Mountaineer, Spring 1945

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Phil and I were rolling dice. Phil works at the courthouse and every afternoon he drops in and we shake to see who buys the drinks, he or the house, which is me. He'll win three or four straight then luck comes my way and I'll win three or four. I guess in the long run we break about even. We do it more to pass the time away than anything, as business is never particularly rush about that time.

Phil is a pretty nice sort of a guy. Quiet. We always get along pretty good. I cuss him out a lot, but he knows I don't mean it and just grins. I never have known him to get sore about anything. That is, until this day I'm telling you about.

A lot of people say we look a lot alike, Phil and I. We're both built heavier around the middle than we are around the top and we both wear glasses, but I think the resemblance ends there, because he is a lot taller than I and while he has a big stomach he has a big neck and shoulders too and his hands together can just cover the top of a pony beer keg. He's just plain big all around. Carries his age a lot better than most men of sixty-five.

Phil is one of those two-type guys. I don't know if I've the right word there or not, but what I mean is that he has two jobs. He handles the job of secretary of UMW's Local 37 along with
his job as county assessor. I suppose that’s not quite the way a lot of counties want their assessor to use his office but that’s the way it’s done in Taylor County. We’ve a couple of pretty big mines here, the Meteor and the Blue Hawk, over on the hill. You can see the gallows frames from the window here. They run three shifts a day and have around four hundred and fifty men on the payroll. They’ve been running for years. I guess as long as there is any silver in them at all, I’ll still be able to make a living. Phil says the day they get to the bottom Holmville will just be a whistling post and that there’ll be a big For Rent or Sale sign in my window. I told him that the day that happens he’ll have to quit sponging off the public and haul his leeching carcass around till he can find someone else to supply him with funds to fill his beer reservoir every day. He just grinned and went out the back way.

I start down towards the front end of the bar when I spot this guy I’m going to tell you about. How he got in I don’t know. It wasn’t like an ordinary person would come in, anyhow. How long he has been standing there I couldn’t say. A cough spell hits him all of a sudden just as I look at him. He really whoops it up for awhile, then climbs on a bar stool where he starts to stare at a quarter he has in front of him on the bar. He is awful thin, and the sleeves of his old blue shirt rolled up to his elbows make him look all the thinner. His hands are as big as Phil’s and look awkward hanging from his skinny arms. His hair is gray and thin and his eyes are further back in his head than a man’s eyes got a right to be. He looks to be about Phil’s age, but it’s hard to say.

I ask him, What’ll he have? I asks him nice too, but not too nice as I figure he looks like he might be going to put the touch on me. Times have been pretty good lately and I haven’t had to put out a bum touch for some time.

He asks for a straight shot. I pour it and watch him as he drinks. He don’t take it in one hand like an ordinary fellow and toss it off. He grabs it with the fingers of both hands and sips it down slow-like. He grins at me as he sets the empty glass back on the bar and remarks that it’s pretty good stuff even on a warm day. He looks so damned down and out that I get soft-hearted and ask him if he wouldn’t have a drink on the house. I don’t put out many drinks these days because of the way the price of whiskey has shot up, but I see he needs it and I’m wondering at the same time what the score is with him.

He lets the drink I buy set in front of him and looks at me as if he wants to say something but doesn’t quite know how to begin. Well, starting conversations is part of my business and so it’s not long till we’re discussing the weather and how the price of whiskey has gone up and the cigarette shortage. As soon as the cigarette shortage is mentioned he asks me, if, by the way, I happen to have a fag about me. I give him one and light it for him.
He says he's just over from the Coeur d'Alene's and that he's looking for work. I think to myself it's strange he should come over here looking for work when there's plenty of work there. Still I figure he's got his reason.

He spots the union sign which I have hanging where everyone can see it just over the big mirror on the back-bar. I don't have to belong to a union, because I own my own joint and run it myself, but I joined up anyhow because I figure it helps business. That's what I told him when he asked me about it.

He says he used to work up at the Meteor Mine before there was any unions around at all. I get more interested then, as I always compare notes with the different fellows who have been around here so long. It's a hobby, kinda.

Pretty soon he starts in 'acussin' the unions. "Damn 'em," he says, "They're always grubbing after money. Just like they took yours when you didn't have to give it to 'em. It don't seem to matter that the miners are making twice as much as we used to in the old days. They keep hollerin' for more."

Well, I'm pretty surprised at this line of gab. I haven't heard anybody around here talk like that. Nobody says much one way or the other.

He says, "Even those fellows that I used to work with before there was any of this union gab to amount to anything, there they are, right in there a-hollerin' for what they say is their share. What in the hell do they think their share is? They're gettin' enough to eat. That's a hell of a lot more than some of us used to get. We used to work twelve-fourteen hours and come off shift and down to this same bar where we'd get stiff and sometimes we wouldn't even get any sleep but would have to sober up as best we could before reporting back on the job. Then we'd go for another shift."

I'm hoping he'll say something about how much nicer this bar looks now than it did then, what with my chrome-legged stools and all, but I guess he don't see very good. He just goes on talking like he is going to talk all day.

"These guys are a bunch of sissies," he says. "'Work 'em eight hours and watch 'em cry. They all pack that union card around and show it off as if they was proud of it. They're getting so's they have to have a white shirt for Saturday nite. They go to the movies and watch a lot of half-naked girls that ain't even real dance around. They buy a second-hand car and go on strike in order to get enough money to pay for it. It'd serve 'em right if someday the company'd up and move out on 'em. Leave 'em cold. Then see how much good that union card 'ud do 'em."

I see he is getting pretty well worked up over the whole thing. I can't figure out how come so I pours his glass full again and just stand there looking at him, waiting for him to go on. He looks kinda surprised that I should fill his glass up twice in a row.
and must have figured that that was because I agreed with what he was saying. I asked him if he belonged to a union.

"Nope," he says, "never have and never will. I’ve had plenty of chance to, too. Do you know Tom Skelly, the big shot union man in Butte? The fellow that thinks he’s so damned good?"

I said I had heard of him.

"Well, I knew him when he first came around trying to organize. Of course, I knew right off that there was no good in the thing. He got plenty of fellows to listen all right, Skelly did, but they was some of us that took no stock in it. It was only them lazy fellows that didn’t want to do a good day’s work for their money that was all ears. I knew he just wanted to have us line his pockets with money. And him doing nothin’ but sittin’ around doing a lot of gabbin’. Look how he sits on his big rear in Butte now."

I say, "Well, didn’t you have a little trouble, you fellows who were against organizing with the fellows who wanted to organize?"

He don’t answer for awhile. He gets another cough spell—not as bad as the one he had when he first comes in—so I don’t feel obliged to fill his glass up again. I figure he’s got the “dust” bad but it’s common around here and I can’t be giving the joint away to every one who’s got a little of it.

Finally, he says, like he has been thinking over what I had asked him, "No, I didn’t have much trouble with the rest of the fellows because I never did like any of ‘em, so if I stayed away from ‘em when the talk was going on about unions and such, it wasn’t anything out of the ordinary. Oh, I used to keep my ears peeled for what they had to say—just never said nothin’ myself. You see, the boss recognized me right off as a good man when I went to him and told him about this fellow Skelly hanging around all the time trying to make trouble. He slipped me five and told me to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut and to find out who was listenin’ to this Skelly with the most interest. It wasn’t a week until seven of the boys who had been standing around with their big mouths hangin’ open had the can tied to ‘em."

I asked how come they didn’t suspect that he had turned them in and made it bad for him.

"They’d ‘uv done me in for sure, if they’d been certain I’d been the one who squealed on ‘em, as they put it. Hell, it weren’t squealin’. I was doing it for their own good. I was tryin’ to show ‘em they was wrong in tryin’ to get something for nothin’."
prised that it should be empty, which of course is intended to re­mind me that I should fill it up again. I ask him what happened next at the mine.

"Well, myself, I done right well for a few years," he goes on, "I never got no big job, like foreman or nothin' but I was always being slipped a few bucks by the superintendent for the little bits of information I could give him to help him fight this evil that was tearin' the heart out of America. That's what he told me. I got along fine there till the 1910 strike."

I'd always heard a lot about the 1910 strike but outside of Phil and a few others around I haven't known many who were per­sonally connected with it. So I ask him what was the 1910 strike all about—just like I hadn't heard about it.

He doesn't appear to hear me. I'm bent over behind the bar with my back to him and have to turn around to show him I'm listening to him all right even if I'm busy stocking up beer in the cooler. I always stock up before five because the boys come off the hill they're pretty thirsty.

"I'll never forget that time," he says, finally. "Everybody knew it was comin' sooner or later. Skelly was gettin' a lot of fellows behind him and he even had an office down town. Not like the one he sits in now by a long shot but a regular office. He'd been tryin' to pull a strike for some time but a lot of fellows was scared and then there was some like myself that wouldn't listen to his rot. Then that damned Finn had to get caved on and get everybody so hoppin' mad that they jumped right on Skelly's band-wagon. Even the foreman quit his job. He didn't go on strike like the rest; he just quit, and I heard that he never did go back in a mine. Went into politics or somethin'. Funny thing about that foreman. He was one of those ambitious young kids just out of school a few years. Pretty fair size and rough and tough as they come. He would come hollerin' and bellerin' around and the men jumped. He beat hell out of more than one around there. Yet they kinda liked him for some reason. I nev­er had much use for him. Maybe because he didn't seem to like me. But he did get the work out of the fellows and he wouldn't stand for gold-brickin'. The company liked him, too. Anyhow, there was some of us standing around the day he ordered the Finn to stope the raise from the 400 level. The Finn told him it wasn't timbered and might cave on him.

"Well, the Finn didn't have much of a reputation around there as a hard worker and I could see that the foreman thought he was just lazy. I spoke up and says that I had worked that raise and that it was okay. The Finn calls me a dirty liar. The upshot of the whole thing was that the Finn was bullied into going in and, dumb as he was, he must have known something about mining because it wasn't long until that whole geezy mine seemed to cave in on him. The racket that was set up around there was somethin' to hear.

"The foreman, big rough fellow that he was, just seemed to
go to pieces. Some big guys are like that—hard as hell till some little thing goes wrong and then they break up. He grabs a shovel and digs right with the rest of the boys showin' that he can sweat too.

"They finally gets the body, what there was left of it, and laid it out in the sunshine on top. The blood was still oozin' out of it and there wasn't much left of the head—it looked kinda like a empty, half-shell of an egg. One leg was bent clear back under so that the body laid on it and try as one of the fellows did, he couldn't twist it back to the place it ought to be. You could hear the bones grind as he tried.

"The foreman was pale as a ghost. The tears were stream­ing down his face like a big sissy. He grabs off his hat, whips out his pocketbook and stuffs every bill he has in the hat and passes it around. He got a nice wad out of it, too. He comes up to me and mumbles something about 'for the family,' but I only had a few dollars in my pocket so I said I didn't have any money. Then he looks good at me and for an instant he seems to come out of the daze he's in and gives me a look that I can remember to this day. I don't see why he should hold it against me 'cause I don't put in nothin' or maybe he was sore because he thought I might have been lyin' about that raise. Besides I figure that when a fellow works for somebody and gets paid wages for it he knows the chances he's takin' and don't expect nobody else to have to chip in hard-earned dough to help some old woman who was like as not glad to get rid of him. I think he had some kids too, but probably only about half of 'em was his. I never liked the Finn nohow. He was always playin' some fool joke on me like puttin' salt in my coffee and callin' me names like the 'money-hungry hermit.'"

He goes on to tell how he scabs the next few years—only he don't call it scabbing, he calls it "workin' in the face of them gawdam pickets."

"I'm gettin' old," he says, "I haven't been around this sec­tion of the country for twenty years, yet some of these old die-hard miners seem to remember me and look down their noses. They sure think they are somebody now that they got a few dollars to jingle. It just goes to show that as soon as a miner gets a few dollars he lets it go to his head and looks down his nose at an old friend like myself just because maybe I ain't dressed as good as him. Say, is that the five o'clock whistle?" he says.

I nod.

"I guess I better be goin', then. Some of my old friends might be in the crowd and I don't want 'em to see me while I'm on my hard luck. You wouldn't stake me to a buck would you, bartender? You been mighty nice to me."

Before I can say or do anything the door opens and in comes Phil. This fellow turns around to face him and you should have seen the look that comes over Phil's face. He looks like some-
body clubs him with a muck-stick. He puts his hand over his heart and leans back against the edge of the door with both his hands gripping the inside and outside doorknobs. Then he starts toward this guy with the gawd-awfulest look I ever seen and I've tended bar a long time and seen a lot of mad men.

All the time this fellow just stands there and looks at Phil and I can tell he doesn't recognize him—that is until that look comes over Phil's face. Then the guy just stands there holding on to the bar shaking and whining. Phil relaxes all of a sudden and hurry down to the end of the bar and I pour him two drinks right quick-like without waiting to shake the dice. First time I ever done that with Phil.

In a few minutes Phil grins somewhat like his old way and looks around slowly, as if he's afraid he might see that guy again, which he don't because the guy has vamoosed pronto the minute Phil walked away from the door. Phil says that the old heart ain't working just right anymore and every once in awhile it acts up on him. I nodded.

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**Senility**

AGNES REGAN

The lake will back up here. The dam's below
Far down, but when the gates are locked the slow
Grey edge will creep along the marshy grass
And crawling up the sloping banks will pass
The high flood mark, then spread low through the brush
And, folding back upon its course, will hush
Its giggling younger self with heavy lull
And settle toward these falls, its surface dull
And calm, and drown the shower of silver spray;
The floundering foam will smother and the grey
Edge still will inch along, each gradual stage
Relentless, passionless as crumbling age,
Until it blankets all the green with silt
And buries, deep with liquid, leaden quilt,
Rich fields beside the sage wastes on its floor;
And trees caught shoulder-deep along the shore
With hopeless branches bare will claw the sky
And rot before the grey flood lets them die.
"She ain't worthy of him." Rosie watched Mrs. Pigget shove the plate of onions; left over from dinner, into the chipped old ice-box, and slam the door before anything could fall out. "Ain't worthy of him atall." Rosie and the three little boys gazed attentively at their mother, nodded their fat faces up and down in silent approval. "Ain't worthy of our Jimmie. Him with a Asiatic ribbon, and Lord knows what the rest of 'em are. Stuck up little baggage, that girl. Just because her paw owns a old drug store. . ." She turned fiercely on the four. "Your paw's a good man. Any of you forgets it . . ." Rosie rubbed the bruise on her arm and nodded her head up and down again, emphatically. Paw certainly did believe in being good, and he believed in his kids being good too. Lord—he sure slapped hard. He should be home pretty soon now. He hadn't had much money when he left. Not more'n five or six drinks. He'd been spending so much the last few days, while Jimmie'd been home on leave. Jimmie had always been a pretty good one to save his money. Although Rosie wasn't quite sure Paw should be asking Jimmie for money. But, she decided, she'd better stop thinkin' about stuff like that. If she should ever forget, and think it out loud. . .

Jimmie sure wasn't like the rest of them. Now, Rosie wouldn't mind so much if that hair had been in her potatoes. But that Jimmie—he'd got all white, and left the table, and didn't come back till way in the morning. He didn't even hardly look like he belonged there. Never satisfied, either. Should be, the way he looked in his sailor uniform. Didn't act like he appreciated being home atall. Shoulda thought he'd be tickled pink, after two years away. Made Rosie feel all choked up inside when she thought of being gone from home that long herself. She guessed Jimmie didn't feel the same as her. And him getting so mad about the cat hairs on his blouse. My gosh, it was only a kitten—and besides, it was Rosie's thirteenth birthday present.

Rosie thought how Jimmie always looked around him, so funny—looking at the furniture, and always straightening things around, and looking at the garbage by the back door. Acourse, the place wasn't no palace, but still... If he wasn't so good to the folks sometimes, you'd almost think he didn't like them. But he'd always been that way—just never satisfied. Always making things hard, instead of living easy like the rest of them. Seemed like he was even worse since he came back.

Rosie rubbed the bruise thoughtfully. Paw'd be feeling bet-ter, too, if Jimmie wouldn't keep going out with that girl. Paw couldn't stand anybody looking like they thought they were bet-ter, like so many folks did. And acourse, Maw didn't like that, Couldn't very well expect her to. The folks now, they saw that she wasn't the girl for Jimmie. Too bad he was so stubborn. Al-
though Rosie did sorta like Ellen. Jimmie’s girl, Ellen. Purty name. And maybe if Jimmie did marry her, there might be a free coke at the drug store once in a while. Ellen had purty hair, too. Rosie’s would never wave on top like that. And the curls always seemed to stick out like the springs on her old bed. Jimmie’d got all the purty hair in the family, Maw told Rosie once.

Rosie slumped drowsily in the warm corner by the stove. She was remembering what a fight there’d been when Jimmie first brought Ellen to the house, over two years ago. Rosie wasn’t even quite eleven then, but she could remember how Jimmie’d bawled her out afterwards, because her face was dirty, and she’d forgot to wear shoes. But she thought Ellen was cute, anyway. He brought her over before they went to a dance, and she had on a wonderful dress, white and shiny, and her hair was up high on her head—dark, and shiny too. Rosie still remembered how careful Jimmie was with her, helping her up the old front steps—and how mad he’d been because she caught her shoe on a loose board and almost fell down.

He brought her into the front room, and it looked real nice. Maw didn’t have time, so Jimmie’d worked all afternoon, fixing things just so. He’d given Rosie a quarter for helping. Maw came in, with her new wedgies on, and the dress she’d made herself. And Paw had on a clean shirt, and he was mad about it. He always said they were so stiff when they were fresh clean. Afterwards, Rosie sorta wished she’d dressed up, with all the family looking so nice, but Ellen liked her anyway. They’d sat in there and showed Ellen the wax flowers that had come from Grandpa Pigget’s funeral, and the picture of Paw in his busman uniform a long time before. They sat around and talked till Paw even got over being made about the clean shirt—but Rosie could tell he still didn’t like Ellen.

That was the night Jimmie told them he was going to join the Navy. Paw was so surprised he just looked at him for a minute, with his chin hanging down; and then he started bawling him out. Maw told Rosie to get to bed, so she went up and sat on the stairs and listened. She hated to hear Jimmie get lit into like that, but she supposed Paw was right. Paw bawled him out something awful, about quitting his bank-messenger job and leaving the family out on a limb like that, and about him and Maw working so hard to bring the kids up, and Jimmie not appreciating it any more than that, running off for a good time, and about Jimmie trying to be somebody, even throwing away money on an evening suit. Next day Rosie’d told Maw she thought Jimmie looked real nice in the suit, and Maw told her to shut up and get to the dishes, and not be getting any high ideas.

Well, anyway, Rosie could remember how Ellen sat and twisted her hankie, and looked out the window, and how Jimmie just sat there straight and quiet, till Paw started cussing, and then he got up and said they better go. Rosie’d run up to her room and watched them go down the front steps, and Jimmie was walking awful stiff, and not saying a word. Then she saw
Ellen stop suddenly, and when Jimmie turned, Ellen had stood on tiptoe and kissed him, right there. And she took hold of his hand and they went off down the street, walking close together, and Paw was still cussing down in the front room.

Rosie’d felt so bad she just cried, and then Maw came up and hugged her close, and told her to be a good girl and never get any fancy ideas, because her and Paw couldn’t hardly get along without their Rosie. That made Rosie feel some better, but she kept thinking about Jimmie and Ellen. And she kinda wondered if there’d be fights when she got old enough to go to dances too. Maybe some day, if she was good, she might even have a white shiny dress like Ellen’s—because Maw had said it was pretty too.

Well, Jimmie didn’t bring Ellen over to the house any more, but Rosie guessed he still liked her, because nearly every night after that, before he left for the Navy, he got all cleaned up and went out, and didn’t usually come back till late, and Paw was usually mad. Jimmie could take an awful lot of bawling out without saying anything back but Rosie was sure he felt bad, just from the way he looked some times. Just like he did once when he was little, and Paw’d shot the dog for stealing the Saturday-night meat. But she guessed he didn’t feel bad enough to stay home from the Navy or to do like Maw and Paw told him, and quit going with Ellen. Especially when he could have almost any girl he wanted. Rosie knew how they always chased after him, and rolled their eyes when he went past. She’d heard them talk about what a good dancer he was, too, and what pretty hair and eyes he had and Rosie’d be awful proud. She’d even brought him notes home from school for some of them, and she’d always wondered why Jimmie tore them up without even reading them. Ellen was the only one that never made eyes at him. And Ellen was the only one he ever noticed.

Rosie remembered, too, the day Paw whipped all three of the little boys. They weren’t hungry for supper, and when Maw asked them, she found out they’d gone into the drug store on their way home, and Ellen was there, and she gave them all an ice cream cone. Paw had certainly been mad. He’d spanked all of them, and you never heard such a racket in your life. Rosie was kinda wishing she’d been with them, till she heard Paw tell them if he ever caught them there again, he’d skin them alive. And he probably would, too. Maw made them all go to bed, and they’d bawled all the way up the stairs. Rosie could remember how she was afraid they’d be hungry in the night, so she asked Maw, and then sneaked upstairs with some crackers. But they weren’t hungry after all, because Jimmie had already brought them up a bunch of suckers. Jimmie was a good brother sometimes, when he wasn’t making Paw and Maw mad.

Seemed like there was always a fight over something around their house—it was a wonder the neighbors didn’t kick more than they did. Even tonight—well, Rosie thought maybe Jimmie should stay home a little more, instead of being over at Ellen’s
all the time, when he'd been gone for two whole years. But ev­
ery time he got mad, he just lit out, and you needn't ever expect
him home till the folks was in bed, and Paw'd quit his cussing to
snore. Tonight now, they'd been sitting around talking, and Paw
asked Jimmie how the supper at Ellen's house was last night.
Jimmie looked kinda surprised for a minute, then he smiled and
said it was fine. Then Paw wanted to know if they'd had finger-
bowls. Jimmie looked down at his feet and said, kinda low, that
they didn't. Paw wanted to know if Ellen's old man mixed the
drinks, or if the butler did. Jimmie said they didn't have a butler
and they didn't have any drinks. Paw wanted to know if they'd
had frog-legs, kinda grinning. Jimmie said no, steak, hardly mov­
ing his lips. Paw wanted to know if the old man had a pull with
the ration board, and Jimmie said he really couldn't say. Then
Paw asked if Jimmie'd ever heard from Ellen while he was gone.
Jimmie'd looked awful funny for a minute and then said why yes,
his face white, and by God, he was going to be with her. He said he was sorry if
Maw and Paw didn't understand but they hadn't been ducking
from bullets and praying for their neck for two years. And now
he'd had six days to live again, and nobody but God could choke
him off on his last night. Rosie didn't quite know what he meant
by that but she'd watched him shove the kitten off his cap on the
chair and start for the door. And she'd seen him turn around,
kinda slow, and his face white, and throw a bill on the table in
front of Paw, and touch Maw's shoulder on his way out.

So maybe he did feel kinda bad—but he'd stayed away all
evening, just the same. And Paw'd sat at the supper table with­
on eating a bite or saying anything, except cussing under his
breath. Then he'd left, and Maw'd pattered around the kitchen
all evening, and brushed up Jimmie's other uniform good, ready
to leave in the morning. Poor Maw looked like she was ready
to cry as she patted it out and hung it on the door knob, and
shooed away the kitten.

There was a sound of mighty puffing and grunting from the
porch, and the door creaked open. Rosie jerked her head up, as
Paw oozed into the room and kicked the door shut. Paw's eyes
were red and bieary and his shirt was wrinkled and dirty, and
half open. Musta been another fight. Somebody always calling
Paw names. Rosie and the boys crawled back into the corner
and watched while Paw gulped down the black coffee Maw'd
kept. He tossed the boys each a beercap for their collections and
laid his head on his arms. His snoring was loud and deep. Maw
smiled approvingly. Paw was tired. Paw was a good man.
Jimmie's train was supposed to leave at 7:45 the next morning. Rosie knew Paw and Maw didn't like it that Ellen was coming too—but Jimmie'd said yes. So Ellen was there. And Maw and Paw, and Rosie and the boys. Jimmie and Ellen, standing a little apart, not looking at each other. Everybody shivering, saying little old things... Maw looked nice in her straw hat with the bluebells on top. Jimmie had bought her that, for her birthday. The red shoes would be nice, too, if her ankles wouldn't bulge so. But then, Rosie's did too. They all ate too good. Rosie watched Maw pin her coat collar up higher, trying to get warm. The train whistled, and all at once, tears were streaming down Maw's fat face. Paw looked, and then he began to blubber softly into his shirt-cuff. Jimmie handed him a bill, all folded up, and Paw seemed to feel better. Then the boys started in. They bawled awful loud, and people were looking—but then, it wasn't every day that Jimmie left for acrost. Rosie felt sad, too. Not really sad enough to bawl but she guessed Jimmie'd like to know they hated to have him leave, even if Ellen didn't seem to. Maybe she'd been wrong about Ellen, Rosie thought. Maybe she didn't like him after all. She sure didn't act like it. Jimmie might get shot and never come back. The tears slithered down Rosie's puffy cheeks, and she wiped them off with her sleeve.

Jimmie looked out beyond the gate, at the tracks, and shuffled his feet. People were going by and staring; Jimmie looked away. Rosie sobbed energetically. The train whistled again, and there was the conductor's "B-o-a-r-d." Jimmie picked up his sea-bag. He looked tired—but then, he'd have plenty chance to sleep on the train. Maw grabbed him and sobbed on his collar, then Paw, then Rosie, then the three boys. People were hurrying by, and looking. Well my God, Rosie thought, they must know how it was to have your brother heading out acrost again.

"My boy, my boy," Maw bawled. Maw always put her heart into everything she did. "God bless you my boy—my little boy." A man turned to stare, and Rosie glared at him through her tears. He continued on his way, a little faster, but still looking back.

Jimmie sorta grinned. He looked like he was going to be sick. He picked up his hat, from where Maw had brushed it off, and turned to Ellen. The moaning Piggets buried their dripping faces in their hands and looked through pudgy fingers to see how Ellen was taking it. Stuck up as ever, Rosie noticed. Sure funny. She'd really thought Ellen liked him. She watched Jimmie take Ellen's hand and look at her for a minute. Ellen was white, and she looked sorta sick too. They didn't say a word. Jimmie breathed deep, and let go of her hand, and climbed on the train. Ellen walked across the street to her old man's drug store, head high, not looking back. The train puffed out. The Piggets screamed at Jimmie and waved, through their tears. Rosie thought he might've at least waved back at them out of the window...
Well, there he was. Only he was looking across the street, where Ellen was standing. She turned around, and Jimmie yelled something. "I'll be back," he said. Nobody else heard—they were all bawling too hard. Ellen was awful white. But she smiled and waved, then she went into the drug store.

Maw grabbed onto Rosie's arm and turned around to leave. "We done all we could," she mourned loudly. "That girl—I b'lieve he even thinks she loves him. Loves him! Well, at least we showed him somebody hated to see him go. At least if she don't care enough, we give him a good sendoff. Not even a tear to shed over our Jimmie—not even a tear she had. Oh well—some day he'll find out what real folks is. Some day he'll find out. Maybe he'll learn enough to pick on somebody that'll at least care enough to bawl a little when he leaves..."

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**Two Poems**

**SGT. WILLIAM D. PERKINS**

**SONG**

Rise up from sleeping, Marianne,
Awake and hear the voices singing
Songs that have no notes of pain.
Marianne, sweet Marianne,
The gentle winds are bringing
Spring to the land again:
Awake, rise up from sleeping!
Why do you lie so still,
And why do April days pass weeping
Over your place of resting on the hill?

**FLAMES**

The fireplace tonight: a bier
Of old things. Dead, or dying with a shout,
They go in flames. This is the year
That old things must be put to rout.

See, fluttering in light, the fear,
My faithful enemy, stammer and go out,
Apologizing, bidding me good cheer,
As one who struggled well—but lost the bout.

I fortify, for I have seen the leer
On Fate's face. Though he is a lout,
Unmannered, ignorant, this much is clear:
That he is strong is proved beyond a doubt.
I watched my brother's wife move across the kitchen to the stove and wondered if she and Nick had been happy together. I supposed they had, but I had never asked her. Aside from having a temper that would make a were-wolf back down, Nick had not been the kind of a little boy that cut worms in two with his teeth, not when he was little. But I remember when he grew up, handsome, impulsive and savage.

He came into the kitchen one day and knelt at my feet. "Jo, I'm going to marry Liz," he said with a note in his voice that pleaded for understanding. "I'm not crazy, Jo, I'm not. Only when I'm drunk and hopped up I slap you around sometimes, but—," he touched the bruise on my cheek. "Did I do that? I slug you, didn't I? Jo...!" He clasped his arms around my knees and laid his dark head against me. I touched his soft, curly hair.

That was my brother. Baby, what's going to happen to you now, I thought as I watched his wife, her dark curls hanging over her shoulders, her little brown face tired as she worked over the hot stove.

"Say, Joana," she said, jerking me out of my reverie. "It's hotter today, isn't it?" She flipped back her heavy hair and stared off over the yellow hills to the timber line. "It's too hot," she scowled nervously.

"Fire weather," I replied, and went on peeling potatoes.

"If we'd get a fire, Jo, there aren't enough fellows here on the ranch..." She stopped stirring the pot on the stove and turned to me with the same thought in her eyes that I'd been holding all morning.

"If we'd get a fire... Hey, I hear a horse." The pan of potatoes shot from my lap and I ran to the door with Liz on my heels. The boy on the big buckskin drew rein at the front gate and leaned down to open it.

"Louis?" Liz said. "No, it's Blaize. What's he ridin' Yellow Jacket for?"

The little Indian fox-trotted his horse up to the porch and dismounted.

"Mail, gals," he grinned, pulling the letters out of his shirt pocket. "Here's a couple from Nick." Liz held out her hand for them, but he tossed the brown squares of V-mail to me. Her face went so white with hurt and bewilderment that I left sorry for her. I handed her the letters unopened.

"You read 'em, Lissa," I smiled. "And I'll take Blaize in and feed him." Blaize was standing with one slim booted foot on the bottom step looking at me with a queer sort of speculative smile on his face. "Come on in," I said and was furious because I had to struggle to keep my voice steady. "We're cooking dinner for the hay crew so you're just in time for stew."
"Thanks, Jo." He flipped his head back as if shaking away his thoughts and followed me into the house, leaving Liz standing on the porch with the letters.

"How's the fire news in town?" I asked.

"Well," he sat down stiffly on the edge of the table and watched me hungrily as I spooned the steaming mixture on the stove into his plate, "I talked to the ranger from Park Meadows and he said they were sure flyin' around up there. Broken Bow's explodin' like a powder keg but it's still south of the St. Cloud and they don't figure it'll jump the river. The Canadian side looks bad but then that's a long ways off. Thanks, kid," he nodded as I cut off a big chunk of homemade bread and handed him the plate. "It ain't often I dig into some good food. Sure tastes good after livin' off your own cookin' for a while. I ain't been off the south range for a month runnin'."

"How come you're down today?" I asked.

"Oh, we been havin' a wild time up there. I spilled a bronc on me the other day," he laughed sheepishly. "That's why I'm ridin' a nice safe pony today. It ain't much but I'm pretty sore yet."

Liz came in smiling tremulously. "O. K.," he looked at her shrewdly. "He's well and still fightin'. What else did he say?"

"Not much," she laughed, taking a quick turn around the kitchen with little, dancing steps before she stopped to pour more coffee in his cup. "He's still at the front but he might get leave to go to Paris. And, oh, kids, he's a captain now! Aren't you proud? The big pill, he's got to write and get Jo's angle on everything before he even tells me about it." Her tone was a little edgy but she threw her arms around me and hugged me tight.

Blaize grinned and nodded. "Doin' all right, ain't he?" he said around a mouthful of stew. "Yeah, just plenty O. K."

"Oh, wonderful," she laughed. "Just wonderful! Captain Nick Randles, sounds rugged, don't it?" She tossed her long hair down around her face and wrinkled her nose.

"More stew, Blaize?" I asked.

"Nope, kid, full right up to here." He indicated a level and drew on his gloves. "Sure good to see you gals once in a while."

I walked out to the porch with him and he turned suddenly at the bottom step. "Jo," his eyes grew merry. "Can you keep a secret?"

I looked at him curiously. "What are you driving at? You've been going around looking like the canary that ate the cat ever since you got here."

"Well," he looked around him with elaborate caution. "Don't for gosh sakes tell Liz about this because Nick wants her to be surprised and he'd rip my hide off but he'll be home here in a couple days."

"What!" I screamed.

"Shhh! Godalmighty, do yuh want to tell the whole St. Cloud valley about it?"
"But how do you know?" I demanded incredulously, in a lower tone.

"Never you mind, Missy, but he's in this country. Those letters were old, cold ones," he winked at me with a maddening look of importance and mounted stiffly, giving me a jaunty wave as he rode off. I sat down on the porch because my knees wouldn't hold me up any longer. Yellow Jacket's hoofs made little geysers of dust on the road as he pussyfooted away and I watched until he was out of sight past the curve. Then I got up slowly and went inside where Liz was reading those little scraps of letters over and over as if to catch their least inflection, their last scrap of news of the man she loved.

"He's a funny guy, that Blaize," I said half to myself, "I wonder how reliable that Indian grapevine is. . . ." Then I remembered I wasn't supposed to tell. "He's related to you, isn't he?" I put in hastily to divert her attention from my last sentence. I needn't have bothered. She was so buried in the letters that it hadn't even registered.

"Humm?" she said, looking up. "Oh, yes, he's my cousin, kind of. What else did we get in the mail?"

"Not much," I shrugged. "These reports from Grant and a note from Regina and Rollie and a big, lonely letter from Bud."

"You know," she laughed, gesturing to the letter in her hand, "I'd almost rather read his letters to you than the ones he writes to me. He's much more eloquent about me than he is to me."

"Always was." I looked more closely at her as I picked up one of the letters. "That's just Nick, that's all."

"You know him so well, Jo. Sometimes I think I hardly know him at all. Well," she got up briskly, "let's get this gang in to dinner before they all quit on us and we have to pitch hay ourselves."

They were a motley crew, a couple of Mex nationals, rugged, clean-looking little animals, three soft-looking city kids sent out west for experience (and they were getting it but they were pretty nice kids really), and two of our own men who have been with us ever since the Slade and Randles ranch moved up from the southwest years ago. They wolfed their meal hurriedly and went out of the hot kitchen into the coolness of the porch.

"Hot night," grinned Jean Paul as he leaned in the low window watching us do dishes.

"Good hay weather," Liz replied, clashing the plates together in the hot water of the dish pan.

"See that smoke over there?" he pointed out toward the blue haze that lay over the clay bluffs hedging in the river. "That, my good woman, is Broken Bow and that, over there," pointing back to the hills behind the house, "is. . . ."

"Oh, hell, Jean," one of the kids sneered. "That's way up in Canada."

The next day dawned in such a blaze of glory that I dragged my weary bones out of bed and, pulling on my jeans, ran out to sit on the corral fence and watch the sun slide over the Crazy
Mountaineer

Horse hills. It came up, a ball of white fire casting out all the colors of the spectrum in writhing ripples against that menacing smoke cloud that lay over the river and reflected off the farther lowering mass in what the kid had said was Canada.

"Gosh, I hope it really is Canada," I said aloud, as I slipped off the fence and ran in to help Liz with breakfast.

Breakfast on our ranch is a husky, man-sized meal and I stood by the stove and flipped pan cakes until I thought my face would melt completely off. Finally it was over. The men and teams trailed slowly off to the fields. Liz carried Nick’s two letters around and read them as she worked, but she looked happier today.

I went out to feed the saddle horses kept in the corral for our private use and sat down in the shade of the big barn while they fought over their oats. Liz’s mare, Goldilocks, landed a solid kick in the ribs of my chunky white pony, so I flipped a rock at her to teach her manners. The big black horse that Nick had bought when we were in Mexico together rubbed his head against my shoulder, confident of his status as a privileged character. "You old beggar," I laughed. "Kind of miss the boss, don’t you?" I gave his sleek neck a pat and sighed. "Well, I sure wish he’d get here." I wondered suddenly how Blaize was so sure he was coming. Was it just Indian gravevine or . . . maybe . . . the thought struck me oddly, maybe Nick was already on the reservation. I sat up straight. Hadn’t Blaize said, "We’re having a high old time," when I asked him what happened to him? Of course. Nick loved to be free, he hated responsibility when it was dull. He even hated it here on the ranch sometimes. It would be just like him to go hole up with Blaize for a week or two till the hay was in. Mmm, I thought, with my tongue in my cheek, dear brother Nicholas, you’re going to have a visitor if I can get away from Liz for awhile. Then I heard Liz call and the note of urgency in her voice jerked the idea out of my mind. I jumped up, scrambled over the high pole fence and ran up to the house as fast as my legs would carry me.

"The phone’s out, Jo," she said as I clattered up on the porch. "That smoke over there looks kind of thick so I thought I’d call down to Dean’s and see if they weren’t getting kind of hot down that way and it won’t give a jingle." She jiggled the receiver with a worried look.

"Did you try town?" I asked.
"Not yet. I got scared."

I walked over to the phone and turned the crank. It was silent. I looked at Liz who showed white under her tan. "It’s burned out," I gasped.

We ran to the window. The smoke that we had had for a week in our nostrils had blotted out the sun, leaving only a red trace; and the timber on top of our little, low hills slowly developed an incandescent glow behind it.

"Liz, we’ve got to get out of here," I cried.
"What about the crew?" she asked wildly.
"The crew's way down river, we couldn't get to them if we tried. Hurry up!" I pushed her toward the bedroom. "Pick up some stuff! Get Nick's boots and his horse show trophy and don't forget Bud's silver-mounted spurs. They're in the piano bench."

On my way down to the barn a big badger crossed the path humping along like an animated bath mat and I had to give a wide berth to a couple of skunks eating daintily out of the cat's dish. I dove through the big double doors of the barn. The inside was cool and dim even on a hot day like this. I glanced hastily over the array of gleaming saddles each on its own pole, complete with blankets and bridles, and almost wept over my own fancy stamped rig. But I laid quick hands on the boys’ beaded bridles—no fire was going to get them!

Catching those nervous broncs was going to be another job, I could see. They were snorting and crimp-tailed with the smell of smoke. I wasn't in the mood to fool with them, so I grabbed up Nick's rope though more than once I've been spanked blue for roping his horses, and after a few minutes running had them caught up.

Liz came out on the porch with a pile of things, so I tightened the last cinch with a jerk that made my white bronc grunt and clambered up on the black horse, leading the other two. The fire had oozed its way over the crest of the hill and was coming slowly down the slope.

I grabbed the boys' treasures and, wrapping them in Liz's fur coat, tied the bundle on the back of my saddle. She had a little cedar box full of Nick's letters, the family pictures from the top of the piano and a big guitar that one of the hay hands practically slept with. These we tied in various articles of clothing, wrapped the guitar in my blue formal, and tied them all on the extra horse and started out.

The fire was burning in patches, making deep flaming holes in the tall grass that the horses shied away from and the smoke was so thick we could hardly see beyond their ears.

"Think we'd better stick to the road?" asked Liz with a cough. "Gee! It's thick."

"Guess we had." I rubbed my eyes. "There's less grass to catch on fire there. Liz, you'd better wrap this bandana around your hair. Those sparks are pretty hot when they land." I brushed a piece of flaming pine bark off my saddle horn.

She took the scarf and tucked her long black curls under it. "It looks like a bad place up ahead there." She stood up in her stirrups and tried to see through the smoke. A lurid streak of yellow and red showed a few feet in front of us where a big tree had fallen across the road and was slowly burning itself out. The horses stopped short, trembling with fear.

"A horse is no darn good in a fire. That's just one more excuse for me mechanizing this ranch come post war," I grumbled, dismounting and throwing my reins to Liz while I advanced to look the situation over.
"Think we can get through?" Liz called. "We can't go back. It's all on fire!"

"We can make it if these horses are steady. There's a ditch to one side here. Better get down and blindfold 'em though. It's a narrow squeeze."

At last the white clay bluffs and the great, rolling green of the wide, sluggish St. Cloud appeared ahead of us. Heaven will never look more beautiful than that wonderful wet, cool water. We plunged in up to our necks, horses, fur coat, guitar and all, and breathed great gulps of the clean, sweet air next to the water.

Time seemed to stop as the fire roared its way down the slope toward the water's edge. The heat blasted at us. There were moments when we fought to keep our footing on the slick bottom against the lunging of the blind-folded, terror-stricken horses until I thought the pleasantest thing in the world would be to drown right there and get it over with. Night fell but the sky grew no darker, the burning brush on the banks cast long patches of red reflection on the black water.

"Are you all right?" Liz called above the crackling of the flames.

"Ugh!" I replied, spitting out a mouthful of river water and mud as I came up from where a blow from the white horse's shoulder had flung me. "Uh huh; depends on what you call all right," I managed to laugh. "Hold still, you knot head. I don't know who's more scared, you or me but stand still."

"How long have we been here?" Liz asked in a strangled tone. She was shivering and her lips were blue around the edges.

I shrugged my shoulders. "My watch stopped when we hit water. Must be night though. It seems like hours. This reminds me—one night when Nick and I were in Mexico. . . ."

"Mexico, Mexico, Mexico," she choked out. "Jo, I've listened to you and Nick in Mexico for six months." Her voice rose higher. "I've heard all about that minor Pancho Villa that Nick got kicked out of school with and how you rode from one end of the country to the other, comrades in arms, and I haven't said a word but I'll be damned if I'll listen to it in the middle of a wet, stinking river at midnight. Shut up!" Her voice rose to a scream and she began to sob wildly.

I stared at her in astonishment. "But Liz. . . ."

"Shut up, I said," she turned on me. "I know darn well Nick cares more about you than he ever will about me. Why shouldn't he? I'm only his wife. But I won't have it rubbed in now. Here I'm just as good as you are."

"Hey, baby," I said softly and reached out to pat her wet shoulder. "Lissa, kid, you know that isn't so. Why, right this minute he's on his way home to you. Of course he loves you." I had said the wrong thing, I knew it, but if she heard, she gave no sign.

She only sighed and turned her head. "No, of course it's
not your fault," she said wearily. "Nick's just Nick, that's all. I'm so tired I'm not even scared any more. Oh, I wish Nick was here," she wept quietly.

"It might help," I admitted sarcastically, thinking of that grapevine talk I'd heard yesterday.

The fire blazed on in an old cedar on the bank, big chunks of flaming branch hit the water with an ominous hiss and died, and slowly with an almost imperceptible lightening of the choking blur of smoke, morning came. Except for an occasional smoldering snag casting an innocent-looking plume of smoke skyward, the fire had burned itself out in the white clay dust of the bluffs. We took the blind-folds off and the horses pricked up their ears and scrambled out on the bank. Liz and I followed, dripping wet. The ground was still hot under our feet . . . the place smelled and looked like a poor reproduction of hell, blackened ground, smoldering denuded arms of sage brush. I shuddered.

Liz sat wearily down and looked at me. "Well, what's next?" she asked.

I shook my head. "We could go back to the house, I guess, and see if there's anything left," I said struggling with the wet saddle girths.

She put her head down on her knees and began to cry quietly.

"Oh, now, Liz," I began, patting her shoulder, when a quick movement of the white horse attracted my attention. I looked up and saw a familiar slim figure walking toward us. He wore high-heeled boots and overalls and he staggered faintly, but nothing on earth could disguise that ram-rod shouldered military school walk. My brother Nick trudged through the clay with the same step as that with which he walked down a parade ground in full dress review.

I half rose to meet him but he reached us in a rush and put his arms around us both, kneeling there on the ground beside us with tears streaming down his cheeks. I almost laughed aloud. His hair and eye-brows were singed, his face was black with soot. He wasn't actually drunk, but the moment I got near him I knew what he had been doing and why Blaize had known he was here. I drew back, hoping that Liz wouldn't notice. I was more used to forgiving Nick than she was. It took practice.

In a moment he loosened Liz's fingers clutching his coat and turned to me. She stared at him in hurt bewilderment. "Damn it, baby," he said, scowling, "did yuh save my good boots? These Indian clod-hoppers I got on are way too big for my feet" He extended them for my inspection.

"Yes, glamor boy," I fleered, "I saved your precious boots for your aristocratic little feet. They're in that pack over there."

"Oh, hell, you got 'em all wet."

I sat down on a rock and began to laugh. Liz looked at me for a moment in a startled way and then she laughed too. He hadn't changed a bit.