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Nance Van Winckel

Here, There, Everywhere

“What I mainly want to know is what’s supposed to collide with what?”

“Sub-atomic particles,” I told Wally, “and don’t ask me how.”

Wally Ketchpaw was walking fast and I was riding slowly on a blue bike up to where Riverway Road dead-ended and Mandan Indian land began. Moments ago we’d seen a pink and lavender Winnebago drive off the road and bump across the low brush and gopher holes of what, a century ago, had been the Mandans’ carefully kept cornfield. Two men in pastel-colored shirts and pleated trousers had gotten out of the motor home and were standing now on opposite sides of that field talking to each other on walkie-talkies.

“The newspaper says no one’s actually ever seen any colliding going on,” Wally said.

This morning I’d filled the bicycle’s tires with air at the Sunoco station, but already they were nearly flat, and I was huffing and puffing, riding on a loose ridge of rubber, close to the wheels’ rims. “I guess they’ve seen the results of collisions, though, and that must be what they’re mainly after. Results.”

“And it takes 59 square miles down underground to do *that*?” He nodded at the field as if it might answer for itself.

“This supercollider thing will never happen, Wally. That rock under there has all sorts of fissures and holes. Just wait till they dig up a few core samples

and see what they're dealing with. They don't want a site that's going to leak who knows what."

All this way up Riverway Road Wally had been carrying something bundled up in a dirty brown towel in the crook of his elbow. My guess was he'd unearthed another bone fragment from the carcass of that long-buried something I'd started calling Rex—at least, as I told Wally, for now. He'd been on his way home from the hole he'd just opened another two feet deeper into his cow pasture, and at first glance as I caught up with him on my bike, I thought what he was holding there so carefully could only be a baby.

Now we came to the fenceline and stopped. The two men were working the keyboards of micro-computers that hung around their necks and rested on their chests like shiny silver amulets. The one in the pink shirt saw us and waved.

"Don't speak to them, Martha. We don't want to start anything," Wally said.

"I wouldn't dream of it."

"We're better off just biding our time."

The pink-shirted man's small computer beeped, and he stared down at it and shook his head.

"See," I said to Wally. "I told you. It's no good out there."

Wally opened one edge of his blanket, then another, and reached his hand inside. When his hand came back out, it held a sandwich of dark yellow cheese on white bread. He carefully ripped the sandwich in two and handed me half.

"Here," he said. "Eat this. No arguments."

At the fenceline where we stood chewing our cheese and bread, not only the road ended but the White Deer River itself. It came to a stop in an acre of marshy wetlands, mostly dried weeds now, though a few green

and brown cattails poked through the tan grasses.

The two men walked back to their Winnebago, got in, and started slowly across the field, coming toward us. The black tires, barely visible in the dry marsh, bent down the cattails which made a swishing sound as they collapsed. Suddenly a great blue heron rose up in front of the Winnebago and flew directly over it. The bird's long sharp claws clattered against the front windshield.

Slammed down that hard, the Winnebago's brakes squealed sharply. The men's heads fell forward and back, and from the shapes of their mouths, I could make out the words they shouted to each other. *What*, the one man said. *What? What?* the other answered.

Mrs. Doctor stood between Wally and me. He wouldn't look at her.

"If you'd be so kind as to tell him I only want to offer him the available resources of the Society." She had on a navy straw hat with a red bow, navy pumps. A quarter inch of pink slip hung down beneath the back of her navy and white polka dot dress.

"I think you're wasting your time here, Dr. Moffitt," I said. We were standing outside the padlocked doors of Wally's pole barn. "Mr. Ketchpaw happens to have one very made-up mind."

Wally turned, looking past her, and nodded to me as if I were reading from the script and I'd finally said my two lines right.

It was 100 degrees, the sun directly overhead,

and no one was giving an inch.

I thought there was a lot we didn't know, and maybe a good bit she did. She had pictures, for instance, reconstructions, she'd told me, of similar prehistoric creatures found in this vicinity. She'd brought them, rolled up into dozens of white logs on the backseat of her rental car, from the Antiquity Society Museum in Grand Forks.

The parts of the puzzle Wally had in that barn were: 17 vertebrae, 8 odd Y-shaped ribs, 2 fibula that resembled oars for a canoe, and a mandible that when pieced together was 52 inches long.

Yesterday the woman whose name Wally chose to remember as Mrs. Doctor had sat across from me at a table in the Motel Edgeway Lounge. She maintained a sphinxy smile, though she'd been in town four days already and hadn't yet been allowed on Wally's property.

"My dear, have you ever considered that what you're unearthing out there is no more a dinosaur than you or I, but rather a giant winged reptile, a Pteranodon perhaps? Actually, they're most common. Really rather omnipresent in these part." She sighed.

In a few minutes I was to meet Danny McCogle, the man everyone in town said was exactly right for me—if I'd just give him some time, since he was, as I'd been repeatedly told, an old-fashioned guy who liked to take his courting slow.

I sucked my wedge of lime until just the rind was left. Then I set it on my napkin, and when I looked up, Danny McCogle was standing in the doorway. He nodded to me but didn't take a single step toward our table. I thought he didn't look at that moment like the same man whose Appaloosa mare I'd visited Thursday, whose hands held a plastic cup under the horse's boil

I'd lanced and let drain. Now Danny's pale hair was combed back so neatly from his forehead, the white places near his scalp which the sun rarely touched were shiny. So was the silver buffalo of his belt buckle. He motioned to me that he'd wait at the bar while I finished my business with Dr. Moffitt.

I took an envelope from my purse and set it on the table. I knew I'd probably never dare tell Wally I'd exchanged any information with her, though it was only a few sizes and shapes of bones she was after. I couldn't help it. I wanted to know myself what the thing was, which didn't explain why, as I passed her the slip of paper, I felt like an enemy spy.

Now, two days later, she was standing by her beige car in Wally's driveway. She didn't show any signs of getting back in, much less of leaving.

Then Wally and I looked up at the sky at the same time. A lazy red-tailed hawk was dallying over the field to our left, where we both knew certain remains of an uncertain something lay buried under a black layer of North Dakota dirt. Suddenly the hawk saw what it was after—a field mouse probably—and swooped down after it. The hawk's trajectory cut a swath through our three intersecting planes of vision. We'd been standing like this by Wally's barn for fifteen or twenty minutes, in a sweltering midday heat; none of us had lunch, and we were all as busy as we could be getting nowhere.

After Wally had patched every hole, restaked all

the gaps and low places in the field fence around his 280 acres, he strung another foot of barbed wire on top. Though I couldn't be sure, none of this activity seemed to have much to do with protecting his dozen heifers.

I'd drive by, honk, and wave, and there'd be Wally unrolling a huge wheel of wire that gleamed in the sun. Then he'd drag the come-along and cinch it up tight to the wire. He concentrated such efforts on the edge of the fence that ran along our road. This went on all through July.

Yesterday he'd told me that Mrs. Doctor, she knows what she knows, and he knows what he knows.

"Which is what?"

"Which is that when the questions are wrong from the get-go, the answers just buzz around in circles."

I nodded, asking myself how much of that response was directed at me, at my own questions, all of them over the years, which suddenly seemed to stretch before me like a field of old cornstalks after a hailstorm—bent down, crooked.

"Things that come up from way down don't always need to be hauled off. The same's so for whatever drifts in from up high. Remember the geese, Martha? Remember them?"

"Geese?"

Wally smiled, one eyebrow raised. Then I remembered. I'd been the one to tell him about the geese in the first place, how the city fathers in Fargo, where I'd gone to veterinary college, had decided too many geese were ruining the municipal park. Geese were everywhere, their little goslings trailing. They'd adopted the park and its man-made pond as their nesting ground, and protected there, their numbers kept growing. Goose scat, which resembled the long grey

ashy remains of a lit cigarette left completely unsmoked in an ashtray, lay in flower beds, under hedges, and all across the neatly weeded and mowed grass.

So the city council came up with a plan: half that many geese were okay, but half had to go. So 123 geese were captured and packed into wooden crates, then loaded on a freight train and sent to St. Louis, where city park department officials thought a few geese would be a nice addition to springtime in Missouri. Back then I had this image of the geese waddling around the strange new city—furious, flapping and hopping in that wild way of theirs.

Forty-eight hours after their arrival in St. Louis, they were spotted in their wide beautiful V flying back over Fargo. Downtown, shoppers and businessmen came out of buildings and looked up as the geese zeroed in for a landing. The geese honked, and people, pulling up to stoplights and curbsides, honked back.

Wally had liked this story. He'd put his head back and laughed. "They navigate by the stars," he'd said. "You've got your sick goose, your cooked goose, but there ain't no such thing as a lost goose."

The only reason I knew about Wally Ketchpaw's bone fossils at all was because years ago I'd made a mistake in his barn. He'd had a mare in trouble trying to foal. She'd almost ripped her womb apart with her first colt a few years before, and Wally, being cautious about the second one, had called my mother and asked if I'd come over and have a look. My mother, who'd

just married Bert, was cuddled up with him by the fire. It was Easter break for me, my last year of vet school, and when Wally's call came, I thought my mom and Bert would be glad to have the evening to themselves.

By the time I got to Wally's, stepping through cow dung and April mud into his barn, the foal's front hooves were out, and the mare was barely breathing, let alone pushing.

Wally glanced at me as if I'd been there the whole time. "I'm going to the house to get my pistol. This whole production is turning into one lost cause."

I bent down and got my hands around the foal's two hooves and yanked hard. It dove forward another ten inches so that its muzzle was out. Back then I thought there was way too much blood, but over the years since, I've seen worse. "We can save this colt," I said. "Come on, let's pull him out."

Wally stopped and stood by the barn door. "I've got 280 acres of wheat to get in the ground. This *week*. Where am I going to find time for bottle feeding a puny horse six times a day?"

He disappeared out the door before I could voice a single argument. I'd already begun to think, To hell with Wally. If he didn't want to raise the colt himself, I'd find someone who would. Then, knowing I'd never get a good grip on those hooves without some rope, I hurriedly searched around me, finally heading up the ladder to the hayloft where I thought surely there'd be some baling twine.

I'd stepped across four or five bales before I spotted the twine hanging from a nail in the wall. I headed for it and had just gotten my hands on it when I saw what I shouldn't have: the bone fossil of some huge creature's pelvic girdle. Farther back behind that, lying in shadows, were more ones—also large, but their

shapes less recognizable, although one enormous femur lay among them.

When from down below the shot rang out, my arm jerked so hard I pulled the whole mess of twine off the wall. I could hear my pulse pounding in a panic as I climbed down the ladder, a descent that seemed to take hours. Feeling my way with my feet from rung to rung, I got myself tangled up in the baling twine I was carrying and in all that I'd seen up there and somehow already knew I shouldn't have.

Wally stood near the ladder watching my descent. He held the gun at his side. The mare hadn't had a chance to make it. We'd both seen that. Too much inside her had been hemorrhaging, and all at once.

I looked from Wally to the foal whose long snout, half in and half out of the dead mare, was twisting and writhing. Then I turned, loosed my arm and hand from the twine, and knelt down in the blood. I ran my hand across the foal's nose, wiping off the thick lining of the birth sac. I heard it gulp its first breath.

Then it gasped. With its ribcage still stuck in the mare, it couldn't fill its lungs enough to get a full breath. "Give me a hand here, Wally." I didn't even turn to look at him.

I wrapped both hand around one hoof, and then there were Wally's hands around the other. "On three," I said, and quickly counted. "One, two, *three*." We took off backwards, walking on our heels. The foal fell out, half on top of me. A stallion. I felt his hind legs kick into my hips.

When I stood up, covered in the sticky blood, Wally was coiling the baling twine around his arm, from elbow to hand.

The colt was already trying to get to his knees, which kept buckling. I watched him for a minute, then

bent down and pushed his nose toward the mare's teat. But the colt just brushed past it and went back to his struggles to stand. So finally I just held him there against her, one hand on either side of his muzzle, almost covering his eyes, until I heard the sucking sound begin.

Wally wouldn't look at me. He put the coiled twine over his shoulder and headed up the ladder.

I found a grain sack and swabbed down the rest of the colt's face, neck, and sides. I rubbed him hard, and he went on sucking and sucking. He had the hang of it by then, which in many ways was too bad since soon I'd have to get him used to a bottle. But at least for the moment he was getting that early real milk, full of antibodies and nourishment.

Wally's steps down the ladder were much quicker than mine had been. He stepped off a waist-high rung to the floor. "Just what in the Sam hill did you think you were doing up there? That hayloft is off limits."

I kept rubbing the colt. "I thought if we saved the colt, someone else might want him."

"What makes you think he belongs somewhere else?"

I took a step toward Wally. "Okay, I'm sorry. I guess I could take him myself, get him started. I've got a few days before I go back to school. Then I'll bring him back here."

Wally turned and watched the colt nurse. He shook his head. I saw he'd put the gun behind his back, its barrel in his belt.

Wally Ketchpaw had kept to himself on this ranch his whole life, and although my father had always claimed Wally was a man who followed his own mind and kept that mind in a level head, I thought maybe,

just maybe, the years had skewed that level. I glanced sideways toward the colt, the mare a wide dark bloody blur all around it.

“What’s up there is nobody’s business,” Wally said.

“Sure,” I nodded. “I mind my own business. I do.”

“Well,” he said, heading toward the door, “if that don’t sound like somebody I once knew.”

I slid my arms, held out like the tines of a forklift, under the colt’s belly and hoisted him up. He turned his head, saw me at last, and let go a loud high-pitched cry.

“Yep, your father...he’d sure enough be surprised to see all what’s happened. To you, and your ma....All your sheep sold off....”

“*Wouldn’t* he?” Wally’s hard gaze met mine as I came up beside him, feeling the heaviness of each slow step.

I didn’t know then how to answer such a question. “I’ll bring this little guy back on Sunday,” I said, and then I’d ducked out, the mud sucking at my feet as I stepped toward my car by way of one then another of Wally’s huge bootprints.

The day I turned 33 I felt a little down, aged and sagging in the wrong places. That is, until I stood out in the middle of Wally Ketchpaw’s wheatfield and tried to see everything around me in its 66-million-year-old incarnation. The creature, whose identity we may as

well classify for the time being as a Triceratops, stood in front of me to the north, dipping his seven-foot snout in the river. But now I let the river disappear. I was there, then gone. That easy.

The place where Wally knelt by a pit in the ground and busied himself picking up pieces of bones, turning them over one by one, and then setting them inside a child's rusty wagon—that place could be swamp, spotted with water lilies and fragrant lotus. I had to squeeze my eyes—not shut but held in a tight squint—to see the wide foreground as floodplain, all the way to the slats of grey horizon lines. To my left, a stand of laurel trees; behind me, dogwoods and persimmons; and farther back, the tulip trees that would soon be in blossom.

Triceratops had three horns sprouting from his massive brow and a frill high up around his tree-trunk of a neck, although Wally had yet to find any bones that resembled a neck like that. When all nine tons walked a ways towards where Wally no longer stood but where now a swamp hummed with insect life and a six-foot-long fish swam just under the surface, the earth trembled. We were, all of us, suddenly at sea level. North America was parted down the middle by a narrow inland sea, and its two shores were inching together, a foot a century. A couple hundred miles to the west, volcanos rumbled and spit smoke. They'd be angry for a while and spew fire, then cool down, and rest for three or four benign decades. Then the creature lowered himself into the swamp and floated across it towards a delicious understory of far-off green: sassafras, soapberry, ginseng. It was hard to lose sight of so enormous a creature.

But when Wally called to me, looming up from the swamp like a strange new creature himself, I did.

My vision blurred.

He stood and raised his hand in that way of his I'd come to know—a brief flick of his wrist at waist level—and then I did the same.

“So Dean Snyder finally heard from his friend about the bone.” I stood by the hole where Wally had almost finished excavating the five-foot piece of whatever.

“His friend the paleontologist?” Wally said, running the syllables together so that it came out closer to *pale ologist*. He walked a step towards me, putting the wagon behind him, and stopped.

“He says he thinks what you've got here are the remains of something about 66 million years old. He said it probably stood ten feet high at the hips and could have weighed nine tons.”

Wally put his head back, closed his eyes for a moment, then let out an exhalation that was part sigh and part laugh. “And just how does the man figure all that?”

“It has to do with measuring the decay of radioactive elements in and around that bone fragment we sent. I couldn't tell you how *that's* done though.”

“That many million years is a long time to be lying around by this river. It's a wonder it didn't just wash away.”

I looked down and saw that Wally had put a tattered but thick patchwork quilt into the bottom of the wagon. On it were fifteen or twenty bone shards arranged into three parallel lines.

I'd been straight with Wally all along, so I just came out and said it. “There didn't use to *be* a river here. Way out there was an ocean,” and I pointed as if we might both look to the northeast and see at that moment a great stretch of blue water. “Several feet

down they've found seashells and fish skeletons."

Wally stared in the direction I'd just pointed.

"Once there was a bayou right here, like down south in Louisiana."

He glanced around him again, shaking his head. Then he passed me a piece of bone.

I felt the sharp splintered edge where the piece had recently broken. "I suppose dinosaurs *did* have bones that size," I said.

"*Dinosaurs*," Wally said loudly. "That's just some people's word for something they don't know."

Looking up, past him, I could see it had begun to rain on Buzz Jenkins' field on the other side of the White Deer river. Wally turned and followed my gaze to where a fat grey cloud hovered above Buzz's newly seeded sorghum field, its mounds of furrows in patterns of light and dark brown. The cloud was maybe three quarters of a mile off, but I could, I was sure, *smell* that rain. I thought I could even hear it, the downpour, way across there. It hadn't rained on this side of the river in five weeks.

"Well at least that piece we sent to Fargo has gotten dated more exactly."

Wally shrugged. "Just so it comes back here the same as when it left. Each of them, every piece, has to stay right here in the end. Just so we're clear on that, Martha."

We glanced at each other across the wagon. "All this"—he waved his hand in the air above the bones—"is bad enough already without letting parts of it go every which way."

"Sure," I said. "Okay." We both turned to watch the rain pour down to the east of us.

Wally shook his head again, slower this time. Then he handed me a fourth piece of bone, a fifth piece,

and so on, until he was sure I'd seen them all.

In front of us and farther off behind Wally's small white house, the huge disc of August sun was going down. We said nothing and walked towards it, Wally pulling the bone-wagon, which clattered on its tiny black wheels.

The landscape was so much blur and glare, I thought we could just as well have been nowhere at all. I was turning 33, but right then I could have been any age under the sun.

Mrs. Doctor stood in the road by Wally's fence watching him through the tiniest pair of binoculars I'd ever seen. She didn't even notice me huffing and puffing up Riverway Road on my bike. I stopped—dead center in her long black shadow on the gravel.

"I thought you'd gone," I said, one foot on a bike pedal and one on the road. When I spoke the crickets abruptly halted their loud clatter, which I hadn't even noticed until the sudden quiet descended.

"No," she said. "There's excavation sites all over that field, *aren't* there?" She looked at me quickly, then turned her binoculars back to Wally, who was busy piling up a new mound of dirt about sixty yards from the new femur he'd found by the river. We both watched as first he'd use the black garden hoe to break up the soil, then, letting that fall, bend down and go at the dirt with a hand trowel.

"That man has no idea what he's doing. This makes me a nervous wreck." Mrs. Doctor's raised

binoculars seemed to pull her own eyes forward so that for a moment the eyes themselves appeared to be extensions of the two black tubes.

“Actually he’s doing a real professional job,” I said.

She let the binoculars fall and dangle on the black cord around her neck. “What in the world would you know about it, Martha? This could be as big as Drumheller, as Red River. It can’t belong to any one man.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s a matter of belonging. It’s more a matter of containment. Stewardship.”

“Stewardship, for Christ’s sake. In a dairy barn!” She shook her head, walked to her car door, and jerked it open.

I noticed the hem of her dress had four or five big purple thistles stuck to it. The crickets started up again.

I never thought I’d stay this long in my home town—not after my mother died, then my stepfather Bert six months later. I thought, Okay, now there’s nothing to keep me here. Most folks had never thought of me anyway as anything but old Dr. Zetter’s assistant—certainly not as a vet in my own right. But lately this Danny McCogle business had begun to turn my thinking back the other way around. Yesterday he’d been delivering a truckload of hay in Wally’s and he’d stopped by my place on his way. The clover and alfalfa smelled sweet and rich, and I’d run my hands over the bales as we stood talking by his truck.

“I don’t see what Wally Ketchpaw wants with half a ton of hay anyway. Didn’t he always grow his own for those few heifers?”

“Wally’s a very busy man,” I said.

“Funny, that’s exactly what *he* said.”

We'd both glanced up the road where Wally's property began at an old cottonwood tree, and mine stopped.

Now Mrs. Doctor and I stood by that same cottonwood and listened to the din of crickets rising as if someone were slowly turning up the volume. Then, all at once, they stopped as the pink and lavender Winnebago careened onto our road and sped toward us, and past us. Puffs of dust and grit swirled into our faces. The Winnebago's side windows were tinted a dark grey, so that as it rushed by, it seemed to do so without a driver. In those windows I caught just the brief flickering reflections of Mrs. Doctor and myself, two women who appeared as if maybe they'd had a mishap on a road along the edge of nowhere.

"And that's another thing. Those Berkeley people," Mrs. Doctor said, both her hands trying to wave away the dust. "The Society has made its opinion known on *their* project. We're getting this place declared a protected archaeological site. Those boys are on their way *out*... Who knows but the fossil extinction horizon extends way west there as well."

The Winnebago had driven off the road and bumped around to the left of the dried marsh grasses. Mrs. Doctor turned and rased her binoculars in that direction. A man got out the driver's side and closed the door. I didn't need any binoculars to see two big metal antennae rise up on either side of the rear of the Winnebago and begin whirling like windmills. The man walked a few yards into the thigh-high canary grass, and though I couldn't see exactly what it was that had made him jump so suddenly and take three quick long strides back to the mobile home, no doubt Mrs. Doctor had, which was beside the point, since I had a very good idea.

Fireflies flickered here and there—small flares through which Wally’s field appeared in bits and pieces, tiny oval scenes of it, backlit, on the wing. But I was the only one watching.

Danny and Wally were busy—up to their elbows in a dusty soapy water. They sat cross-legged outside Wally’s barn. They’d dunk the bones one at a time, then pat each one dry with a dish towel. They hadn’t even noticed the sun hit the last low rung of tree limbs across the river, then disappear.

I’d gone to Dan’s truck for my sweatshirt, and by the time I’d returned to the patch of grass where they sat working, it was dark. That’s because, as my mother used to say, I dawdled. I let my mind wander, and my feet slowed down on their own.

One corner of Wally’s field, like a huge dingy grey mattress, was held down by the green dot of Dan’s pickup. I’d shown up with Dan at Wally’s barn door, and though for a good ten minutes Wally hadn’t given him more than a brief nod, now they were going about their business as though they’d been doing this work, in just this careful silent way, for years. The field behind them was an explosion of dirt mounds, which the fireflies lit up. Dark heaps of cool earth that had cradled the craggy old bones of who knew what since who knew when—now they sat empty as robbed tombs.

Since I’d made her a promise, I asked Wally one last time. “Dr. Moffitt just wants to take a peek at these things, just to get a general idea of what this all adds up

to.” I waved my hands over the bone pieces.

Dan raised his gaze in my direction, his lips pushed forward as if he’d tasted a fruit not nearly ripe enough to eat.

“I’ll be good and dead and she can take herself a peek at my bones first,” Wally said without looking up from the one he was drying, which had the contours of a vertebra.

The bare bulb that stuck out from high up over the barn door threw an oval of light into the tub of water.

I stood in my sweatshirt by the corral fence and watched the men’s hands rise and fall in steady rhythms between water and towel and the tan bones that made a ring around them on the grass.

The fireflies flew between the hands and the bones and me. The fireflies I’d caught as a child I’d put in jars with nail-holes hammered in the lids. At night on my bedside table those jars were mostly containers of darkness themselves, except for brief occasional illuminations. And once, when I’d been ill with a high fever and surrounded by a delirium of ghosts in my room, my father had spoken to me about them from the doorway, already almost a ghost himself. Fireflies, he’d said, were prayers on their way to heaven. Later that night as my fever rose and I tossed between damp sheets, I’d been sure the fireflies’ lights were growing dimmer, sure that whatever final flash I’d see in that jar would also be my own.

I watched as a single insect positioned itself now on a piece of bone near Wally’s elbow, lighting up that bone, which was, it seemed, half a rim of an enormous eye socket. Then the firefly flew to another bone, and another, lighting them up one by one, as if to suggest to anyone who was watching that here were the

instructions we'd needed all along: the perfect order into which all the pieces should finally be reassembled.

When the thunderheads rumbled, changed direction, and moved right at us, the sky flashing sudden shades of purple, yellow, gray—like signals—and when at last the rains came, we just sat there—Wally, Danny McCogle and me—in Wally's field watching it happen.

Danny counted “one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi,” etc. after each lightning bolt, and occasionally Wally's lips moved, as he counted along to himself. Between each flash and its echoing rumble, there was a stillness, a quiet that went through us as much as each boom of thunder.

With three hand trowels we'd spent the whole afternoon scraping dirt away from the top and sides of a new bone. We had no idea yet how wide this one was, or how deep. Its exact contour was mystery we uncovered inch by slow inch, brushing at the crumbs of dirt with our fingers and palms.

The supercollider was, as Danny pointed out, a *mute* point. The one good thing Dr. Moffitt had accomplished was directing the Bureau of Land Management's attention to our probable Mesozoic remains. This in turn put a stop to further talk of a subterranean haven for colliding quarks. Now everything had been put on hold, which was, Wally and I agreed, just the way we liked it.

We were tired this afternoon, and except for a

few grunts as one of us bent awkwardly sideways to dig, none of us had spoken in the last hour. Though earlier in the afternoon Danny had mentioned a couple of times that he should be getting back, he still hadn't made the least move toward leaving. I'd worn holes in the three middle fingers of my right-hand glove, and my fingertips poked through: raw and red, my nails jagged, filthy.

"Should this be getting wet, Wally?" Dan glanced down at the bone that was beginning to look like the mandible of...of *what*, I wondered. Some gigantic gator?

Wally sat back, stretched out one leg, and rubbed his kneecap. "I guess he's been wet before."

Looking up, I saw three or four black clouds swirling. One large raindrop and immediately another fell on my forehead. They ran down my cheek in two cool lines. Then I stretched my legs out too and leaned back on my hands.

All at once it was coming down hard. The air around us was grey, the wheatfield an intense somber brown. A sudden coolness seemed to drape us as if lowered like an invisible cloak, and the fat clouds appeared within arms' reach.

Wally took our three trowels and jabbed them one by one in a line—red handle, blue handle, brown handle—into the mound of dirt we'd dug up and pushed to one side.

We let the water pour over us, leaving streaks in the dust on our arms, then erasing the streaks, rinsing our arms and faces clean. Water filled the hole we'd been making until the bone was completely covered. I took off both gloves and dipped my hands into that water which was beige and cool.

For a few moments the rain came down so hard

that when I looked across at Dan and Wally, all I saw were the shapes of their bodies, their two heads tipped back, mouths open, tasting rain as if it were the first rain ever.

Danny and I stood like sentries against the doors of Wally's barn. We'd knocked but we couldn't come in, Wally said, until he got something ready to show us. Dan held the bottle of glue in both hands as if it were a casserole on its way to a potluck.

Wally's spiel was that he'd built a dozen clipper ships in bottles, a 12-foot high grandfather clock; he'd carved—with a chainsaw and a fishing knife—an American Bald Eagle out of a stump of Douglas fir; and as God was his witness, he could glue the pieces of the ancient so & so back together. Better him, he said, than some goofball from the Antiquity Society.

Danny's father had worked through August whipping up a special glue, which we told him was for bones, very old bones, but we couldn't say whose. One week his garage had smelled like pig intestines, the next week like sour goats' milk. And for all we knew, perhaps such things were actual components of the formula. Mr. McCogle wasn't saying.

We'd been waiting for ten minutes. Inside, Wally was hammering something. Then we heard a motor whirr. A tiny saw? We waited five minutes, each of us leaning against one of the big double doors.

So that when the doors flew open, Dan and I almost toppled in. Bathed in a bright fluorescence from

three sputtering work lights hanging from the rafters, the giant femur lay in eighty or ninety pieces across the bench, but close enough together that a definite femur shape was discernible.

“Ee-gads,” Dan said. “That’s what I call a leg bone.” It ran down the length of the workbench, nearly ten feet.

“Jeez, that must be a back leg, Wally. I don’t think they had front legs that long.” I couldn’t take my eyes off the bone pieces, all pushed up close together in what seemed an expert jigsaw puzzle worker’s careful arrangement.

“I just finished getting this new gadget, this glue gun, fixed,” Wally said, “so now we’re all set. We’re set to go.” He nodded to the mayonnaise bottle with the straw-colored glue that Dan was holding.

Hanging on the wall behind Wally’s workbench were about a dozen garden implements—hoes, picks, pitchforks—so that the whole place had the look of a surgical room from another country in another century.

We glued, literally, until the cows came home. When the first few appeared, their huge heads through the door, they hesitated briefly, seeing the three of us inside. Then timidly they sauntered in, their full udders swinging.

Wally left Dan and me to our gluing and went to “hook up the girls” to the milk lines. The heat from the overhead lights and the glue had turned our hands golden. Dan came up behind me and put his arms around my waist, leaving a cool kiss on the back of my neck. “Can you believe this,” he said, “how lucky we are to be here, to be seeing it?”

I bent down and brushed my lips across his knuckles as he reached out to steady a big jagged shard, the shape bearing an odd resemblance to a bear claw. I

positioned my smaller piece above it and slowly lowered it until it slipped in—like a little miracle, which at first I only thought, then turned to Dan and said, just like that, aloud.

We heard the milking machines start up then, and the swoosh swoosh of milk through the lines. The barn floor trembled from the sound, and the patched-up bone, perfectly adhering in its special glue, took shape beneath our hands, and held firm.