“To you,” he said.

I looked at him and his plump, round face covered with freckles. Shorty was considerably more ugly than anybody in my family.

“I think you’re mistaken,” I said.

“No, I’m not,” he said. (He was practically singing his words.) “A member of your family married a cousin of mine.”

This was in 1931. My sister Myra had two years earlier married Douglas Greenleaf, an attorney from Cheyenne and a wealthy friend of the Palmerstons, the family for whom Myra had worked. I had hated Douglas at first sight: he, like Mary’s husband Loran, was much too old, and, unlike Loran, Douglas was overweight and smoked cigars. Douglas liked to put his arm on other people’s shoulders and give them commonplace information in a confidential tone. (“You got a real nice sister,” was what he had said to me when we first met.) I was pleased to think that Douglas in ox-blood wing-tip shoes could be a cousin of a raggedy boy like Shorty, and he was the family connection I immediately seized upon, as I despised Douglas for taking my quiet sister to live with him in Cheyenne, and

any negative thought concerning him easily came to me.

“You’re related to Douglas Greenleaf?” I asked Shorty.

“I don’t know who that is,” he said. “I’m a cousin to Luanne Aldpack. Anyways, that used to be her name before she married your brother Carl.”

“You’re an Aldpack?!” I asked.

The question sounded worse than I would have wanted. Shorty fortunately was used to being abused by others, and the small slight hardly registered with him.

“They’re my mom’s people,” he said. “I didn’t know myself till last week. My folks was having a big argument in the kitchen, and my dad says to my mom: ‘You no good Aldpack bitch! Why the Hell did I marry you?’ and he let her have one across the chops. That was my clue. Mom told me this yesterday evening she’d growed up out by the Big Springs and she was a cousin to Luanne. That may not make me and her exactly cousins, but close to it. I don’t know how these things work.”

I was thinking that this revelation explained some things about Shorty, such as why he was slow in school and why our teacher Mr. Owens couldn’t train Shorty how to clean his face and hands before entering the classroom or teach him not to say bad words in front of the girls. Shorty, I figured, was bad blood. I would not think that of him today, but back then we picked up a lot of old folk tales along with the truth.

“Guess what else,” said Shorty.

“Don’t say that. Just tell me.”

“My mom’s got a sister, and she just moved up here from Oklahoma.”

“She’s an Aldpack too?” I asked.

“Well, wait, I guess she used to be,” said Shorty hesitating to think the matter over. “Her name’s Bartholomew now. She moved up here to get away from her old man ‘causing he’s a louse. And guess what?”

Shorty was playing with his gum as he spoke; he would stretch it upward with his fingers, and then lower it back into his mouth like a long spaghetti noodle.

“I can’t guess.” I said.

“She’s got a daughter our age—she’ll be in school with us in the

fall—and she's real good looking!"

"Who is?" I asked. "Your mother's sister or the daughter?"

Below the water tower were the railroad tracks that ran north-south through Sterton. Shorty and I had placed a penny on each rail, and I was hoping the 11:05 coal train would come by before noon because examining the flattened coins would be more interesting than hearing about Shorty's Aldpack relatives.

"I mean the girl's pretty," he said. "Her mom's an old woman, near forty. Hey, and you know what?"

"Stop that!" I told him.

"We could go see her right this day, if you wanted to!" said Shorty.

I looked at Shorty's face and thought of his mother. If the girl looked anything like them or the other Aldpacks, I didn't want to see her on that day or on any other.

"Let's do something else," I said.

"Ah, come on. She's *beau-ti-ful!*" pled Shorty. "She and her mom's living a little bitty ways down the river."

"Don't whine," I told him. "We'll do something else. You want to look for magpies under the railroad bridge?"

"Hey, yeah!" agreed Shorty, who immediately forgot his cousin. "We could do that! And we could get the nickel bounty on any eggs or babies we found!"

We raced along the tracks to the bridge. I got there long before my friend because Shorty, as his nickname indicated, didn't have the longest legs in the world, and he had to take three strides for every two of mine. Shorty running was a lot of movement and not much forward progress, which made him the butt of some very cruel jokes whenever he was scurrying about the school playground and his round head was bouncing forward on his stubby neck and his short arms were ripping through the air as fast as automobile pistons as he strained to catch up to the taller boys. Looking back from the high ground of my old age, it occurs to me that a lot of boys I went to school with were slower than Shorty, and he was the target of our jokes because the other slow movers had sense enough to hold back and not make spectacles of themselves, whereas Shorty jumped into every foot race or ball game with every enthusiastic atom of his small body. Unless someone said something to him, he didn't seem to

know he look ridiculous, and—in opposition to the whole world—Shorty enjoyed the sensation of running as much as a greyhound does.

The magpies hadn't laid their eggs yet in the area around Sterton. The nests we found under the railroad bridge were empty and made from grey, brittle twigs.

“Last year's stuff,” said Shorty.

He crushed a nest in his hands and cast the broken pieces into the river.

“Hey, it's like this!” he said.

He ran to the top of bank and walked like a tightrope artist atop the rail until he came to the middle of the bridge.

“Shoot me, Tom!” he shouted down to me.

“Why?”

“Causing this is like the movie I told you about.”

I cocked my thumb, aimed my index finger, and blasted him. Shorty clutched his chest and lunged forward in smiling agony, saving himself from a headlong fall by putting a quick hand on the railing at the last moment.

“Then zzzzuup!” he said, and described his theoretical drop into the moving water below with a declining arch of his arm. “Kersplash, a dead man!” he concluded.

“That's how he killed the bad guy,” he said, climbing through the railroad ties to me.

“Who's he?” I asked.

“I don't know. A fella who's gots shiny black hair and a city mustache. I guess he's an actor. Hey, I once seen this movie picture five times where these ladies are taking their clothes off to go swimming. And every time they're about naked, a train goes by and blocks your view. I figured that train would be late or early sometime, but five times I seen it and the train came and got in the way every time. I'd like to be a movie star,” he said.

Shorty and I walked up Riverview Butte and atop a large sandstone outcropping. We rolled a boulder down the slope and watched it kick up the dust on its wild run towards another large rock, against which it exploded like an artillery shell.

Shorty found an indecent carving in the soft sandstone, probably made by some other boy about our age; I think it was supposed to be

of a naked girl, but was unfinished from the waist down. Shorty took out his pocket knife and had a shot at finishing the picture; he made the outline of the girl's hips, but had to pause and scratch his head soon thereafter because he didn't know how the rest of her would look, so he had to leave the work unfinished a few strokes beyond the point where the original artist had quit.

"You know what?" said Shorty.

"No," I sighed.

"A man can catch trout with his bare hands," he said.

I remembered Carl and I doing the same thing in the autumn flood pools and told Shorty about it.

"No," he said, "I mean I can catch them right out of the main river; get 'em while they're sleeping under the bank."

I said he couldn't.

"I'll bet ya I can," said Shorty. "I'm good at stuff like that."

"You've got no money to bet with," I said.

"Then I'll bet favors."

"What sort of favors?"

"Like, if I can do it, you have to go with me and see my new cousin," said Shorty.

"And if you can't do it, you have to be my slave and carry my books the first month of school."

"You got a deal," said Shorty.

I should have learned long before not to make bets with Shorty McVick. He won a dollar from me one time by betting he could drive his dad's car ten miles and not leave any mileage on the odometer; he had put the car in reverse gear and backed up through the streets of Sterton for ten miles, and to my astonishment not a single new tenth of a mile was registered on the dashboard. How someone as dense as Shorty would know how an odometer functioned remains a mystery. On another occasion he won an entire ten bucks from one of the school swells by wagering he could throw a golf ball across Ocean Lake; Shorty took the swell out to the lake in winter when it was frozen over and, sure enough, threw a golf ball onto the ice, and it bounced more than a mile to the opposite shore. Knowing obscure things that no other boy would was the one candle God had lit for Shorty, and he made the most light he could with that single flicker of flame.

We returned to the river, and Shorty crept to the bank and squatted on his haunches to study the water immediately to his left. He stayed fixed in that position for a couple minutes.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Shh.” He held a finger to his mouth. “Looking for tail fins,” he whispered.

I was standing a few feet behind him and from my vantage point only saw the glare the sunlight made on the river’s surface. Shorty backed away from the shore and walked behind me and downstream approximately ten paces. He took off his shoes and socks before he entered the water, but he didn’t bother rolling up his pants legs as he would be in up to his waist anyway. He spent another full two minutes wading back upstream towards me. His hands were held outward at his sides to balance himself, and his attention was focused on a spot beneath the section of the bank directly in front of me. He hummed one sustained note as he went, a note I could not hear above the gurgling water until he drew quite close. He stopped and dropped his hands into the water behind his back, and in a single slow motion brought them in front of him as he bowed his head towards the shore. He remained bent forward in that position, humming that one, monotonous, note for what seemed like a quarter of an hour but probably was closer to another two minutes. Shorty stood upright as slowly as he had gone down, lifted his hands to where I could see them, and held up to me a rainbow trout about a foot and a half long. The fish didn’t wriggle, nor was Shorty gripping it tightly; it lay still on the flats of his palms and worked its mouth open and shut.

“Touch him,” he said to me.

I reached towards the fish, and the instant my fingers touched its cold scales it flipped out of Shorty’s hands and landed back in the river.

Shorty was laughing as I helped him back onto the shore.

“You don’t got the gift, Tom,” he said.

“How did you do that?” I asked him.

“I figure it’s because I’m part Aldpack, and everybody knows they’ve got some of the paintbrush in them,” said Shorty. “We Indians got special powers over natural animals. Fish’ll let me tickle their bellies and put ‘em to sleep. You see how they run from a pure white man like you. I bet I could learn how to walk on dry grass

without making a sound if I wanted. I seen these Indians do it in the movies.”

Shorty wasn't being clever with me; his mind didn't run in that direction. If he said he believed he had inherited magical abilities from an Indian ancestor, I'm convinced he meant it.

“You're a strange kind,” I said to him.

“Could be,” he agreed.

He sat in the rough spider grass and rubbed the water from his clothes. The river had reached up to his armpits, and the seat of his pants would be covered with mud when he stood upright, but my pal Shorty's spirits weren't dampened a drop.

“You're gonna fall in love with Julia—that's my cousin's name,” he told me as he put on his socks. “That's a heck of a sweet name, isn't it? Julia. She's named that ‘causing she was born in July.’”

“Augustus Caesar named his daughter Julia,” I said. “Her name may have been sweet, but she wasn't.”

“Whoever it is you're talking about, I'll bet she isn't as good looking as Cousin Julia.”

“She was somebody in one of Mr. Muir's books,” I said. “And I've already bet you once today.”

We walked up river through the cottonwood thickets west of Sterton. A few Indian families as well as some seasonal workers from the railroad had built some makeshift houses among the trees out there. After a winter or two each of their little homes leaned slightly away from the west wind the way the trees did. These places had less trash in their yards than the unkempt houses around the Big Springs, as the Indians and gandy dancers had fewer possessions to squander than did the Aldpacks, but they were otherwise almost as unkempt as those belonging to the outlaw clan. I might not have recognized the poverty those shacks represented in the time before I went to live with the Muirs, who had given me a higher ground from where I could see the world more clearly. A few years earlier, when I was living upstream from those hovels on my family's original homestead, I would have felt the same as my pal, Shorty, who said he thought these houses weren't so bad; a person had peace out here, he said, and the whole river as a neighbor.

“You know what my dad says to me?” he asked me, his wet pants legs buzzing like cricket wings as they rubbed together. “He says:

‘Shorty, my boy, you’re gonna be a horse, and the whole world is grass.’ That’s good, huh?”

I liked Shorty when he talked nonsense of that sort. Another boy might have burdened me with nasty talk about his sister’s underwear, whereas Shorty’s asides were all fatuous innocence. Some years before, when he happened to find a piece of green jadeite in the school yard gravel, Shorty had wiped it clean and declared it was an emerald, and dropped it into his hip pocket and held his hand over his treasure as if he had the British Empire stored there. Everything he fell upon struck him as amazing. Everything he was told he believed. I often have wondered what sort of man he would have become, being as naïve as he was, had he grown to be as old as I have. His fate was to die in a senseless car accident that was not his fault when he was but nineteen, and we will never know how he would have turned out. My guess is that Shorty would have grown a few inches wiser, and several yards more bitter by the time he was an old man, for the world is not kind to innocent men.

We came to a recently built house resting on cinder blocks to set it several feet about the spring flood plain. The building was compact and stood fairly straight for a river house. The pine boards on its outside had not yet been painted.

“That’s a long ways from Mr. Muir’s work,” I said.

Some of the gaps between the rough-cut planks in the house’s exterior walls were wide enough to stick a pencil through.

“Aunt Janet’s got a man friend in town that made it,” explained Shorty. “He’s gonna do better some time soon.”

“Better by her or by the house?” I asked, but Shorty didn’t understand me.

My friend hesitated before he went to the door and patted down the cowlick at the back of his head. “Do I look all right?” he asked me. He again rubbed at the mud on the seat of his soggy pants.

“You sound like an old woman going to a party,” I told him. “These people are your relatives. It’s not like we were visiting the queen.”

“You can say that again,” said Shorty, checking the front of his shirt to see if the buttons were fastened straight. “No old creaky queen could hold a finger up to Julia.”

He smiled at me, then suppressed the expression, the same thing

he did when he made a bet he knew he was going to win.

He stepped to the front porch—a half-pyramid of cinder blocks rising to the door—and raised his fist to knock, but stopped his hand in mid-air. He turned to me, and I could see a soft bead of sweat collecting on his forehead.

“It’s funny how they don’t have dogs, isn’t it?” he said.

“Let’s get this over with,” I said in a loud voice. “Go ahead and knock!”

Someone within yelled: “Who’s out there?!” and Shorty retreated backwards as the door opened. A woman’s head emerged from the dark interior. She had hair the color of straw and an angry face featuring frog green eyes and a crooked red mouth like a crushed rose. Her nostrils were as wide as those on a bull that is preparing to charge.

“Christ Almighty!” I was thinking. “Shorty has taken me to a brothel!”

The woman lowered her eyelids to screen out the sunlight.

“What the Hell?” she said. “You’re my cousin Kathy’s brat, ain’t you?”

“Yes’m,” said Shorty.

“Now is the time to leave,” I was thinking.

Shorty swallowed hard and added: “And this here’s my friend Tom Wedderburn.”

The woman leaned against the doorjamb, her head set at an angle as people do when they’re examining something curious.

“What do you two little bastards want?” she asked.

“We’d like to talk to Cousin Julia, ma’am,” said Shorty.

“Damn you, Shorty McVick!” I was thinking. “Why don’t you leave?!”

I would not have been too astonished if the woman in the doorway started spewing poison like a rare African cobra.

The woman shrugged her shoulders and stepped back into the dark interior of the shack.

“Julia,” I heard her say from somewhere inside, “Cousin Alfred’s brought somebody to see you.”

I looked at Shorty and asked myself whether I should start running immediately or wait for him to make the first move. His face was shiny from sweat, and I feared mine would soon look the same.

“Your aunt’s pure Aldpack,” I whispered to him.

I was aware of something moving at the doorway as I spoke to Shorty. What can I say but that it was Julia? I could write that she had long brown hair and eyes as grey as silver and a high, clear forehead and a nose and chin and entire face as perfect as the evening sky, and I would be telling nothing close to how she was. I could sooner write the truth concerning the street signs in Heaven than do justice to Julia’s beauty. The memory I carry of her on that day is the stronger because we were both fourteen and it was the first time I saw her, and what comes first is the dearest, for the same reason the first snowfall of the season is the one that makes the earth smell sweet and the first day of June is the one that presages the entire summer.

Before I looked upon Julia I had never had a girlfriend or kissed a female other than my mother and my older sisters. Until then I had not felt I had missed much. To see her in her pink sun dress and to look at her long hair curled and bedecked with tiny ribbons told me I had done nothing worthwhile since my conception, and had lightning struck me dead before I could bring myself to speak to her I would have never actually lived.

“I got a new cat,” she said to Shorty.

She shoved a yellow tabby cat she had been carrying in her arms towards her cousin. I hadn’t noticed the animal till she spoke.

“I named him Sammy Kaye for his blond hair,” she said.

Shorty took the cat and swallowed the words he was about to say to her.

“I’m glad I didn’t cut my hair,” she said and ran her hand through her tresses. “Bobbed hair isn’t in style like it used to be. I’m mad for that word: in style. Aren’t you, Alfred? In style. It sounds so elegant. Who’s your noisy friend?”

She eyed me with a sidelong glance and gave me a sly smile.

“And this here’s my friend Tom Wedderburn,” proclaimed Shorty, who was glad he had something to contribute to the conversation.

“Hello, Tommy,” said Julia. “You know,” she said to Shorty, “I can’t talk now. I’m doing my nails.”

She held up her hands, her palms turned towards her, so we could see.

"Sammy Kaye's got them fuzzy already, and I've got to start over another time. Do you like picnics? There's a swell place for a picnic down by the river. You and Tommy could come back tomorrow at eleven o'clock, and I'll fix something for us. It's been nice to meet you," she said to me and took the tabby cat from Shorty. "Goodbye," she added, and went back inside the house, closing the door behind her.

Shorty picked some cat hairs off his wet shirt.

"You see," he said. "I told you she was a looker."

"For this garland I have seen, every flower shall make me sigh."

"What's that?" asked Shorty.

"It's from one of Mr. Muir's books."

"Whatever you say," said Shorty. "But I don't see what flowers have got to do with anything. Hey, speaking of Mr. Muir: do you think he'd let us use his rifle to go hunting rabbits? There's jacks as thick as flies down by—"

"Let's get out of here," I said and pulled him in the direction of the river.

We walked back to town through the flood plain and past the Indian shacks. I was moving faster than my friend and kept myself several paces in front of him with my hurried clip. Shorty had to break into a trot to keep up with me on the uneven ground inside the cottonwood tangles.

"You all right?" he asked me.

"Why do you ask?"

"I don't know," he said. "You seem to want to get away from me. You mad about something?"

I didn't answer him right away. We came to the reservation bridge that cuts straight into the tribal lands south of Sterton. I went onto the road and upon the bridge itself from which I could see the mountains in the west. Shorty was talking to me, but I wasn't listening to him. I located the white patch of permanent snow below Gannett Peak, which is grandly fancied a glacier in these parts, and I wished I was far away from Shorty and the river and was sitting in the middle of that patch of snow, for there I might be so alone I could say what was in my heart.



## Pirates and Other Daydreams

To keep the wind from seeping into their house, Julia and her mother had pasted over their interior west wall with old newspapers. They added a second layer over the newsprint of pages taken from Julia's movie magazines. Portrait photographs of famous actors, the studio camera lights glowing on their high cheekbones and their eyes dilated by the glare, turned the wall into a collage of the popular and passing of that era. When the west wind bored new holes through the glossy pages, Julia and her mother patched the damage with newer pictures of more recent screen personalities. Shirley Temple went over Mary Pickford, Richard Dix over Warren Butler. The wind eventually triumphed over all the handsome faces, but as long as the mother and daughter stuck on additional pages, the wall remained an advertisement for the glittering lives being lived far from Sterton and the Wind River Valley.

I became familiar with the colorful west wall thanks to Shorty McVick's connection to the family. Any people with Aldpack blood treat their kin like members of their immediate household. They think nothing of making unannounced visits to each other's homes. Shorty and I could turn up at Julia's house at the crack of dawn with no one besides the birds to tell that we were coming, and after her ugly mother snapped at us, Julia and my pal and I were free to waste the entire stretch of the day along the river. During the first summer I knew Julia, Shorty and I got into the custom of bringing a string of bullheads from the river every morning as a sort of bribe for the mother. The green, slimy fish were outside Julia's sense of a proper gift; she said every pond in Oklahoma was full of "tadpoles" like that and only colored folks would eat them. Her ugly mother had no such qualms and was glad to batter and fry them for her man Buck, who made the jaunt from Sterton every night and passed Shorty and myself every morning as he walked back downstream before the sun arose.

I suppose Shorty was also in love with Julia, for about the first month. In those first weeks after I met her, he was the one most eager to climb out of bed and was the first one under the reservation bridge, our pre-dawn rendezvous point. Naturally, I resented his company, especially since his out-going personality overshadowed mine when we were together with her. His feelings for her were obvious and far too common; that is, he loved her because she was pretty, which was the sort of sentiment I would expect of a boy like Shorty, who hadn't read much and thus had a limited outlook on life. A time soon came when he grew tired of Julia. He wasn't continuously interested in her stories concerning Oklahoma or in the Hollywood anecdotes she gleaned from her movie magazines. After a month of her company Shorty wanted to be once more wandering in the sandstone hills, scanning the slopes for rabbit and the small birds young boys like him love to hunt. He wanted to rest in some shady spot and converse with a best friend about the cliff-hanger films Republic Studios made by the hundreds, or else he would have liked to hang around the sugar beet dump beside the train station and listen to the old timers talking about the great blizzard of 1889, when the snow got so deep it covered the rooftops—an image that made Shorty roll his eyes in astonishment. He discovered that Julia wasn't interested in doing any of those things. She liked to speak of lovely things, such as herself and the glowing faces from Hollywood on the west wall of her home or of shopping inside the largest department store in Tulsa or of movies that were about wealthy people kissing each other inside ruined castles. She and her interests could make Shorty yawn within a quarter of an hour. He eventually didn't want to keep visiting her; he said she was boring and never wanted to participate in any of the "true fun times" he and I had enjoyed before I had met her.

"After all," he said, "she's just my cousin. It's not like she's King David's Bathsheba or such."

I rather thought she was akin to Bathsheba, and couldn't have guessed how an illiterate pagan like Shorty McVick knew any thing about the Bible. I had to give him a nickel every day to make him accompany me to her house in the flood plain. His lackadaisical attitude towards his beautiful cousin came to anger me, but he was necessary baggage in those early days. To come to Julia's door alone

would have made the situation clear to her. She might have resented that despite my plain face my heart had turned to her in a brief period of time, and that would've meant the end of our relationship. Had I been blatant enough to come to her without Shorty in tow, I might never have been allowed to sit with her in the tall grass near the river and watch her paint her toenails fire engine red as she sang "Happy Days Are Here Again," which was a pleasure I would have never surrendered in exchange for any amount of earthly riches.

During our first days together Julia spoke to me indirectly, via her cousin. "Ask your friend, Alfred," she would say, "if he would like to have a slice of bread." Or: "Your friend certainly is a loud one, isn't he?" Even though I was right there next to her, she preferred to have things arranged to her liking, and her liking was that I remained at an emotional distance up to the time she had figured me out.

That process didn't take her long. Some people have known everything about me from one good look. As soon as she had discerned how harmless I was, she warmed to me. She discovered it was easy to make me blush and that the mention of girls turned me from a simple fool into a full-blown idiot. "I think, Cousin Alfred," she would say in an affected manner she thought was sophisticated but was actually a poor imitation of Mryna Loy, "it's high time we got Tommy here a girlfriend." I would color bright red. "Do you have anybody you like, Tommy? Do you like them tall or petite? Do you like girls with long legs"—when she mentioned legs, she would raise the hem of her dress and give me a glimpse of her own tapered limbs and of her white undergarments—"or would you like a girl with some flesh on her?" She pronounced the words "some flesh" with an emphasis that would have made an adult chuckle, but made me fidget where I sat. "When you get married," she asked me, "how will you kiss your wife, Tommy? Will you smack her full on the mouth, or will you give a tinsy peck on the cheek?" She puckered her lips and blew a pantomime kiss to add to my bewilderment. A quick barrage of her teasing questions, and I was thrown into such a panic I couldn't form sentences in my mind to answer her. Julia would laugh at my predicament until she leaned over backwards in the grass and kicked her bare legs at the sky.

The best words in Julia's vocabulary, the ones she reserved for praising her favorite objects in the universe, were "grand" and

“splendid.” Magazine articles that contained color photographs of Paris, her yellow cat, and long summer afternoons were “grand.” Black eye shadow, shiny leather shoes with silver buckles, and the Cord automobile, being slightly higher in the hierarchy of wonderful things, were worthy of the finer adjective “splendid.” That which was both “grand” and “splendid” was anything that had been touched by the divine. Only the movie “Broadway Melody,” the dancer Fred Astaire, and red satin sheets made so smooth they caused a body to slip out of bed in the morning were both “grand” and “splendid.” The great Wind River Mountains and the rugged brown hills leading up to them were “all right” according to Julia. I was considered “nice,” and her cousin Shorty was “not too bad, sometimes.”

She tried to teach me to dance to the scratchy gramophone a previous beau of her mother’s had given to Julia to keep the girl in her bedroom. (She had given one lesson to her cousin and declared he was unteachable.) The object, she demonstrated to me, was to glide across the plank floor like a disembodied spirit. I wasn’t taken with the spirit, nor could I pretend I was one, and I couldn’t move with her grace. When I was that age I suffered from the illusion that I had a more correct self, watching my pitiful person from a distance whenever I was doing something I knew was foolish. I hovered about one spot on the floor and made small gestures towards the sweeping ballroom movements she wanted me to imitate, and I could meanwhile sense my watching self, shaking his head “no.” My reluctant dancing was of course more ludicrous than the comic scene I would have made if I had cast myself into the dance heart and soul, and Julia and Shorty were much amused with me.

Sometimes, and never often enough, my attempts at dancing so delighted Julia she would throw her arms around my neck and hug me. She would draw away from me a moment later, but I would dream for hours about holding her every night when I was alone in my bed at the Muirs’ house.

I could drop out of our conversations—they were monologues anyway, for Julia did nearly all the talking—and merely watch her, minute after minute. A desire would mount in me to touch her beautiful, moving face while she ran on about traveling jazz bands and what celebrity was in love with what starlet. There was nothing lurid in what I wanted. I couldn’t have said at that age what it was

men and women did after the initial touching, or why they wanted to do it. My sterner, watching self feared I wouldn't restrain my hands; he feared that in a desperate instant I would reach out for her and commit an offence for which I would be forever banned from her circle of friends. Perhaps because Julia sensed how agitated I became when I sat silently staring at her, she would order Shorty and myself to stand up and walk with her along the riverbank. "Look how green" (or blue or white or grey, depending upon the day) "the river is today, Tommy," she would say. "Why is it that?" I would tell her the things Mr. Muir had told me: the river reflected the mood of the sky. If it showed green, the sky was low and overcast, and the water was catching its color from the willow stands along the shoreline. White was the color of a hot midday, which would change to a dark blue in the evening when the sun was lower and the cottonwoods were making long shadows. A grey river was a portent of rain: soon the air would turn colder and then ringlets would start forming on the surface of the water.

"You're such a smartie," Julia would tell me, and she would hook her arm inside of mine and walk with me like a lady strolling beside a gentleman.

If Julia ran out of things to say, she would read us stories from her women's magazines. These were always different versions of the same tale. These stories were set in the contemporary world, which would have killed my interest in them had anyone else other than Julia been reading them. I remember liking how she played with her long hair and the way she pronounced the word "love" with a broad English accent. The stories centered on a young woman, most usually a governess, who fell in love with an older gentleman who had hired her to take care of his impetuous children now that his wife was dead; he was haughty to the young woman at first; she was willing but cautious in light of her past unhappy love affairs; a jaguar growled in the distance; and the two main characters ended up kissing like bandits on a tropical beach as a crimson sun fell into the deep sea.

I would pull a foxtail and chew on its soft stem as Julia read aloud. The taste in my mouth was like young carrots pulled fresh from the ground. I had tasted foxtails a good thousand times before that summer and would taste them a couple thousand times since, yet

each time after that summer their flavor brings back the memory of a particular time when Julia was reading and Shorty had gone to sleep and I leaned back to look at the sky and believed I had discovered the secret to living, which was that the greatest pleasures of this world are known through out body senses, and therefore what we taste and hear and smell and feel matters more than anything else, even more than the wisdom stored in Mr. Muir's books.

Every day was a new opportunity to be with her and her silver—grey eyes, and every passing day was another part of that summer gone forever. When the fall came and school started anew, Julia would meet boys more attractive than Shorty and I, and she would be lost to us.

Mother did not know what was wrong with me because I had ceased visiting her rented rooms in Sterton. I was gone from my bed at the Muirs' house before six in the morning, and ten minutes later I was waiting under the tribal bridge for Shorty to escort me to Julia's place. Julia didn't get up before eight herself. She next had to eat her grits and take care of her hair, which took another hour. Shorty and I waited outside, thinning by hand the weeds from her mother's vegetable garden or skipping flat stones across the river, until such time as she either came out to us or invited us indoors. It would be after dark when I returned to my cold dinner at the Muirs'. Either Mother or Mrs. Muir became concerned about my behavior and wrote to my oldest sister Marilyn, and being as she was, Marilyn right away guessed what was happening. She sent her husband Bob one night to bring me out to their farm, and when I arrived she took me upstairs to her bedroom and made me lie down with my head resting on her lap.

"Now then, Tommy," she said, "you have to tell me all about her."

"About whom?" I said.

She knocked me on the forehead so hard I saw stars.

"Don't treat your big sister like she's a dummy," she said. "Tell me about your little girlfriend."

I explained that Julia wasn't my girlfriend nor could she ever be, as she was far above me in every way. I told Marilyn that Julia encompassed everything noble and perfect and that Marilyn could not understand what Julia meant to me unless she could live inside

my body for an hour and see and hear Julia through my senses.

"Is she pretty then?" asked Marilyn.

"She's beautiful."

"Better looking than your sisters?" asked Marilyn, smiling out the side of her mouth, as she did when she thought she knew something no one else did.

"I don't compare her to other girls," I said.

"And she comes from a good family, Tommy?"

"We don't come from that good a family ourselves," I said.

Marilyn again rapped me on the forehead.

"You'd break Mother's heart if she heard you talk like that," she warned me. "Talk about your people like that, and I'll have Bob hold you down while I give you such a whaling you won't want to sit down until Christmas. Now, what's her family like?"

"There's only her and her mother."

"Has she got kin in the country?"

I hesitated to tell because I knew how Marilyn would react when she heard.

"Who is it?" she asked, having read my face.

"It's not important," I said, "but Julia's an Aldpack on her mother's side."

My sister gritted her teeth and pushed me off her lap. She ordered me to take a bath, and later she fed me supper and sent me to bed at eight o'clock at the same time she tucked in her own small children. At the dinner table her husband Bob had wanted to ask me what Mr. Muir's opinions on the economy were; Marilyn had snapped her fingers at him, and he took one look at how her jaw was set and didn't say another word. I remember it as a very quiet supper.

After the household was asleep, Marilyn came into my room wearing her long white nightgown. She took me by the ears and lifted my head from the pillow. She dug her nails into the skin, and made my head throb with pain as she shook me.

"Listen to your big sister, because she loves you, you little moron!" she said. "In the first place, you're too young to have a girlfriend. Don't you know the Aldpacks are the dirtiest, nastiest outfit on the face of God's green earth? Having poor Carl married to one of them is worse than having him dead! You stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid boy!"

She let go of me and let me fall back onto the pillow. Marilyn took me in her arms and rocked me for a time without speaking. Then she kissed both of the ears she had been yanking a few seconds before.

“Get over this filthy girl as quick as you can, Tommy,” she whispered. “Don’t be letting down the folks who love you.”

I let her down. I didn’t get over Julia, quick or otherwise. Bob drove me back to Sterton in the evening, and the morning after that Shorty and I went to see her.

During our afternoons together on the flood plain I wished for a chance to show Julia everything I felt for her. Under the circumstances that confined us, that was impossible. The sun came up and eventually went down, and I had let another day go by, and the weeds had grown a fraction of an inch taller. If only pirates—scabrous, God-cursing pirates, massed as thick as thick as a swarm of grasshoppers fresh from a spring hatch on the deck of a rotting sailing ship and wielding swords with wide, rusty blades—had come floating down the Wind River towards us. Circumstances would have been different then. I could have drawn my saber (if there were pirates on the Wind River, then I would have had a saber) and taken Julia about her waist and said something like: “Courage, darling. They’ll not take us so long as I have breath in my lungs.” The two of us could have escaped the flood plain and gone to some verdant isle beyond the reach of pirates or of any of our relatives. After we were safe, there would be some rustling of garments and a final scene would come wherein I would hear Julia whisper: “I will be yours forever.” Shorty, I decided, I would leave to take his chances with the buccaneers.

My entire estate that summer was fourteen dollars and seventy-seven cents, ten of which I spent to buy Julia some red satin cloth at the new Sterton J.C. Penney’s store. Using her mother’s sewing machine, she made for me a handsome red shirt I considered too fancy to wear outside my room. With the remaining scraps she made for herself two long skirts for school and an Atlantic City swimsuit she modeled for Shorty and me down on the flood plain, after she had made certain her mother couldn’t see her from the house. I was too overcome at the sight of her naked arms and legs to do more than take a quick glance at her before I turned my head away, but Shorty,

who was becoming increasingly hostile to his cousin with every new day, whistled at her like she was as a cheap woman on the streets and told her only a tart would wear anything like that in front of boys. The image of her in that red swimsuit kept me awake through the August nights, when the first cold breezes of the season came off the western hills and shook the shelterbelt trees. Every sound in the night made me start from my sleep, for they each seemed to be her footstep on the gravel road leading to the Muirs' house. If God had answered my prayers, I would have gotten up one midnight, opened the front door and beheld her standing on the porch in the red swimsuit, her white limbs glowing as bright as the moon.

I would go to the living room window and stare at the southwest, the direction of the river and of the distant clump of trees about her house. Mr. Muir once caught me standing next to the front window in the morning as he went outside to his tool shed.

"It is customary to sleep in the horizontal position, Tom," he said and touched me on the back.

He and Mrs. Muir had tolerated my absences throughout the summer and did not mention them to me. Whether either of them had an inkling of my daily routine that summer was as unknown to me as my fantasies were to them.

"When I was your age..." said Mr. Muir, busy with a new hinge he was opening and closing in his hands. "When I was your age," he began again, "I thought the world and I would never get old."

Another thought came to him as he worked the hinge. "Did you know the Etruscans made their houses of wood the same as we do? Only their temples and the graves for the dead were made of stone, made to last the ages. Everything else they built has vanished like last year's flowers. The same will happen to my houses, save for the nails and the metal do-dads like this."

He held up the hinge.

"School's almost here again," he said. "Back to work then, Tom, back to work. Enjoy yourself while you can."

Then he went out the door to his tool shed.

August was indeed dwindling toward September and the beginning of the fall semester. I had read that elsewhere in America that this is the hottest time of the year: in Wyoming the evenings are already cool, and in the late afternoon, when the sun is among the

mountains, there came the hard west wind that reminded me that the green earth I had lived in for the past three months was an illusion and that the world's normal state is winter. Julia would soon no longer belong to Shorty and myself. I sat with her in the tall grass and wished I could tell her. I brought my fiddle with me, played and sang for her the fine old song "The Water is Wide."

"The water is wide, I cannot get o'er

And neither have I wings to fly.

Give me a boat that will carry two,

And both shall row, my love and I."

"I want to be a musician someday," I told her. "Or maybe a poet, but that's a lot harder to do."

"Do you know any happy songs?" she asked.

"I think most good songs are unhappy," I said. "We remember the sad things; they're more romantic."

She strongly disagreed and suggested I read a story in one of her magazines that was about a young woman named Jessica, who tries to homestead in early California and is captured by the Mexican Army and is later rescued by a dashing gunslinger named Travis.

"Now, *that's* romantic," she said.

The mess I wanted to put in front of her was that I had dreamed she and I had been lifted from this place by a beam of light and set in a separate Heaven... and that wasn't quite what I wanted to say either. I didn't know what I wanted to say to her. I could only look above her head and see that clusters of cottonwood leaves had turned pale green overnight, and I would feel my insides gripped by a melancholy as strong as bronchitis.

"Skirts are going to be longer this year," she read to us from a fashion magazine. "How about that, Tommy? You'll have to hang around the drinking fountain just to see the girls' ankles."

Shorty—the ever present and ever more annoying Shorty—laughed like a pig choking on a tree stump. "Look at Tom turning red!" he said. "Oh, my!"

"That's because he's so shy," said Julia. "He's like an antelope you surprise when you come over a rise, and then it runs away before you can appreciate it. Here, come sit by me, sweetheart." I did. "You're going to have the sweetest girl in the world someday, Tommy, 'cause you're so sweet yourself." She hugged me, and I

flushed red again. "I won't ever tease you again ever." She promised.

One evening the sun went down, and the summer died before the sun came up again in the morning. The entire world had changed, but Tom Wedderburn had not. In the dark of the wee hours I arose and turned my wall calendar to the First of September, the first day of the school year. I hadn't been to call on Julia for the last three days because the pressure of a final meeting with her before I lost her to one of the swells might have been too great for me, and I might have blurted out some awkward declaration of love right in front of Shorty. I had paced the floor in my room at the Muirs' house and dreamed I was Frank Elder and the year was 1897, and I could carry Julia away to the badlands, to a place where a man's will was the only law. We could live in the caves above the Wind River Canyon and hunt for our meat in the Owl Creek Mountains, always staying at least fifty miles from everyone but the lone shepherds of the Arapahoe Ranch. We could pick the wild asparagus and black currants growing the stream banks. The scrub pines would give us the wood we would need to get us through the winters. We would live in nature, like Adam and Eve did before the Fall, protected from everyone who wanted her for themselves.

I went to Mr. Muir's study and took from a notebook two lined sheets. I folded each sheet into eights, and tore them along the creases to make sixteen pieces. On each scrap of paper I wrote:

"Do not go to school today. I love you."

I dressed and ran to the river before the town was awake. In the bark of a cottonwood Julia would have to pass as she walked into Sterton I stuck one note; it was fixed at approximately eye level, where it might catch her notice. Another note I stuck onto a tree directly across the pathway from the first. A third I let fall free in hopes that the wind might carry it to her. As I went down the river path toward Sterton I left notes attached to bushes and atop rocks and lying in the middle of the tribal bridge. I stuck the last note onto one of the overhead spans of the bridge; if she turned to look back at the mountains, she would see it.

When I had distributed all sixteen notes, I returned to the Muirs' house, and made a pot of coffee for myself. Mr. Muir, who at six o'clock came down the main stairs, saluted me in military fashion, and told me I was the best quartermaster in the army.

“Major inspection today, my boy,” he said. “Look sharp for Mr. Owens, shall we? Fortune favors a soldier who is up and at them early in the day.”

I wasn't in the mood for his bluff good humor that morning. I took my coffee to the front porch and sat with my hands wrapped around the warm cup. “Please, let her be sick, just this one day,” I thought. Among the many faults I had when I was young, I much over emphasized the power of thinking positive thoughts. My theory was that the future could be shaped by my expectations; if I envisioned the best possibilities, then Providence would let them happen. To admit a single moment of doubt and to see an alternate future in which the worst occurred was to bring on the full catastrophe. Therefore, if Julia was to be kept from the other boys at school, I had to prevent myself from imagining her entering the classroom that day. She *had* to be sick that day in my thoughts, otherwise she would enter the school and at once take up with a new boyfriend. I could feel my watching self looking at me from beyond the new cemetery wall beyond the Muirs' porch; he wanted to know why I hadn't signed my name to the notes or thought of a better plan to keep her at home. The wind might blow the notes, or she might see them and think they were mere litter. I ignored my watching self and thought: “Julia will be sick today. She will be sick.”

I left for school after the clock in the hallway chimed once for seven thirty. My books were tied inside a belt so I could swing them like a chain mace at the fence posts along the side of the road. I walked down Silk Stocking Avenue on which the town doctor and the mayor lived and onto Main Street and past the laundry where Mother worked. I kept concentrating on positive thoughts. “She will be sick. She will be sick,” I repeated in my mind with every step I took.

A sparrow flew across my path as I entered the schoolyard. The bird perched atop the rosebush my former teacher Miss Casey had planted next to the school house years before, ruffled its feathers quickly and as quickly smoothed them once again. Then the sparrow took off, flying southwest toward the river. I followed it in the sky as it became a tiny speck and vanished beyond the treetops.

“She will be sick. She *will* be sick,” I thought, but it was too late. Watching the sparrow had let a sad memory of Miss Casey intrude

upon my concentration, and I knew my hopes concerning Julia were lost.

I sat in a desk and waited for her. My old classmates filed in, as did Shorty McVick—who had a scorpion in a Bell Jar he wanted to show me—and finally Julia entered and sat behind a well-dressed swell whose name I don't remember today; I do recall that he was as pretty as a minister's wife and that Shorty said he had a heart like a cabbage, a leaf of which he gave to every girl he knew.

This swell and Julia were already smiling at each other when I looked away.



## A New Year's Eve Dance

I was on the stage of the Burntover Grange Hall playing my fiddle. The cigarette smoke was hanging from the low ceiling in long, transparent lines. The big room was crowded and hot. We had played the necessary Dutch Hops and waltzes and were down to the music I enjoyed, the kind that carries a history. We—I mean George Kellerman, who finger picked the guitar, and myself—played “Londonderry Air,” although I didn’t sing the words, for I considered the verses written for the tune to be unworthy of the music. The people danced the box step, and the heavy farmers’ boots gently sought their paths among the narrow shoes of the women. A wood stove behind the elevated stage was making me perspire hard in my white shirt and tie. The feeling in the room was good, and our playing that night had been better still.

Between songs a big fellow in a wool cap reached onto the stage and tapped me on the foot to get my attention.

“Do that one about the ship, would you?” he asked. “You know, the one that has the kid in the ocean. I love that one.”

Many people in the county loved to hear me play back then. I was eighteen and as thin as a stray dog. I kept my hair long, and kept it in place with a shiny pomade, that smelled like oranges. No one would suspect it today, but there were times when the young girls would settle close to the stage, and try to make me look at them. I played and sang in Sterton, Lost Cabin, Thermopolis, Lysite, Dubois, Poison Spider, Burntover, Burris, South Pass City, and on a couple dozen farms and ranches in the valley, and some people liked me so well they followed me wherever I played. The man in the wool cap was someone I recognized from Sterton; he had traveled the twenty-five miles of bad roads to Burntover for no other reason than to hear me perform on this New Year’s Eve. Playing brought out a secret Tom Wedderburn, a boy finer than the everyday version, one glowing with a fire that people did not expect of me. My watching

self didn't shake his head when I was playing my fiddle. He was nowhere in the room.

"Sure, I'll play it for you," I told the man.

I paused for George to find the right key on his guitar and launched into "The Golden Vanity."

"There was a little ship,  
And she sailed upon the sea,  
And the name of this ship  
Was the Golden Vanity,  
And she sailed upon the Low Lands low."

I played and sang it fast and high at 4/5 time; slowing only if George lagged behind me. Tonight he was reasonably sober, and my bow flew ahead unimpeded.

"But there was another ship,  
And it sailed upon the sea,  
And the name of this ship  
Was the Turkish Reverie,  
And she sailed upon the Low Lands low."

In the song, the captain of the Golden Vanity asks his crew if any of them can save his ship from the corsairs on the Turkish Reverie; he will give his beautiful daughter to any among them who can. Up steps the cabin boy, the Tom Wedderburn of the crew, and, yes, he says, he will go and destroy the other ship.

"Then he dove in the ocean,  
And on swam he,  
And he swam till he came  
To the Turkish Reverie,  
As she sailed upon the Low Lands low.  
Then he drew forth an auger  
And drill did he,  
And he drilled till he sank  
The Turkish Reverie,  
And he sank her in the Low Lands low."

But the captain had lied to the cabin boy: he will not give him his daughter in marriage nor will he let the boy return to his ship; he instead leaves the cabin boy to die a lonely death at the bottom of the ocean.

"And down swam the cabin boy,

And down swam he,  
And he swam till he died  
At the bottom of the sea,  
And he drowned there in the Low Lands low.”

I could play this song like no other. In my mind I was the cabin boy, and Julia was the beautiful daughter, and the captain was the evil force that kept us apart. The cabin boy had done right by the daughter; and I had done right by Julia, and still he and I were both alone at the end of our stories. The original song I learned has eight verses in it. My passion for the song caused me to compose eleven more in which I give the conversation between the captain and the boy and described the two ships in greater detail. I suppose I disliked having the song end and wanted it to go for a while longer before I got to the boy's death in the final stanza.

The dancers whistled and clapped for me when I finished. The man in the wool cap tapped me on the foot again and smiled at me: that was the song he drove twenty-five miles on snow-covered dirt to hear.

“We're going to take a break now,” I said. “We'll be back up here in about ten minutes.”

I went out the front door for some fresh air. Walking from the hot room into the cold and looking up at the close misty sky and knowing I had shown the best within me made me tremble in the middle of my chest. George Killerman, who was much older than I, and couldn't take as much fast playing, came outside with me and showed me his hands.

“You'll have me bleeding on the strings, son,” he said. “Let's play some nice, slow things like ‘Red River Valley’ and ‘the Lonesome Homesteader’ in the next set. I can't keep up with you.”

I didn't care for musicians who weren't serious about their art, and didn't want to talk to George right then. My pal Jim Holmes and his father Art were standing off to one side of the Grange Hall's front steps and were passing a bottle around to several other men. They motioned for us over to them.

“Say, Tommy,” called Art, his breath strong from the liquor. “Awfully fine music, fella. Come here and have a drink with us.”

He gave me a bottle of something that tasted like cough syrup.

“Terrible stuff, ain't it, Tommy?” said Art.

"It's orange juice and vodka," said his son Jim. "Mr. Pierce fixed it for us. He says it's just like what the rich folks in New York City are having tonight."

"Being rich is hardly worth it, eh fellas?" said Art, and slugged his son on the arm to punctuate his joke. "I'd rather be poor and drink whiskey that tastes like whiskey. It keeps a man in his regular habits. Did I ever tell you fellas about Dirty Hank Jones before this?"

Steam was rising from his nose and mouth as he talked, but he was indifferent to the cold.

"Who's Dirty Hank Jones?" I asked.

"A fella who didn't keep his regular habits," said Art. "Took a bath one day, and it killed him."

"What's that got to do with anything?" asked Jim.

He was put out with his dad's odd sense of humor, as any sensible young man would be. Jim Holmes the old man is now days a far sight sillier than his dad ever was, but I would be getting ahead of myself if I told that story here.

"It's got a lot to do with things," said Art. "I forget what most of those things were. Not that it matters. The memory's the second thing to go, boys. I forget what the first thing was. Dreadful stuff," he said and took another drink from the bottle.

"Where is Mr. Pierce?" I asked.

I was referring to a young man of about twenty-five years from the East; he was well educated and a sharp dresser, which were qualities that made him stick out like a Muslim imam in our part of the country. He was in some manner connected to an investment group in New Jersey that had sent him to Wyoming to oversee a large ranch his superiors were financing. I suspected his bosses did not send him west to drink and keep company with anyone within earshot of him, although that was what he did. Rumors circulated around the county about him; he was said to be in disgrace back in New Jersey; some called him a womanizer and said he had habits worse than the drinking we knew he did. We in Elder County knew Mr. Pierce only as a wonderful conversationalist who knew a little bit about everything. We expected rich Easterners to be haughty toward rural folk, but Mr. Pierce was charming to everyone and had a smile and a tidbit of information for the most loathsome bar flies and the Sterton bankers alike. I had met Mr. Pierce a year before at

a dance like this one, and I had become great friends with him when he told me I was "A bard of the ancient tradition," and made a record of my music that he sent to a professor friend of his. Conversing with him was an educational experience, for he had read more than anyone I knew, including Mr. Muir. Being around Mr. Pierce was nearly compensation for not attending college after I graduated from the Sterton School. He introduced me to the modern writers, and between his new writers and Mr. Muir's classic authors I imagined myself a literate man, the first in my family. Unlike Mr. Muir, Mr. Pierce had acquired no moral philosophy from his learning; he knew the ideologies current in the outside world and was an excellent teacher, as he took no idea seriously and thus was an impartial judge of any doctrine. His attitude should have outraged me at times. Mr. Pierce was an accomplished young man whose future held more possibilities than were open to any ten thousand young men in Wyoming, and he was wasting his advantages by drinking himself into a premature middle age. He was eloquent and yet, by the standards of say Mr. Muir and Muir's books, he was immoral. "Politics is the art of constructing beautiful lies," Mr. Pierce told me: "the man constructing the most aesthetically pleasing lies is called a statesman." "Virtues are like hats," he also said to me; "they look fine when worn in public, but one best take them off when he is in his own house." Mr. Muir had called him a "dilettante nihilist" after speaking to Mr. Pierce for only a half an hour. While I realized there was something wrong with Mr. Pierce, perhaps something that was very wrong, when he bravely entered the worst saloon in Sterton and insisted on sitting with his legs crossed like a lady and held his wine glass delicately by the stem as he winked at an old battle ax who hadn't turned a head since her birth and called her his "precious," I found it impossible not to like him.

"He's around," said Art of Mr. Pierce. "Can't expect him to stay with the fellas when there's so many girls about."

"He wanders around too much," said Jim.

"That's the secret of life," said Art. "Everybody knows what we want; nobody knows what's good for him." He shifted his feet in the shallow snow and examined his boot prints. "He's like you, Tommy." Art was turning serious, and the mood didn't suit him. "You need to get away from here, get an education, be somebody."

“I will some day,” I said. “I need some time of my own first. Next year I’ll take off, maybe this next September.”

I didn’t tell anyone I stayed in the county because I wanted to be close to Julia. Mr. Muir had offered to pay for my tuition at the state university in Laramie whenever I chose to go there. I kept putting him off. I said I was perfecting my music, or that I was saving money I earned herding sheep along the Sweetwater in the warm months, or that I wanted to keep an eye on my family now that Mother had become too ill to work and had to move herself and my younger siblings to Marilyn and Bob’s farm. I wasn’t in my mind lying to Mr. Muir if I failed to mention Julia; lying is the distortion of truth, and I was only hiding a portion of the truth from him, which was, I thought, a much smaller sin.

“Have you seen Julia Bartholomew?” I said.

I had purposely asked about her after I inquired after Mr. Pierce. To have asked about her right away would have been too obvious.

“Is that the short, chubby, blonde girl, the one that’s got the limp?” Art teased me.

He re-examined his footprints in the snow, and winked slyly at his son.

“When are you going to Hollywood, Mr. Holmes?” I asked. “They need funny men like you.”

“As soon as I can find the time,”

“As soon as he can find the railway station,” said his son Jim. “Julia isn’t here,” he added. “She’s with some cowboy.”

Julia had indulged in a new fling every couple of months or so, as was natural for a girl with her exuberant character. Someday soon, maybe as soon as she entered her twenties, I believed she would outgrow these frivolous connections she made with other men and would want a serious affair of the heart.

“What do you think of the Whistle girl?” asked Art. “Brenda, Bernice, Babs...”

“Barbara,” said his son.

“That’s it,” said Art. “She doesn’t have a boyfriend. She’s a nice, nice girl. If I was twenty years younger and still single, I wouldn’t let her get away.”

“She has too many teeth,” I said.

“You want a girlfriend or a horse?” said Art. “Too many teeth!”

At least they ain't as sharp as somebody's I could mention."

"I have to be getting back," I said. "Happy New Year."

I re-entered the heated building, and sought the slick black head that belonged to Mr. Pierce. He was sitting at a card table by the wall. His glass was overturned in front of him, and he was talking to Mrs. Dietz, the Burntover postmistress, about the President.

"Roosevelt is fortunate to be a cripple," he was saying. "People would not sympathized with him if he were a whole man."

Like many government workers in the state, Mrs. Dietz owed her position to the Democratic Party, and she kept the President's picture over the clerk's window in her post office. She digested Mr. Pierce's remark as willingly as she would have digested a live bug.

"*Our leader*," she said, "is more a man than lots of whole men I know of!"

"You've known a lot of whole men in your time, Mrs. Dietz?" asked Mr. Pierce, as he twitched his eyebrows like Groucho Marx to emphasize how naughty he was being.

"You cannot speak to me like that!" said Mrs. Dietz.

She would have slapped him if the two of them had been alone. People in the hall gawked at them as the bountiful old woman jumped from the table and raced to her friends to tell them what a foul-mouthed cad Mr. Pierce was.

"There're men here who'll kill you for mouthing off to a lady," I said to him as I sat down in the empty chair and pretended I didn't feel the forty sets of eyes that were watching us.

"Old Bernie Dietz is no lady, Thomas," said Mr. Pierce, and lit a cigarette with a characteristic flourish of his wrist. "No one living in this free and prosperous republic is a lady—well, maybe some slender, overly groomed young men I know of back home would qualify. But that's got nothing to do with Hecuba, does it? Why aren't you playing? Get these sons of the soil dancing. Dance, dance, dance. And fighting. And God knows what else they do out here."

He was becoming quite loud. People in the hall were looking at him. Some of the rougher looking men were mumbling about the "rich Easterner."

"This wouldn't be a good place to have any trouble, sir," I said. "Some of these characters would like nothing better than to beat you up."

Mr. Pierce leaned forward and whispered in my ear. He had been making a face at a couple standing by the stage, and I assumed he wanted to tell me something about them.

“Do you know,” he said, “why men tyrannize women?”

“I didn’t know they did, sir,” I said.

“The smart ones do. The men in charge of their own... what is the appropriate word: distortions? It is so, my young friend, my poet of the prairies, singer of the old ways; men keep women down because women are perverse.” He made a clicking sound with his tongue and palette. “They would mate with the apes in the jungle, if we let them; with goats; with niggers; with accountants; with lawyers; with nigger lawyers. A woman’s sexual yearnings are like Irish Catholicism: a terrible thing. A priest told me that... about Irish Catholicism, I mean, priests don’t talk about sex.”

He extended his hands outward at arm’s length, pushing something invisible away from him.

“You and I may be the only two honest men here tonight,” he said.

“I’ve got to get back on stage,” I said. “I’ll get my friend Jim to look after you, sir.”

Mr. Pierce took me by the arm as I rose to leave him.

“Do you know Miss Julia Bartholomew?” he asked. “A ridiculous question. Surely you know her. How many people are there in Wyoming for one to know?”

“What about her?”

“Nothing, my boy,” he said and let go of me. “I’m babbling. I shouldn’t drink so much. I let myself get stinko again. Sorry to be such a burden. You’re a good boy. Here, have a dollar.”

I brought Jim Holmes and his father inside to look after Mr. Pierce while I returned to the elevated stage with George Kellerman. We played the slow instrumental piece “The Lonesome Homesteader,” complete with bird trills at the end of the bow strokes. George strummed slowly two beats behind my shrill violin, his fingers seldom reaching higher than the two bass strings.

I sang “The Unquiet Grave,” an ancient song about a young man brought back from the dead after his love recites magic charms, and I had gone into “The Three Marys” when Julia entered the hall. The cold outside had made her face the color of flesh pink found in those

hand-tinted photographs that were popular in the last century. She took off her coat and stocking cap, and her long hair fell across her shoulders in a startling confusion that was like a flower pod bursting open. I continued to sing and play. The music came from me automatically as I watched her and her silver eyes. At her side was an enormous cowboy I didn't recognize. His head was as big as a beer keg, and his arms were two heavy logs.

"There's the little whore!" shouted Mr. Pierce.

He bolted from his table, and was across the floor and headed for Julia and the tall cowboy before Jim and Art could stop him. People ceased dancing and made way for him. The old folks sitting about the four walls left off gossiping, and the children stopped chasing each other in circles at the edge of the dance floor and turned to watch. I lifted my bow from the strings.

Said Mr. Pierce to Julia:

"Does it have to be back at the zoo before closing time? Or do its keepers let it run loose all night?"

The cowboy raised a fist over Mr. Pierce's head that appeared big enough to crush the dandy's skill like a hammer would a raw egg. Mrs. Dietz gasped, but, on second thought, relaxed, because she reasoned that Mr. Pierce might have it coming to him.

Mr. Pierce took the cowboy by the lapels of his denim jacket and smashed his own forehead into the big man's face. None of us present had ever seen anything like it. The cowboy was as stunned as anyone else, and he kept his huge fist raised in the air and let the smaller Mr. Pierce jump into his face a second time. Blood poured from the big man's nose and from the top of Mr. Pierce's shiny head.

"That's a heck of a way to fight," exclaimed Art Holmes.

Mr. Holmes tried to get between the two men a moment too late. The cowboy brought his fist down, and Mr. Pierce threw his entire person at his opponent. They both fell over a row of chairs and rolled against the south wall. The cowboy was hitting Mr. Pierce in the stomach, ribs, and anywhere else he could reach. His blows sounded like someone pounding on the inside of an oil drum with a wooden mallet.

Art Holmes punched the cowboy on the arm and gave him a kick in the back. The big man didn't seem to feel either blow.

"Couldn't he have picked a fight with somebody bigger?" Art

swore. "Goddamn, why not take a swing at a damn bear?"

The cowboy rolled on top of Mr. Pierce and trapped the dude's arms underneath his knees. The big man now could alternately hit Mr. Pierce in the face and bounce his head off the wooden floor. Jim Holmes hit the cowboy over the head with a folding chair; two chair legs came off and the wicker seat came undone, leaving Jim holding two sticks.

"They should make chairs out of whatever's in his head," said his father Art.

Cap Dollenger, a local farmer in his mid-thirties who had been Frank Elder's last deputy fifteen years earlier, emerged from the crowd and hit the cowboy one blow behind the ear. The big man collapsed on his side, his pupils turned inside his upper eyelids.

We placed the two unconscious fighters side by side on a table-top, and Jim Holmes poured the remainder of his orange juice and vodka on their bloody faces. The cowboy came round immediately, spat blood, and began to sit up when he passed out again. A minute later he roused himself, and this time managed to get upright and to stagger towards the bathroom. Mr. Pierce was breathing, but his eyes remained fastened shut.

I took Julia outside away from the chaos. During the fight she had found safety behind the crowd of onlookers. She was clearly upset, but neither angry nor frightened.

"What was that about?" I asked her.

She took out her pocket mirror and checked her hair.

"Tommy," she said, "I told Clarence it was over between us. He doesn't know that..."

"Clarence?" I said. "You mean Mr. Pierce?"

An ugly image came to me that I couldn't quickly cast from my thoughts. I stepped off the Grange Hall front porch. Julia was talking at me, explaining the fight inside. I whispered: "Julia and Mr. Pierce?" and made a vapor puff that swiftly rose in the cold air. She had taken many other boyfriends since I met her: John Hardy the king of the school swells, a farmer named Roger, and two cowboys from the big ranches; never had she been with someone this much older than her and from outside the local area.

"... and I don't know if Kirk can take me home," she was saying. "Did you bring a car, Tommy?"

"I have Mr. Muir's car," I said. I talked past her, to the porch light above her head. "I have to keep playing."

Jim Holmes came outside and told us Mr. Pierce was sitting up.

"He vomited some blood," said Jim. "I guess he's going to be good. Come and take a look at his face."

Across the road from the hall was a barbed-wire fence: beyond that was a field of unimproved land full of sandstone boulders. One chunk of yellow rock, a long massive block the wind had cut in the shape of a boat, sat at the edge of the light thrown from the hall porch light. Looking at that rock at the same time Julia was talking in my ear, I wished I had words as heavy as that piece of stone I could bring down on her and on this unclean night and smash the both of them into dust.

"Take Julia home in my car," I said to Jim, and gave him Mr. Muir's keys.



## My Career in the Rodeo

Having been born a shepherd's son, I inherited a low opinion of the rodeo and of the entire universe of cowboy baloney.

To people from back east it seems a glorious thing for a man to risk his life atop a wild animal when there is only the arena sand to catch him after he is bucked onto his backside. I have heard some say that the rodeo is our modern world's last link to the old west and the times when men drove cattle across the unfenced range. One eastern writer I came across, a man shaped by reading more than by observation, was so aroused when he went to his first rodeo he wrote that the rodeo reminded him of those ancient Cretan works of art that show young men and women vaulting through the horns of wild bulls.

Those of us living in the west know the rodeo is a fraud. It was created at the tail end of the nineteenth century to get money from the tourists then traveling the far west for the first time. The oldest paying rodeo in the world, held every Fourth of July in Lander, Wyoming, is less than a hundred years old. No frontiersman in earlier times tried to ride a Brahma bull for fun, nor did anyone mount an unbroken horse to see what would happen: horses, if they weren't completely bad, were broken with a special halter, and if they weren't good they were shot. When an early day cowboy talked about "bulldogging," he meant biting the bull's lower lip until the animal flipped on its back: this "steer-wrestling" contest they have today is a game someone thought up to entertain the dudes: it has no practical function on a ranch. I don't want to grind the subject into the ground, but the west the rodeo celebrates never existed. That west is a creation of the dime novelists. There were no gunfighters facing each other on deserted streets: when people in the real west were shot it was usually in the back and at night. The most popular drink of the real west was sherry blended with raw egg, not the rut-gut whiskey they swill in the movies. Our storied outlaws were renegade killers

the Civil War displaced from normal society. The chivalrous “code of the west” was as authentic as the singing cowboy and Gene Autry’s fifty-shot revolver. There wasn’t any particular type of cowboy dress in the old days: people out here wore what they had and what lasted, which in Wyoming meant they wore heavy wool and fur. Trappers hunting beaver pelts came first to this part of America, prospectors seeking gold and silver acquired title to the land, and soldiers sent to guard the mines conquered the area. The first cowboys didn’t come north from Texas until the 1870’s, by which time the Indians were largely subdued, and the transcontinental railroad was completed. The cowboy and the open range he grazed his cattle upon dominated the west for a single decade, and were soon superseded by the herder and the farmer. The cowboys of this century are either the few surviving aristocrats owning the few remaining big spreads or—as is more often the case—they are edge of town people; I mean to say they are working class folk living in kit houses and now days in trailer houses just beyond the incorporated boundaries of every western town. They keep a pick-up and a couple of overweight pet horses, and are content with a tank full of gas, a lip full of snooze, and a head stuffed with the popular legends of the mythological west. It is, I admit, a mythology impervious to facts. Just this last year I read a novel written by some idiot from Texas that overflowed with gimcrack nonsense about cattle drives and outlaw gangs, and paraded forth every silly cliché that has been written about the old west since it became old. The cowboy, the itinerant agricultural laborer of the late Victorian era, our region’s bum on horseback, apparently remains a verdant legend that every generation reseeds.

I go on like this—although I know it’s taking me places I don’t need to go—because I want everyone reading this to know that people in the valley with any sense stayed away from the rodeo and anything else touching upon cowboys. Sensible people in our valley became farmers, or else they got an education and left the area altogether. That’s what I needed to explain, and I don’t want to say anything more on the subject.

In the summer of 1939 I was working for J.D. Hirsham, proprietor of the Hirsham Livestock Company of Greeley, Colorado. I was herding forty-five hundred registered Columbian sheep in the Green

Mountains for three weeks at a stretch. When my three weeks on the job were up; I was relieved by Henry Wister, another young herder in Mr. Hirsham's hire. Because the outside world had farther imposed itself on our valley, I could no longer find work as a musician. People had fallen in love with the record player and with the big band music they heard on the radio. No one wanted to hear the old music any more. For a time I could still get paid to play in the little hamlets too far off the main roadways to be up with the most recent trends. By late 1938 the little places had dropped me as well. During the Thanksgiving holiday season that year, a St. Louis band came to Sterton on a silver streamlined bus and performed in the new skating rink a foreign gentleman from Chicago had built on the Highway 287 turnoff. Above the rollerskating rink was a roll-away dance floor mounted on springs that made the dancers slightly bounce when the floor was full. In the skating rink parking lot after the Thanksgiving dance, one of the members of the St. Louis band got into a fight and stabbed a local shop clerk in the abdomen. The clerk bled to death, and jazz became a sensation in the county. I had been singing about drowning sailors and ancient princesses, and my songs were nothing compared to moving dance floors and a music strong enough to kill. I waited around for a few months for people to get over this new entertainment. What did jazz have to do with the Wind River Valley, anyway? My music was the music of our old men, and this new stuff was something from the distant big cities. The sound did pass in time. In a few years the valley people were on to something else, but they never came back to the old music. Other musical forms and the motion pictures and eventually television would take them farther from any art form that was related to their world, and my little fiddle act would have seemed ever more quaint in the years after 1938 had I tried to perform again.

Working for Mr. Hirsham afforded me a good life on my off days. Henry Wister, the other herder, and I rented a small house near the grain elevator in Sterton, and we alternately lived in it while the other was on the job in the Green Mountains. The town had grown since my childhood; close to three thousand people lived there before the war, and Sterton for the first time was large enough to have several distinctive neighborhoods. My part of town was mostly traveler's hotels and boarding houses for single workingmen. My area was not

as respectable a place as the blocks of family homes that had arisen on both sides of Main Street and not as seedy as the sandbar district that was close to the river and was home to the Mexicans and white trash and a few Indians who had quit living like Indians and had to come to town to suffer with the other misfits. I remember that in my part of Sterton the bachelors sat on the front porches during the summer afternoons and conversed with the widowed landladies when the latter were taking their daily constitucionals. In the winters, we had house parties that lasted into the following mornings, when we had to walk the slippery, snow-caked streets back to our cold beds. Unmarried young women were scarce in Sterton. The single men working the farms, the railroad, on the oilrigs, far outnumbered the shop girls on Main Street. Groups of us went downtown every evening merely to look at those rare creatures in their long white aprons as they stood behind their counters. A brave man among us would go inside a shop sometimes and pretend he was going to buy a certain item; he would request the female clerk's assistance, and if he were handsome she would come over and pretend she was making a sale to him. If the bachelor were not so good looking—as was true of myself and of most of my pals—the shop girl would take one look at the gang of men pressed against the front window and tell the man in the store to return to his friends. "Get away, poor boy," is what they told me. "Can't you see I've got real customers in here?" Jim Holmes, who was working as a mechanic for an oil company, and Harv Miliken, another herder, and I were called "poor boy" so often the other bachelors took to calling us that also. If we three went out together, everyone we met would declare: 'Here come the poor boys,' which they said not so much to mock us as to let us share in the joke being played us. For we three friends, a trip downtown was entirely looking, wanting, and dreaming that one of the sales girls would one day look back at us.

When I wasn't working or wasting time with my pals I stayed home and read. I was older and had earned a better judgment of Literature, and I had decided that the modern writers Mr. Pierce had introduced me to did not measure up to the classical authors of Mr. Muir's library. As modern music had lost its sense of balance and had ceased to honor the beautiful, so had modern literature become pretentious, degenerate, and obsessed with the worst of human

sentiments. I returned to the Greeks and Romans and to the medieval romances, and ancient men and women again filled my thoughts during the long hours of the sagebrush hills among my forty-five hundred sheep. Oedipus and Polyphemus had been shepherds before me, and it was to them and their ancient brethren that I turned my thoughts as I sat on my wagon steps in the remote hills.

My sister Myra wrote me once a week. She had divorced the attorney Douglas Greenleaf and had moved with her three-year-old daughter to Denver and there worked as a legal secretary, a trade she had learned in her ex-husband's office. I don't know the details of her and Douglas' break-up. I infer their relationship had turned quite bitter, for Myra refused any alimony or child support in her divorce settlement and had ceased all contact with Mr. Greenleaf. The Cheyenne newspaper said, in the briefest manner possible, that infidelity was the grounds for the divorce. Myra had found God in her new life alone, or rather, I should say, she had refound God, for she had long been a serious-minded girl, and either religious devotion or political extremism never lurks far from a serious mind. Her letters told of her daily routine and of every day incidents she said were miracles that re-affirmed her faith. "I held my Angela in my arms," she wrote, "and stood at the screen door watching God's holy rain come down in sheets to make the world new again." She wrote in her letters that she prayed for me and hoped I would someday believe as strongly as she did. She signed "God Bless" and taped a square of her homemade butterscotch to the page below her signature. The odd thing about Myra was that, unlike my other sisters, who lost their good looks as they got older, she became more splendid as she aged. My spirited sister Mary acquired her husband Loran's puffy cheeks and his sad, watery eyes, and Marilyn grew larger as her family and fortune did the same, but Myra was a flame that kept burning brighter every passing year. Her hands and face grew thinner till in old age they revealed the bone structure underneath her flesh, and her hair, once long and golden, turned a pale brown, but beyond those small changes her person seemed to become ever more finely tuned until she became all slender muscle, enamel skin, and burning eyes that dwelt in the earthly place called Denver but lived to nurture her daughter and to bless others with her good works. I waited for another forty-six years for the radiant figure

of goodness that was my sister Myra to admit that feeding the poor in soup kitchens is tiring or that caring for orphans demands too much time and energy or that old age brings pain and loneliness, and I am left waiting now that she is gone. She seemed happy, Myra did, though she never remarried or ever again fell in love.

During the Easter weekend of 1939 I took Julia to see the Schictling Brothers' World Circus inside a big canvas tent raised on the Elder County Fairgrounds. The show featured a dog act and one middling-sized elephant that wheeled about in a circle as it carried on its back an amply built woman dressed in violet leotards that fit as tight as sausage casings. There was a young man who juggled five bowling pins at once and an acrobatic display in which a woman was suspended twenty feet in the air at the end of a rope she held in her teeth. The Schictling Brothers was a small circus, and no one minded that the Fabulous Edwardo—the man holding the hoops in the dog act—was also Sinbad the Turkish Wonder, the bowling pin juggler, or that the lady hanging by her teeth was also the Gypsy Sparrow, as she was called when she rode the elephant. Everyone in the crowd agreed that at least the elephant was real, and we applauded all the acts. Julia ate three cherry snow cones, and said, smacking her lips, there must be no career in the world more exciting than working in a circus. She was then working as a cook in a restaurant, and was bored with her job.

After the show, she and I went down to the center ring. The Great Edwardo and the hefty lady in violet leotards were signing programs for the children, and Julia said she wanted a signature for her mother. At close range I could see that Edwardo had a waxed love curl on his perspiring forehead and wore cobalt blue eyeliner to highlight his deepset eyes. He signed Julia's program: "Best Wishes, Eddie De Grazio."

"I am hoping you and your husband were enjoying the performance," he told Julia, lingering before her longer than he should have.

"Oh, Tom isn't my husband," said Julia. "He's only a friend." He wrote something else on her program she would not let me read when we emerged from the tent.

Two days later, Julia, didn't report to work. She wasn't seen about Sterton for an entire month, but in June returned to town on the

bus, a suitcase in her hand, and two shoes and one high heel to her name. "Italian men are so peculiar," she explained. She did not explain anything more.

At the Independence Day Parade I saw her with the big cowboy Mr. Pierce had unwisely fought at the New Year's dance four years earlier. They were riding the Rural Electric Association float together. Julia was dressed as a saloon girl and was sitting on the cowboy's lap as he drank iced tea from a whiskey bottle. A banner on the side of the flatbed trailer they were riding upon read: "BACK IN THE DAYS OF THE OL' RED DOG SALOON."

That night when I went to a dance at the skating rink with my pals Jim Holmes and Harv Miliken, we met Julia and her boyfriend, whom she introduced as Kirk Redan.

"What sort of a handle is 'Kirk?'" Harv asked me when Julia and her beau were on the mobile dance floor doing the jitterbug.

"It's Scottish for 'church,'" I said. "Literally it means: 'Has a head as empty as a steeple.'"

"I know him from some place," said Jim.

"You should," I said. "You broke a chair over him at a dance."

"I don't mean that," said Jim. "I mean recent. 'He's in the rodeo out at the fairgrounds, I'm pretty sure. Wrestles steers, I think.'"

"Pity the poor steers," said Harv.

I didn't care to stay. Jim was making eyes at a girl who wasn't paying attention to him, and he and Harv wanted to remain at the dance because maybe this time would be different than all the others. I left and strolled uptown to the old city park. I sat under the cottonwoods, my back against the trunk of a tree. The town's cats were out that hot summer night. They quietly slipped about the trees, brushing their tails against the rough bark. Two of them, identically black in the dim moonlight, would halt in their tracks if they met, stare at each other for a moment, make a warning hiss, then all at once one would chase the other into the heavy darkness of the wide grass fields at the center of the park. Minutes later, another pair—or perhaps the same cats re-enacting the same scene—would appear, prowling around the tree trunks in two opposing circles and eyeing each other as they built towards the instant of confrontation.

I watched the moon move across the sky and found Cancer in the apex of the zodiac.

Early on the morning of the Fifth I went to visit my old patron Mr. Muir. He had already had his breakfast and was in his workshop planning a pine door as he whistled “Scotland the Brave.”

“They let the wood get wet,” he said—“they” being the Hiram Pound Lumber Company. “The damage was not as great as they thought. I’ve salvaged two hundred board feet from the three hundred and twenty the dunderheads let the rain get to. Snug and tight poured as this,” he said of the door he was planning.

What I liked best about Mr. Muir, other than his kind heart, was that his mood never changed. As long as there was wood for him to work, and Mrs. Muir remained in good health, then he was happy to be in the world. The ominous events then unfolding in Europe could depress the entire world, but not him.

“There’s going to be a war,” he said, still preoccupied with the door. “In the heart of Europe. Poland will set it off. Poland sits on the northern coastal plain, the one sure route across the continent. Saxe, Marlobough, Napoleon, Gustavus Adolphus: they knew the value of that land. The fool Kaiser knew it.”

“Mr. Holloway says we’ll stay out of it this time,” I said.

Mr. Holloway was the school principal and a man holding forceful opinions on everything, and he generously shared what he believed with all the citizens of Elder County. Mr. Muir thought he lacked a historian’s perspective.

“Eric Holloway thinks what he reads in the newspapers,” said Mr. Muir. “The world was too small for us to stay out in 1917. The world hasn’t gotten any bigger since. He would know better if he had ever been in the Army. The Army teaches a man to care what he says. Nonsense can be fatal to a soldier.”

“You think the service will take me?” I asked.

He looked up from the door.

“They’ll draft everyone who is fit, Tom,” he said. “They will take you and your friends. That is why you should go to college now, get a few years of study under your belt, enter the Army as an officer. Officers have privileges. A soldier needs privileges in the trenches.”

His hands stopped guiding the plane. An old memory appeared in his mind, and he winced at the pain it gave him.

“You don’t think this war will be fought with bomber-planes?” I asked. “What will they need soldiers for when they can fly from one

side of the world and drop bombs on the other hemisphere?"

"Bombers can't beat infantry spread out and dug in. Tanks can't beat good infantry. Nothing can beat good infantry. Infantry can conquer the world—and it has a couple times already. Look at Alexander the Great and Caesar. Bomber planes were created to entertain the Eric Holloways of the world."

His hands were again moving the plane along the grain of the wood. Four recessed spaces, all identical rectangles, were beginning to take shape on the door's surface.

"What do you think will be the most dangerous thing a man could do in this war?" I asked him.

"I can't say about the Navy or the Air Corps; I'm sure they perform dangerous tasks. Submarines, airplanes. The worst in the Army, I think, will be these parachuting troops I see in Life. Jumping from the sky, just imagine."

He paused and looked at me.

"But the very worst won't be in the Army," he said. "That would be in the Marines. They get sent into the worst parts of the worst places. In the last war we used them up like that," he said and snapped his fingers. "Meuse-Argonne, Belleau Wood. Terrible waste."

He saw some deformity in the door, and took up a chisel to cut it away.

"You don't want to be in the Marines," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because they're bastards," he said.

When he realized he had used a profanity he looked at the main house and grinned at me.

"I shouldn't talk that way. I meant to say, the Marines abuse their inductees, turn them into fighters, not complete soldiers. It's not the Army. But don't worry about that. You would be happiest in some sort of teaching position, Tom. Go to school; get some credentials. They're going to need thousands of men like that. It will be a great start for you. You could teach men to read and write, or perhaps you could study a foreign language and teach men that. Never leave stateside and have a veteran's benefits when it's over."

"A Marine would be sure to see combat then?" I asked.

"Yes," he agreed, "but you don't want that Tom. I can't see your

life going in that direction. What if something should happen to you? Think of your mother, your sisters, of Nora. You are the treasure to your family.”

“I didn’t say I was joining up,” I said. “I was only curious.”

Mr. Muir set his index finger on a spot near the center of his door and probed it as hard as his digit would allow. He took the wood chisel with his other hand and placed the point directly above the spot he had marked with his finger. A single tap with his mallet sent the chisel right through the door, ruining the entire project.

“Damn it,” he said, and once more was angry he had used a profanity. “The board had a wet spot. One rotten hole destroys everything.”

In the afternoon the other “poor boys” and I piled into Harv’s Chevrolet truck, and drove to the fairgrounds to watch the late rodeo.

“Why do you want to come out here?” Harv asked me. “There’s nothing but yahoos out here.”

“He’s looking for his Julia,” Jim Holmes presumed to answer. “Her good friend’s riding tonight.”

“You don’t know anything,” I told them. “For everything you know I might be riding tonight myself.”

Jim whistled like a drunk in a strip tease joint.

“You’re the one to get himself killed doing stuff he doesn’t know anything about,” he said.

“This is like a story I know,” said Harv Miliken. He was a gangly boy wearing Wellington boots that were three sizes too large for him. “Back on the farm we had this hired man—”

I put my hand over his mouth.

“This isn’t about a hired man or any such low-life,” I said. “I’m myself and no one else, and I’m going to ride because it pleases me and not for any other reason.”

I went at once into the main office underneath the grandstand, and put my ten dollar entry fee on the desk, right in front of a woman who had orange hair.

“I want to ride a horse,” I told her.

Jim Holmes had followed me into the plywood room and was pleading for my attention.

“Let’s get out of here,” he was saying to me.

“Honey, ever`body in the rodeo rides a horse a` some sorts,” said

the rodeo lady in a strange accent she apparently had learned at the cinema from Scarlett O'Hara.

In contrast to the room's four bare walls, she was wearing turquoise jewelry and red jeans that had green stitching up the side of the legs, and her lipstick and rouge were as bright as electrified neon.

"I want to ride one of *your* horses, a bucking horse," I told her.

"Is your name on the list? Ah don't think ah know you. Have you talked to Mr. Larson 'bout this ridin' business, honey?" she said and tilted her head to one side the way a puppy does when it looks into a person's eyes.

"Listen, ma'am," I told her, I don't know where you're from or who this Mr. Lawson is. I only want to ride. Around here, when a man can pay and he's of legal age, you give him what he wants."

"You don't have any tack," she commented and tilted her head in a new direction. "Yur clothes ain't right."

I snatched the ten dollars off the desk and left.

"Goddamned self important bitch!" I told Jim. "They let a monkey like Kirk Redman into their dog and pony show, and they won't let me! You know why? It's because I haven't achieved anything. I haven't won anything. Never had the chance. When the choice is between a low-life and an honorable man who hasn't accomplished anything, the world will favor the low-life every time."

We walked behind the chutes to watch the ones the world favored swagger about the contestants' area. There were as many young men in big hats perched on the rail fence on both sides of the gates, as there were spectators in the grandstand. Several of the very youngest would-be cowboys were darting in the arena in groups of two or three to play at fixing the swinging gate or at shifting something from the sand that no one in the stands could see; they were accomplishing nothing, but they were getting noticed. In a chicken wire behind the number two chute they were stretching their legs and pounding their leather gloves into their palms. One of the men yelled: "Get those kids out of there!" to show he was in charge of the situation and knew what he was doing. Nobody—certainly not the excited boys fooling about in the sand—did anything in response.

An Indian cowboy, his long black hair falling from beneath his hat, mounted a horse in the chute and wiggled himself into the

saddle. A loudspeaker across the way crackled something I couldn't make out, but someone must have been giving the rider's name, because everyone on the other side of the arena directed their attention towards him. The long gate swung open at the same instant the Indian marked his horse by kicking his legs upwards and bringing the spurs into its ribs. The animal coughed harshly like an old man waking up, and rose from the gate and straight upwards into the air, its front legs nearly touching its hind ones. The Indian's head snapped backwards as his legs again curled into the horse's sides, and his body went limp and flopped forwards and back on the bucking horse as if his bones had dissolved inside him. The harness slipped on the horse's chest and rubbed in time with the animal's breathing; the loose gear and the horse's short, rushed breath together made a deep 'brr, brr' sound that was louder than the few amused shouts that were coming from the grandstand.

The horse leapt across the sand, flipped itself into a reverse direction, and brought the helpless Indian against the fence. The rider's left leg banged against the wooden slats. Dust sprayed through the gaps as something cracked, and the boys on the side of the fence swore in admiration. The horse jumped away in the direction it had originally taken, flailing the Indian across its back and making the rider's hat fly off its head and roll across the sand.

The eight-second bell over the chutes sounded as a second rider on a tame horse came along side the Indian and helped him make a clean dismount.

The loudspeaker crackled, and Harv Miliken, who had an ear for difficult sounds, said the judges had disqualified the Indian for failing to mark his horse cleanly out of the chutes, which was an out and out lie. Not that any of the other contestants or any of the spectators protested; they pawed their neighbors and hooted at the lone Indian walking, with a new limp, across the arena to retrieve his hat.

"They don't let Indians win," said Jim Holmes.

"At least they let them ride," I said.

"By God, if he didn't do that nice," said Harv.

"There's something to be said for anything that's well done," Jim agreed.

I thought they were both simple minded for praising eight seconds

of Dutch courage given to the rider by the bottle the cowboys were sharing behind the fence.

Another rider, this one as wide as the horse waiting for him inside the gate, climbed atop the chute and planted himself in the saddle. The horse sighed under the weight of him. Before the sunlight hit his face I knew from the size of him that it was Kirk Redman.

"They ought to let the horse ride him," said Harv. "It'd be a fairer trick."

Kirk pushed his hat back on his massive head. I could see the sharp angle of his chin and strands of thick brown hair peeking over his forehead. He was a beautiful picture in the chute, as wild creatures often seem to be from our domesticated perspective. He was a force of nature atop the horse: big, powerful, dumb; a pile of handsome bricks; an aesthetically pleasing stack of stones. Proud of everything he was, and ignorant of anything he wasn't.

Kirk nodded to an official, the loudspeaker crackled, and the gate opened. That was the positive portion of his ride. The horse jumped straight up, and big Kirk Redman hit his head on the board arching over the chute exit. The impact sounded like a ball meeting a bat. Kirk slipped off the saddle like a load of canned goods leaving a torn grocery sack, and the riderless and triumphant horse danced in circles before the grandstand.

"He's dead!" someone shouted.

No one did anything because no one expects dramatic events to occur in one's own life.

"How often you figure this happens?" asked Harv.

"That fella must be hit over the head once a day, just for practice," said Jim Holmes. "Look, he's not hurt, much."

Kirk was quickly upright on his feet. Big and dusty and smiling and glad to have blood running down his face, he turned to his left and attempted to wave to the crowd but instead saluted the part of the arena fence that bore advertisements for blue jeans and Coca-Cola.

Julia came running from somewhere under the grandstand. She embraced Kirk around his chest, or she so tried, but her arms couldn't reach entirely around him. Kirk swayed on big feet that were not good supports for him at that moment.

"Who's that?" a boy called from the chutes. "She shouldn't be out there!"

It's O.K.," another voice replied. "That's his wife."

My thoughts were as blank as the sky over the grandstand. I didn't want to know how they had done it; whether they had awakened the Justice of the Peace in the middle of the night or rented a whole church and purchased twenty bouquets and a choir for the ceremony, I didn't care. For one thing, I wanted to look over the area for a spell at the empty sky that was bleached white about its edges. When I had done that, I wanted to be away from the fair grounds as quickly as I could.

Jim and Harv drove me home to my rented bachelor house. I shook hands with them and thanked them for being my friends.

"You might not be seeing me for a while," I told them.

"You aren't going to do something dumb, are ya?" asked Harv.

I remember him as a good-hearted boy who found homes for the stray dogs that wandered into Sterton from the farms. Harv saw only disaster and evil intentions in the vast portion of the universe beyond the influence of his goodness.

I told them I was going to be fine and they were not to worry. I would be in touch with them soon.

"Julia and I were never true friends," I said. "She never cared for me."

"Look at those clouds coming in," said Jim Holmes.

In my part of the country we talk about the weather when it is difficult to say what we would like to say. We three looked at the black rain clouds building over the Wind River Mountains and were silent for our last moments together. Harv Miliken drowned in the North Atlantic after a German U-Boat sank his transport ship, and Bill Holmes would suffer wounds as painful as death on Okinawa.

We watched, and afterwards I said goodbye.

I left a note in my house for Harry Wister, my fellow herder for the Hirsham Company, asking him to explain my absence to Mr. Hirsham and informing him that any furniture or clothing I left behind were his and that the rent was paid through the summer, after which time he would have to find another house mate or rent a cheaper place. I wrote three separate, identical letters: one for Mother and Marilyn on the farm, one for Mr. And Mrs. Muir, and one for my sister Myra in Denver. I wrote that I loved them and would be writing them again soon. In Mother's letter I included two hundred

dollars in cash.

I packed a suitcase with two of everything: shirts, socks, pants, underwear, and Chapman's Homer and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, my two best books. At eight forty-five that evening I caught the bus to Casper, and in the morning I went to the recruiting office next to the city building and joined the Marines.



## My Brush with History

On a map of Wyoming, two long mountain ranges reach eastward like two long arms from the northwest corner and gather the central valleys of the state into their embrace. On a good map, such as the state highway map, which shows the state's topographical features in relief, I can make out the image of a woman in those mountains: the Wind River Range and the Big Horns are her right and left arms, the outline of her head lies west of the Absorkas and south of Yellowstone Lake, and the sagebrush foothills bordering the central deserts are the edges of her long robe. A single river that is called the Wind in the southern basin and is know as the Big Horn when it flows north, moves through both valleys the woman holds in her arms; it waters the low-lying arms and supports the sparse life that exists in the harsh land. My six years in the Marine Corps was the only time in my life I lived more than a hundred miles from the mountain woman and her glistening river.

The Corps sent me to Parris Island, South Carolina, for my boot camp. An old green bus rocking on its worn-out shocks took me and twenty-three other rash young men from Denver across the Midwest and the South to our mutual destination. We were a silent bunch on that long, hot ride. Twenty-three of us were having second thoughts concerning what we had done at our recruiting stations. The twenty-fourth man of us was a loud country boy from some small town west of Fargo, North Dakota, who looked underage and walked the bus isle boasting of his marksmanship and his skill as a boxer. "I whipped a prized fighter once," he told me. All the other men had told him to leave them alone, so he settled in the back seat next to me. I could barely understand him, as he spoke faster than we do around Sterton.

"Heck, I whipped a bear," he said. "In a traveling exhibit. He wanted to wrestle me, and I boxed him. Couldn't knock him out, but I figure I won on points. They wouldn't give me a prize. What's the

name of the fat guy they show by Hitler, the one in the baggy pants?"

"Eva Braun," I said.

"Yeah, that's him," he said. "My name's Quinten Sanders. Call me Q-Ball, if you like. I used to know all those Nazis from the newsreels. I thought Eva was his girlfriend's name."

"Her name's Hermann Goering," I said.

"I'll take your word for it," he said.

He told me about pitching pennies against the sidewalk in his hometown and about his experience in a Mrs. Swenson's third grade class. "Our neighbors talk Norwegian to their dogs," he told me. He was going to marry his sweetheart, Ellan Louis Mecklenburg, in a year or two or as soon as the President and those Prime Ministers from England and whoever else got together and decided not to have a war. She, Ellan Louise, made great marzipan; well, maybe her mother helped her.

"How old do you have to be to get married in South Carolina?" he asked me. "She's only fourteen, you know."

I learned he liked to listen to the radio at night, after his parents were asleep, and that he could drive a truck around the family farm but he didn't yet have a license to use the road into Fargo.

"Look how big this darned country is!" he said.

We had crossed the Mississippi River at Memphis an hour or so before and were passing through fields of crops I didn't recognize.

"Did you know America was this big?" he said. "On the farm it was us and the folks down the road. They said in school we were a great powerful nation, and I'll be darned if we aren't. Did you ever think it was *this* big?"

"In Wyoming we figure everything is big," I said. "I knew from reading that we were a world power. It is something to see how varied the country is from place to place; the big cities here, then the farms and the miles of trees. I never pictured it quite like this."

"They're taking up an awful lot of good crop land with these cities," observed Quin. "We're going to be good friends, eh, Tommy?" he said.

"Could be," I said. "But I'm not going to call you 'Q-Ball,' and I would prefer you didn't call me 'Tommy.'"

"People have called me worse," he said and sat in contented silence for the next thirty miles.

Quin was short, had a slight build, and straightaway put me in mind of Shorty McVick, my late friend from Sterton; which shows I was always friends with the same sort of men. No one else at boot camp cared for Quin, and the consensus of my boot platoon was that Quin would be among the first batch of men sent home in the light blue uniform the Marine Corps puts on its failures for the purpose of humiliating them before the general public. Time has taught me that our first impressions of land and horses are usually correct and that those concerning other people were as often as not wrong, and while I have heard there were braver men in different units and in other theaters of the war, the bravest, most tenacious warrior I was ever to meet was the diminutive Quinten Sanders. His name is listed in a book I have that names all the winners of the Navy Cross, and that honor does not begin to tell of his heroics. If the Marines had given him a medal every time he earned one, Quin would today have a whole book to himself. We have a curious image of military bravery in the modern world. We think a hero should be an athlete: well formed and possessing a self-confidence that is as perfect as his wardrobe. We don't recognize a genuine hero should we meet him face to face and he is small and wiry and bristling with nervous energy like Quin. We forget it is the runt terrier that will stand an fight to the death when there is yet a chance of escape, whereas the cougar, a creature full of grace and power, hides in the treetops upon hearing a single dog bark. I have read in an old *National Geographic* that the average soldier in Caesar's army was less than five feet tall, which would mean the Emperor had entire legions of fierce, diminutive Quinten Sanders under his command, and that explains to me why the tall and muscular barbarians did not stand a chance against the Romans for as long as the Empire maintained its ferocious little infantry.

It was raining as we got off the bus at Parris Island. It was always raining at Parris Island. We had two months of rain and mud and, worse than that, we had two months of Sergeant Victor Staws, our drill instructor, a stocky, sanguine man whose spine was as stiff as the brim of his campaign hat.

"Sons of bitches!" he shouted at us as we were piling off the bus and forming two lines. "Sons of bitches, I'll kill every last of you 'fore I let my slimy sons of bitches in this man's Marines! You might

as well get back on the goddamned bus right now, every tit sucking one of you, ‘cause I’m gonna kill you if you don’t!”

Quin raised his hand.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said. “The sergeant at the recruiting station in Fargo said I was a Marine when I signed up. I took the oath and everything.”

“You talking to me, cockbite?!” Sergeant Staws screamed.

He scrambled over to Quin and repeated the question point blank in his face.

“Who else would I be talking to, sir?” said Quin and shrugged his shoulders.

The sergeant’s attitude confused him, and he glanced at the other men for a clue as to what was happening.

Sergeant Staws stomped away from him, swearing at the ground under his boots. When he was again in front of the entire group he spun about and frantically kicked mud at us.

“Jesus Christ! You *stupid* sons of bitches!” he yelled. “I’ll kill you! I’ll take a bite out of you ever’ day you live! I’ll put your asshole on a stick! I’ll bite your fuckin’ nose off! I’ll scramble your balls in my eggs for breakfast! I’ll kill you ten thousand times before I let ‘em put a Marine uniform on one of you! Dirty shits! Filthy shits! Filthy queer shits!”

Every time he yelled “shits” he kicked the puddle before him and splattered us.

“Stay here!” he ordered us. “Stay here and die in the goddamned rain!”

He straightened his blistered red head on a neck that was more jowls than muscle and bone, and left us standing beside the bus for the next three hours.

“This doesn’t look to be as much fun as it did back in Fargo,” said Quin.

He was right about that.

At Parris Island we had to drill in mud and hike in mud and camp in mud and crawl on our stomachs in mud while Sergeant Staws shot live ammunition over us and screamed: “I just might slip and get you this time, I might!” I dreamed about mud at night and would awaken to cough up mud on my bed sheets. Mud got up my nose and into my ears, and if I turned my head on the hard pillow I could feel the grit

digging against me. "Mud will make men of you!" explained Sergeant Staws, coming as close to poetic expression as he dared venture.

During the long, humid days we were exercised into exhaustion on the mud flats Sergeant Staws said were the parade decks. In the mess they fed us brown, tasteless food that resembled mud.

Sergeant Staws taught us bayonet fighting with pungee sticks, which are short poles padded on both ends. Once I had the weapon in my hands, every cell in my body felt it could ram one end into the sergeant's red face when he ordered me to "come and show me." I knew I could kill him; at the moment I wanted to kill him more than anything I had wanted to do before. This was, I should have recalled, what he did for a living. His face was gone before my stick got there, and the next sensation I felt was his stick in my stomach, and after that I was on the ground and Sergeant Staws was kicking me in the groin.

"I'm gonna piss on you, Webblebuns!" he screamed at me. "You're nothing but shit under my boots! I might as well piss on you!"

I was balled into the fetal position, and he was standing over me, unzipping his pants.

In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius wrote:

*Do not say: "How unlucky I am, that this happens to me!" Say rather: "How lucky I am, that this has left me with no bitterness, unshaken by the present, and undismayed by the future.*

I re-read his book before I went to sleep in my bunk. I pictured the old Roman sitting by his campfire in the German forest, the barbarians a bow shot away, while back in Rome worked the conspirators—his evil wife, Faustina, and his son, the savage Commodus, chief among them—and before old Marcus and his Empire lay the certain prospect of ruin. He should have hated the world. He chose to write:

*If a man makes a slip, admonish him gently and show him his mistake. If you fail to convince him, blame yourself, or else blame no one.*

I wished I could be as good a man as Marcus was. When Sergeant Staws stepped on Quin's back as we were doing push-ups, and he held Quin's face in the mud by setting his boot on the back of Quin's head as he hollered: "This is death, you tight-assed Yankee shit! Death is as dark as a hole!" I wished I could forgive Sergeant Staws as Marcus had forgiven his enemies. The anger might have left me, if I had been that good. I consoled myself with the knowledge that boot camp would not last forever and that Marcus had declared all bad times passed if they were endured.

*Pain of hand or foot is nothing unnatural, so long as hand and foot are doing their own work. Likewise, some pain is not contrary to the nature of man, as man, so long as he is doing a man's work.*

As the point beyond tired is exhaustion, the point beyond exhaustion is delirium. In the mornings my muscles hurt more than my mind could withstand, and my mind had to be put in some other body for me to function in my man's work. I learned to walk in another way, using the fresh legs I imagined I had, for my accustomed manner of walking became impossible. My heart continued to beat somewhere inside the cloud of nerves that was my chest; I talked to it, and told it I hoped it would keep going as it had since my birth. I could feel it in me when I stretched my neck or back, and my heart hurt so badly I felt as though my aching muscles were strangling the flow of blood. If I wanted to move my hand from one place to another, I had to look at my hand, as I would look at a hand attached to another man's arm, and I had to look at the place I wanted it to go, and by sight alone I would guide my hand to its destination, because the part of me that lay between my hand and my brain was no longer controlled by my thoughts.

"War is a hammer," Sergeant Staws told us. "You take care of the handle end, and it will take care of the other."

"What do you figure that means?" Quin asked me. "How can a hammer be war?"

"It's a metaphor," I said. "Not a very clear one. He means we should follow orders, do what we have to, and that will make everything else work out fine."

"I wish war was plain and simple shooting the other side," said

Quin. "I'm good at shooting. It's this metaphor stuff that's too complicated for me."

Quin's bragging on the bus turned out to be more than puffery: he really was a fine marksman. Sergeant Staws screamed at him for turning his left hand completely under the rifle stock. He informed Quin, in his overstated way, that this was a sure way to injure one's wrist. Quin kept his bad habits and hit the stationary bull's eye more often than anyone on base, including Sergeant Staws, who time and again snatched the rifle out of Quin's grasp to show how shooting should be done.

"I pretend the target's old Staws' head and every shot's my last shot," said Quin to me. "If I can picture how big his mouth is, that bull's eye looks a mile wide."

Quin and I adjusted to the heat and the eternal dampness of South Carolina, and we demonstrated that a life lived out of doors is a proper training for a soldier's job. We had never had much before we became Marines, and did not miss having more. We could endure the long marches and make do with little water and less food, for that was how we had always lived. He and I did not lose ourselves in the Corps, as some of the weaker men did. The weak ones had to polish every button and stretched their bed sheets, to make them as taunt as tambourines and in a thousand small ways became Sergeant Staws' personal slaves. Quin and I became Marines of a fiercer, more primitive type, the kind that during the war was called the old breed. I caught Sergeant Staws smiling to himself while he watched Quin and I slip through the muddy obstacle course like two weasels after the same chicken or when he watched us hit the stationary target dead center, and I was sickened to know I was pleasing him, and knowing that made me angrier at him and that the world that allowed Sergeant Staws to have authority over other people in a miserable place like the sovereign swamp of South Carolina, and I drove my bayonet into the practice dummy harder and made myself take the next step forward no matter how tired I was.

At our final ceremony in boot camp, Sergeant Staws, looking as content as a fed cat, congratulated Quin and myself: "You two Yankee boys are going to love California. You done real good down here," he told us. I remember that when he took my hand his palm felt as dry as sandpaper, and I wondered if it was the only spot in the

entire state that wasn't wet.

The Corps sent Quin and me to San Diego, where the palm trees grew along the sidewalk and people would kick their watchdogs on a Marine if he stepped off the sidewalk and onto someone's lawn. We were attached to the Fifth Marines, which was then participating in amphibious exercises on and about San Clemente Island. In comparison to our war experiences, these early landings would have been a vacation holiday had they been better planned. The surf off shore was heavier than the officers expected, and some of the landing boats foundered in the warm water, forcing the Marines on board to cast off their rifles and gear and to swim to land. Most of the landlubbers, myself included, became nauseous on the rough sea, and our charge onto the beach of San Clemente had to be delayed until we had paused to vomit. Because we were using some of the new landing barges that opened in the front after the bolts were shot, the commanding officers wanted the exercise to come off well. Not surprisingly, the San Clemente operations were reported to the public as "highly successful," and the new barges that had performed poorly in the high surf became standard equipment throughout the war.

San Clemente in those days (I understand it's different now) was yellow rocks and sand and no people. Millions of sea birds would rise out of the rocks when we hit the beach; their wings whirling in unison sounded like a freight train when they passed over us. On the island's far side were packs of sea lions lying in the sun above the shoreline, their fat, wet, backs shining like so many thousands of lumps of jelly. Quin liked to run at the lions with his arms out, shouting "Git going! Git Going!" and either the lions would gallop into the ocean, or else one of the old bulls would take after Quin, who had to race back into the rocks, laughing at the trouble he was causing.

The ocean made San Diego endurable. The ocean is the one natural feature Wyoming lacks, though the war would teach me that any land lying on the sea will sooner or later have trouble for a neighbor, and I have since decided that I am pleased that Wyoming is so far inland. When the ocean lay calm, I could stand on the California beach and look west and see the line where the earth curves away from America, and I would wonder at how large the sea is and at the loneliness of the men living on such a vast and separate

expanse. If I looked long enough I would ponder questions as large as the ocean, such as: Why does the ocean make me think of both birth and Death? Why wouldn't ancient men think this long, unvarying line where water and sky meet was the edge of the world? Why do we long to be over that line instead of the place we are? If I looked longer still, I would think of Julia, about whom my loose thoughts always tended to collect.

My sister Myra wrote me often. She wrote of her child and of Jesus, and in her letters one had much in common with the other. Marilyn also wrote to me, on Mother's behalf, as Mother was not well and was entirely dependent on Marilyn and Bob's good will. Marilyn wanted to know if I was meeting any interesting young women in California, which indicates how much she knew about the Marine Corps. The only women on or near our base were officers' wives, commissioned nurses, and the prostitutes waiting outside the camp gates. I lived on my bunk, in a room with fifty other men. I had an overhead fan for companionship while I learned the hard lesson that being a warrior touches more upon fighting boredom than it does upon fighting the enemy.

Early in 1941, Quin and I were transferred again, this time back east to Quantico, and soon after that to the New River base in North Carolina, where the weather is as damp as it is on Parris Island and a lot colder. In May of that year we were placed in the First Separate Battalion of the Fifth Marines, an elite outfit composed of six reinforced rifle units, each containing more than one hundred men who were trained to land on shore directly from destroyer transports by means of motorized rubber boats. We were to act as scouts for the larger division or to create diversions by launching rapid attacks on the enemy's rear.

This was a happier situation for us. Some of the hard-bitten First were Westerners like Quin and I, and the majority were tobacco-chewing peckerwoods from the South, whom poverty and boredom had driven into the service. They fought endlessly amongst themselves, but were better comrades than the Easterners in the main division, most of who proclaimed as often as they were permitted to talk that they had joined the Corps to defeat Hitler and help create a just post-war world. The Japanese did not figure in their thinking in any manner whatsoever.

“The United States will not enter the war until the capitalist Nazis have attacked the Soviet Union,” one Easterner had complained to me.

A friend of his had argued: “F. Roosevelt is not a captive of the reactionary circles. Premier Stalin and he won’t let W. Churchill position A. Hitler against Russia.”

The southern boys in the First argued about poker and baseball and were fiercer Marines than the political thinkers from the northeast, for men fighting because they enjoy fighting have always been better in battle than men fighting for ideas.

The First was trained in small unit tactics. The whole of our doctrine was “close with the enemy and kill him.” We had a great battalion leader in Lieutenant Colonel Merrit A. Edson, a burly blue-eyed killer known in the battalion as Red Mike. I knew him and his chief exec Lt. Colonel Sam Griffith as two officers who went among the men every day, asking questions of the troops and issuing orders to the junior officers. I have read in later years that both were learned men and were highly regarded as strategists by the higher ups: during our commando training at New River they seemed as common as the rest of us walking around the beaches in our soggy pre-war fatigues. Edson became famous during the war, and people have asked me if I remember anything about him. Other than telling of his distinctive large eyes, I tell anyone who asks that I remember what a poor speaker Edson was. “Well,” he began one of his addresses to the entire battalion, “this training should come in handy some day.” Then he had the sergeants dismiss us from formation, and he went to have his supper.

Our unit reached its full 1,000 man strength at New River, and the high command gave us a new name: the First Raider Battalion, and we were given the shoulder patch with a skull on it, which, like Lt. Col. Edson, would be famous for a time during the war. We were transferred yet again, this time to Solomon’s Island, Maryland, and trained with less specialized units in mass landings at the mouth of the Chesapeake. We could not longer train in the deep sea, as the U.S. had entered the war in December of 1941, and German submarines were prowling the Atlantic coast. We tried landing at night, which was easy for the Raiders, since we went ashore first and in small rubber boats. The Army’s Ninth Infantry Division, our

partners at Solomon's Island, used the big barges and even some LSTs of the sort that found action in Europe, and in the darkness they came into the coastline like an avalanche and smashed into each other a thousand times before they found the shore. Dozens of them were badly injured. No enemy forces were on the beach to say otherwise, so this operation was judged "highly successful", like the others before it.

In May we—and I here mean the entire First Raiders—were transported across the Pacific to New Caledonia. Our ships ran with lights out during the night, and everyone but the sailors on duty were kept under deck for twenty-three hours a day. As we headed into the South Seas, the atmosphere in the crowded hold became as thick as that in a steam bath. I was sick through most of the voyage and stayed in my bunk, except for the one hour a day I could go topside, and breathe a day's worth of fresh air. The Southerners played cards for the next year's paychecks, and got into a fist-fight because one Marine bet his death fund after he had already lost two years salary to his mates.

"You can shoot me in the back, first thing we're in the jungle, and we'll be even," he man deep in debt said.

His best friend hit him in the mouth.

The Marine wagering against his death was named Karl Leuthauser, or Karl the Nazi, as he was known in the platoon. His friend was Joe Avery, called the Crocodile on account of his ravenous manners at the mess table. They were buddies of mine, as was Sammy Lee the Georgia hillbilly and Jack Killdeer, a half-Cherokee from Oklahoma, who had shoulders that were wider across than any of the ship's portals. I remember their names and faces: the men who entered the platoon after Karl, Joe, Sammy, and Jack were dead are the ones I have forgotten. I was naïve about much at this point in the war and hadn't learned I shouldn't become connected to the men serving beside me.

Quin was impervious to the heat and to the smell of the sweating men in the hold. He sat at my feet and ate a baloney sandwich he had stolen from the mess.

"Who's the top Jap again?" he asked me.

"Officially, it's the Emperor Hirohito," I said. "In reality, its Generalissimo Tojo."

“What kind of a name’s ‘Generalissimo?’” he asked.

“It’s Spanish,” I said. “He’s named in honor of Generalissimo Franco, the leader of Spain.”

I can’t justify teasing Quin as I did; he hadn’t done me a wrong turn, and I was the one person in the platoon who understood my jokes, so it wasn’t as if I were keeping every else entertained.

“I seen Hirohito in *Life* magazine, like the other old boys,” said Quin between bites. “He was this sissy on the skinniest horse you ever saw. We’ll beat him easy. Who do you suppose a runt like that figures he can take us on?”

The baloney sandwich was making my stomach rotate.

“Maybe the Pacific isn’t big enough for him and us,” I said.

“It’s big enough for the fish,” said Quin, which was true, but didn’t make any sense.

Two of the fighters rammed into our bunk, momentarily knocking Quin on his side. He held on to his sandwich and ignored the combatants. The Southerners wouldn’t have paid us any mind had Quin or I said something, for their fights, like their card games and their group visits to the whore houses, were strictly for friends, and they would have resented any Yankee interference.

“I’d be willing to give old Hirohito the South of that’d satisfy him,” said Quin and took another bite of his sandwich.

New Caledonia is a small island in a dark blue sea. The entire patch of land is not as big as some ranches back home, and is an apparition from a storybook. If a person goes off to fight a war, the last peaceful spot he visits should be like New Caledonia. The land is green and puts forth coffee groves and tall curved coconut trees. The people are a mixture of the many races that have strayed there by mistake during the centuries: Europeans, Chinese, Polynesians, Malaysians, Vietnamese, and they seemed as exotic to me as did the strange bright birds I saw perched on the jungle branches. They make copra in New Caledonia, which I discovered is the meat of coconuts dried in the sun. A man with brown gaps in his teeth gave me a piece of the odd stuff as I was walking down a plantation pathway. The man smiled at me and said something in his language; I believed he was speaking of the sun as his hand pointed in that direction, but I will never know for certain. I have heard that some native women on New Caledonia go swimming in the nude. I have not seen them in

person. Someone started a rumor in a Moumea bar filled with Marines that a naked woman had been spotted on the beach, and at least forty of us ran down the street, drinks in hand, to have a look. Sammy Lee, the Georgia boy, said he could see something out beyond the breakers, and he dove into the water fully dressed to have a look. A half hour later, we decided he had seen some seaweed floating on the surface. Another man said he had seen something that resembled a naked woman swimming off to the east. "She's too far away by now," he said, looking wistfully at the horizon. We all agreed that probably she was very beautiful.

We left pretty New Caledonia on destroyer escorts, dressed in full combat gear, and not one of us knowing where we were going. We arrived on Koro Island July the twenty-second. The very top brass was on Koro, a fact our lieutenant pounded into us during the several days of landing rehearsals we held on the island. In front of the Corps commanding officers were discovered that Koro has too many reefs surrounding it and that we could not bring our boats into the beaches from most directions when the ocean was at low tide. We made an enormously foolish sight, we thousands of men stranded on landing craft, sitting for hours outside the coral outcroppings hundreds of yards from the island proper while the generals stood on Koro and threw their hats into the sand and cursed us.

"Let's hope the Japs play fair and don't fortify any islands that have reefs," I told Quin.

We didn't know we had been brought to Koro to prepare for Guadalcanal. The Japanese had almost completed an air base there, and when the airstrip was finished, they would cut Australia's ocean lifeline to North America. The Japanese had more ships in the area than did our Navy, and they had more troops already stationed on Guadalcanal than we had available to send there. We didn't know those things either.

On the Thirty-first of July we were sent west across a smooth, hot ocean. I waited under deck and re-read my other best book, Chapman's Homer.

*Now put to sacred seas our black sail.*

I had no concentration in my reading. I skipped about from line to phrase and lost the story line.

"I'm going to make a necklace out of Jap gold teeth," said Karl the Nazi, and showed me a pair of pliers he intended to take into combat.

Sammy Lee said he was going to pickle Jap noses for souvenirs. Another Marine said he was collecting Jap ears. Soon it was Jap heads, and Jap testicles. Karl, not to be outdone by anybody, said he would eat a dead Jap raw, provided Joe the Crocodile and the others forgave him his poker debts. Joe said he would rather lose the war than not collect from Karl. Karl said something about Joe's mother and goats, and another fight erupted. The lieutenant had to muster the platoon into formation and threaten us with court martials if we didn't behave ourselves.

August Second was a Sunday. Everyone, including the men who had bragged about the dozens of women they had been with and the men who were going to cut up dead Japanese, attended services on deck in the open air. Jack Killdeer was roaring when we sang "The Old Rugged Cross," and he would've given testimony in front of the entire battalion had the chaplain not seen that Jack had tears streaming down his face and told the big Okie that he needed to calm down. Quin and I attended the Catholic mass as well as the Protestant ceremony just in case we had been misled in some manner when we were children. At both services the chaplains had to wait longer than they had intended to let the men finish their prolonged prayers.

*O friends, someone abides within here, that commends  
The place to us, and breathes a voice divine.*

The last two days at sea were overcast. We had time to write letters home while the brass waited to see if the weather would worsen. I started a letter to Marilyn that began: "I may be dead when you this gets to you." I tore that letter up and wrote another that wouldn't upset her or Mother. "A lot of interesting things have happened to me since I wrote you last," I began. Towards the end of the letter I asked: "Have you seen any of my old friends? For instance, have you heard anything of Julia?"

Before dawn on the Seventh of August we put camouflage paint

on our faces and tied shredded burlap onto our helmets. We were busy in our preparations, loading our rifles and collecting water, and food rations, and were relieved to be in motion, instead of sitting below deck waiting. The Southerners begged on last tobacco plug from the commissary.

At 08:00 hours we were over the side of the ship and in the Higgins boats as the bombardment commenced. Flights of dive-bombers passed over us and split into two formations that attacked both sides of the Sealark Channel as our boats sped into deep water. The day, like the two days before it, was cloudy, and the overcast sky combined with the smoke and dust the shells and bombs were causing to make the shoreline invisible to us until we were right on top of it.

The First Marine Division was sent south of the channel, to Lunga Point, the place on the main island where the Japanese were building their airport. The Raiders went north to Tulagi, a small island four thousand yards long and a thousand yards wide that lay roughly ten miles off Guadalcanal and directly across the channel from the airstrip. Both our landing and theirs were unopposed.

We made a line of men across Tulagi and probed towards the southeastern half of the island as two more Marine battalions landed to our rear and came up to support us. The morning's shelling had not thinned the jungle in front of us, and we had a slow time of it cutting through the underbrush of thick green leaves and long coils of bougainvillea that tied the plants together in a living mesh. For three hours we pushed ahead, meeting no resistance. The men kidded each other about this being only another exercise drill since there obviously weren't any Japanese here. Jack Killdeer, our point man, saw a branch move overhead and, working on reflexes, he raised his gun to his shoulder and fired. A green and orange bird that had a beak as big as its body tumbled from the trees and landed on the jungle floor. We were flat on the ground by the time it hit the ground. The lieutenant had Sergeant Dumont up front in a hurry to find out what had happened.

"Private Killdeer shot one of those feathered Japs," said Karl.

Quin held the bird up by the wings and turned it so the light glittered off the luminous feathers. The green turned to blue, and the orange became fire red. The dead bird sparkled like a Merlin's eye

as the sun caught it's plumage in different places.

"The prettiest thing I ever saw," said Quin.

At about noon we entered an abandoned village the Japanese had constructed on Tugali's north shore. Bomb craters were everywhere. Every windowpane in the houses was shattered. I kicked in the door of one house and found a bathtub filled with hot water, and on a table in the house's main room were two plates of rice, partially eaten and left behind when the enemy fled into the trees.

Quin and I were examining a calendar that had on it a print of some sort of traditional procession when the battle started. Mortar shells began raining on the street outside, and rifle bullets, buzzing as they spun past, erupted from the bushes to the south.

We got on the ground and returned fire, shooting into the shadows beneath the high trees for lack of better targets. A group of maybe ten Japanese, the first we had seen in the flesh, jumped up and ran across the open ground towards our position. There were twirling swords above their heads. All were screaming: "Banzai! Banzai!" exactly as the training pamphlets stated they would.

"God, do they look like a bunch of idiots!" said Quin.

He aimed his Browning Automatic Rifle, but he got to laughing at the ridiculous bravado of the Japanese and couldn't fire. I shot fired my Springfield at the lead Jap and missed. I worked the bolt, fired again, and hit the man behind the lead, causing him to jump backwards and turn a summersault.

"Shoot!" I yelled at Quin. "They're going to kill us!"

I worked the bolt and shot another one, who fell to his knees and grabbed at his intestines as they fell out his front.

Quin was shaking with laughter.

"Look how dumb that one is!" he said, pointing to a fat soldier on the far right. "You can't charge a B.A.R. like this!"

The lead Jap wasn't twenty feet from us when Quin opened up on them. He made a complete left to right pass with the Browning, then swung back to his left to knock down any men left standing. The Japanese came apart in the hail of bullets. Their useless swords flipped into the air, and their arms, heads and legs, like pieces of broken dolls, were tossed up after them. The soldier I had shot in the belly was the last to go completely down; he made a high, whistling scream, like a pig being forced into the slaughterhouse, and collapsed

on his face.

"Bonzai my ass!" said Quin.

We lay on the ground for the next twenty minutes or so and laughed hysterically at the dead Japs. "Stop it!" I would tell Quin, "You're going to get us killed!" Then I would get to laughing along with him, and we would be out of control once more. I can't explain why we reacted that way.

On that first day, the Raiders took all of Tulagi but for the last one thousand yards of the island's southernmost end. By late evening Lt. Col. Edson ordered us to fall back into defensive positions for the night. We were dug in by the time the sun set and were reinforced in the darkness by the Fifth Marines. The utter hopelessness of their situation did not stop the crazy Japs from trying to fight us. We had four hundred of them trapped, cut off from any avenue of escape, on that last parcel of land. The sane, human action on their part would have been to surrender. No American commander would have thrown away his men's lives if caught in a similar position. The Japanese didn't think like Americans. They were brave to such a degree we could not distinguish their courage from stupidity. They came at our lines in small attack groups until the morning of the Eighth. Many of their senior officers had attended college in America or Britain, and they had taught their men some English phrases to yell at us in the darkness: things like "Dirty Marine bastards, you will die tonight!" and "Americans, I defecate on your graves!" although I doubt many of the Raiders knew what defecate meant and weren't terribly offended by the remark. They ran at us to make us shoot, and threw hand grenades at our muzzle flashes. Another trick of theirs was to send one man in one direction and have him whistle to draw our fire, and then a swarm of other Japs would charge us from a different angle. Behind their attack troops they kept a team of snipers hidden in bunkers made of coconut logs, and they would kill us if we panicked during a suicide charge and stood up to retreat. But Marines don't panic easily. For all their bother, the Japs succeeded only in getting slaughtered, and made no headway against our lines. A single infiltrator made it into our sector of the front; the two other Japs he charged with were mowed down in the open ground, but this third man ran past our forward machine gun and dove belly first into the low shrubs right in front of our trench. Quin saw his hiding place

and crept over to the Jap, put his pistol to his helmet, and whispered: "Good night, friend," before he shot the man twice through the top of the head.

As would happen on every night during the campaign, the mosquitoes and land crabs were swarming on us till morning. I was familiar with the former type of pest from my childhood along the river, however the South Pacific variety of mosquito carried malaria, a disease many of us would contract before we departed Guadalcanal. The latter type of creature, the tiny land crab, rose from the ground by the thousands and bit us on the face and through our tunics, leaving red spots on the skin that became infected because we couldn't bathe.

In the morning we brought up heavy mortars, both sixty and eighty-one millimeters, to destroy the remaining Jap fortifications. This was more execution than warfare. Spotters in our forward positions radioed in the exact locations of the coconut bunkers to the gunners, and the big shells, slow moving and perfectly visible as they passed over our heads, made a high, smokey arch and descended directly on top of the trapped Japanese. A few stunned and wobbly little men sometimes emerged from the wreckage the shelling was causing and would try to stumble toward us over the broken logs. We easily picked off this doomed handful as we advanced to the edge of the carnage. In another sector of the thousand yard front some Jap defenders retreated into caves; the Raiders in that portion of the line simply tossed demolition packs into the cave entrances and blew the occupants back to their ancestors. By evening the shooting was over. We took a few Japanese too badly wounded to kill themselves from the smashed bunkers; the rest were dead. Out of nearly a thousand men on the island Sunday, six were still alive on Tulagi by battle's end.

Joe Avery and another man from our platoon were among the Raider dead. They were in a foxhole together, and must have shared the same grenade, for their bodies were mixed together, and we had to dig their dog tags from the mess to identify them.

We survivors didn't mourn our dead. We felt a hundred years older, but were happy to still be there. We talked too much, much as boys drunk on their first beers do, and told lies about the battle to each other than none of us believed but we felt compelled to tell.

After a couple weeks rest, the high command had the Raiders ferried across Sealark Channel to Lunga Point and the foothold we held on the big island of Guadalcanal. The First Marine Division and their support units had established a perimeter about eight thousands yards wide around the airport—by then the brass had renamed it Henderson Field—and the First had successfully defended their new base against a heavy counter assault launched from across the Ilu River on their west flank. As long as we held Henderson our fliers and the naval aviators from our carriers had control of the air by day. At night the Japanese Navy would sail down Sealark and shell our positions around Henderson. Our ships tried to counter the Japanese fleet in the darkened channel, where spotters did little good and radar did not work well, and both navies essentially blundered upon each other at nearly point blank range. The two sides lost so many ships in the narrow channel that it was dubbed Iron Bottom Sound after the numerous wrecks that soon lay on Sealark's floor. The entire contest came down to who could keep their land forces supplied longest and which navy could afford to lose the most ships. The Navy Seabees were at work expanding Henderson to hold more and bigger planes, and if we held the base till they were done, our air superiority would be too great for the Japs hiding in the island's jungle to withstand. If the Japs were to win, they had to break our perimeter and drive us into the sea before the Seabees were finished.

The Raiders got into the daily routine of fighting on the Canal by relieving the sick and wounded along the front. By day the enemy kept his distance in the heavy foliage lest we would smash him with our big mortars. At night their snipers would sneak close to our foxholes and shoot at any Marine foolish enough to move from his position during the naval bombardment. A lone Japanese bomber, the famous "Washing Machine Charlie," from the big enemy base at Rabaul, New Britain, would fly over us just before and just after the Japanese ships shelled us, and would drop some green flares or a couple light bombs to make us waste our ammunition in trying to shoot him down. The men bet cigarettes each night on what time Charlie would arrive. If he dropped a big cluster of particularly bright green flares, we would cheer for him as though we were watching a fireworks display back in the States.

On September the Eighth, the Raiders got back into our motorized

boats and made a strike at Taivu Point, several miles to the west of our perimeter and the place the Japanese Navy had dropped supplies for their land forces. We landed at Tasimboko village and found its defenders to be a couple hundred wounded Japs dressed in rags; they had been pulled from the central battle and most of them were too weak to hold their rifles steady. We killed about twenty of the sick and dying men, and the rest fled into the forest. We burned the village and the supplies in it. The reserve artillery the enemy had kept in tidy rows inside the village were pushed into the ocean to join the sunken ships. For our own use we took some delicacies such as cans of crab meat and bottles of sake. Karl the Nazi grabbed an armful of colored pennants he'd found in an officer's hut; he hid them in the keel of our boat while the lieutenant was on shore helping set fires. We were out of the village in two hours, and once back at Lunga Point and Henderson Field, Karl announced he wanted to play cards again. He didn't have any money, he said; he had something better, these Japanese "battle flags" he claimed were sacred objects blessed by the Emperor Hirohito and worth more than gold on the contraband market. Two Marines from Arkansas believed him, and the three of them played poker into the night.

On September the Tenth, Lt. Col. Edson sent the Raiders and a paratroop battalion to the south side of the defensive perimeter. He lied to us—the only time Red Mike did so during his command—for he said we were going into a rest area as a reward for our casualty free raid on Taivu Point. We dug into the south face of a long, high ridge that ran at a right angle to our other defenses. No trees grew along the ridge, and from its top we could overlook Henderson Field and the whole of our battle lines from Alligator Creek in the east to the Matanikau River in the west. I told Quin that for a rest area the place did a good imitation of the most strategic point on the island. Artillery fire from atop the ridge would rout any advance the Japanese made against any other part of our lines. If they wished to take Henderson, they clearly would have to take our ridge first.

At sunup the next day we spotted Jap bombers from Rabaul overhead. We assumed they were headed for a strike on Henderson, as was their daily custom; to our amazement, they veered south and dropped their loads on us. A five hundred pound monster exploded a stone's throw from me and buried me in my hole with dark, wet

earth. I burrowed out and brushed the dirt from my face, and must have been a nasty sight, covered as I was with the damp soil and bits of land slugs and reeking of the decay that was common to the whole of Guadalcanal. Karl the Nazi called me "the Mole" after that, and I stayed the Mole to him and the other Southerners for as long as they were alive.

At nine o'clock on the night of September the Twelfth, Washing Machine Charlie flew over us in a light rain and dropped a solitary green flare. We recognized it immediately as a new signal: From far out in the darkness beyond Lunga Point we saw flashes resembling lightening. A second later we heard the cannons' boom and the swelling rush of the incoming shells. The whole ridge jumped a few inches from the impact, and the noise was too large for our ears to hear. We hugged the ground and screamed—it was safe to scream for no one could hear over the barrage; a man could not even hear himself. The Jap gunners must have figured we would be dug in atop the ridge instead of on the south face; because the gigantic fourteen-inch shells tore up the ground just to our north and by and large only scared the devil out of us. When the ships ceased firing, hundreds of parachute flares lifted from the jungle below us. The ridge, the trees, the sky, for a thousand feet straight upwards: everything was as bright as midday. Mortar shells—their Mortar shells—lobbed into the ridge, and out of the trees marched Japanese soldiers, thousands and thousands of them, their wet helmets shining green under the flares, and each of them slapping his rifle butt and chanting, in English, "U.S. Marines be dead tomorrow! U.S. Marines be dead tomorrow!"

It was good theater and bad soldiering.

"Fuck you, Japs!" shouted Quin. "You be dead tonight!"

The other Raiders shouted insults down the slope, some hollered inarticulated sounds, and the ridge gave forth hundreds of needles of yellow fire.

How the Japanese commanders imagined the assault would work I don't know. Their brand of thinking is outside an American's comprehension. The grim figures pounding their rifles melted away under our bullets as quickly as they had appeared from the trees. By dumb strength of numbers the Japs managed to overrun our foremost positions, and we had to retreat up the hill in the darkness and

regroup on higher ground. The long, upward flank of the ridge presented too much open ground for any soldier to cover in the face of direct fire. When they tried to attack farther we sent them rolling back all the way to the treeline. At first light the attackers were gone from the grassy slope, leaving behind scattered bodies that bloated in the morning heat and split open like Thanksgiving turkeys during the long afternoon.

“Everybody in Japan must be crazy,” said Quin. “Else they think they’ve got more people than we got ammunition.”

“They think it’s a glorious death,” I explained. “There’s no greater honor than to die for the Emperor.”

“Yeah, look how glorious that sorry son of a bitch is,” he said, and threw an empty cartridge at a dead Jap lying a few yards from our hole. “You’ll never make it to North Dakota now, will you, stinking bastard?!” he shouted.

The day at hand was a Sunday. It passed without services on our ridge. Everyone, the chaplains included, were afraid to move from cover.

As night came on the Japanese attack began in the same manner it had taken on Saturday: the single flare fell from Charlie, the naval barrage—which again missed us—followed, and last came the infantry from the jungle. This time they were better organized and had gathered more men. Their officers were in front, their swords raised, and the files of men coming after them had learned to keep their heads down and to shoot their rifles rather than waste time trying to frighten us. They had brought their light machine guns to the edge of the forest and were peppering the ridge above the attacking troops as soon as the hundreds of parachute flares were fired. But we too were better prepared. Our commanders had also realized that the whole battle on Guadalcanal depended upon holding the high ridge, and they had stationed the First Division’s artillery regiment behind us during the daylight hours. When the Jap infantry started their long climb toward the Raiders, forward spotters sent the signal back to the gunners, and blazing flights of one hundred and five millimeter howitzer shells were soon streaking over the ridge to greet them.

Again they drove up the south face. Their covering fire was concentrated on our automatic weapons, and if we opened on a group

of attackers, we would catch incoming fire at that spot a moment later. At the ridge crest we stopped and threw volleys of hand grenades into the advancing swarms; we pulled pins early and let the grenades bounce downhill into their lines where they exploded like Roman candles. I saw a Marine on my right catch a Jap grenade in mid-air and toss it back in the direction it came; the device went off as it left his hand, and I could see the rays of shrapnel go through his chest and out his back. On my left, Quin sidestepped a Jap coming at him with a lowered bayonet and clubbed the soldier with his Browning before the man could turn around. Quin rolled the Jap's body down the slope, put a new clip in his rifle, and shot two more Japs who had paused to catch their rolling comrade.

Still they pushed us farther back. A second wave of Japs attacked after midnight, and a third around two o'clock in the morning. A man ran the length of our lines along the top of the ridge, holding his head and wailing, "Elenore and Franklin! Elenore and Franklin!" He vanished over the west side of the ridge and was never seen again. Lt. Col. Edson went from foxhole to foxhole to talk to the men. In the noise and confusion there was no other way for him to maintain communications with us.

"How we doing, son?" he asked when he came to me.

We had not met before.

"I've got seven I know of, sir," I said. "Probably some others I can't be sure about."

"Don't keep score," he said. "Just keep firing."

He gave me three grenades and two clips from the pouch he had over his shoulder.

"Regular ammo runners are dead," he said, and moved on to the next man.

At about four-thirty a battalion from the Fifth Marines arrived to reinforce us. We had withdrawn to the north end of the ridge at that juncture, and the Japs reformed and attacked us a fourth time before the sun arose. We expected this would be the climactic assault, but the new ground did not favor the Japs. Atop the ridge they had out advanced their covering fire from the jungle. They were fully exposed to all of our rifle and automatic weapon fire when they stood to charge, and this last attack was a massacre. After their last able-bodied man went down, we easily retook that portion of the ridge we

had lost. Once we were back in our previous foxholes, the cries of the wounded and dying Japs all around us was louder than the sporadic bursts of machine gun fire that continued to come from the jungle below.

At dawn it was ended. The Japanese retreated far into the trees and did not return in force for another month, by which time the Seabees had finished the air field, and the battle had been won. As they always did, the Japs fought to the last man, but after they had thrown away all their available men in their failed attempts to take the ridge, they were fighting for their ancestors and not in hopes of victory. In the months to come, our bombers would pound the remaining Japs into the muddy ground and cut off supplies to the starving survivors. Thousands of fresh American soldiers and Marines could be brought to Henderson, and they would eventually leave the defensive perimeter and overpower the last of the enemy.

On the day after the fight on the ridge, Red Mike assembled the Raiders and gave us one of his brief, celebrated speeches. "They're good," he said of the Japanese, "but I think we're better." He paused. "I think they've got some new respect for the American fighting man." He nodded, and dismissed us.

The fight on the ridge is known in the history books as the Battle of Bloody Ridge, though it sometimes is also called the Battle of Edson's Ridge. Most military historians I have read—and I have read most everything written on Guadalcanal—assert that Bloody Ridge was the key engagement in the campaign, and everyone agrees that Guadalcanal, along with Midway, El Alemein, and Stalingrad, was one of the four great battles that guaranteed the Allied triumph in the Second World War. It was an important event, not only for me, Tom Wedderburn, but for everyone living in modern times.

I today think of the morning after the battle, of myself: tired and dirty, my right hand bleeding from the heat of my rifle barrel, of the many dead, theirs and ours, including Jack Killdeer and Sammy Lee, rotting in the sun; and I understand why the post-war world is no damn good. For I was there when the beast was born, and anything so hideous as a newborn will not become beautiful as it grows older and stronger.

## How I Earned My Bad Leg

Three weeks after Bloody Ridge the Raiders were sent west to the Matanikau River. We made a confused, but quick, strike on the Jap fortifications on the other side of that muddy stream, killed a goodly number of the stunned enemy, and were lucky to escape back into our lines before the enemy had time to counter. A couple days later fresh troops replaced us on Guadalcanal, and we shipped back to New Caledonia. Ninety-seven of the Raiders were dead, another two hundred were seriously wounded, and a hundred more had malaria. We looked so bad in our rotting uniforms the sailors helping us onto the Higgins boats gawked at us in disbelief. We smelled worse than the dead bodies lying inland, and in our weariness we stumbled like drunks on the gangplanks leading to the boats.

“What are you swabbies looking at?” Quin snapped at the sailors. “You want to see something bad? Go take a gander at the Japs we blew to Hell!”

I didn't enjoy lovely New Caledonia on the return visit. I didn't go into the countryside or visit the sea as I had done before. When we weren't on base, Quin and I lived in the Noumea bars and did the drinking our old Southern comrades weren't around to do. For a space of about a fortnight after his first combat a man feels weak from the experience, and he is lucky if he can go through the motions of his duty while inside he is trembling at the odd fact that he lives while many others he once knew are dead. When the initial shock is past, a veteran finds himself less attached to everything he took pleasure in before, and at the same time he has become more reckless in his habits.

A sailor, probably an innocent boy, bumped into me one afternoon, as I was perched on a bar stool and made me spill my beer.

“You clumsy bastard!” I said. “I'll teach you to watch where you're going around Marines!”

I hit him square on the jaw, exactly as I should not have, the human jaw being so much harder than the fist. I was holding my throbbing hand and he was blinking and looking back at me when I remembered I had never been in a fist fight before, not even when I was a boy, and I didn't have a good idea what I should do next to the sailor. Everyone in the bar backed away from us, and I was feeling pretty awkward and wondered if it was too late to apologize to this stranger.

He must have hit me, for I recall seeing his hand come at my face, and I recall being on the floor and seeing Quin leap over the top of me and tackle the sailor. I got up and punched another sailor who happened to be there, he barged into me, and the two of us went crashing back to the floor. We rolled into a forest of white uniforms and chair legs, he and I flailing at each other as we went. Somebody—I have no idea who—kicked me from behind, but I kept on throwing punches until the Shore Patrol rushed in the door, brandishing their nightsticks and demanding we come to attention.

When they had us lined up against the walls, the sergeant in charge asked: "Now, who started this?" It was not the question I would have wanted him to ask.

Quin and I were confined to barracks for ten days. Sergeant Dumont, who had somehow survived Guadalcanal without the Japs shooting him in the front or his men shooting him in the back, never let us forget the incident during his lifetime. He stuck a poster of Joe Lewis on the wall above my bunk and told the platoon "Slugger Wedderburn" would soon be taking on the champ.

"Him and Sanders is going to fight Lewis together," he told the men.

We had eight replacements in the platoon, young boys who hadn't been with us on the Canal, and it was wrong of Dumont to shame us in front of them.

"Together," said the sergeant, "they'd weigh about the same as Lewis, if you got 'em both sopping wet. Haw, haw."

"The next time we go to war," Quin told me in private, "I'm going to kill that fat-assed Dumont if he ever dares to get in front of me."

Like every military outpost, New Caledonia had women of a certain type loitering near the off-duty places the service men

frequented. The majority of such women in Noumea, were half caste and didn't speak English beyond some phrases such as: "Hey, Yankee boy." An universal characteristic of these ladies, everywhere in the world they work their trade and regardless of their race or age, is that their mouths never seem right; their lips are too big and painted too red, and when one of them smiles the whole red mass slides to one side of her face. Quin and I had stayed away from the red-mouthed women during our first stay in New Caledonia. Before we had been blooded on the Canal, Quin had said the prostitutes made him feel like they were predators on the verge of making him their supper.

On an evening late in 1942, we were out drinking and—wisely—staying away from fistfights, when Quin pointed out two women in split skirts leaning against the arch of a church doorway. They were smoking and blowing smoke rings in the warm air, and at the same time making stagy flourishes with their hands, like two bad actresses portraying whores in a play. I could see heavy red lipstick smears on their cigarettes when they held them in their hands.

"Hello, GI's," said the one on the right.

She was mostly Chinese and as attractive as evil things often can be. Her friend was a mixture of French and of something round-featured and dark-skinned, probably Malaysian.

"You girls want to help the war effort?" asked Quin.

He turned his garrison cap sideways on his head and stuck his hand inside his tunic to mimic Napoleon. The two women made no response to his antics.

"I do like some Chinese food now and then," he said to me.

"You bet," I said. "We need a good case of clap."

Quin held out a wad of money and let some loose bills fall at the women's feet.

"Slant-eyed girls like GI's?" he asked them.

They snatched up the money as it settled on the church steps. Quin put his arm around the Chinese whore's waist, she being the prettiest and the most healthy-looking of the two.

"Guess the other one's yours," he said to me.

"You're joking," I said. "They've got everything but jungle rot."

"They'll have to catch that from us," he said and put a loud, wet

kiss on the Chinese girl's cheek.

She smoked her cigarette and watched the smoke she made rise above her.

"This isn't right," I said.

The other whore took two steps towards me, and I backed an equal distance away from her. She smelled sour, like potatoes in an earthen cellar.

"Let's forget this," I said. "What would your Ellan Louise Mecklenburg say if she saw you now?"

"Don't throw her up to me," he said. "She don't figure in my plans anymore, 'cause I'm never gonna see her no more. You see, I seen it in a dream, Tom: you and me aren't going to live much longer. We're going to die out here in the islands, like the rest of them have. What difference does it make if I have a Chinese sweetie face?"

"An honorable man wouldn't do it," I said, "even if he knew he was dying tomorrow."

"Don't talk like those old Roman books of yours," he said. "Those Roman folks aren't here. You and me are. We won't be here a whole lot longer. Let's say we have a little fun before the party's over."

The ugly prostitute stepped towards me again. I signaled her to halt. Her eyebrows distracted me momentarily; they had been plucked out completely, and the remaining bare skin had been painted over with two black, metallic lines.

"Do not ask, "Why are such things brought in the world?" I said, remembering my favorite Roman. "We are all made but to live a day, the remembered and the forgotten alike."

"What *are* you talking about?" said Quin.

"Nothing that matters to you," I said. "I'll see you back at the barracks."

I walked away, and Quin and the Chinese whore went off to some other place. The ugly whore followed me for a ways down the street. She called, "hey," once. I kept on walking, and left her standing alone in front of a native police station.

We spent the winter in New Zealand. Travel books call it one of the loveliest countries in the world, but I saw none of its beauty, nor did I want to. I saw the crowded city of Auckland and the Marine base

where the First Raiders were being brought back to full strength and where we trained along side the new men for a new battle.

Mother died over the Christmas holidays. I didn't mourn for her as a man should for his mother. Marilyn's letters spoke of the hysteria that temporarily prevailed in the family from the time of death until the funeral was over, and I was happy to be far from the frenzy. Marilyn wrote that Myra, Mary, and Mary's Wobbly husband Nels came back to Wyoming for Mother's services, and there was a nasty fight between the two oldest sisters over Mother's personal items that had developed into a fierce argument about Mary and Nels' marriage. Marilyn told Mary she should never had taken up with a worthless boomer like Nels. Mary said Marilyn, and her husband Bob, were two fat, narrow-minded bourgeoisie. The words flew until Bob asked Nels outside to the yard, and the two overweight and aging men had stood nose to nose for a time but neither had gotten up the courage to exchange blows. Gentle Myra wrote to tell me she didn't think the rest of the family was quite at peace with the Lord.

The First Raiders returned to New Caledonia in the spring, and were given refresher courses in amphibious landings and jungle warfare. This was done for the benefit of the new men, those good mannered young boys whom I could not stand to be around if we weren't actually in the field and not allowed to speak to one another. Anyone who hadn't been to the war seemed ridiculously at odds with reality; their opinions were childish, too light-headed to be heeded; they knew nothing, had survived nothing more terrible than boot camp, and didn't deserve to be taking the places of men who had given everything. They chirped to each other like birds during the mating season. The majority of them were going to die within a couple weeks' time, and they kept right on joking and bragging, pretending they were going to live forever. They acted as though the Marines were an adult version of summer camp, and they thought everyone in the battalion should become pals so we would want to get together in years hence and relive the good fun we shared on the islands. As I have said before, I didn't bother to learn their names.

When summer came we remained on New Caledonia. The high command had seemingly forgotten about the Raiders, as the war in the Pacific went on without us. There were so many units available,

so many complications involved in planning the battles, that I thought it would not be impossible for the top brass to have kept us out of the action until Japan surrendered. Or so I hoped.

I was promoted to corporal and had to have daily contact with Sergeant Dumont and the lieutenant. They expected me to help train the replacements in combat tactics using charts and manuals they provided to me. But it isn't a football game; a good soldier functions on instincts and fear. Tactics are relevant to the generals and to the historians who clean up after them. Even if I had believed the training mattered I wouldn't have cared enough about the new men to make them better Marines. I told the replacements to keep low and move quickly for they had to kill the Japs before the Japs killed them. I didn't lie to them by pretending there is a science of fighting they had to learn, and I didn't coddle them by telling them that their training was going to keep them safe. I told them when their turn to fight came they should remember who they were, and they would fight and die as well as any other group of Marines.

In late June the high command remembered us. We were taken to sea and held on board ship for a week while the Army put to shore on the island of New Georgia, another patch of jungle in the Solomon chain. The Army was running the main show on the south side of the island, where they were landing in the thousands. The Raiders were to land on the north side, on the beach at a place called Rice Anchorage, then make a quick strike through the dense jungle, and at the village of Bairoko cut the Japs' supply routes between their airbase at Munda and their landing depot at Enogai Inlet. It was precisely the type of mobile operation we were expected to do well. We had all of three days allotted to us to make the march through what intelligence reported to be an empty jungle. Lt. Col. Edson had been kicked upstairs after Guadalcanal, and for New Georgia we had a new commander, a huge, bony man named Colonel Harry Liversedge, or "Harry the Horse" as he was known to the men. Liversedge had been a shot-putter in the Olympics and was easy to spot because he stood a head taller than almost everyone else in the battalion.

The landing took place at night, on the evening of the Fourth of July. A Navy task force shelled the beach for us, and the Raiders went on our Higgins boats to the slender sandy opening between the

mangrove trees. Everything went bad minutes after we disembarked. Most of the boats ran aground on a sand bar fifty yards from the shore, and bundles of supplies had to be thrown overboard to let the rubber boats pass into the tidal basin. When we at last got to the island we learned there was little real ground to walk upon; New Georgia is largely swamp water six inches deep, some mushy soil lies underneath the water, and mangrove trees grow in the thick goo and bind the place together. Worse than that, we discovered in the light of the morning that our food had been in the bundles we had thrown away when we lightened the boats, and we would go hungry unless airplanes could drop us new supplies.

We marched for five days towards Bairoko, bivouacking in the stagnant water at night and eating nothing. We met a solitary Jap patrol during the long walk in the filthy water among the mangrove trees; there were six of them against a thousand of us, and after we slaughtered them we found they were carrying only a few packets of dried rice we could not boil on the wet ground. Everyone contracted trench foot or some species of strange fungus that found a home between our toes. The leeches hung on our legs in clusters and bit us through our puttees. We would stop every hour, and one man in each squad would light a cigarette he passed around to his mates so they could singe the leeches off their calves. The little fresh water we had, beside what we had in our individual canteens, was carried in large jugs lined with cheap enamel; in the heat the lining dissolved into the water, turning it into a milky solution that made a man deathly sick if he dared drink it. We couldn't drink the swamp water either, and our thirst became such we rubbed the sweat off our bodies and drank that in our cupped hands.

Three days, the length of the planned mission, became a catch phrase among the hungry troops. If a man fainted, a buddy would chide him that we had been out for only three days and he should be in better shape. When dinnertime came, minus dinner, someone would say: "Don't worry, we'll eat good in three days." "How long till New Georgia falls?" a Marine would ask. "In three days," came the answer. "How long would the war last?" "How much longer will I live?" "How long will the world keep turning?" "Three days" was the reply to everything.

Not until the Tenth, six days after landing, did we reach

something, but it wasn't Bairoko we arrived at, it was the landing depot at Enogai Inlet. Our lead patrol walked onto some Japanese soldiers sitting on a dry patch as they ate lunch, both sides fired at each other, the men in the rear rushed towards the shooting, and, without knowing what we were doing, the whole battalion swept from the mangroves and into the Jap entrenchments. Neither side was ready for a fight. They hadn't expected us, and we had misread the maps and didn't know where we were. At the battle's start we were two groups of men charging into a confused melee and were surprised to see men dressed in different looking uniforms running past us. I ran to a bunker and tossed a grenade in the gun slit; I could hear the men inside arguing, in their language, about what was happening. One of them glanced out the slit and gasped at seeing me outside his bunker. We stared at each other, both of us too astonished at the peculiar situation to react. Then the grenade exploded. The soldier closed his eyes and shaped his mouth to say "oh." Death came too quickly for him to be afraid, much too quickly for him to understand that I had killed him and his friends. His small, close shaven head and part of his upper torso jumped from the bunker and landed at my feet. I remember how warm he felt when I knelt and touched him.

Quin won his Navy Cross at Enogai. He ran the length of a coconut log trench, screaming noise and shooting the Japs trying to scramble over the rear wall and escape. He would race right up to them and fire a burst with his B.A.R. at close range. The Marines who saw him make his kills said some of the Japs turned and shot at him, but they were breathing hard and were too frightened to shoot straight. Quin ran at them, screaming and laughing and shedding tears down his dirty face, and his gun tore the enemy soldiers open like a chain saw slashing through rotten timber. He was credited with sixteen kills that day, though he told me he had been cheated on the citation, and he had killed at least twenty.

As a group we slew over three hundred Japs at Enogai, and chased the rest into the woods. Quin came to me as soon as the firing ceased, his rifle cocked over his shoulder, his face fixed in a wide, crazy smile.

"I was wrong back on New Caledonia," he said. "I'm going to live forever. Nothing can kill me."

That afternoon reinforcements brought us food and fresh water, which all of us had been utterly without for two days. With dead bodies lying around us, we ate with good appetites and soon felt stronger. I ate a can of Spam. Cool, fresh, and packed in solid gelatin, my meal made me think of the two pigs our early neighbor Mr. Keary kept on his farm beside the Wind River. I pictured in my mind's eye those two pink beasts lying together, grunting contentedly in the shade beneath the cottonwoods, and I thanked them and their fellow swine for that delicious treat.

We camped in the jungle until the Eighteenth of July. Another Raider battalion, the Fourth, arrived from overland to help us move against Bairoko, our original objective. Until that date, the Raiders had inflicted far more damage than they had suffered, and as horrible as killing is, it is a small ordeal to suffer compared to doing the dying, as we did when we struck out for Bairoko. Across our path the Japs had dug trenches that reached through the mushy topsoil and five feet into the hard corral underneath the swampland. They lined these trenches with coconut logs, as was their usual practice, and made roofs of the same: they had piled corral and more dirt on top and let the jungle grow over the structures so that an approaching Marine couldn't tell what he was nearing. They had had two months to prepare for us. We had the Nineteenth of July to run at their near-impervious lines, and be shot.

After our forward patrols had blundered into their concealed positions and had been killed, we attacked in mass, moving from tree to tree to cover ourselves. One moment I was up charging with my squad, the next I was sprawled flat in the mud and everything was jumping up about me. "It's rough today," I said to the Marine who had been behind me, but he wasn't there when I spoke to him. I retreated to look for him and the others in my group, and found six of them bunched together in a space so small I could have covered them with a blanket; they all were hit in the head or chest and were as dead as stones. I located another squad and charged with them. One of the new groups made a lucky grenade toss into a Jap gun slit, and another, armed with a flame-thrower, burned a mess of Japs hidden in a machine gun nest. Beyond any Jap we killed were more Japs dug in, and my new squad was cut down in bunches as we climbed over the splintered remains of a destroyed trench. I picked

up a man whose legs had been shattered from the knees down and carried him back to the rear. Then I carried back a second man who bled to death in my arms. A corpsman asked me to help him gather the wounded, for the other field medics were missing and he already had fifty men laid in two rows and needed someone to bring in more while he stanching wounds and stuck the fallen with morphine. By early afternoon we had more bleeding, dying men in the rear than we had whole men up front trying to crack the Jap lines. At about two o'clock the enemy had brought up heavy mortars and shelled us for the rest of the day. I caught a shell fragment in my side, just below the ribs, during one of my dashes to the front. The piece of metal was long and jagged, but had hit me sideways and didn't penetrate far; when I pulled it out of me it was still hot from the shell burst, and it's extraction caused the blood to come out in a stream that covered my pants leg. I stuffed some gauze into the hole and kept moving. After dark we withdrew to Enogai. The wounded were evacuated on the Twentieth, and the others were taken off New Georgia in the following two days.

We learned at a later date that we did not have air support at Bairoko because Col. Liversedge had made his request for an air strike an hour too late on the Eighteenth. He had sent a messenger back to Enogai to radio the request to the fleet. The messenger was delayed by the swamp; the request was sent at 1700; whereas regulations demanded that requests for air support be made by 1600 hours on the previous day. The regulation, like all regulations, was undoubtedly the creation of one of the deep thinkers whose well-dressed descendants today claim the war was won through the application of something they called managerial science. The incident serves as a good example of the modern world's key principles: namely, that normal procedure is worth more than men's lives and a thousand times more than the lives of fighting men.

New Georgia ended the Raiders. We had lost so many men that changes had to be made and blame had to be assigned for our failure. The top brass in the end blamed the concept of training special forces to take ground and not hold it. The Army would eventually capture New Georgia in the same grinding fashion they had used to take the rest of Guadalcanal, but the Raiders would not be along for the triumph. We returned to New Caledonia, and thence to Hawaii. In

January 1944, the First and the other Raider battalions were disbanded, and the Marines from the old units were farmed out to the new regular divisions that were being created for the final push against Japan. Before the First was broken up, *Life* magazine, Quin's favorite publication, came to Honolulu and photographed the battalion, or what was left of it, standing in formation on a parade ground next to a full battalion. The picture was a graphic demonstration of how many were gone. Not one in four of the original Raiders from New River and San Diego was still alive and unwounded and thus able to stand in their old places. Quin bought twenty copies of the dreadful issue and proudly sent them to everyone in his family back in North Dakota.

A portion of the old Raiders was dispatched to Camp Pendleton, California, and the group in which Quin and I remained was sent to Camp Tarawa, Hawaii. We both became sergeants, since after New Georgia there was a shortage of veteran NCO's among the former Raiders, and the officers were willing to promote anyone who had fought and was still alive. Sergeant Dumont, my old tormentor, had been buried somewhere in the mangrove swamps near Enogai. Karl the Nazi, the lieutenant, and everyone in the platoon but Quin and I had gone to the same fate. A man I had saved on the road to Bairoko happened to be a captain; and though I had done other things and received no notice, for saving his life I was given a bronze star to go with my new sergeant's stripes.

Our new unit was the Twenty-Eighth Regiment of the Fifth Marine Division. Colonel Liversedge became our regimental commander, and each time we veterans saw him walking down the ranks, his head towering above his men, we remembered we had once been special and were forced to recall the disaster that had befallen us.

I wanted the new men I was assigned to train to fear Sergeant Wedderburn as my boot platoon had feared D.I. Staws. I wanted to be the toughest instructor at Camp Tarawa. I yelled at my men if they didn't get off the landing barge quickly enough. I made them do push-ups in the barracks if they didn't polish their boots until they reflected the ceiling lights.

"Go forward and the Japs might kill you," I warned them. "Turn and run and I *will* kill you."

I kept to myself at Camp Tarawa. Quin had become too wild for me to be around any longer. He was drunk every night he could beg leave, and frequented the whores as often as he drank. He had turned mean, and was locally famous for his participation in bar fights, in which he had learned to fight with the bemused savagery he displayed in battle. He bit, he kicked his opponents' groin, he used chairs, he used the knife he kept in his boot top; he did anything he had to do in order to win. The boy who used to ask me endless questions about the world had decided that destroying everything in the world was the answer to every possible question.

As for the men I trained, I again made an effort not to know anything about them. We were making a combat regiment, and combat regiments are made for the high command to use up like pieces on a chessboard. Getting attached to them would only cause me anguish when the Japs cut them into bloody pieces of meat. I did have one Marine under me, a Pole from Ohio named Harold Movshovitz, whom I came to know, in spite of the distance I placed between myself and my squad. He had seen me in the base library reading Gibbon one Sunday afternoon, and had followed me through the stacks. He approached me to ask some questions concerning Roman history, was polite and showed a good knowledge of the subject. From that encounter I guessed he was college educated, for his grammar was flawless, considerably better than mine. For several weeks he kept up a surveillance of me, and at last approached me in the NCO's office, a converted barracks in which I shared a desk with five other sergeants and where I had to sign requisition forms the officers had already approved the previous day.

"Sergeant Wedderburn?" he said. (He had a notebook with him.) "May I have five minutes of your time?"

I completed my entire daily routine at my desk in five minutes. I usually read a copy of Heroditus I hid in the bottom drawer for the rest of the day and kept a busy expression on my face in case any of the lieutenants came to check on me. I told Movshovitz to sit down and be brief, as I had a tight schedule.

"You've been to war, haven't you, Sergeant Wedderburn?" he asked.

I said I had been on Guadalcanal and New Georgia. He asked some specific questions about the campaigns and scribbled

something in shorthand in his notebook.

"What's that you have?" I asked.

"Notes for a book I'm writing," he said.

"You're writing a book on the war?"

"Not about the big picture," he said.

He asked if he could smoke and lit a cigarette he selected from a gold pocket case. His manner was too relaxed for a PFC addressing a veteran NCO. He was forgetting to end his sentences in "Sergeant" and assumed a camaraderie that doesn't necessarily exist between a Marine private and his immediate supervisor. I would have reprimanded him if I hadn't enjoyed his company.

"I want to write about the war from the fighting man's perspective," he said. "What a man thinks when he's risking death. How he conquers his fears. What drives him. I joined the Corps to get that perspective."

"You joined the Marines to write a book?" I said.

"Yes...yes, Sergeant Wedderburn," he said. "It could be an important story, provided I get it right."

I almost told him he was an imbecile, but I reflected on my own reasons for joining my Marines and did not.

"You want to ask me about combat, Private Movshovitz?" I said.

"For the book."

"Why me?"

"Do you know Corporal Brubaker? He's a corpsman attached to the regiment."

"I think he was on New Georgia with us," I said.

"Right, and on Guadalcanal. He said I should talk to you because you are the bravest man he knew."

I was taken aback that anyone would speak of me in those terms.

"He's wrong, Private Movshovitz. I'm not a bit brave. I've never done more than I had to do."

"Corporal Brubaker is of another opinion," he said. "You're a reader, aren't you?"

What's that got to do with anything?"

"Sergeant—and I say this with no malice to anyone—most of the other veterans—How should I say this? They aren't literate in the best sense of the word, if you catch my meaning. They've been to the elephant, as they say, but they can't say what the elephant looked

like.”

“You think I could?” I said.

“I’m hoping so,” he said. “And...”

“And what, Private Movshovitz?”

“Don’t take this wrongly, Sergeant,” he said as he put out his cigarette. “In the men’s opinion, you are better to your squad than the other sergeants in the company are to theirs.”

He had surprised me a second time.

“Private,” I said, sounding as severe as I could, “are you saying I’m soft?”

“With all due respect,” he said, although his manner was familiar rather than respectful, “you make us do calisthenics, you give inspections. The other sergeants run their men till sunset; shoot live ammo at them, call them every sort of name. They never give their men a rest, and—most of the time—you leave us alone... Sergeant.”

“Then, they do think I’m soft.”

“They think you’re humane, as I do, Sergeant Wedderburn. Yesterday morning, Sergeant Sanders had his men on the beach at five, raking it clean. You let us sleep in. There are other examples I could give.”

“But I threatened to kill you if you ran from the Japs,” I said.

“The men understand you are expected to say that, he said. “With all due respect, we know you would do not such thing.”

“No,” I said, disappointed because I thought they would be more impressed with me than this. “Would they obey me, in real fighting?” I asked.

“They think you’re a regular Joe,” he said. “They’ll do whatever you demand of them. I must say, with all...”

“With all due respect?” I said.

“Yes,” he smiled.

Private Movshovitz had an exact, well-managed smile, one as neat as his manicured nails and his black hair.

“The men think you’re fair, Sergeant, but a bad actor. I shouldn’t tell you this, but—mentioning no names—a man in the squad does an imitation of you giving us one of your angry speeches. He does it in...”

“I don’t want to hear about that,” I said.

I gave him an account of what I’d done at the war. I spoke for

nearly an hour, and he wrote notes in shorthand.

"Well and good," he said. "What would you say was your motivation?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"What drove you? I—to sight an example—I am not a religious man. My parents were Jewish, but that's neither here nor there. If you twisted my arm I would say I was an existentialist. I take responsibility for my actions, but I act in the context of an unfathomable universe. To me there is no standard of right and wrong, there is merely a certainty of action. One man must..."

"Don't talk crap," I told him. "You're making this complicated. It's not. When you're in combat, it's partly a matter of chance who lives and dies. Training can help, but we can't assure anything, though screwing up will kill you for sure. Forget about the universe. Forget everything but killing Japs, or else you'll screw up. You'll have time to think on what you've done when the war's over."

I hadn't given Private Movshovitz the sort of answer he had been seeking. He closed his notebook and rose to leave.

"Thank you, Sergeant," he said. "I won't take any more of your time."

We saluted at the doorway.

"There's one more thing," he said.

"Yes?"

"How do you think I'll do?" he asked.

His voice rose at "I'll do," quivered, and almost broke. So that was what he was about, I thought. He was afraid. This elegant young gentleman had pondered and pondered on what might happen to him until he had made himself as sick with fear as the lowliest, most ignorant cracker in the Corps. How he must have agonized about dying on some insignificant, soon to be forgotten beach; his civilized person ripped into the sloppy pile of guts that is the great practical joke of a violent death. A wave of pity came over me. I just as quickly fought off the feeling. I could not feel anything for a Marine I might someday ask to die.

"I wouldn't worry," I said. "The war will be over soon. It's not likely we'll be called up. The Navy and the Army Air Corps will bombard the Japs into..."

"Don't say...don't talk like that," he said, interrupting me.

“Everyone, everyone down to the buck privates knows we’re being prepared for the invasion of Japan. There will be many more battles.”

“Maybe,” I said. “What you should know is everybody, me, everybody, the Japs included, are afraid. I’m afraid every time.”

I was lying. I had been afraid going into action the first time. After that I was resigned to whatever happened to me. I didn’t feel anything approaching fear anymore. In combat I only thought of what I should do next.

“Your feelings aren’t unique,” I said.

There is nothing in my life I look back upon with more shame than speaking such garbage to a frightened young man who had come to me for some reassurance. He’d told me I was a bad actor when I was training the men, and I knew he saw through this lie also. He smiled his exact smile and left the office.

I have wondered ever since if he really was writing a book or if he only wanted to talk to someone. Whatever he had wanted from me, I had disappointed Private Movshovitz. After our conversation he kept apart from me; he acknowledged me with a smile whenever we met in the library, and would withdraw from my presence without speaking.

In the fall of 1944 the Fifth Marine Division began training for a landing on “Island X,” a treeless, fortified rock covered with lava flow and volcanic ash. The senior officers had topo maps of the place, which they carried on field exercises and used as references if a junior officer or an NCO had a question. Their maps had no longitude or latitude, and there weren’t any place names on them, only letters and numbers. Underneath the surface of Island X was said to be a rabbit warren of tunnels the Japs had dug in the black rock. The entire bit of land was five and a half miles long and two and a half miles across at its widest point, and the Japs supposedly could move underground from the extinct volcano on the island’s southwest end to the low plateau on its northeast side, and we would not be able to detect or stop them. They could pop up behind our advancing lines any time they wanted to ambush us from the rear, and their tunnels were so deep an extended naval bombardment could not hurt them.

I had seen my share of Pacific islands and knew of nothing resembling Island X. I told my squadron it was a hypothetical place.

As a teacher uses a problem in an algebra book, the officers were using Island X, I said, to prepare us for the worst possibility. On a real island we would have lots of trees and high grass and hills to hide behind, whereas on the fictional Island X a man could only burrow into the black sand. Were Island X real, tens of thousands of men would have to die in taking it, and I couldn't think of any strategic reason the top brass would waste a couple divisions to conquer eight square miles of black sand.

Among the new men in the Corps were some too well educated to take orders and be quiet as the old breed had done. One of these unknown geniuses located a map of the Marianas Islands, and using some deductive logic discerned that if our big B-29s were hitting Japan from our bases on Saipan and Tinian, then we needed, for the protection of our bombers, to build a fighter base and a way station somewhere between the Marianas and the Japanese mainland. Looking farther north, he found, almost precisely equidistant from our airbases and Tokyo, an island that was the exact double of Island X, an evil place whose name has since been carved in headstones and family crypts across America. The rock the Marine found had risen from the sea on a volcanic uplift only fifty years before, and was called "the Sulfur Island," which in Japanese is Iwo Jima.

Word of the horrible place spread so quickly everyone in Hawaii knew our destination before the officers did. When, in January 1945, the entire division was given one final leave in Honolulu, civilians on the street came up to us and wished us luck on Iwo Jima. The trinket shops were selling ceramic monkeys that bore the inscription across their bellies: "No more Japs on Iwo, by Jima." Had I asked around, I suspect someone on the street might have been able to tell me the date of our demarcation.

We shipped to the Marianas in the week after New Year's Day, and arrived off Iwo on the evening of February the Eighteenth. We watched the shells hit through the night, and in the morning had a good look at the place as we climbed down the sides of our ship. People who are sentimental about nature and say man's works cannot match the beauty of natural creations need to visit Iwo Jima. The rottenest lean-to the Aldpacks ever built for their kin has more charm than it. The Island is hot to the touch because of the underground thermal activity, and its surface shows three shades of black dirt,

black rock, and black dried volcanic mud. Steam rises from fissures near the sea, and the place stinks from the sulphur deposits after which it was named. The only potable water there is rainfall. The only things that ever grew there was some stunted fields of sugar cane that had withered and died long before we arrived.

“I can’t wait to get my butt shot off on that lopsided piece of shit,” said a man in the front of my barge.

We had a final smoke and watched the first wave go in at 0900 hours. Nothing happened. The island had been calm since the naval shelling. The first wave advanced a hundred yards and more inland, and not a shot was fired.

As everyone waited for the first explosions, we in the second wave started for the beaches. The men in my squad were peering over the top of the drop plate, pointing out on our left Mount Suribachi, the extinct volcano at the base of which the Twenty-eighth Regiment was landing. Our tanks went ashore, and there was a smattering of fire from the Japanese, not yet enough to drown out the roar of our boat’s engines.

“It’s not going to be bad,” a man—another of the men whose name I hadn’t learned—said to his friends. “Most of them’s dead, I reckon.”

We could see the gray backpacks of the first wave Marines on the dull black beach ahead. They were hurrying onward, some actually walking upright. A man in the front looked back at the two sailors in the stern piloting our boat and asked: “What did he say?”

No one answered him because we could no longer see Iwo Jima or hear anything. The Japs weren’t dead; they had been waiting for us to draw within range. Probably every gun, every mortar they had, were opening on us. The smoke and dust made a cloud over the island. The men in the barge worked their mouths, trying to shout at each other over the noise. A head with its helmet still strapped to it came bouncing through the living from the front of the boat, and a flash of sparks like something made by a giant welder’s arc hit the rear of the barge: we were on fire. Another sergeant and I fought our way to the bow and threw back the bolts that held up the drop plate. We grabbed men and pushed them out the front and into the sea. We were giving commands like: “Swim to the beach. Regroup there.” No one could hear us. The men worked their mouths at us, and, if a

bullet didn't knock them backwards, they dove into the water. I grabbed Private Movshovitz and hauled him forward. His entire back half was ablaze. I shoved him at the open water, but he caught himself at the fallen drop plate and stopped on his hands and knees.

"I'm sorry," I said to him, but he could not have heard.

The barge lifted its bow and went down. Under the water I wriggled free of my backpack and swam underneath the first wave boats, then climbed onto the beach.

I had lost my rifle. I attempted to take one from a dead Marine lying head down in a shell hole. His hand was closed tight on his weapon, and I couldn't break his grip. I had no trouble in finding a second one, for there were lots of men lying on the beach who wouldn't need a rifle any longer.

In the next couple hours I crawled up and down the beach and collected two of my men. I led them to a ledge where Quin and his squad were hunched down and were relatively safe from the sniper fire raining down from M. Suribachi.

"Ain't this great?!" he said. He had already killed three Japs and was in good spirits. "How about two farm boys like you and me fighting for a place like this? God Almighty, you couldn't raise moss out here!"

I told him what had happened to my squad, and he agreed to let me join his bunch.

"We'll have some good ol' times again, you and me," said Quin. "This one's gonna be a dandy, ain't it?"

Mt. Suribachi sits on a narrow point of land on the island's southwestern end. The Twenty-Eighth's job was to move across the island and isolate the volcano before taking it in a direct assault. Moving across the black ash meant jumping from shell hole to machine gun emplacement, dodging incoming fire as we advanced, and sometimes finding live Japs in the hole we wanted to use. We marked our progress with little white flags we placed above every enemy position we took, but as on Island X, the Japs did indeed have a network of tunnels that allowed them to return to the places we thought were secure. They needed only a few minutes to pop up behind us in an area we'd just won from them. We had to leave the dead where they fell. The medics would drag the wounded into the closest hole and treat them as best they could until night came and

they could evacuate the fallen to the hospital ships. If the Japs came up in a hole in which we had left our wounded, they would castrate our men and stuff the genitals into the dying men's mouths. In two hours the Twenty-Eighth took a few hundred yards between our landing site and the opposite shore, and in that way cut the mountain fortress of Suribachi off from the rest of the island. The combat engineers needed the whole night to blast the tunnel openings shut with phosphorus charges to keep the enemy from slipping behind us.

For the next three days our artillery blasted at the mountain as we moved toward the base of the steep slope. The actual climbing of Suribachi and the planting of the flag at its peak, which is commemorated in a statue in Washington, DC, I have never gone to see, was not the hardest part. The hard part was breaking the Jap defenses below the mountain. All day we shelled them from the sea and from the beach head, and at night the Navy illuminated the sky with star shells that colored everything bright yellow while we crept close to the Jap lines and threw hand grenades into their positions. We didn't eat or drink much on account of the difficulty we had in bringing supplies from the rear, and the hunger, along with the blisters the hot sand made on my legs, is what I remember most distinctly of Iwo Jima. I was weary and wanted to be somewhere safe, preferably a farmhouse that had clean cotton sheets and lemonade. The snipers prevented us from retreating to secure places to sleep, so we took naps in the hot sand while another Marine stayed awake to stand guard against the little men in the tunnels.

On the fourth day of the assault, after two days of blessed rain that cooled my face and let me drink from a clear puddle of water in the bottom of my foxhole, we made our final rush to the top of Suribachi. The Japs the shelling hadn't crushed underground emerged from caves on the volcano's sides to make a final show of resistance. They were dressed in loin clothes because of the dreadful subterranean heat, and their nearly naked bodies bore grotesque scabs made by our flame throwers. These last die-hards strapped demolition packs around their waists and ran—or tried to run—at us in hopes of taking us with them when they pulled the pin. I shot one man directly in his packet as he wobbled towards me. The resulting explosion set off the packets on the two men behind him, killing everyone in their group right up to the mouth of their cave.

At first light that morning, Quin chased a Jap from a foxhole and stabbed him in the back with his bayonet.

"I've been out of ammo for an hour," he said when he returned to our position.

He took a clip from a dead man, and scurried off to kill some more.

At 0800 hours on the Twenty-third of February we went up the slope. The Japs had blown the paths away, and we had to climb foothold and handhold right up the cliff. A few Japs staggered into the sunlight and tossed hand grenades down the hill at us, but, as had been the case on the fourth day on Bloody Ridge we had broken the Japs' will, and they were going through the motions of fighting to please their ancestors watching them from Heaven. At about eleven hundred hours, another patrol in our battalion reached the volcano's inner lip and there raised an American flag on a piece of drainpipe.

Every living Marine on the island and the sailors watching us through binoculars from the ships off shore saw the flag atop Suribachi and stopped to cheer for the Twenty-eighth Regiment. They made a roar that echoed off the mountain side and back into the plateau where thousands of doomed Japanese clung to almost half the island. I marked the exact time—eleven-seventeen—on my wristwatch.

"We've won the war," I said to Quin as we joined the crowd forming near the top. "From here on we coast home."

I was dizzy from lack of food and sleep and very much wanted a day's rest.

"As long as there's Japs alive," said Quin, "the war's still on."

He went down the slope with his men, his rifle over his shoulder. It was the last time I saw him.

The sole surviving member of my squad and I jogged down the black slope in another direction, looking for cave entrances. I was tired and sat down on a broken light machine gun in an abandoned emplacement. As I rested I thought of lying underneath the sheepwagon and of the cool breeze from the west that came every evening at about six o'clock. While I was thinking, a Jap, bloody and naked except for his short-brimmed cap, walked from a cave and shot me in the face. I didn't move. It seemed I was watching a film. The bullet passed through my left cheek, outside the corner of my mouth.

There was little pain, no more than a dentist shooting me with Novocain. The Jap fumbled with his rifle and shot me again, this time in my left hip. I fell forward and in the same motion fired at him. I emptied the clip of my M-1 in him, then clawed my way to his body and crushed his head with a rock.

“Cut us, did you, you yellow son of a bitch!” I yelled at him.

My man pulled me off him and held a rag on my bleeding hip until the corpsman could come for me.

The sky was high and white. The small black birds above me were going about their business, indifferent to the catastrophe we'd made on the ground.

## Going Home

Hospitals all smell the same, like rubbing alcohol. A balcony offering a patient fresh air to relieve that stagnant odor is better than having a new book to read, better than playing cards and drinking from a flask with cronies in the lobby, better than anything that can happen in a hospital, other than a bed-side visit from Miss Rebecca Wilson, the tow-headed nurse in charge of the west wing from noon to eight o'clock, Saturday through Wednesday. Rebecca had green eyes and a kind broad face that wasn't beautiful, but was sweet and comfortable, a face that could make a man happy simply by being near him. She laughed easily at the bad jokes the convalescents told her in the hallway and at the legless soldier who whistled, partly in jest, when she walked past him. Her parents must have praised her often when she was a child, for as an adult she was at ease with herself and with the patients' adulation. When the men complimented her curly hair, her rolling walk, or her soft voice, she sometimes scolded them like a favorite sister, but she never disagreed with their opinions of her. She was as pure and as good as angel in her white nurse's smock, and I was a broken man confined to a hospital bed. Falling in love with her was a simple thing to do.

Nurse Wilson took the bandages off my face after the doctors had rebuilt the left side of my face. She shaved me and got a hand mirror so I might have a look.

"Oh, we're so handsome!" she said. "I'm going to have to stand right here and fight the girls off with a stick."

She was being nice. I looked as common as I had before my surgery, plus I had a long scar running from my mouth to my ear. The wound would heal, and Rebecca would pull out the stitches, leaving a crease on my face time would never entirely erase.

I didn't care for Dwight, the male therapist the doctors assigned to me to help me walk again. He was as muscular as a Greek god and the only man I'd met who wore orange T-shirts. He called his

patients “girls” if they couldn’t do the exercises, and he hurt me when he massaged my hip. To look at him was to know Dwight had never been within five thousand miles of the shooting war. I hated walking the parallel bars for him; putting weight on my left hip hurt as much as being stabbed when he was there shouting at me. I gladly did the same thing for Rebecca. She would walk the bars with me, guiding my hands and calling me “baby,” as in: “Come on, baby. We need another step, and now another, baby. Oh, we’re getting so strong!” If she knelt to help me bring my leg forward, I would lean forward a little, so I could sniff her hair without her knowing. She smelled like good women do, like the outdoors after the rain has stopped falling, when the storm is past, the air is clean, and the grass and trees glisten.

I once purposely was out of my room one morning, which meant that Nurse Kilpatrick, a dried-up and bitter matron, couldn’t give me my sponge bath, and Rebecca would have to give me one in the afternoon. I acted nonchalant when she drew the curtains around my bed and undressed me. It was when she was in fact touching me that I disgraced myself. She was too exciting and caused me to have a crude reaction.

“I’m sorry,” I said and turned my face into the pillow.

I perhaps should have said nothing, because nothing I could say would excuse me.

“Don’t be that way,” she said. “It’s the most natural thing in the world. You’ve been out in the jungle since God knows when. Lots of men do it. Now, Tom, let’s turn back and let me get done.”

I turned upright, but covered my face with my arm.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m very, very sorry. You must think I’m sick.”

“Stop talking that way or I’ll slap you!” she told me. “You haven’t done a thing to be sorry about. We’ll just forget this happened. We won’t talk about it ever.”

She finished bathing me and fit the hospital pajamas onto my body.

“I did do something wrong,” I said. “I missed my bath with Nurse Kilpatrick on purpose. I wanted you to do it. I’m sorry.”

“I figured as much,” she said. “I hope you learned your lesson. Now,” she said and pulled the bedclothes back over me, “are we still

friends?"

"I want to be," I said.

She gave my arm a squeeze and went off on her rounds.

I remember Rebecca was in my ward on another day during a thunderstorm. A lightening bolt struck outside my window, making a loud clap that made the glass panes rattle and shook the jug of ice water on my bed stand. A page was turned back, and I was on Bloody Ridge catching incoming from the Japs on Sealark Channel. I gripped the iron bars at the head of my bed and arched my back in anticipation of the next big explosion. When I was conscious of being back in my room, Rebecca was prying my fingers loose and telling me to relax. She sat by my bed, holding both my hands, and told me a story about her older brother and her watching the lightening on the family farm in Nebraska.

"We'd look out the window and see the lightening hit, and we'd count: 'one, two, three,' and when if there was thunder on 'three,' we would say it was three miles off. I've heard since you're supposed to count slower, like: 'one thousand one, one thousand two,' because the flash isn't as far off as we thought."

While I'd been at the war, I had operated beneath feelings like fear and regret. In the fighting I had made a picture in my head of my next task and had tried to perform as closely to that picture as I could. I had cut myself off from thinking of the risks I took and of the harm I caused others. On my bed in the thunderstorm, after the fighting was finished, I could afford to have pity for Private Movshovitz, for my nameless men, for the young Japanese soldier I killed on New Georgia. I also could be afraid, as I had not allowed myself to be since I first saw men die on Tulagi. I wept for the dead and for myself. Having Rebecca there embarrassed me, and I held back the tears for her sake, but for only a while. She told me about playing tag in an old barn and about the rough Nebraska winters. As the clock moved along she told me of planting spring wheat and of the cranes returning to the Platte Valley in March.

When she ran out of memories, she remained by the side of my bed and held my hands. I knew she wouldn't leave me as long as I was awake, so I closed my eyes and feigned sleep. Rebecca went on her rounds in the west wing, and returned three times to check on me during the course of her shift. I kept up the sham sleep to let her feel

she had done right by me. I didn't fall into a genuine sleep until the morning.

From my room I could see the northern edge of Cheyenne. From the window in summer, the town of 30,000 people was a forest above which I could see a few church steeples and the golden dome atop the state capital in the approximate middle of town. The hospital was a mile outside the city limits on a six hundred acre estate that had been a ranch before the war. The main hospital building had white stucco walls and a red tile roof like a Florentine mansion, a peculiar feature the hospital's wealthy benefactor had wanted. The grounds beneath my window had recently been improved; the straight lines between the blocks of new sod were still apparent, and saplings, much younger than the trees smothering the town, lined the narrow black top driveway curving into the front portico.

I had been in Cheyenne since April. After Iwo Jima I was transported on a hospital ship to Honolulu and from there to San Diego. The major portion of my surgery was done in the latter place. The doctors lined up the wounded in the hallways beneath the large ceiling fans and ran us in and out of the operating room like products on an assembly line. They fixed what they could and amputated the parts too damaged or too rotten to be saved. A special truck had to come to the hospital's loading dock every morning to haul away the pieces of living but diminished men. Patients awoke from anesthesia to find their legs or arms missing, or to feel a chunk of metal where their chests had been, and those who retained power over their lungs screamed when they realized their new conditions. The nurses—they were not gentle, smiling nurses in Rebecca's mold, but old, mechanical, fat-armed hags carrying needles as assassins carry daggers—would march into the crowded hallways and knock out the screamers with drugs. They glared at their unconscious victims with a look that said: "Why don't you die and save me some trouble?"

The doctors stuck a pin through the fragments of my smashed hip, forming a puppet's joint that has not fit comfortably in me for these forty some years. Discomfort aside, an eight inch pin in my hip and a cast covering half my body were better than losing a leg. When there was any pain I hid it from the nurses. I didn't want the fat bitches coming after me with their needles. A man who submitted to their tender care and let himself be carted back to the surgeons a

second time would return to the hallway a mutilated creature pleading for morphine.

Should a man forget himself and ask one of the San Diego nurses for a drink of water in the stifling hallway, he would be told not to make demands. The nurses said they were overworked as it was, and we ought to be grateful that they had saved our lives. What was more—the offended nurses would here finger the gold bars on their collars—they were officers. They often forgot to feed us, and those men unable to move were left to lie in their filth. On the islands I'd seen men run a mile to the rear, bullets raining about him, just to fill some canteens for his comrades. In San Diego, the nurses wouldn't walk to the drinking fountain to fill a paper cup for a thirsty man.

Those patients who didn't die in San Diego were shipped to various veterans' hospitals in the forty-eight states. That was how I came to be in Cheyenne. The staff there wasn't military, but were real nurses like Rebecca and the large and motherly Mrs. Cousins, a bear of a woman in charge of the evening shift. I was confined at first to my bed or to an extra wide wheelchair that could accommodate my body cast. When they cut the plaster off me, I learned to walk on crutches. After three months of rehab I could get about with only a cane. Dwight, the therapist, was pressing me toward the day I would walk without the aid of any artificial appendage, but the pain in my hip told me it would take a while.

The war in Europe was over, and people in Cheyenne, as was true of people in the entire nation, were proud to have been on the winning side. We crippled veterans would sneak into town when the nurses decided not to notice, and we would partake of the good feelings and the free drinks the civilians then had for the returning heroes. We would hobble to the hospital gate, some of us on wheels or one leg, and catch a ride into town with some patriot eager to hear war stories from men who'd been there. They would take us to the Mayflower Bar or to the lobby of the Plains Hotel, the second place being my favorite spot because comely women travelers would often come from their rooms upstairs to see the broken heroes drinking at the long wooden bar. People needed to know that the propaganda they had been force fed for the last four and a half years was indeed true. They were comforted when we assured them that, yes, America had beaten those lesser nations across the seas and we were the most

powerful, most destructive people ever to grace the earth. Since we were hospital patients in blue striped and pocketless gowns, none of us carried any money on these excursions downtown. Every drink we had—and we had them for as long as we told war stories—was purchased by the curious civilians.

War in itself is bad enough, and we attached more disgrace to it with our bragging. Men who had huddled in ditches and whined to Jesus above to save their lives downed a couple bourbons and proceeded to tell how they'd fought off a thousand enemy soldiers while they kept one arm around the waist of a pretty native girl. In our stories we talked of killing other men as if death were a comedy, and we called the enemy cute, diminutive names like "Nips," "Krauts," and "Jerries" now that they were far away and we were safe. This careless, humorous boasting disgusted me. If the people in the bars asked me what I'd done in the war, I said I had worked at a supply depot in St. Louis and had been injured in an auto accident. They were disappointed to hear I had been such a failure, and preferred to listen to a lad from Casper tell how he'd tossed a grenade into a "Jerry" tank and told the men inside to "divide it up amongst themselves."

I learned from these drunken outings that everyone, including the pretty female travelers from the upstairs rooms in the Plains Hotel, loved the world war. Having witnessed the slaughter from a safe distance, they all felt connected to the national effort. Ask someone my age about the war, and he might not declare outright that it was the best time of his life, but press him and he will tell you more—a great deal of it old gossip and lies—about that era than any other he can remember. Consider this: from my reading I know the United States had a population of some one hundred and sixty million people back in the 1940's; eleven million went into uniform; of those eleven million perhaps a half million—fewer people than living in Wyoming, the least populous state—ever saw combat; fewer still saw fighting more than once, and a majority of them were killed; of the few hundred thousand survivors, perhaps twenty percent, or some thirty to forty thousand men, ever fired their weapons in anger. What I am saying is that in this vast, triumphant nation, a tiny minority, as few in number as the small city of Cheyenne and many of them misfits like my friend Quin, actively fought the war and lived to tell

their tales, and yet everyone down to the grandchildren of the most harmless grandmothers remembers World War Two as a central and joyous event in their lives, when for most of them it was nothing more than a daily item in the newspapers and a ration card for nylons and gasoline. I do not claim to understand this odd circumstance. I am saying the differences between peoples' perceptions and reality tugs at me.

Rebecca would be waiting for us when we wobbled up the driveway to the hospital after visiting the bars. Returning to her was like revisiting my older sisters at an earlier time in my life. She would put her hands on her hips and give us a mock show of anger.

"Get in here!" she would say. "What would the doctors say if they found out?"

The doctors knew and didn't care. The doctors sometimes bought us drinks in the downtown bars. For Rebecca's sake we pawed the ground like wayward children and let her lead us back inside. Someone of us in a fit of cleverness might say to her that we had been off to visit the governor, and she would tell us the governor should stay out of the saloons and no wonder the state budget was in such confusion.

"I expect these other galoots to sneak out and get drunk," she said to me. "I expected better of you, Tommy."

She sugarcoated this with a smile. I knew she was teasing me, and I should have answered her in a similar spirit. But women I am attracted to disconcert me. Rather than reply with a jest of my own I became awkward and apologized to her.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm so very sorry. I didn't mean to cause you any trouble."

"Honey, I'm joking, don't you know?" she said and gave me a chaste, sisterly hug. "Don't take things so seriously. If you don't give me a smile right now I'm going to be upset. Ye Gods! You'd think you'd murdered a baby!" she said and threw a slow, harmless punch at my jaw. "Every man in here sneaks off to town and has a drink. It breaks the monotony, makes 'em feel good, like they're getting away with something. You haven't done anything that's wrong. So quit this sad act, or I'll sock you for real."

Her manner indicated she would do nothing of the kind.

In the afternoon, when I was stranded in my bed, and Rebecca

was bustling about the ward, I would wait for her to make her way down the row of patients to me. My bed was next to the wall, the last on the west wing and her last call on every round. Rebecca had large shoulders for a young woman, and thick, powerful legs; features that kept her from having the perfection Julia had possessed. Most of the other patients did not even think she was pretty, nonetheless they thought highly of her. No one said crude things about her, as men often do when women aren't around.

The man immediately before me was a soldier dying of an intestinal injury. He had bits of shrapnel scattered in his insides, and he couldn't sit upright in his bed or eat solid food. He was known by his initials, J.D., which struck me as peculiar and is why I have remembered him. Rebecca would check J.D.'s intro-venus bottle and ask how he felt that day.

"I've got Hell inside me" he'd say in a hoarse whisper, "and a Heaven's angel in front of me."

He would lift the corners of his mouth, with great difficulty, like a strongman straining to lift an enormous weight. Rebecca turned him on his side to change his sheets and the woolskin pad under his back.

"I didn't dream last night," J.D. told her.

I knew he rarely slept; after lights out he stared silently at the white ceiling.

"Old men shall dream dreams," he said, "and young men shall have visions, but dead men shall close their eyes and see black."

She would say something soothing and as light as a blade of grass to him. She was careful not to make a joke. Dying men don't appreciate other people's jokes; they only enjoy the broken fragments of their own weary humor.

"How's my boyfriend today?" Rebecca asked him.

"I'll ask him when I see him," said J.D. "Not that I get around much these days."

"Would you like some water?"

"No, sweetheart," said J.D. "it might rust my guts."

He relaxed his listless body on the new wool pad and closed his eyes, well satisfied with his dreadful wit.

When she arrived at my bed the sun seemed to come up and the day began anew. From the time she appeared on the other end of the

ward I would be thinking of what I would say to her when she arrived. She didn't change her hair style, and therefore I could say "I like you hair" on just one occasion. She wore the same white uniform every day, and it would have been stupid to comment on her dress. I had been staring at her hips and breasts as they moved inside her clothes, and it certainly would have been improper to make any remark to her concerning her body. I usually resorted to blurting out: "Hi. It sure is nice today, isn't it Becky?"

"It's raining outside, Tommy," she said and barely kept herself from laughing. "It rains too much in Cheyenne in the summer."

"I sort of like rain," I said.

"We've had this conversation before," she said. Bending closer to me, she whispered: "You don't have to have an opening line every day. We're friends already."

She changed my sheets and brought me fresh water. How was my family, she asked. Had I gotten another letter from my sister? Could she get me another book from the library?

"You smell wonderful," I said.

I had planned this conversation in advance and had wanted to work into it a passing remark concerning her cologne. The stark declaration: "You smell wonderful," was not the phrase I had wanted to use. The other patients had teased me about my feelings for Rebecca, and they were now looking at me as though I had dropped my pants in front of a minister. J.D. whispered: "Good, the subtle approach," and he again raised the heavy corners of his mouth. Pulling the bedclothes over my head and staying hidden for the next few days didn't seem a bad idea right then.

Rebecca continued her work as if I had made another harmless comment on the weather.

"I have a book at home," she said. "I'll bring it in, and you can explain it to me. You know a lot about things like that."

She brought the covers back over my chest and up to my throat. As she withdrew from me, she briefly gripped my hand.

"I don't understand books like that," she said.

I couldn't place her mood. She wouldn't look directly at me, and her expression showed concern mixed with a large portion of distress. She left the ward at more than normal speed.

"You lucky young man," whispered J.D. "To be loved by

Rebecca..."

"It's not that," I said. "She's nice to everybody."

"She's nice to them; he whispered, "she *loves* you. I know. I know everything now that it's too late. But I know."

I had asked Mrs. Cousins, the large nurse on the evening shift, if Rebecca's husband didn't mind her working so many hours. I asked this as calmly as I could, my eyes on a newspaper I pretended to read.

"Honey," said Mrs. Cousins, "Becky doesn't have a husband. She doesn't have any boyfriends I know of either."

"Hmm," I said, and I pointed out to Mrs. Cousins an item on eastern Europe.

A distraction from my contemplation on Rebecca came in the form of a letter from my old friend Quin, a letter that was to be our final communication with one another. He wrote me in August of 1945 to say he and the Fifth Marine Division had missed the fighting on Okinawa. Japan's surrender on the Sixth of August meant there would be no more fighting for him anywhere else. He wrote from Honolulu: "Not much is happening out here. New men keep coming to Hawaii. We keep training them. Don't everybody back there know the war is over?"

Quin wrote he was wondering what he would do after he was discharged. He doubted he would fit in back in North Dakota. After the islands, the old farm might be too peaceful for him.

"It wouldn't be so bad for me," he wrote, "if we fought another war. The Russians need a good licking like we gave the Japs. If they don't want to fight, maybe we can beat up the English again. They probably got it coming."

I intended to write him back. I bought stationery and stamps and began two different letters, one upbeat, and the other an exaggeration of my injuries. With Rebecca in my thoughts, and the day I would return to Sterton not far in front of me, I couldn't turn my mind back to Quin and the war. That Rebecca and the war could each have a place on the same world seemed a huge flaw in God's judgment. To admit that both could exist was to admit that human nature was bent double and included two opposite possibilities that should have excluded each other. I found it easier to look at Rebecca and believe the war had been an accident. The truth, I wanted to think, was in her

smile, and hope would be found in her friendship. Should I think of Quin, I wanted to remember the nervous boy I met on the bus trip to South Carolina and not the overzealous killer he became on the islands. Had I written him back, he would have answered me, and I no longer wanted to be acquainted with the man he was. I threw away the letters I'd begun, and figured Quin would think his letter to me had been lost in the mail on account of some post-war mix-up.

Rebecca brought her book to me. It had folio-sized pages of textured paper and was garnished with four-color illustrations drawn by a lady who owned a hyphenated last name and, according to the frontpiece, lived in a cottage in rural England. It was a gift shop version of A.E. Houseman's *A Shropshire Lad*, a book Mr. Muir had kept in his personal library, but had not pressed upon me other than to remark that old Houseman had stolen some good things from the Greek lyric poets. The poems therein were too weepy for my taste; they dwelt too long on the "blue remembered hills" of Houseman's childhood, and I considered it a weakness in a man to mourn for his past and the past lives of every dead soldier, hanged convict, and ruby-lipt maiden he'd ever heard about. If, as one poem claims, Houseman had really wanted to become immune to poison like the ancient tyrant Mithridates, he would have fed himself on stronger food than old sorrows. But Rebecca had a sentimental strand in her personality, and being with her while we talked of the book made up for my having to keep company with Houseman.

She and I went for half an hour every day to a balcony on the hospital's south side, where the sun was best in the afternoon, and together read a poem from the oversized book and discussed what it meant. She let me go on as though I knew a great deal more than she. I told her about iambic pentameter and the ballad form, but she gave herself away when she told me Mithridates was the King of Bythnia and claimed I had told her about that enemy of Rome sometime previously. I knew I hadn't. Anyone knowing that much about history would also know what poetic meter was. Rebecca swore she knew nothing on the subject besides the basic things I had told her. We sat side by side on a marble bench as we read and talked. She leaned forward over the open book; her head nearly touching mine. The sun on her hair made the tresses appear lighter, almost the color of dandelions gone to seed, and the wind that is a constant factor in

Wyoming put long yellow whispers of it across her face. Brushing the hair from her eyes was a reasonably good excuse for touching her, and she allowed me to do so without making an objection. I recall the pink-white sheen her skin had in the strong light and the tangle of fine blonde tuff that gathered at the back of her neck. As we continued to read together, she placed the large book on my lap and leaned against me to view the open pages.

“Why is Mr. Houseman so sad?” she asked.

She was again posing a question of which she already knew the answer in order to make me feel smarter than I was.

“He thinks the present is nothing compared to his past,” I said.

“That’s all that’s bothering him?” she said, and lifted her head, putting her broad, comfortable face inches from mine.

“He wishes he were young again,” I said.

Most of the other patients were in downtown Cheyenne drinking. Never did the company of men seem to be so inadequate as when I felt Rebecca’s breathing, and I thought of the others downing beer and telling war stories.

“You’re sure?” she said.

Her lips were shiny wet when she opened them; specifically there was a gleaming line of moisture set just beyond her lower teeth.

“He wanted something else too.”

“Such as...?” she said.

Her eyes were moving as she spoke, looking for a sign in my face that assured her I wasn’t hiding anything from her.

“He wanted to be loved,” I said.

“You mean he wanted to be *in* love, don’t you?”

“No, poets are always in love with something. Being loved in return is the grand prize that eludes them.”

“No,” said Rebecca, “Mr. Houseman and you are mistaken. A person has to be in love before he gets love back.”

“Old Houseman,” I said, “says he’s loved only too well.”

“Oh, he loves feeling sorry for himself,” said Rebecca, and her smile showed she was pleased to have put a sentiment exactly as she had wanted. “I think he’s proud to have suffered. Even if he hasn’t suffered nearly as much as some have. Suffering makes him feel he’s better than other people. After all, most people have so little imagination they fall in love with each other instead of with their

own unhappiness. I myself think his point of view is stupid, but then I'm one of those people without much imagination. What do you think, Tommy?"

For a few seconds the only thing I could think of was how much I like the way she called me "Tommy."

"Look, there's so much unhappiness," I said. "The world is..."

I stopped because she was shaking her head "no."

"There's bad things," she said, "but there's so much joy and love and good things you can have them any time you want. You have to stop indulging in your own unhappiness. I mean Houseman should have. But I haven't read as much as you have, so I don't know. What do you think, Tommy? Am I a tiny bit right?"

"Yes," I said.

Whether I should have said or done something more that afternoon is a matter I've considered in the years since. The particular moment carried intimations that certain actions were conceivable, even acceptable to her. She was looking at my eyes, waiting, and I alternately wished the moment would last for days and feared it would do precisely that. I have rethought the incident time and again and I have decided many times I did the right thing: I lowered my eyes and went on to another dreary poem. Rebecca was precious beyond any estimation, but I could not imagine her living inside the small circle that was and remains my world, and how much I wanted her didn't change matters. After these many years I can still feel her breath on my face, yet I know I acted only as was possible.

However—and my regrets spring from that word—I was left wanting to do something more. On the stationery I had purchased for my aborted correspondence with Quin I wrote her a letter that ran:

*Dear Rebecca,*

*Please don't be upset with this note. I surely don't wish to upset you. I want to tell you how fond I am of you. Don't worry, I will not try to approach you, and you will never know who I am. I only wanted to send flowers to a beautiful woman.*

*An admirer*

I snuck into Cheyenne and ordered a dozen roses delivered to Rebecca's home address (which I had found in the phone book) with the note attached. I must have thought this was a worthy gesture of my appreciation. Ever since I have wondered what I could have been thinking.

At the end of her rounds the next afternoon, after she had made her calls on the other patients and had progressed to my bed beside the west wall, Rebecca ordered me to get on my feet and come with her.

"You and I have some talking to do, Thomas," she told me.

She took me to our balcony and showed me the letter.

"Tell me about this," she said.

When she was angry, as she was pretending to be then, she drew her heavy farmgirl shoulders up so that she looked as powerful as a man.

"What makes you think I sent you this?" I said, not very convincingly.

"Do you think I'm dumb?" she said.

"No."

"Then why are you lying to me?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. I wish..."

"Here," she said and ripped the letter into little pieces. "We'll throw this stupid letter away, and you can write me a new one."

She had a pen and folded piece of paper for me.

"I don't know what you want," I said.

"Write what I tell you," she said. "Now: 'To Becky, These roses are my way of saying I care as much for you as you do for me.' Sign it: 'Your friend, Tom,' and one of that 'admirer' business."

I did as she asked and gave her the new letter.

"Thank you, Tommy," she said, and her shoulders fell, and her voice softened. "The flowers were lovely. I have them in a vase in my kitchen."

She kissed me on the cheek and quickly rubbed the spot with her hand to erase the evidence.

"I'm still your nurse," she said. "So we'll wait a couple weeks till we do that again. We'll have to be nice and friendly till then, understand?"

"I sent them on impulse," I said. "Silly whim."

"You're sweet," she said.

"Then, you're not angry?"

"Tommy..." she paused and lowered her voice. "Have you ever had a girlfriend?"

I told her about Julia and of how I had loved her when we were children together in Sterton and of how I had carried her memory with me through the war.

"Wait," said Rebecca. "What I was asking was: have you ever had a *real* girlfriend?"

I said Julia was a real girlfriend and described the summer days we had sat together on the flood plain beside the Wind River. I told Rebecca about tasting the foxtail and discovering that life is known through the senses, but Rebecca didn't accept those experiences as real. Her response was to put her hand over her mouth to smother a burst of laughter that was suddenly on her lips.

"Oh my!" she said. "For such an intelligent young gentleman you certainly have a lot to learn!"

There was some cruelty in this, and she could not hide it. She must have feared she had hurt my feelings, for thereafter she went out of her way to say only nice things to me.

"How old are you?" she asked me when we were again sitting on our balcony.

We had ceased to go through the pretense of reading together. We sat and secretly held hands and talked of what we would do after I was released.

"I was twenty-eight in February," I said.

"That old?" she said.

She swung her feet back and forth under the marble bench as a child does on a swing seat.

"I shouldn't say that," she said. "I'm only two years younger."

Her better judgment perhaps told her not to say what she said next, for she hesitated for nearly a minute.

"And your only girlfriend has been this Julia?" she said, and had another fit of laughter. "No, that's wrong of me," she said, and put her hand over her mouth. "It's pleasant...really. You're a sweet, sweet man."

She had to wrestle with her glee again, and the struggle made her chest throb as if she were choking. She took a deep breath and

changed the subject.

“What are your plans for when you’re out of here?” she asked.

“I guess I’ll go home,” I said.

“To do what?”

She stroked my hair. It’s odd how so many women have done that to me. Mother, Mrs. Muir, my older sisters, and Rebecca each had the same quirk.

“I can get a job herding sheep.”

“You’ve done that already. It’s got no future for you. Why not go to college?”

“I’m too old,” I said. “I wouldn’t fit in.”

“That’s not true. Lots of men your age are coming back from the war and going to college. The government will give you the money.”

We discussed the possibility of college for several days, and I at last admitted I wouldn’t mind becoming a geologist. I told her there had been a time I had considered studying history. Now I no longer trusted books as I once had. The land remained reliable in my estimation. I told her that the rolling hills we could see around Cheyenne from the balcony were almost as good as those around Sterton, and a life spent studying something as eternal as those hills would be a life given to a purpose higher than most men chose.

“Geology would be fine,” agreed Rebecca. “They teach it at the state university in Laramie.”

Within the hour she gave me an application for admission she chanced to have on hand. To make her happy I filled it out and mailed it. I let her outline how I would study in Laramie on weekdays and take the train back to Cheyenne on weekends to be with her. I could go to summer school, she suggested, and be done in three years. She went to the state library and dug up some brochures dealing with the mining and oil exploration in the northern and western portions of Wyoming, where the state chief economist predicted a need for geologists.

“We could have a good life any place,” she said. “You could,” she added, when she realized what she had said.

On the Friday after Labor Day I was given permission to leave the hospital. Rebecca helped me pick a suit from a shop window for the great occasion. She had to tie the bow tie that came with the outfit because the only tie I’d worn before was the one the Corps issued for

regulation dress. I looked so citified I couldn't stand to see myself in the store mirror. She drove me to the railway depot in the morning to catch a train bound over Sherman Hill for Laramie. The trip there would take an hour, and I would enroll for college classes and be back in Cheyenne in the evening when she got off work.

"I'll need a place downtown for tonight," I said.

The passenger train was waiting at the brick platform as the railroad men talked to each other and let the departure time slip a few minutes past the posted schedule.

"You can come to my place tonight," said Rebecca.

She was wearing a long, loose, blue dress embellished with pink print flowers. I had seen dresses like it in San Diego and Hawaii during the war, and the fashion had recently filtered into Cheyenne.

"Yes, you'll have supper," I said. "I was thinking about a place to stay."

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll take care of that."

She thought I didn't understand the cunning look she attached to her reply. I had long wanted to be with her in the way she was suggesting. The problem was, as my relationship with her had turned more from wanting her to being with her in fact, something else had begun eating at my heart. For the first time since Guadalcanal, gentle Rebecca had made me feel fear. I can't justify my feelings. She had been amused at my shyness, as every woman I've known has been, but she was very kind to me. I tried to rationalize my reaction to her by telling myself that she was too good for me; or that it was too soon after the war, or that I harbored an old desire for Julia. I even believed those arguments for a time. I want in this book to state the facts, even if the facts make me out to be a cowardly fool, and as a tired old man I must tell that I was afraid of my kind nurse because I could look into her green eyes and see the short road to a family and a house in town and to coming home in the evenings to her as she waited for me behind the screen door. These were the things I wanted most, and Rebecca was going to give them to me all at once. But at twenty-eight she was making me act as I should have acted at eighteen; I was too old to be learning of love for the first time, and standing on the brick platform, Rebecca's arm inside mine, I could sense the other people watching me and saying things that reflected badly on us.

The conductor called for us to board, and Rebecca started kissing me, first on the cheek and then on the mouth.

"The idea is to pucker up, honey, and not let me do all the work," she said, her lips stuck out in a mock pout.

"People are looking," I said.

She threw her arms around my neck and gave me a loud kiss everyone on the platform could hear; then another and another after that. Each time she made as much noise as possible. A man and wife going up the steps into the railroad car shared a chuckle about "these young people."

"Kiss me back, or I'll make some real noise," whispered Rebecca. "You'll get so embarrassed you'll die."

I tried to do what she wanted.

"A little better," she said. "Still too sloppy. Try it again."

She pulled my face down to hers.

"Again."

The conductor drew an arm's length from us and coughed into his fist.

"You better get on the train," she told me, and touched me on the nose.

"You'll take care of him, won't you, sir?" she asked the portly, bald conductor.

"Oh yes, ma'am" he laughed, happy to be let in on the fun.

"Give him this handkerchief," she said to him. "Someone has gotten lipstick on his face."

She blew me a kiss as I climbed the stairs. As soon as I was at my seat, she ran to the side of the car and put her hand on the window, and didn't pull it away till the train began to creep west. She waved to me from the brick platform as she grew smaller and smaller and the train picked up speed.

In Laramie I walked around town on my bad leg in the morning. At noon I ate lunch in the Conner Coffee Shop downtown. I didn't go to the university. In the afternoon I caught the return train back to Cheyenne. I had a drink downtown and ate supper somewhere on Sixteenth Street not far from the bars in which the other veterans were bragging about the war. The rain came as the day grew late, making the streets gleam shiny black under the wheels of the passing cars.

I walked through Rebecca's neighborhood a couple times, keeping at least a block from her house until the sky grew completely dark. At about nine o'clock, I walked down the sidewalk on the opposite side of the street from her home, and hid behind a tree. From there I could see her front door and her porch, which was covered with a low, sloping roof. The outside light was on to illuminate her walk for me.

I waited until nearly ten, when Rebecca came outside and looked both ways down the empty street. I could see she was wearing the blue dress with the pink print flowers she had worn at the station, but I was too far away to read the expression on her face. She looked both ways a second time, and sat in the porch swing and pushed herself forward and back for a time with her right foot. The rain came back around midnight and made the night colder. Rebecca put her arms around herself and went inside her house.

I walked to the bus station across from the railway depot and bought a ticket for Sterton. In the morning, when I awoke in my bus seat, I could see from my window the blue-green Wind River Mountains on the horizon, and I knew I was home.



## A Trip to the Caribbean

In 1948 I was herding sheep for Rob Richardson a few miles north of Muddy Gap. I owned as many sheep in the flock as he did, and I had money in the bank and my first vehicle, a black Chevrolet pick-up with a split windshield.

Mrs. Muir had died in the winter of 1947, and Alexander had not been able to continue without her. He had followed Nora to the grave in the spring and was buried at her side in the Sterton cemetery, not a hundred yards from the house he'd built for her twenty-seven years before.

When their estate cleared probate, I inherited their property, minus the taxes and a gift to the Humane Society. I had become, I imagined, a prominent man in the county.

The ties binding me to my family and friends had become weaker since the war. So many changed young men had come home from the service that people in our part of the world were wary of veterans in general. Wyoming had far and away, on a per capita basis, led the nation in sending the most men to the fighting, and the state had likewise been first in the number of casualties. Even the Indians on the Reservation, who had to volunteer because they couldn't be drafted, had sacrificed an extraordinary large number of men, although I can't imagine why they would have any sense of loyalty for America. The older people left behind had been hurt when their sons had died, but they were hurt worse when the surviving sons returned cynical young men no longer satisfied with the valley. The simple routines—eating meals at a family table, talking politely in mixed company, watching how much liquor one had at the bar—these were hard to maintain in the years following our return. I, like many others, offended my family with my newer, coarser personality.

My sister Marilyn had me at her home for Sunday dinner a year after I was back, and Bob—Marilyn's inoffensive, good husband

Bob—suggested that Harry Truman didn't have the leadership qualities Franklin Roosevelt did. I said:

“You're talking out your ass. Truman and Roosevelt are two peas in a pod. They both win elections and wars the same way, with money and blood. The sons of bitches never led anybody. They sit on their throne like Caesar and give commands to their lackeys.”

I was eating Marilyn's good mashed potatoes. I wouldn't have stopped eating had I not noticed the faces of Bob and Marilyn's two boys, Dale and Little Carl. The boys were stock-still; their forks were part way between their plates and their open mouths. Their eyes were as big as teacups. Bob looked out the dining room window and said he wished he would get some snow soon; his fields needed moisture.

“Tom, could I speak to you in the kitchen?” said Marilyn.

I was angry with myself for swearing, and her presumptuous, older sister's tone was gasoline on the fire inside me.

“No thanks,” I said. “I'm not done eating. I promise I'll watch my mouth.”

“I want to see you in the kitchen *right now!*” said Marilyn, becoming more insistent.

“Listen,” I said to her, “you're not my mother. My mother's dead. Don't think you can order me into the kitchen and give me a lecture.”

Bob became further engrossed in the weather situation outdoors. His wife threw her napkin into her plate and glared at me.

“Thank God Mother *is* dead!” she said. “She would die a thousand times over if she were here to see what an ill-mannered, foul-mouthed lout her darling son has become! Every time you talk like that you do dirt on her memory!”

She jumped up from the table and ran from the room weeping. The boys had scarce moved since I had cursed.

“Must be that time of the month, eh, Bob?” I said and shrugged.

I hated myself for speaking crudely of Marilyn. She was my beloved oldest sister, and as the words spilled out my mouth my heart was flooded by the great store of love I held for her. I struggled against my conscience while I stirred my potatoes around my plate. Ten seconds later I had followed Marilyn into her bedroom. I sat on the bed with her as she covered her face and sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Sis," I said. "It won't happen again."

"How could you talk like that in front of my babies?" she asked me.

Her crying had discolored her puffy face. My dear sister looked older than she was when she turned to me, and—God forgive me for thinking it—she seemed more than a tad ridiculous.

"What is wrong with you?" she demanded. "Don't you know how to act anymore?"

"I've got new habits. I'll get over them," I said. "I don't mean the things I say."

"Then why say them? Do you want to hurt us? Where's my little brother Tommy? I want him back!"

She sobbed anew for a while. She got a hold on her emotions and added:

"You're angry every time we see you. You don't enjoy anything. I've told the boys what a good, loving man their uncle is, but they're scared to death of you. You look so mean they think you're about to hit them any second. You aren't happy with anything. You don't have any friends."

"I have friends," I said.

"Those men you drink with? They're not good for you."

"And who would be good for me, Sis?"

I took a Kleenex from the dispenser on her bureau and dried her eyes. Every room in her house had an open box of Kleenex in it someplace. I had to wonder if having ready tissue paper was something middle-class people did.

"Tom," she said, making herself somber once more, "I want you to listen and to take this seriously."

On the islands I had seen men as close to me as Marilyn was, disemboweled by mortar shells. Having seen that, I could no longer take ordinary people, including my middle-aged sister, as seriously as I had when I was a boy.

"I'm listening," I said.

"Would you let me help you get a girlfriend?" she said.

"Sis..."

"You said you were listening," she insisted. "Now, at our church I know several single women your age. Do you remember Anna MacDougell?"

“Charles’ little sister?” I said.

“Don’t you remember how pretty she was?”

“No,” I said, “I don’t remember her. Her brother was a handful, wasn’t he? How is kept out of prison is a mystery to me.”

“He was wild,” agreed Marilyn, who had forgotten her tears for the sake of finding me a mate.

I have discerned that older, married women can vicariously participate in romantic adventures and can still taste some of the excitement they knew in their courtship days, if they are allowed to arrange the love affairs of their younger family members.

“Anna,” she was saying, “has to be the nicest girl I’ve ever known. She’s really smart. A teacher, you know. Like I said, she goes to Bob’s and my church in Burntover. She never meets any nice men in our little community, and I know she’s lonely.”

“Aren’t we all?” I said.

“Would you like... to have me bring her to supper sometime?”

As she became caught up in the fun of being a matchmaker, Marilyn had forgotten she had been crying less than two minutes earlier.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

I was as good as my word. I did think about Anna, and about women in general. I, and most of the veterans, didn’t think of much else. I didn’t need Marilyn to tell me what was wrong with me. When a man has been sick for as long as I had been, he becomes an expert on his own affliction and knows only too well what will cure him.

An invisible wall had long stood between women and myself, and the separation from them was more painful after my discharge, for it seemed to me that every woman in the valley had become beautiful in my absence, and each of them was now willing to flaunt herself in front of me. There were young girls whose plump thighs showed under their culottes, and they filled Sterton’s public benches in front of the new supermarket and the high school; they whispered to one another when I came near a swarm of them, which made me yearn to know if they were talking about me. There were wealthy married ladies who sashayed down the sidewalks, leaving behind them trails of strong perfume that strayed across my path and made me feel I was walking through someone else’s fantasy. On summer days there were independent young schoolteachers in long print dresses like

Rebecca had worn on the last day I saw her. And there were secretaries who lunched on the south side of Main Street, across from the Stockman's Bar; they ate tiny sandwiches that had the crusts cut off and perched their skirts above their knees. In contrast to the modest old days, there were now rows of young girls in swimsuits sunbathing in the city park, their bare legs shiny with oil. And girls in sweaters that bounced as they walked. And women on their way to the country club, in low-cut evening gowns. And young women strolling with their lovers, kissing and pawing on one another as the entire town looked at them. And there were women smiling at me from billboards. And singing to me over the radio like sirens. And there were the idealized women in the magazines.

I had a lot of problems with magazines.

I would go to the library to read and would drift from the real books into the periodical section like a moth drawn to a porch light. That was a great era for Hollywood ingénues. Every slick publication had a full-page photograph in it of a young actress posing on a beach or caught by the camera as she climbed over a fence in her short skirt or as she fought—always unsuccessfully—to push down her dress as an unexpected gust of wind carried it above her waist. The young women pictured rarely became famous, for they could not move or speak convincingly on the screen. The one mannerism every one of them had down pat was the look of total innocence at the very instant she was exhibiting the most of her body. The resulting images were overpowering to me. I could look at the pictures with pure dumb wanting and imagine what the girls would say to me were I in the picture with them. Once I had taken that step into their realm I found I could escape from them only by getting into the deep wild countryside, where there were no women and no images to make me want what I could not have.

So in 1948 I was herding sheep above Muddy Gap. I was working, but to no purpose. Before he died, Mr. Muir had written me a final letter to give me a last sliver of advice before he was gone. He was grieving for his Nora, and his mind consequently strayed from its customary disciplined path. For the only time during our acquaintance he rambled. "When the barrage gets worse," he wrote, "you have to dig in and wait." When he wrote that his thoughts were in the France of 1918, a place he almost never allowed his mind to

go, but the notion was a last something for me to grasp onto. The barrage on my position could not have been worse in the months following my return to the valley, and I had to dig myself into my work and wait for better times.

I woke up on the Fourteenth of September 1948, feeling that this morning was the beginning of a long peace when the war and my longing were at last asleep deep inside me. I hung my pocket mirror on the corner of my wagon and shaved outside in the cool desert air, and whistled "Scotland the Brave," as Mr. Muir had done on his best mornings. The sky was clear and quiet after the night's hard frost. I had gone to bed tired and had slept well in the cool night. My sheep were gathered at the bottom of the hill below my wagon. Each of the fat, gray animals was facing in a different direction, for there was no wind for them to turn into, and they were pointed to whatever their feeble sheep intelligences aimed them. On mornings like that, medieval monks had poked their heads outside their stone monasteries and had reasserted that their chosen path had been the right one, for there had to be a God to create such perfect days. The rising sun set a corona of golden fire around the edges of the sagebrush hills, and I felt as good as I had in many years. I did not think of Rebecca for more than a few minutes as I prepared for work.

A red car, a Packard or a Lincoln or something else big—I could never tell cars apart—appeared on the dirt road below the hill and parked among the grazing sheep. The sound of the door closing sounded plainly in the crystal air, and echoed off the sandstone cliffs surrounding my hill. A small green figure walked around the side of the automobile and up the path towards my wagon. I could tell it was a woman from the flowing patch of skirt about her legs and from the large white ribbon tied in a bow at the back of her head. I ran into the wagon and put on a different, much cleaner shirt. As I came out again, I checked my hair and teeth in the mirror hanging on the wagon.

"You're getting to be an ugly old man," I said to my reflection.

The woman coming up the hill was taking high steps on the rutted path, as her heels made her choose only the firmest ground. When she came closer, I could discern that she was also taking care not to step on the ants swarming across the path, which is one of the inconsequential but pleasing behaviors that arise naturally in women

but would never occur in a man.

I had decided this was a lost lady from the highway here to ask directions. She was too well dressed in her green linen dress and matching short jacket to be a local woman, not even a rich local woman. She moved as no country woman would: one foot placed directly in front of the other and the toes held straight forward, and her head held at an unvarying right angle to her level shoulders.

She entered my camp, and I could see she was very beautiful.

"Hello, Tom," she said.

"You look like someone, ma'am," I said. "Are you related to a woman name of Julia Redman?"

"I *am* Julia Redman," she said. "Actually, it's Julia Bartholomew again. I divorced Kirk five years ago."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know you. You're different."

Her hair was much brighter than I remembered it, and her makeup, which she hadn't used with much skill before, was different, but there was something else I couldn't place. One moment it was clearly her, and the next I saw someone else. I had thought of her every day for the last nine years, but here she was in the flesh, and she didn't match the memory I had kept of her.

"I hope I don't disappoint you," she said.

"No, no, it's not that," I said.

If it were possible, she might have become more comely than she was as a girl. Her dress and movements were more refined—a cynic would say more calculated—and she had learned to manage her facial expressions so that she could transform her mood from happy to concerned to interested as quickly as I could have switched a light bulb on or off. She must have practiced her new expressions in a mirror, and in a three-way mirror at that, for her face conveyed as much meaning from the side as it did from the front.

I let down the lazy board on the side of my wagon to make a bench for her. She and I caught up on our respective lives while I got the coffee ready and brought her sugar and a napkin, the latter of which she spread evenly on her lap and did not let the breeze rustle a millimeter out of place. I noticed a stain on my supposedly good shirt, and held a hand over the dark spot with as much casual grace as I could muster. A third person observing us would never have guessed that this elegant woman and the dirty shepherd hurrying

about his camp to get her sugar and cream came from similar backgrounds; he might have guessed instead that I was Julia's servant, not her butler of course, but perhaps a lowly gardener badly soiled from his work.

Kirk, she said, sipping from her cup as delicately as a cat at a milk bowl, had been a mistake.

"I was so headstrong back then," she said. "I don't know how anyone could stand me. I met a boy with big muscles. He told me he loved me, and I was so rash I married him."

She balanced her cup and its saucer on her lap atop the napkin, and clasped her hands over her knees. I feared for a moment she was about to spill my strong coffee on her precious linen dress. I know now that she was conscious of everything she did, and the moon would sooner dive into the sun than she would make a false move.

"Kirk and I were water and oil," said Julia. "We had no mutual interests. He hated my friends, and I was afraid of his. The whole marriage was a painful lesson for me."

She picked up her coffee again, holding the saucer by the rim and the cup handle with the thumb and index finger of her other hand.

"Rather I had gone to college than get married," she said.

"Ra-tha" was how she said the word "rather."

"Katharine Hepburn!" I thought. "That's who she's pretending to be!"

Julia used to mimic movie stars in the old days, and now, for reasons of her own, she was mimicking a character from *The Philadelphia Story*. Hers was a charming performance, and I felt privileged to be her audience.

I told her of the war, my one big story, since I don't have any past marriages to explain.

"It must have been simply dreadful," Julia stated.

I did a dishonorable thing then. To keep her attention and win a portion of her sympathy, I embellished my war stories, as my fellow patients in Cheyenne had done for the bar patrons. I wanted her to know I had been brave, and—I left her to connect the dots I drew for her—I wanted her to know I had been brave for her. I recall I said something along the lines of: "I fought for the people I loved," which was as miserable a lie as any braggart had ever told. It was a testament to my desire to please her that I could allow such words to

leave my mouth and yet I did not choke in the effort it took to expel them. She was so intent on trying to be pleasing to me, she could listen to such blatant nonsense and not take offense.

“You make me proud to know you, Tom,” she said.

She held out her hand at arm’s length and took the hand I had been holding over my shirt stain. She tilted her head and smiled a smile other men will see in their daydreams.

“My dear friend Tom” she said, and I melted like a candle set in a dish, and left to burn the whole night, long.

“I have missed you these nine long years,” she said.

I wanted to say: “You have?” but nothing came out when I opened my mouth.

“I have a great favor to ask of you,” she said.

I was liquid wax by this point, and running off my plate. Whatever she asked of me; jump off a mountain or swim the Pacific, I was going to do it.

“I’ve won this silly contest on the radio,” she said. “They wanted me to write ‘Why Coca-Cola is the pause that refreshes’ in forty words or less. I know; it’s dopey. But I wrote them, and my entry won. They gave me a free vacation for two in the Caribbean, a voyage on a ship, for nine days and eight nights. Now you know the work I do, only a clerk on the Casper water board, and an old maid like myself has no social life. I don’t know anyone to take. I was hoping an old friend would help me out. Do say you’ll come with me. We’ll have great fun together. We can sit in the sun and drink those extravagant cocktails that have umbrellas in them and be as carefree as we want.”

I had half suspected she wanted money, and here she was asking me to come away with her. My candle was not merely melted; its wick was burned to ash, and the wax had evaporated.

“That’d be great!” I said, and in my excitement I nearly swallowed my tongue.

I walked her back to her car at the base of the hill, and she told me: “I’m so looking forward to our trip and to rebuilding our friendship.”

As she turned and walked to the driver’s door, she gave an extra motion to her hips. She may have done this unintentionally, though my more observant self tells me this new version of Julia didn’t do

anything unintentionally, and she knew where I would be looking when she turned her back on me.

She glanced over her shoulder and gave me a different sort of smile, one accented by lowered eyelids and a dimple at the corner of her mouth.

“I’ve thought of you so often,” she said.

We left for Miami, Florida, on the Twenty-third of that same month. I bought every white suit I could find in Sterton and practiced standing with my hands in my pockets and my back leaning against a railing. Julia made me return the suits and buy other new clothes in Miami. She said I had selected old fashions and bought them too large at that; the clothes she chose for me were pale khaki jackets and pants matched to black and dark brown shirts; the shirts were as tight as something a woman would wear, and the other items fit as loosely as a tent. She showed me how I should leave the collar button and the top button below it open, and how I should put only my finger in my pockets and leave the thumb outside and parallel to the pants leg. She fixed my hair for me in the Denver airport. Since I was three years old I had parted my hair on the left and combed the rest to the right; Julia said a gentleman on vacation would use tonic to comb his coif straight back, thus showing off his widow peaks and making him appear older and more mature. At the last minute, she made me run to a department store and buy a white wool sweater, which she told me I should drape over my shoulders, and tie its sleeves across my chest whenever I wasn’t wearing a jacket. I felt odd wearing the sweater that way, but the look seemed to please her.

On the flight down, my only trip in an airplane, I told Julia at least forty times how beautiful she was, and upset her a little by looking out the window too often and proclaiming how big everything was from up there. I felt bursting with enthusiasm, and was in the same glorious state when we got to the boat. We shared a large cabin divided into two separate bedrooms. The first night out I couldn’t close my eyes for thinking of Julia lying in bed but ten feet from me.

Julia arose before I did in the morning. I went topside and had a big breakfast in the galley, then took a stroll on the promenade deck, where I thought I might find her. She wasn’t there, but I met a honeymoon couple from Indiana gazing at the blue-green sea. They asked if I’d ever been on the ocean before.

"Yes," I said, "but not under such pleasant circumstances."

"Where are you from?" the lady asked me. "You have the strangest accent."

"Wyoming," I said.

They looked at each other.

"I'm not familiar with that country," said the young man. "They must have good schools there. You speak very good English."

I caught up with Julia at lunch. We shared a round table beneath an umbrella with two other couples and ate cold cucumber soup.

"I've met the most delightful group of ladies," said Julia. "There are the three of them, and they need a fourth for bridge. You don't mind if I help make a foursome this afternoon, do you Tom?"

In the valley, bridge is a game for spinsters over sixty and for old men who no longer have the nerve or the pocket money to play poker. I couldn't imagine Julia enjoying the game.

"If you want," I said. "I'll explore the ship."

Several tables from us was seated a large, heavy man in a pink shirt. His face and thick throat were sunburnt to a shade that nearly matched his clothes. As he ate lobster, he would now and then set down his food and gesture with his hands to his wife, an older, smallish woman bundled up in a shawl, sunglasses, and a big Chinese hat.

"Do you know that gentleman?" asked Julia.

She had noticed I was studying him.

"His name is Douglas Greenleaf," I said. "He used to be married to my sister Myra."

"I didn't know that!" said Julia, sounding genuinely surprised.

"You never knew Myra had been married?"

"Not to Mr. Greenleaf."

"Mr. Greenleaf?" I said. "Do you know him?"

"Sort of. He handled my divorce from Kirk."

"Then we both have a bad memory of him," I said.

"He's not a bad sort," said Julia, and glanced at Greenleaf. "In some ways, he is actually rather courtly."

Douglas Greenleaf had done two things in his lifetime I could never forgive in a man: one, he had become a lawyer, and, two: he had mistreated my sister. I knew from Myra that the shriveled mandarin at his table was an heiress he had married for the love of

her checkbook. From the looks of her, Douglas must have often thought her bank account was not as attractive as he once believed.

“Let’s talk of something else,” I said.

Julia was gone from the cabin again the following morning, and spent the day playing bridge with her new lady friends. When the ship stopped at Key West, she said she was ill. She said the same at Havana, Cuba, and at Nassau, Bahamas. I had to go ashore each time without her. I would buy something for her in the stalls set up for the tourists—a doll, a Panama hat, some fresh flowers—and I had to wait until lunch the next day to give them to her.

On my own I took to roaming the lower decks where the crewmen worked. The sailors were young Scandinavians, and were as vigorous as they were blonde. They arose before their shifts and did calisthenics and ran in place on the open air decks before doing six hours of work. Some of them spoke a little English, and what they had to say centered around words like “physic,” “regimen,” and “diet.” Their attitudes reminded me of my hospital therapist Dwight, and I suspected that more than a few of these young Vikings also had orange T-shirts in their dressers back home.

The passengers topside were either newlyweds or retired people taking their dream vacations. They traveled in pairs, and were deeply involved with each other, as they should have been. I might as well have been in another world. I was jealous of the happiness they enjoyed inside their nations of two as they sunned on the deck chairs or went downstairs to eat and dance. I stayed for hours at the railing and watched the sea. We went over patches of ocean so shallow I could gaze down through the clear water and see the sandy bottom. As we sailed past Grand Exuma and Grand Inagun Islands, a school of dolphins raced along side the boat: they leapt over the trough the ship cut in the water like sprinters going over a hurdle, while they smiled at the joys of a dolphin’s life.

I was with Julia only during the lunch hour. She was excited about the trip, talked too much, too fast, and entirely of the pure blue sea we could see from our chairs. She said she was very happy. I was, she said. “a regular sport” for going with her.

Things were wrong, of course.

I went to bed at night, alone in the cabin and thinking of other ships bound on other journeys. A disaster was coming. There would

be no landing or battle as there had been at the end of my other sea journeys, but something bad was surely coming. I could not tell its shape or the hour it would come round for me any more than I could read Julia's mind under the layers of acting, and not knowing kept me walking the decks and gazing at the sea and waiting. I felt as far from the day Julia came to the sheepwagon as from the old days we spent beside the Wind River. I wanted my mountains and solid ground to walk upon, and to feel certain again, even certainly alone.

We were six days out, and had the eastern tip of Cuba on our port side as we closed on our last port of call in Jamaica. I had been lying in the lounge chair since sunrise and watching the black mound of distant Cuba while I tried to place what other island it brought to mind. The old woman crept into the chair beside me, gingerly, like a cat stalking its prey. I was aware she was staring at me, her rat's face screwed up beneath the dark glasses and below the odd Chinese hat. I hoped that if I ignored her she would go away.

"Young man," she said.

I pretended not to hear.

"Young man, answer me!" she said and slapped my leg.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" I said.

I had to look at her directly. She had an obvious black moustache, and her mouth was drawn into a tight circle that seemed ready to spit saliva. For the last time, I felt sorry for Douglas Greenleaf. He had to wake up next to her every morning, and she wouldn't be wearing the sunglasses in bed.

"Are you traveling with that wretched Bartholomew woman?" she asked.

"You're being impolite," I told her.

"Are you her pimp, or are you just some ignorant hillbilly?" she said.

"Ma'am," I told her, "I don't know why you think you can insult me. I don't know you, and I wish you would leave me alone."

"Do you know where she is?" she asked.

"Go away."

"Do you? You don't know, do you?"

"All right, all right," I said. "She's playing bridge. Now you know, you can go away."

"Bridge! Bridge!" she bleated louder than my sheep. "I've heard

some euphemisms in my time, but that takes the cake! You imbecile!" she spat at me. "She's with my husband!"

Her rat's face collapsed into itself and became a wide, dark hole I fell into headfirst, down, down, deeper than the ocean floor.

"She's been Douglas' mistress for years! They think I don't know! They think they're fooling me!"

"She had tickets," I said, helpless, falling down. "She won a contest."

"Douglas bought her tickets! Douglas buys her everything! They think having you here fools me! Don't you see?! Don't you see anything?! He couldn't leave her for nine goddamned days! This was to be my vacation! My vacation, you moron!"

Down a thousand miles, down a thousand years. I snatched at anything in the shadows. I caught something firm, and when I rose from the lounge chair and out of the darkness I had the old woman by the throat.

"Where are they?" I said.

She gurgled something at me, the tail end of it being "stupid." I tightened my grip.

"Tell me where they are, or I'll break your neck."

Fire was jumping off the sea and off the corners of my eyes. Sparks came out of my fingers in geysers.

"Cabin Seventy-four," she gurgled, and I tossed her aside.

I took a fire extinguisher off the deck wall and carried it to the cabin door. Using the extinguisher's butt end, I smashed a hole through the wood above the doorknob. I then reached in and opened the door from the inside. Julia was in the bed, the sheets wrapped around her. "Oh, Tom," she said. Douglas was coming out the bathroom door, a towel around his waist. I bounded across the room and hit him in the stomach so hard he dropped the towel and fell backwards into the bathtub. He started to get up, but I knocked him down again and pinned his shoulders to the floor with my knees. I hit his face with both hands and made the sparks fly. There was fire and blood coming out his nose and mouth, and I could not see or hear for the flames blazing around us. Half a dozen young men pulled me off him momentarily. I broke free and kicked him in the crotch, and he howled and flopped around the tile floor like a dying pink whale.

They carried me to the brig and threatened to do worse than lock

*TOM WEDDERBURN'S LIFE*

me up. Douglas lived. He didn't press charges against me because he already was in legal difficulties with his wife and wanted to keep as much out of the papers as he could. The captain threw me off the ship at Kingston, and I had to wire my sister Marilyn for money to get home. I got passage on a freighter bound into New Orleans, and took the train the rest of the way back to Wyoming.



## Wanting Nothing

The next fifteen years of my life make a nearly blank chapter in this book. I will deal with them as a doctor deals with an operation, with as little blood spilt and as little pain as possible. Another of my theories of life is that unless a person becomes a member of Congress, buys General Motors, or climbs to something higher still, his personal history becomes less crowded with meaningful events, as he grows older. For most Americans, the key episodes in their stories have been played out before they are twenty-five years old, and everyone, save the ruling elite, has made every important choice they'll ever make by the time they are thirty-five. I knew I would be forever a sheepherder and become old alone, and the only deed left to do was to age. I stayed with my flocks in the badlands south of the Wind River Valley, worked hard, and kept my council with the open sky. I made money and saved it. There wasn't anything I would have wished to buy. Some of my earnings I invested in the new uranium mines that began in the Gas Hills in the 1950's, and that money expanded over time like a tubercular growth left untreated. During my rare trips to Sterton to buy supplies, I would check the size of my wealth at that bank and at Lockhart's Brokerage House. With a carelessness that unnerved my financial advisors, I would always re-invest my dividends and let the money accumulate at a higher rate.

Time, said Aristotle, is a continuum. The minutes, seconds, and years we divide time into do not exist outside the minds of men. The mountains rise and fall and rise again; the seas dry up and then reform in other parts of the globe; the sky changes and soon is the same as it was before: only to men do things seem to pass. When I was in the country with my sheep I hid my wristwatch inside the wagon, and let the continuum slip by me without feeling the pain of loss. The seasons changed, for seasons are real and not a part of our imagination. Seasons have to be endured. And though the land does change, the alteration was so slow it was imperceivable to me. I felt

I had become a part of the land and of the angry sky that brought the storms, and I did not care I was growing old. Only when I went where people lived could I tell that I, like other men, was passing. I would catch a glimpse of myself in a plate glass window or in a bathroom mirror, and I would recognize the face I saw as a sailor might recognize the shipwrecked remains of a ship he once served upon. That was another reason to avoid towns.

The 1950's and the early 1960's were boom times in Wyoming. The dirt roads became black top highways, and every place two highways met, up popped a gas station and about the gas stations grew hotels and cafes and gift shops that sold cheap agates at twenty times their actual value and authentic Indian silver jewelry made in Taiwan and a million other tawdry items with which the sales clerks robbed the tourists. The tourists came in long rectangular cars, and each car dragged a silver Airstreams trailer behind it all the way to Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons. Trucks as big as river barges, kept the vagabond tourist's company on the blacktop and occasionally, without any malice, killed several of them, when a long rectangular car slowed down in a trucker's path. The men in the gas stations hauled the twisted wrecks to the junctions, stripped them of their parts, and left the remaining hulks sit around their garages in disordered swarms that turned to black and then to grey-red as the weather ate through the paint and later the primer and finally rusted the broken metal.

About the small towns such as Sterton there sprouted treeless rows of tract houses, each of them identical to its neighbor. Beyond the suburbs there grew outburbs of trailer houses, where the poorest workers and their disorganized families lived. Oil was discovered throughout the Wind River Basin. Iron ore was mined in the South Pass. In the Rattlesnake Hills north of Jeffery City, men took from the ground yellow cake uranium, enough, the newspapers and the booster clubs said, to power the outside world for a thousand years and send space men to the stars. The miners, the roughnecks, construction workers, and truck drivers had to be somewhere when they weren't attacking the land or crowding into their trailer parks or driving as fast as they could on the highway, and I did not care where that place was, so long as it was far from me.

I watched this story unfold from my desert retreat above the

Sweetwater, and I knew what was happening. I had read my Livy and my Gibbon, and I knew that Rome had eaten the Mediterranean Basin after destroying Carthage and had eventually died of indigestion. America had eaten the entire world after the Second World War, and soon we would be sicker than little Rome ever was. I watched from my sheepwagon and thought of the money I let grow in the Sterton bank. The money was I decided, my small contribution to the hard lesson America was learning in those prosperous times. As long as I let the money increase, there would be a little more booty for my fellow citizens to stuff themselves on, and the nation would become that much fatter and dumber and more unsatisfied. The parallel growth pleased me, as I now thoroughly hated America. The only nation I cared for was the sagebrush hills, specifically the land that begins where Highway 287 gives way to dirt and ends on the borders of Highway 26, where the road swoops into Sterton. When I ventured beyond those limits, I was a stranger in a country I no longer called mine.

In the wilderness I ate the wild berries I gathered from the riverside and the venison I took in hunting season. My dog was my only constant companion; he listened to me, and did not answer. The wind combed my hair, and the sky was my roof. I re-read the books from Mr. Muir's library, though more of my free time was given to dreaming of the life I might have lived had events been different. I drank when I was thirsty. Slept when I was tired. I thought of Julia and Rebecca as little as possible, no more than a couple hundred times a day.

On an April day in 1954 I met my old friend Jim Holmes as he walked across the foothill beneath Garfield Peak. I had guessed it was him from a distance, as he walked with his left foot splayed out to his side and carried a walking stick. Up close he wasn't the young man I'd known years before: his hair and the clusters of whiskers on his face were prematurely white, and his denim clothes were as torn and as black with dirt as my brother Carl's had been when I last saw him along the Nebo.

Everyone in the valley knew Jim's story. He had been trapped inside a cave on Okinawa, the Japanese had attacked, and he had killed them one by one as they entered the cave mouth until there were so many dead they clogged the entrance. Jim had somehow

survived and had his medals to show for his ordeal. But part of Jim remained in the cave. Since the war he had roamed the hills about Elder County, killing rattlesnakes and keeping their buttons in a cigar box. Under his arm he kept a worn picture book about Mesopotamia, a subject that had fascinated him as a boy. On his good days, when he wasn't as wild as a grasshopper in a glass jar, Jim would show anyone he chanced upon a picture of a ziggurat, and would talk of the cities Ur and Erech. Though he was harmless, children were afraid of him, because he talked to himself and sometimes shook as though he were fighting to keep the worst of his madness contained within himself.

"Jim," I said, "what are you doing out here?"

He gaped at me.

"By Jesus, you know my name!" he exclaimed. "Are you an angel?"

"No, I'm Tom Wedderburn. We grew up together."

He walked around me to have a look on every side.

"You married an Aldpack?" he asked.

"That was my brother Carl. I used to play the fiddle, remember?"

The confusion left his face, and he smiled like the old Jim Holmes.

"Well, I was hoping you were an angel. There was something I wanted to ask you, were you one. So, how you been? It's nice walking country, don't you think?"

The land around us was sagebrush and dirt for fifty miles in every direction. My wagon on the hill behind us was the only manmade object in sight. It was not a place a person took a casual stroll.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"That's the second time you've asked me that," he said. "Must be an important question. Mind if I sit?"

He spread his jacket on the ground and sat on it Indian style. Once he adjusted his backside into a comfortable position, he opened his book to a marked page he showed to me.

"Sumerian Wheel of Fortune," said Jim and snapped the book shut. "Could tell the future, good and evil. Have I ever told you the uranium story?"

"We haven't met in fifteen years," I said.

"Sit with me, old friend."

He made room for me on his jacket. Save for his eyes, which were dancing about in their sockets, he appeared calm.

"Do you still play the fiddle," he asked.

"I haven't picked it up in nearly—"

"The uranium story," he said. "In 1938 I was with the Forest Service. We were cutting scrub brush. Underbrush they called it. To prevent forest fires, you see. One time, I was resting, leaning on my shovel, and I look up and here was this patch of yellow rock in the middle of a granite cliff. I filed it away in the old brain."

He screwed a finger into the side of his head.

"Years later I read this book on uranium. Not this book."

He indicated the book he carried.

"This book's on Mesopotamia," he said. "Means 'between the rivers.' Another subject entirely. This other book, the one on uranium, it says the deposits they're mining these days are just *arruvial* deposits."

"Alluvial deposits," I said.

"Right, *arruvial*, spread by water," said Jim. "The source of these mines we got now is a mother lode, somewhere in the Wind River Mountains, maybe in a granite cliff. The bright boys say it might only be as big as a little room. I saw it back in 1938. I got to find out where I was back then, and I'm rich. The damn thing is worth hundreds of millions of dollars..."

"Jim," I said.

"...hundreds of trillions, kazillions, qudrabillions. I would be able to buy a boat, a car, a new knife. This old knife I got is rusted shut."

"Jim," I said, "you're in the Rattlesnake Hills, a hundred miles east of the Wind Rivers."

He looked at me and looked at the barren hills.

"Well," he said and hit himself in the forehead. "Well, you bet!"

He hit himself harder.

"That's where the trees went," he said. "I sure could use that angel now!"

"Let's get something to eat," I said and helped him stand. "Perhaps you were looking out this way for practice. Maybe you were testing some theories."

"Theories," he said. "Sure. Did I tell you about the dream?"

"We'll save that for after dinner," I said.

Back in my camp I made beans and cornbread, and we ate hidden from the wind on the eastern side of my wagon. Jim ate enough for three men, and played with my dog Sam, whom he said reminded him of a dog that had belonged to his father.

“He’s dead now, don’t you know?” he said. “I mean my father. The dog is too, of course. That’s to be expected. The way he chased cars and such. I’m glad you’re not dead, Tom. It’s amazing anybody from the old days is still alive. You used to play that song about the boy that sunk the ship, didn’t you?”

“Yes I did,” I said.

“I loved that song,” said Jim. “Let me tell you the dream story now. It’ll explain about the angel. I was hoping you were a good angel because I already had a visit from the bad one. You know who I mean, don’t you?”

I said I couldn’t guess whom he meant.

“Jesus Christ!” he said and threw his plate down. “Don’t you read your damned Bible?! I mean Lucifer, the Prince of Dark Ones! He used to be a prince of angels in Heaven. The Sumerians had a god a lot like Lucifer, did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t,” I said.

“So, anyway,” said Jim Holmes, “I went to sleep on my left side, and the next thing I know I’m walking into a big revival tent. It’s a summer night, hot and the place is full of sweaty people. My dad took me to a revival just like this, years ago in Sterton. Down in front of these people there’s this beautiful black preacher, and—he is beautiful, take my word for it—he’s got something wrong with him because his one hand is nice and sleek like a woman’s, but his other hand, his left one, is big and scaly like a monster’s. One look at him, and I know who this fella is. Do you know who he was?”

“Lucifer?” I said.

“Why yes,” said Jim, taken aback by my answer. “You haven’t had this dream too, have you?”

“I was guessing,” I said.

“Oh, well, so this black preacher, he calls out to the people and with his pretty hand he brings forth this fat man in a suit. Lucifer says to him: ‘What is it you want more than anything? Tell me, and I’ll give it to you.’”

“The fat man, he hems and haws and then says: ‘I want mountains

of riches! I want to be the richest of my kind in all the world!"

"So Lucifer touches him with his scaly hand and changes the man into a fat little sparrow and sits him loose inside a granary overflowing with oats. 'Here's your mountains of riches,' he says. 'You are truly the richest of your kind. Now watch out for hawks.' And he laughs. A terrible laugh that makes the whole world shake.

"Then the Devil summons with his good hand a pretty woman, one what's sort of older. She's crying and has tears coming down her face. He says: 'What is it you want more than anything? Tell me, and I'll give it to you.'

"The woman's crying so loud I can't understand her at first. She says: 'I want to be loved. Nobody's ever loved me like I deserve.'

"So the Devil holds out his terrible hand and changes the pretty older woman into a black Angus cow, and puts her in a pasture with seven bulls. He says to her: 'Now you'll be loved as you deserve, every day, up to the day the farmer slaughters you.' He laughs again and makes the whole world shake.

"Then the Devil turns to me, and calls me up front with his pretty hand. He says: 'Crazy Jim Holmes, tell me what you want more than anything. Tell me, and I'll give it to you.'

"I wanted, right down to the middle of my heart, to say I wanted to find the yellow patch of uranium and to have the money it would give me, but I thought I better not, else he might do something bad to me like he done to the others. I said: 'I don't want anything.'

"The Devil put his evil hand over his own head, and sort of curled into a ball. He was shrinking right before my eyes. 'A man who wants nothing,' he was saying in his teensy, squeaky voice, 'shall have his heart's desire.' He shrunk into a black dot, and changed into a snake the size of a worm and crawled into a crack in the ground.

"The people in the tent stood up, their hands raised over their heads, and they shouted: 'Dear God, Jim Holmes has beat the Devil!' I woke up then, turned over on my right side, and had a dream about hunting ducks."

"That's quite a story," I said. "Want nothing, and you'll get what you want. You're probably not half wrong there."

We were facing the eastern horizon. The sun was setting behind us, and the earth and sky before us were blending into a featureless wall of dark blue. When the wind fell we could hear the meadow

larks sing and the chirps of the fir crickets.

“Those were Sumerian ducks I was hunting,” said Jim, “living in swamps, between the rivers. Which is why they called it Mesopotamia.”

“Sounds reasonable,” I said.

“So I’ve figured it out,” said Jim. “If I’m going to find the uranium, I have to not want it. If I could not want it strong enough, then I’d be home free. Sure could use a good angel, though.”

## My Almost Family

In 1964 I bought a farm in the upper Wind River Valley on the irrigated land north of Burntover. I was tired of the desert and of following the sheep from summer pasture in the high country to winter range on the lower plains. On my farm I could keep the sheep in pasture during the warm months, and feed them hay when the year turned cold. My work was safer, easier than it was on the open range. In addition to keeping my flock, I grew malting barley for beer and sugar beets I sold to the Great Western Sugar Company. I had trees around my house and broken machinery in the yard like every other farmer in the valley. For a change, the postman knew where to find me, and everyone in the county, not just my bankers and Lockhart the broker knew, I was wealthy, because I owned property and had paid cash for it.

I kept my house after a bachelor's manner. I had one sofa and one bed for the eight rooms, and my dogs slept in the kitchen on my one rug. If I could keep the tumbleweeds out, I didn't waste much time dealing with the dust bunnies that accumulated in the corners. Three months went by before I got around to buying a broom. I became so domestic I purchased a television, but I disliked how the damn thing barked at me, so I kicked the screen in and left the infernal machine's shell in the Burntover garbage dump. The most pleasure television gave me was the fine explosion the tube gave me when I put my boot through the glass. The sensation was akin to stepping on a land mine and walking away without a scratch.

On the adjoining farm to my east lived Nancy Allison, a divorced woman, and her son Stanley. My sister Marilyn. God bless her, had, once, long ago, tried to fix me up with this Nancy Allison at a Sunday dinner. Nancy reached towards bearable when she had her mouth closed, but get her going about a subject, particularly about men, of whom she thought her former husband was a typical cheating, brutish example, and she would reveal herself to be a loud, shrewish, angry woman no man in the county would consider taking

as a wife. Other than her exceptionally foul personality, Nancy was nothing remarkable. She could have been pretty once. When I knew her she was past forty-five and stooped from years of hard labor on her small and worthless farm. Her hands were as rough as metal rasps, and her fingers were wide and flat, and wouldn't have looked worse had they been smashed with a hammer. I'm convinced her ex-husband did use a hammer on her wide broken nose. She dressed like a man, in coveralls and her hair stuffed under a hat. A person had to know Nancy for a long time before he would suspect there was any woman left in her.

Her son Stan was of more pleasing stuff. He used to walk the fields abutting my place, dreaming dreams perhaps like the ones I had lived in when I was his age. A group of secret friends would be about him, and he spoke to them as he went along, gesturing with his arms to help himself think. I caught him out on his circuit once when he was twelve. I was setting canvas dams in the ditch right next to the fence, and Stan nearly was right on top of me before he became aware of my presence. I said, "Hello," and he ran away like a rabbit.

I bought him a good Western Stetson—the kind that has a short, turned-up brim, and not the big, floppy Texas hat they wear in the movies—put it in a plastic bag, and left it on a fence post for him when he walked by in the morning. I put a note on the hat that read: "You need to cover your head from the sun when you are out. P.S. Don't be ashamed of your daydreams. I used to have them too."

He was waiting for me beyond the fence some days later, wearing the hat. We nodded to each other, and in time became friends of sorts from that small beginning. He came to work for me for a couple summers; Stan bucked bales, sat irrigation tubes, and the like. I showed him how to throw a baseball. (I had to get a book from the library on how this was done, for I had never had the chance to play when I was young.) He read several of my books, such as *Treasure Island*, *The Three Musketeers*, and the Kipling novels. Stan didn't have a mind for difficult literature, and was satisfied with adventure stories. There was, I knew, little adventure to be had on his mother's impoverished farm. He was a taciturn, timid boy. He had already learned the farmer's habit of talking about the weather and of crops and of nothing else. Impenetrable and living within his head, he reminded me of someone I'd once known.

His mother was repeatedly coming to me to beg on Stan's behalf. "Stanley could use new shoes," she said. Or: "Stanley needs school supplies. Pencils and notebooks." Stanley would need new clothes and clarinet lessons and tickets to the school concert, all of which Nancy curiously thought I would buy for him, and I curiously did. He was a good kid. I don't claim he had the qualities to make him a great man. He was clearly only going to be a good man equal to his modest talents. However, helping him get by let me think better of myself at a small price.

I took him to a Father/Son banquet at the Burntover High School when he was seventeen. We ate fried chicken and baked potatoes while the daughter of the PTA president sang a Rogers and Hammerstein medley at the piano. The guest speaker asked every son in turn what they wanted to be as an adult, and Stan said: "I'd like to go to welding school. Be a welder." A boy at another table proclaimed he wanted to be an astronaut. Not to be outdone, a handsome boy named Jack Rafterry—that was, you might remember, my mother's maiden name—said: "If I am anything less than President, I'll be disappointed." The Rafterry boy had a look about him that would have frozen warm water, and to my reckoning he was serious in his expectations. He and the would-be astronaut may have had some abilities to go with their ambitions, and because they were young I could forgive their arrogance and their not knowing that ability counts for nothing in this world. Success turns on whom one knows, and two boys from Burntover, Wyoming, weren't going to know anybody who could help them. I would have wagered on the night of the banquet that Stanley would become a welder a century before those other boys got near a space ship or the White House.

After the ceremony, a teacher who didn't know I was Stan's pretend father, told me I had a fine son. I should have corrected him. It instead seemed normal to get compliments regarding Stan, or, I should say, it seemed comfortable, although that is a word I've used to describe my feelings for someone else in this book, and I should be wary of the adjective. I told the teacher I was very proud of "my son."

We went fishing together in the mountains several times. Stanley got excited over a big rainbow that swallowed his hook in Warm Spring Creek on a summer afternoon. He got to jumping around on

the bank and shouting for me to come look, and he forgot to reel the fish in all the way. In his excitement, he ran back from the shore and brought the trout in that manner. When he ran to pick the fish up, the rainbow took advantage of the slack in his line and flopped back into the water. Stan had to run backwards again, this time so far the fish couldn't possibly make another escape, and he at last caught his trophy in both hands and held it over his head to show that this was his fish, and Fate itself had failed to take it from him. Until he became older and fell in love, the capture of the fish would be the most excited Stan ever let himself become.

In 1970, his mother came to me the night before Stan was to go away to a technical school in Denver. The Vietnam War was on, and Nancy and I had waged a long struggle to keep Stan out of the service. The draft board was doing its usual work and was taking every boy in Wyoming who could count to ten and walk under his own power; they had taken away the farm deferment and scoffed at the notion that Stanley was an only child, as his father had children from another marriage. Stan wasn't university material, and so was ineligible for the college deferment. My sister Marilyn knew a man in Sterton who, for \$10,000 in cash, paid in small bills, would see that the draft board looked upon a technical college in the same light as a university. Some money had passed from my pockets into someone else's, and Stan had won a year's deferment for the sake of his education. His mother had come up with another plan to save him permanently.

"Why don't you marry me?" she said.

"Because I'm not insane," I told her.

"We wouldn't have a real marriage," she said. (She had put on a dress a gypsy wouldn't have worn, and had on a perfume that smelled like grapefruit.) We'd be man and wife in name only. You could adopt Stanley. Legally."

"So?"

"You're a veteran. He'd be the only son of a veteran."

"That won't work," I said. "People on the board know me. They'd know he wasn't my son by blood."

"Your sister could talk to her friend again," said Nancy. "For money he could forget some things."

"I'm sorry," I told her. "It won't work. My generation fought and

died for nothing, and I would like to save Stan from this war if I could. I can't. They'll take him if they want him."

Ours was a conversation that couldn't reach a satisfactory conclusion; at best it could be ended after much sobbing and pleading on her part. I was tremendously relieved to be done with it, and to have Nancy and her cheap perfume out of my house.

I drove Stan to the Sterton bus station and loaded him with some of the pompous advice the old use to burden the young. I told him to trust half of his first impressions because virtue is hard to discern, but evil bears its true nature like a coat of arms. I said work is worship, and honesty is superior to wealth, and he should let his head rule his heart.

Stan was watching a flight of wild gees fly overhead in a "V" formation while I harangued him.

"Mighty nice geese," he said in response to my advice.

He wrote me from Denver. He said he liked the city park and the zoo. He was astonished, he wrote, at the long streets and the tall buildings, and took walks through the downtown area. He had discovered take-out food, and loved looking at the girls in their short skirts. At school they were teaching him the importance of a clean workstation.

A miracle happened then. Or I think of the event as a miracle, since it was an act of God's grace that I did not deserve. The President ended the draft, leaving Stan to finish his year at the technical school and to be a free man afterwards. He returned to the valley and—with the help of a gift from me—started a small welding service in Sterton, which he still has, though he makes a very modest income from it these days. He married a Mormon girl as quiet as he is, and they have two little girls who think I am something like their uncle or grandfather. I was at first leery of his wife Sally, because she was LDS and insisted Stan convert. My dad had taught me that you couldn't trust a Mormon with your horse or you children. But I was wrong about Sally. She was a good match for Stan, largely because she is considerably smarter than he, and can keep his books at his business and tell him what he should do from day to day. I put the money the Muirs had left me, which I had augmented in my investments, into Treasury Bond that yielded a handsome yearly dividend; in 1976 I gave the bonds to Sally and said they were an

inheritance I had been holding for Stan. She is, as I say, a smart girl, and knew where the money really came from. She took the bonds only for the sake of her children.

“You’ve done so much for us, Mr. Wedderburn,” she told me. “You’re a very good man.”

“No, no, I’m not,” I told her. “I’m a very selfish man trying to buy a little balm for his conscience.”

Whenever I get to feeling more bitter than I normally do, I go have Sunday dinner with Stan and Sally. The sight of Stan holding his two small daughters on his lap is better than any medicine, and I thank God He has granted me this sign of His kindness in my old age. I try to arrive at their house a little after the noon hour, for Sally, clever woman that she is, has decided she would like to convert me as well to her religion. If I arrive on Sunday morning, she will drag me to church services, which are, I might note, so dreary they make the staid Presbyterian Church the Muirs attended look like a rambunctious temple of the Whirling Dervishes. I love her and hate to disappoint her, but Sally will have to wait an awfully long time before she can inscribe Tom Wedderburn’s name in the lists of the saints kept in the Salt Lake Temple.

## Wealth for All

In 1979, the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island dealt a nigh mortal blow to the atomic energy industry. Within weeks of the events in Pennsylvania, the uranium mines in central Wyoming cut production. Inside two years, those same mines were closed. In the early 1980's, OPEC flooded the world market with cheap crude oil, and in Wyoming hundreds of wells were either turned off or capped and abandoned. Unemployment across the state rose to above ten percent. In much of Elder County unemployment was over fifty percent. Banks failed. Businesses went under and took their creditors down to bankruptcy with them. Along Main Street in Sterton shops stood empty; their expensive plate glass windows were replaced with plywood slabs bearing red and white stickers that read: "For Lease. Reasonable Rates." For months after the economic downturn the area's remaining miners and roughnecks gathered in their dreadful bars and talked drunken gibberish about "the big boys" responsible for this disaster; soon they had to move on to other jobs in other states, and the bars themselves failed. Towns containing several thousand people slumped back into the sleepy villages they had once been, and villages became ghost towns. Everywhere in the valley were deserted farms, houses, and trailer parks. Lawns, trees, and crops were left unwatered and unattended; they turned brown and died in the harsh, indifferent climate. Weeds arose through the cracks in city streets. Everyone was suddenly wiser and said that this was a stage in a cycle of boom and bust. Most of the wiser people went bust anyway. But not the lawyers. The lawyers turned the bankruptcy claims, the liability disputes, the divorces, the lawsuits, and the debts left in arrears into handsome new opportunities for themselves. In the new times of misery, the lawyers prospered as never before.

Through pure chance I had sold my uranium stock in 1976 to buy the bonds I gave to Stanley Allison. I had also purchased some gold stock that had tripled in value by 1981. In comparison to my neighbors I was a second Croesus. My sister Marilyn and her

husband Bob, for instance, had to sell a quarter section of land to me to cover their debts, and while they're back on their feet again, their big house could use another coat of paint, and their Oldsmobile has over a hundred and fifty thousand miles on it. They, like everyone else in the valley, await the better times coming when (and if) we have another boom. In the meantime, the depressed economy has solved the traffic problems we used to have on local roads. I will be dead by the time the black top highways were crowded once again.

February the Eleventh, 1982, was a cold day followed by a colder night. I lay in my bed and heard the wind singing through the power lines and the bare branches of my shelterbelt. After midnight a car slipped into my yard. I listened to the gravel and snow snapping under the tires, and a few seconds later I had someone knocking at my door. I pulled on my shirt and pants, and went to see who could be bothering me at that indecent hour. Somebody was standing in the freezing air at the foot of the porch and out of the light. When my eyes adjusted to the dark I could tell it was a woman standing there, a hood or maybe a shawl over her head.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"A friend," came the reply.

"Julia," I said.

This time I had recognized her voice.

"Come where I can see you," I said.

"I'd prefer not to," she said.

"It's cold," I said, breathing steam into the crisp air. "You better come inside."

"I'm an old woman," she said. "I don't want you to see me."

A nobler soul would have disagreed, but no part of me wanted to see Julia at age sixty-five. I would rather remember her as she had been in past times, the same way I would rather remember myself.

"What is it you want?" I asked.

"Money," she said.

Her face was turned away from the house. She told me she had divorced Douglas three years before, and now that he was dead his family had tied his will up in court. The ten percent of his estate that their divorce settlement dictated would go to Julia was lost somewhere in the messy legal proceedings. She had recently secured an enormous loan and invested it in a condominium development in

Casper; the bad local economy had placed it in jeopardy. She had a friend, an actual congressman, who assured her that the Energy Department was going to build a coal gasification plant in Casper, and the condominiums and everything else in Casper was certain to prosper. Unfortunately, she had spent everything she had fighting over Douglas' estate and couldn't pay the interest on the loan.

I stopped her from giving me the details.

"I don't need to hear everything," I said. "How much do you want?"

"A hundred and twenty thousand dollars for this month alone," she said. "More, if you can."

"Fine," I said. "I'll make arrangements tomorrow in Sterton."

"Like that?"

"It's my money," I said. "I should know how much it's worth to me. You can go now."

"You're the best, Tom," she said.

"I don't want to hear it," I said. "If I gave you nothing, I wouldn't hurt you as much."

"I'll pay you back, I promise," she said.

She turned a bit, enough to let me see the blue silhouette of her face.

"You're going to lose it every penny," I said. "You'll lose it, and you'll never come see me again, because I won't have any more to give you. Goodbye." I added to myself: "I prayed you would come," after I had closed the door.

In the morning I went to Sterton and sold my gold stock, drew my money from the bank, and mortgaged the farm and machinery. I held back twenty thousand dollars and my flock for myself, and sent one grand payment of three quarters of a million dollars to Julia. A year later, the government announced they would not build the coal gasification plant, but they would fund a study of the feasibility of building a similar plant in the year 2012. The condominiums and Julia went bust, and so did I. As I predicted, she did not come to see me again. The next time I saw her was when I brought her back to Sterton for burial in 1986. I should have predicted that Julia would not live long once she was both old and poor. To avoid looking upon her, I ordered the undertaker to keep the casket closed.

In the spring of 1987 I was back in the Rattlesnake Mountains

tending my sheep.

Jim Holmes came to see me that May. He arrived at my camp in a big yellow limousine driven by a young Mexican chauffeur in knee-high boots and a double breasted uniform. Jim wore a yellow suit to match his car, and had a bright red ascot about his throat. He was remarkably clean and well coifed. He still carried his worn Mesopotamian book under his arm.

“How the Hell you doing?” he asked me, bounding from the car and shaking my hand.

The sheep were afraid of his big car; they scurried away from it, bleating in terror.

“Hold on a second, Tom. I got something for you,” he said and returned to the car and took a large wrapped package and a revolver from the back seat.

“Joe, my friend,” he said to the driver and handed him the revolver. “I’m going to eat beans and cornbread with my pal Tom here tonight. You drive around a while. You see any snakes, you know what to do.”

“Where will I drive?” asked the bewildered driver. “This is a desert.”

“You do what you think’s best,” said Jim. “Remember: aim the gun at the rattler’s head and let him sight himself up. Then you shoot the bastard. And don’t forget to take the buttons and put ‘em in the box.”

He gave the driver an encouraging slap on the shoulder and added: “This is good snake country. You could get real lucky.”

The driver took off, and Jim came over and shook my hand a second time.

“Good boy,” he said of the chauffeur. “Drives like Hell, but he can’t shoot snakes for shit.”

He shook his head.

“So how you been?” he said. “I been thinking of you. Like my teeth?”

He showed me his new, capped teeth.

“You look uptown,” I said.

“I thought about having a diamond put in each one,” he said. “That probably would’ve been too showy. The dentist had the prettiest little goddamned nurse you ever seen.”

"Things have been good to you, it seems," I said.

"Don't you know?" asked Jim. "I found the uranium. The good angel helped me."

"A good angel?"

"She said her name was Kathy," said Jim. "Claimed to be a secretary in the county clerk's office. I told her I worked for the Forest Service and the..."

I was building a fire out of scrub brush to cook dinner upon, and Jim had paused to look at the ashes I left that morning.

"Did you stir that?" Jim asked. "A lot of snakes hide in old camp fires."

He stirred the ashes with a stick to make sure nothing was lurking therein.

"Guess not," he said. "What was I telling you?"

"How the angel helped you find the uranium."

"So, anyway, this angel showed me a map of the old Forest Service camps in Elder County," said Jim. "And here was the place I worked in 1938 up by the Pinnacles. I says to her: 'By Jesus, that's my old camp!' So I went up there, and here it is: a yellow patch in a granite cliff. I filed a claim, and sold the whole damn thing to a French company. But it wasn't worth hundreds of millions of dollars like I thought."

"No?" I said.

"After taxes, it was not a penny over twenty-three million," sighed Jim.

I checked Jim's expression. He was too crazy to be a good liar. At the time I write this, I have verified that he was telling the truth.

"What about your dream?" I asked. "Did you want nothing?"

"Really, I always wanted the mother lode," said Jim. "I just acted like I didn't. It wasn't that hard to do. I guess the Devil's not that hard to fool."

"Maybe he isn't, but what about God?" I asked. "Is God easy to fool?"

"You can't fool God," said Jim. "He knows everything. You don't have to fool him. God's all right to people. Sometimes even to old men."

I agreed with him, and told him the story of Stanley Allison and his family.

“Are you re-heating?” he asked me about the beans.

“They’re better than fresh,” I said. “They get thicker over time.”

Jim said that was true.

“I’m out of cornbread mix,” I said. “I’m saving some made bread for porridge in the morning.”

“Add a little warm milk?” asked Jim and smacked his lips. “And a little butter?”

“Yes.”

Jim rubbed his hands together.

“Damn!” he said. “Can’t wait for breakfast! Some salt and pepper, and it’ll be like Mom’s porridge!”

We ate the beans and talked of what Jim could do with his money. I suggested he take a trip.

“Nah,” said Jim. “The only place I’d want to see is Mesopotamia. ‘Between the rivers’ it means. It’s completely Arab now. No Wheel of Fortune, no ziggurats anymore. They all go to Mecca instead. Maybe I’ll get a pretty young wife.”

“A young wife would kill an old man like you,” I said.

“I’ll get me an old wife then.”

“You’d kill her,” I said. “When are the Frenchies going to mine your uranium?”

“Could be never,” said Jim. “They’re calling it a ‘future asset.’ They’re leaving it in the ground for now. They might dig it up in a hundred years.”

“Twenty-three million dollars, and they leave it buried,” I said. “The French are as stupid as we are.”

“I bought a new knife,” said Jim.

He took it from his pocket and showed me.

“Good for killing snakes,” he said. “I bought the car. And a boat. Wyoming’s not a good place for an eighty-foot cabin cruiser. You’d be surprised how shallow some of these damned little desert lakes are.”

“You should buy a home,” I said.

“In a couple weeks,” said Jim, “we’ll have a full run-off from the snow melt in the mountains, and we’ll get the boat off the sandbar. I can live in that. This is for you.”

He gave me the wrapped package he had taken from the car. Inside was a new violin in its case, along with a bow and a rosin

block.

"It's lovely," I said.

"It's Italian," said Jim. "This is isn't a Strado-whatsyoumacallit, but it's Italian. And it's not cheap. Play for me. I was happier when I heard you play than any other time. We were young back then, weren't we? Play for me."

"The strings have not been tuned," I said.

"Tune 'em. You're a musician."

I haven't played in forty, forty-eight years."

"By Jesus, you need the practice then," said Jim.

I tuned the strings by ear and tried a few bars. The bow screeched and howled like an alley cat.

"I don't remember how," I said.

"I know what song you can play," said Jim.

He grabbed me by the arm and drove his thumb into the inside of my elbow joint.

"Play 'The Golden Vanity,'" he said. "I've thought on it, and I know you won't forget that one."

I played the first five notes and right away was surprised at the familiarity of the sound. Then I played the entire refrain, and the song came back to me the way riding a bicycle or swimming comes back to a person who hasn't done them in a while. I played the first verse and the chorus, and Jim got up to dance. Or rather, he intended his motions to be a dance. He hopped from foot to foot around the fire like a movie Indian preparing to go on the warpath. I started singing, remembering some of the words, making up some other verses when I came to a blank space. I repeated the final verse, the part about the cabin boy diving into the sea, three times because I didn't want the song to end too quickly. Jim sat down and rested while I rosined the bow again.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Hell, yes!" said Jim.

He rose and danced around the fire as I played and sang "The Golden Vanity: another time. Afterwards Jim collapsed by the fire and laughed, his hand held over his heart.

"By God, that was a good thing!" said Jim, looking up at the sky. "Is that Mercury up there moving so fast?"

"No, that's an airplane," I said.

He was right about the song. It was a good thing, good enough to end this story. I was grateful God had let me play this last time, and I was in that moment grateful for my family, for Stanley, for Rebecca, for Shorty McVick, for Frank Elder, for Quin when I first met him, and yes, for Julia. I'm not ending this way because I believe the good moments and good people, not even the fun of seeing Jim do his war dance, make up for the many bad years; my point is that somehow happiness had survived as long as we had. I cannot write anything more true than that. I will miss the moments of happiness when I am gone from the earth, and I hope God grants me more of them in the place I'm going.



*[Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.]*

WITHDRAWN

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**T**om Wedderburn's *Life* is what its title says it is: a story of a man's life, in this instance the story of a simple man born into an isolated community where he is filled with the values and mores of the nineteenth century. It is Tom's misfortune that the century he must live in is the chaotic twentieth. He has to see the end of his isolated world, he falls in love with a modern woman he does not understand, and as a young man endures the hell of World War II. Left disillusioned and alone in his old age, Tom holds on to his peculiar sense of dignity and even finds a measure of happiness.

*Theodore Judson has worked as a teacher, construction laborer, and a security guard. He continues to live in Wyoming, where he was born and grew up. This is his first published book.*

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