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CHINOOK ZONE

By

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B. A., University of Montana, 1974

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

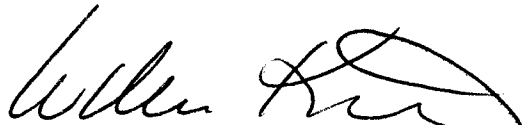
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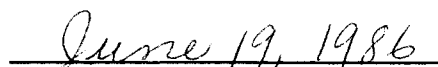
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CHINOOK ZONE

A Collection of Stories

By Kate Gadbow

In memory of  
Burke McNamer--  
brother and friend

CHINOOK ZONE

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## MEMENTO

Tom Foster is dead. Ellen Temple, who loved him for fifteen years, waits with Tom's family in an alcove of the mortuary as two funeral directors bustle nervously around them lining up the procession of mourners.

Ellen worries that there aren't enough flowers. As the group begins a halting shuffle through a foyer and into the velvet-draped chapel, she notices that there are only four arrangements on the altar. The large one, hers, is in the middle. It looks too big and the colors are wrong for winter. She thought pink and yellow would be comforting somehow, but it just looks like an overblown Easter basket.

She turns to the funeral director whose pale hand now grips her elbow and whispers, "Are there more flowers you haven't put out?"

"No, ma'am, there were only those." His breath smells minty and he looks sincerely sorry. "In fact," he adds confidentially, "our establishment contributed the small arrangement of carnations on the right to fill things out since the family chose not to order."

Tom's daughter Joan walks ahead of Ellen. She looks over her shoulder at the director. "Dad wasn't much for flowers at funerals. A lot of his friends gave to charity instead." She shifts her cool gaze to Ellen and whispers, "There are quite a few people here."

Joan is a tall, large-boned woman, bigger than Tom or his wife were. Her straight gray hair hangs to her shoulders in a thick bob.

Her stride is long and she has always struck Ellen as determined. The director tried to take Joan's arm when the family gathered to walk in, but she shook him off and waved him back to Ellen, not saying a word.

Tom's other daughter, Carla, is taking her seat in the front row of the chapel beside her husband Lyle. She is a smaller, rounder version of Joan, and softer somehow--kinder Ellen thinks. She never said as much to Tom, though. He seemed to love his daughters equally.

Ellen can hear the granddaughters whispering and giggling behind her. One of them hisses something that ends with "...guys give me the willies" and another snorts and stifles a giggle. At seventy-five, Ellen's hearing is still very good.

As they enter the chapel, Ellen looks around at the faces turned toward her. Most of them are as old as she is, people she met through Tom and all his activities, but a few are middle-aged, even young. The room is nearly full. Suddenly weak-kneed, she wants to sit down but doesn't know where to go. She whispers to the director that she should sit in the second row since she really isn't family, but Joan is gesturing and impatiently patting the seat beside her. The director leads Ellen to it, giving her elbow a reassuring squeeze as he leaves. Tom's grandchildren fill in around them.

There seem to be so many of them but there really are only six, all in their twenties and early thirties. Joan's daughters are as tall as their mother. Slim and dark-eyed, they look like twins though they tell Ellen that several years separate them and they are "really quite different." Even now she isn't sure if it's Adrienne or Beth

who sits next to her smoothing the skirt of a gray wool dress, a folded sheet from a legal pad held lightly between narrow polished fingertips. One of the boys sits behind Ellen, knocking her chair with a guitar case as he settles himself.

The grandchildren planned the service the night before, clustered around the table in Tom's small dining area, digging through his books and desk drawers. "This is really going to be different," they promised. "You have to know what you want or those funeral parlor people will just take over." So they planned and laughed and drank beer. It was a performance to them, some kind of play. Joan and Carla spent the evening in a corner of the living room, sipping bourbon and talking quietly about their childhood together. Already they said "Dad" as effortlessly as they spoke of Sarah, their mother, who had been dead for eighteen years.

Carla asked Lyle to get Ellen a cup of tea. He did, then sat beside her on the couch making gruff attempts at small talk. She could only stare blankly at him and try an occasional vague response. When Ellen started to cry in the middle of Lyle's explanation for the falling grain prices, Joan asked him to take Ellen home. It was as if she'd done something a little crazy--as if nobody had died.

On the way home Lyle said, "Yup, I hope I do it like Tom did. Live a good long life--what was he? Eighty, eighty-one?"

"Eighty-two," she whispered.

"Live a good long life like that, then die in bed when the old ticker gives out." He glanced at Ellen then reached over and patted her hand. "It's a blessing, you know. You look around you at some

of these vegetables in nursing homes..." He stopped suddenly, as if embarrassed, and adjusted the wipers that slapped at the wet snow. Maybe he remembered Ellen is seventy-five, that arthritis has stiffened her walk and knotted her small fingers.

Alone in her apartment, Ellen stood for a long time leaning against the guest room doorjamb looking at Tom's bed. He'd had the movers put it here three years ago when he sold the house and rented his small apartment.

"You have more room for it than I have," he said. "Besides," he added with his sly wink, "You never know when I might get caught in a snowstorm."

He died in it Tuesday morning. She came in early when she heard him tossing and found him lying on his side, ashen and glassy-eyed, whispering strange words. By the time she'd called the ambulance, the words had stopped.

Joan stripped the bed that evening and Ellen hadn't felt up to remaking it. It filled one end of the dim room, the four dark posts rising from the stark white mattress cover like fenceposts in the snow.

A granddaughter steps to the podium in front of the altar. Yes, that is certainly Beth, the younger one. The rustling and coughing in the chapel stop and she begins to speak.

"One of my fondest memories of my grandfather Tom Foster is a fishing trip we took together when I was six years old..." Beth is

a good speaker with a rich, ringing voice. She was in plays somewhere or studied drama in college. Ellen can't remember what it was. The story is a new one to her. She thought she'd heard most of their stories, all about Tom years ago, as if he hadn't been alive the past ten years. Ellen wonders briefly if Beth made this one up last night or found it in one of Tom's books. She can't see him as the bumbling, robust sportsman Beth describes.

The only time he ever talked to Ellen about fishing was one day when he had a bad cold and sat propped in the four-poster in her guest room watching Marlin Perkins. She'd brought him a hot toddy. He liked the way she made them--whisky and hot water and just a touch of sugar. He patted the bed at his side and said, "Come up here and watch this guy land his fish." She did and they both watched for a while as the man grunted and cranked his fishing reel, and Marlin exclaimed whenever the fish flashed silver in the air then disappeared. But Tom got tired of it and changed over to a movie with the remote control. When Ellen sneezed, Tom wrapped the afghan on his lap around her and kissed her. "I guess I can kiss you now," he said. "Sounds like you've caught my bug."

People chuckle, some laugh out loud as Beth concludes the story then clears her throat, suddenly serious.

"Now I'd like to read you something I can never read without thinking of Grandad." She opens a book and brushes her glossy hair back with one hand.

"Now nearly all those I loved and did not understand when I was young are dead, but I still reach out to them..." Beth's voice becomes

huskier and more dramatic as she reads about fishing and rivers and words. Ellen has never heard the quotation before and she strains to connect the series of images it presents. Beth pauses and takes a deep breath, then almost whispers the final line: "I am haunted by waters."

It is very quiet in the chapel and Ellen feels tears rising in response to the beauty of the passage and Beth's throaty delivery. But she can't link anything she heard with Tom. She doesn't remember him being a fishing nut. And Tom wasn't haunted by waters, or by anything else, really. He was the least haunted person she'd ever known.

As Beth sits, a man in the third row rises and makes his way to the podium. There is a pink-scrubbed clerical look about him, although he wears a golf shirt and a sport jacket. His gray hair is carefully combed back in wings above the ears.

"Tom Foster never set foot in the First Presbyterian Church where I conduct business," he begins in a reedy tenor with just a hint of a burr. That's who he is. That Reverend McDonald or MacDougall she met at the country club last year. "Our religious discussions took place on the golf course where we played eighteen holes together every month or so during the past few years. Tom Foster had a philosophy that is fairly rare and wonderful in this day and age. He accepted each day as it came and found something to be grateful for in it. He also accepted people as they are and managed, with that light wit that was his trademark, to make everyone he met feel a little better about himself and about life in general. Tom called himself an agnostic. I hope he'll forgive me if I call him a Christian."

He launches into a discussion of Christian living and seems more comfortable with that topic. Ellen wonders how well he really knew Tom. She can't imagine Tom engaged in big religious talks with this man. She can see him listening as McDougall discusses "The Lord," perhaps holding the flag as the minister interrupts himself to putt; Tom would then make some agreeable or half-humorous remark before hopping back on the golf cart with that spry step that belied his age.

"Let us bow our heads and pray," McDougall says. Ellen is grateful for the opportunity to focus on the handkerchief knotted in her hands. She has been trying to look at the speakers while avoiding the altar behind them with its ill-assorted floral arrangements and bare spot where a coffin should be.

She tried to change the subject when Tom told her he wanted to be cremated. He sat beside her one night after dinner and took both her hands in his. "I'm writing this all down for the girls, but I want to tell you too. It's all paid for. No embalming. Just cremation, then get somebody to say a few words about me if you want to."

"Tom, I..." she interrupted, but he put a finger on her lip.

"It's all arranged at the Croswell Brothers.' They do the cremating, then there's a spot for the ashes at the Mausoleum...next to Sarah's." It was then that he looked away.

He didn't let her tell him about the horror she had of cremation--the mutilation and finality of it. She tried to get Joan and Carla to change Tom's order against embalming, but they read the will and refused to do it. So she didn't see him at rest. Instead, she was left with that final picture--the drooping mouth and vacant stare as

the ambulance team worked over him and finally wheeled him away.

She twists the handkerchief and grasps at the words of the minister's prayer--"O kind and merciful Heavenly Father"--fighting to block the hovering image of Tom's distorted face and pale, defenseless legs, licked by white-hot flames.

Joan's son Micky blunders out of the second row, bumping his guitar case on chairs and whispering "excuse me." He goes to the podium, looks around uncertainly, then places the case on the floor, crouching awkwardly beside it to take out the instrument. Ellen has always liked this shy, bumbling boy with his gangly limbs and homely, serious face. He looks nothing like the rest of the Fosters. Joan always says with a sigh that he's the "spittin' image of Grandpa Flynn," the father of her long-dead husband. The sleek, confident women in his family seemed at a loss as to what to do with this introvert until somebody in high school discovered he was "musical." Then his mother pushed that for all she was worth.

Ellen is not sure how talented he really is. He does seem more relaxed and happy when he sings than he does in normal social situations. Perhaps that's reason enough to encourage him.

He finishes tuning the guitar and begins to sing. She recognizes the song. He wrote it several years ago for Tom and played it for them when he came to town on a business trip. He works in a music store in a Seattle mall, stringing guitars and demonstrating Lowrey organs. Whenever his company sent him to conventions here in Great Falls, he'd stay with Tom.

Tom listened to the song with his legs crossed and a cigarette



held poised in the air beside his bemused smile. It was all about how Tom struggled through the Depression and served as an example for his children and grandchildren. Tom told Ellen later that he found it impossibly sentimental and moderately misinformed. At the time, though, he dubbed Micky "a true Irish bard" then asked him if he wanted to go bowling.

As Micky finishes the song and repacks the guitar, Ellen moves in her seat trying to loosen the painful stiffness that has crept into her neck and spine. Joan touches Ellen's arm and whispers, "I think Anna's the last speaker. How are you holding up?"

Ellen dabs her nose with the handkerchief and replies with a brave smile. She notices that Joan's eyes are dry.

Anna is at the podium now--Carla and Lyle's middle child. She is eight months pregnant and her normally thin face is puffy and flushed. She adjusts the folds of a tent-like dress and glances at a small card in her hand.

"I don't have a song or a poem for Grandad today," she begins breathlessly. "But I do have a gift of sorts. I'm sure none of you noticed, but I'm about to have a baby." She waits, smiling, while the titters of the mourners subside. "I also happen to know, modern science being what it is, that this child will be a boy. We've already named him Tom Foster Duffy, and we'll do our best to see that he lives up to that name. It may not be easy." The other grandchildren begin to clap, and after a brief hesitation the older people behind them join in. Ellen clutches the sides of her chair, waiting for them to stop.

"I also have a 'thank you' for all of you here today," Anna continues. "As you know, since Aunt Joan moved away ten years ago, there hasn't been a family member living here in town with Grandad. It was his good health that kept him independent during these last years. But it was his friends who kept him happy. Thank you."

She looks around at the faces in the room, almost as if she is expecting more applause. Several people shift in their seats and chairs squeak. A man in the back of the room coughs. Anna glances quickly at the card in her hand then directs that florid smile toward Ellen who looks down at her handkerchief, afraid of what is to come.

"We'd also like to extend a special thanks to Ellen Temple who has been a faithful companion to Grandad these past fifteen years and for whom, I'm sure, he cared a great deal. Thank you. All of you."

Ellen looks up now and watches Anna as she walks heavily back to her seat. What does this smug child with her babies and her naive certainty know about Tom and herself? As Anna admits, they've been away for ten years except for holidays and brief, rushed visits when they'd take Tom over, acting like they knew all about him, acting-- maybe even hoping--that Ellen was still just a friendly neighbor, nothing more.

How does she explain to these people who call her a "faithful companion" as if she were some sort of loyal puppy that their Grandad once asked her to marry him? He brought it up casually at dinner one night, saying that it would make travel and family visits easier. She was flustered. The first thing she could think of to say was that she'd lose her dead husband's railroad pension. Tom shrugged and

smiled. He never mentioned it again.

How can they ever know that her marriage was her bleak old age? It was an arrangement urged on her by her mother when Ellen turned thirty with a harsh, humorless man who left her alone for weeks at a time and stopped sharing her bed when she failed to produce children. These last years with Tom were the beginning of youth and hope for her. She knows she's always been a plain woman--perhaps even ugly--and she has no talents. But he made her feel treasured.

Tears are blinding her now and she lifts her glasses to wipe them away, aware as she does so that Joan is standing up. Joan turns to face the others in the chapel.

"This concludes our memorial service. Again, thanks to all of you for coming. We'll be at Dad's apartment if any of you would like to stop by."

There is a shuffling and murmuring in the back of the chapel. Recorded organ music swells from behind the altar. The grandchildren begin talking out loud. Bending to pick up her purse, Joan asks, "Ready, Ellen?" as the funeral director glides over to assist them. Ellen feels disoriented and rushed. Something has been forgotten. They left something out. She has not yet been comforted.

Everyone seems to be talking too loudly, laughing too much. Lyle mixes drinks in the kitchen of Tom's apartment with a group of men standing around him. Ellen sits in a chair near the dining alcove.

As people mill around the room, occasionally one stops to take her hand and murmur something about how lucky Tom was to have her. Someone puts a cup of tea and some cookies on a small table beside her.

There is a lull in the him of conversation and Ellen hears Joan's daughters behind her talking across the dining table.

"Why don't you just take the dining room set, Adrienne? I have other stuff here that Grandad promised me."

"What about Carla and the cousins?"

"All of them had to fly in. They don't want to ship furniture. Besides, Carla and Anna are splitting Gram's silver--sixteen place settings of Grande Baroque. They're hardly getting a raw deal. The guys just want golf clubs and little junk."

"I don't know. We need a table but I don't know if this Victorian or whatever it is will fit in with our other stuff."

"Why don't we just get a U-Haul tomorrow, load everything up and drive home with Mom. Then she can take what she wants and..."

A burst of male laughter from the kitchen covers the rest of the conversation. A large woman who has just come in pats Ellen's arm then rushes across the room and envelops Joan in a tearful hug. Gladys Simpson. She was Tom's bridge partner and had been a great friend of his wife's.

Ellen knows what "other stuff" Beth is talking about. Several years ago, when Tom still lived in the big house, Beth came to stay for the weekend. She slept in the mahogany four-poster that night and was talking about it when they picked Ellen up to go to breakfast.

Beth told how she liked to play on it when she was little. "Grammy Sarah" would get out her jewel box and let Beth hang necklaces on each of the posts, then Beth would put on Sarah's Chinese silk bathrobe and try on a necklace at a time, pretending she was a princess being offered gifts.

Beth and Tom talked about the bed and Sarah for a long time, until Tom noticed Ellen's uncomfortable silence halfway through breakfast and changed the subject. But as they left the restaurant, Tom put his arm around Beth and said, "You know your Grammy always had a soft spot for you, Bethie. I think she'd like you to have that bed. If you can wait twenty years or so, I'll will you the whole bedroom set." Beth laughed and hugged him, saying she'd love to have it but that she doubted he'd ever die. Nobody had mentioned it since.

Ellen starts as someone touches her arm. Beth is bending over her, holding her teacup.

"Can I get you some hot tea, Ellen? This is cold."

"Yes, I guess...thank you, dear," Ellen falters. "That would be nice."

She considers escaping into the bathroom when Beth goes into the kitchen, but the girl is back too soon. Beth sets down the cup and leans over Ellen, resting one arm on the high back of the chair. She smells of lilacs.

"Ellen, I know this isn't the best time to talk about things like this, but we have to be out of here the day after tomorrow, so we're going to have to load up all of Grandad's stuff tomorrow. I was wondering if there's anything in particular you'd like to have.

Also, we thought we'd bring a truck over to your place tomorrow afternoon some time to get Gram's bed. Would two or three o'clock be okay?"

Ellen can't think what to say. She should have expected this--in the back of her mind she had expected it--but she realizes now that she still isn't prepared.

"Beth..." her voice is shaky. She clears her throat and tries again. "Beth, I wonder if you would want to wait until summer to come and get it..." She rushes on as Beth straightens, open-mouthed with amazement. "Oh it's yours and I know your Grandad left it to you, but I just can't seem to part with it right now. I don't have another bed for that room yet and my sister is coming to stay one of these days, and I just think it might be better if you took it in the summer when it's not so bad taking things down stairs and all..."

She looks away, trying to collect her thoughts, willing herself to stop babbling. She once heard herself described as a "silly woman" by Gladys Simpson who sits across the room now talking earnestly to Carla on the couch. Tom was hosting his bridge club when he was still in the big house, and she came in the back door to hear Gladys' voice booming from the living room. "Honestly, Tom," she said, "I really don't know what you see in that silly woman. She won't--or maybe can't--learn to play bridge and she manages to go on and on about the most trivial things when you talk to her..." Ellen couldn't hear Tom's low retort that cut Gladys off, but she felt the anger in it.

She looks back at the girl standing beside her. "You'll get the bed, Beth, but please, not right now. I wish I could explain to you..."

Beth interrupts, her lips trembling. "That was my Grandma's bed, Ellen. You were there when Grandad gave it to me. I don't know how you can have the gall to..."

Joan is standing at the other side of the chair. Her voice grates in Ellen's ears. "Bethie, it's not your Grammy or your Grandad--it's a goddamn bed. If she wants the bed, give it to her."

Beth stands, teary-eyed, looking from one woman to the other, then whirls around and rushes across the living room, threading her way through the crowd of people holding drinks. She disappears out the front door. Joan watches her go, pats Ellen's shoulder absently, then sighs and walks toward the bedroom.

Ellen's back and hands ache. She is very tired. From her chair she can see the closed bathroom door in the hall by the bedroom. When it is vacant, she'll go get some aspirin. Anna, the pregnant one, is across the room talking on the telephone, a finger in her ear to muffle the din in the room. She puts a hand over the receiver and calls to Carla.

"Mother, Nicole has an ear infection. Scott says her fever is a hundred and three. I think I should fly back tonight."

Her mother nods and cups her hands around her mouth. "Call the airport and see when they can get you out. It's still snowing--there might be delays. We'll take you when you want to go."

The bathroom door opens and a grandson steps out. Ellen rises stiffly and makes her way across the room. As she passes the bedroom door, she glances in. Joan is sitting in a circle of light in the overstuffed reading chair. Tom's blue cardigan is around her shoulders

and a photo album rests in her lap. She lifts her head as Ellen walks by. Her cheeks glisten with tears.

Ellen stops, her hand on the doorjamb, wanting to say something comforting to Joan. But the words won't come. There doesn't seem to be anything she can say. Joan notices her and looks back down at the book in her lap, flipping pages rapidly.

Carla is standing in the hallway when Ellen comes out of the bathroom. "We're leaving now to take Anna to the airport," she says. "Would you like us to take you home on the way?"

Ellen thanks her and goes to find her things. It's still snowing as they leave the building, large soft flakes in the grey twilight that cling to Ellen's glasses and the sleeves of her black wool coat. Anna takes her arm and guides her to the street. Carla says she's exhausted but she drives her dad's old car. Lyle is too drunk.

It's cold in her apartment. Ellen turns up the thermostat, then takes an afghan off the couch and wraps it around her shoulders. She wanders into the guest room and eases herself stiffly onto the mahogany bed. She puts one hand up and touches the smooth, cool wood of the headboard. With the other, she holds the afghan to her chest. The steam radiator stops clicking and it is very quiet in the room. She pulls the afghan tighter and feels, beneath her hand, the beating of her heart.

\* \* \*



## INVERSIONS

Clare jerked the rope to help the plastic sled over a hump of frozen slush in the middle of the street and saw at once that she had pulled too hard. The sled cleared the hump and skidded sideways, tipping two-year-old Erin and three sacks of groceries into the rut on the other side. Clare lunged for Erin and caught the shoulder of the child's coat before her head could thump down on the icy street.

"Whoops," she said, smiling into the startled face that scanned her own for clues as to how to react. "Mom's a bad sled dog."

Erin's chin stopped trembling, but she didn't smile. She still gripped the plastic handles of the sled, and Clare straightened both child and sled in the rut, then began gathering oranges that had rolled out of one of the sacks. A dark sedan turned the corner at the far end of the block and started toward them.

"Mommy, a car!" Erin was on the edge of tears again.

"It's okay, he sees us," Clare said, but she jumped up and flapped her arms at the car until it slid to a stop before she lifted the last sack into the sled. She didn't open the egg carton to look. If they were broken, they were broken.

She eased the sled over to the side of the street, then turned and grinned apologetically at the driver of the waiting car, waving

him on elaborately, like a flagger on a construction site. The driver, an elderly man in earmuffs, didn't acknowledge her at all. He continued to frown and stare straight ahead as he started back down the street. The car swayed and fishtailed as the tires caught in some frozen ruts at the end of the next block.

"Well, excuse me!" Clare muttered. She watched the car until it turned another corner and disappeared, then she looked around trying to decide where to walk. It hadn't snowed in weeks. The temperature had hovered around freezing the whole time, melting what snow was there during the afternoons, hardening it during the cold nights until it became as mottled and pitted as old stone. Back streets like this one were sanded at the intersections but not plowed, and the slush had calcified into gray humps between furrows cut by tire tracks. Today it was colder, and the jagged bumps in the street remained rigid. The sidewalks that had been shoveled after the last snow were bare so she couldn't pull the sled there. Those that weren't clear were sheets of ice. Clare decided that her best bet was the edge of the street. At least the sand-dappled snow was level there, if not soft.

She walked slowly to the end of the block, then turned to watch the sled as she edged it around the corner. Erin still clutched the handles and her mouth was pulled into a worried little knot. She looked pale inside her red hood and had been complaining of earaches again. It was a mistake to bring her out on a day like this.

Missoula was in the middle of another inversion. The way Clare understood it, cold stale air somehow got trapped in the valley--held

down by warmer, cleaner air above. Now pollution hung visible in the atmosphere, obscuring the surrounding mountains, hazing over the sun that undoubtedly shone brightly just a few hundred feet above. The smog stung Clare's eyes and smelled of auto exhaust, wood smoke and dust from the sanded streets--mostly smoke in this neighborhood.

She stopped to straighten one of the sacks that had begun to tip again. She wiped Erin's nose with a shredded kleenex she found in the pocket of her parka.

"A few more blocks, Babe," she said, patting her daughter's cheek. "Are you cold?"

Erin shook her head. She wasn't talking today.

Clare straightened and pulled on her mitten. Her stomach churned again with that vague, undirected anger she'd felt all week. It was probably this weather as much as anything. It angered her to be living in the heart of the Rockies and worrying about things like particulate levels and her daughter's breathing capacity. She couldn't help imagining bits of soot and sand burrowing like termites into Erin's new pink lungs.

Everyone she met seemed affected by it--depressed, out of sorts, snappish. Everyone but her husband Will, that is. As Clare thought of Will, her stomach knotted again. It was his fault that she struggled home with this sled. Thanks to him, their only car sat in Ron's Auto Body until a new front fender and radiator could be ordered.

"Good thing you weren't hurt," she said when he came home and told her about hitting ice at a stop sign on the way back from the

university and sliding into another car that, luckily, was moving slowly. But even as she said it, she was sure he had been driving too fast. And as the days went by and life became more and more difficult without the car, Clare grew sullen and accusatory, while Will just seemed to get more cheerful.

This morning, he whistled as he stuffed graded midterms into a backpack then went to the porch for his felt-lined boots.

"You know," he said as he sat down to put the boots on, "I'm really beginning to like this walk to work. It clears my head. I should try to do it all the time. It can't be much more than a mile each way."

"I need groceries, Will," she said. He didn't miss the tone of her voice and looked up quickly, dark eyebrows raised. He was still smiling, but guardedly.

"Ask one of your friends. Jan or Elizabeth would give you a ride."

"I've asked each of them twice in the last two weeks. They're busy. I can't keep asking them to run me around town."

Will shrugged and began lacing his boot again. "Take the bus. It's such a sleazy day, they probably have cut rates."

"I'd have to ride all the way downtown, change buses, then come back a different way just to get to Albertson's."

Will sighed and sat back in the chair, his arms folded. The smile was determined now.

"Besides," she added. "I need too much stuff to haul it all

on the bus, especially with Erin along."

Clare wasn't sure what she wanted from Will. Maybe just for him to stop smiling.

"Look," he said. "Why don't you give me a list of the bare essentials and I'll stop at Grizzly Grocery on my way home."

"No, that's okay. I need everything. I'll walk." Clare was suddenly all activity. She pulled on her coat and found Erin's snow suit. "Come on, Erin," she called into the living room where Erin sat watching Sesame Street. "We're going to the store."

"How'll you get all the food back?" Will asked.

"We'll take the sled." She stuffed one of Erin's legs into the red snowsuit. It seemed important to go right away.

"There's not all that much snow," Will said on his way out the door.

He'd been right about that. The main route to the store had been plowed and the street and sidewalks were bare. Clare had to carry the sled most of the way, and Erin too since she began to whine after the second block. Clare decided to take the back streets home, through a neighborhood she didn't know well.

Now, as she rounded another corner, she saw a woman ahead on the sidewalk pulling a two-wheeled wire cart that held a sack of groceries. Clare had noticed her leaving the Albertson's parking lot but lost sight of her when the sled tipped in the street. She wore a man's black quilted jacket--the kind that made Clare think of ranchers east of the mountains--and a gauzy turquoise scarf that partially covered

white hair. Her boots looked like men's boots too, black buckle-up overshoes that nearly touched the hem of her brown skirt and jingled softly as she shuffled along the sidewalk.

As Clare drew parallel to the woman, she glanced at her sideways and was surprised to see that she was much older than her straight back and square shoulders had suggested. She appeared to be eighty, at least. Her sagging cheeks and jutting chin were heavily creased and her wrinkled lips were pressed together in a line as tight as a zipper. She started slightly when she caught sight of Clare and turned to look at Erin in the sled.

Clare wanted to say something to her, something commiserative about the smog and snow, but before she could speak the woman slipped on the icy incline of a driveway and fell. She went down heavily, uttering a soft cry as she hit the ground and her groceries scattered beside her. She lay still until Clare stood over her.

"My God!" Clare said. "Are you all right?"

The woman struggled to a sitting position and adjusted the scarf on her head. "Yes, I think so," she said.

"Are you sure? Hips and back okay?"

The woman nodded but her mouth trembled. Clare thought, horrified, that the woman was going to cry.

"Here, let me help you up," Clare said. She got behind the woman and tried to raise her by lifting under her arms, but the woman was surprisingly heavy and Clare, though tall, was too thin to lift her.

"Wait, no, that's not the way," she said. "What am I doing?"

let's do it this way," She hurried around in front of the woman and grasped her hand and elbow. She was smiling forcedly, being overly bright, the way she was with Erin when fending off tears. The woman pushed herself up with her other hand and Clare lifted her to her feet then helped her straighten the jacket that had twisted around her hips.

"It's hell to get old." The woman tried to smile as she said it, making a joke, but her mouth continued to shake and the smile became a sort of grimace revealing long, yellowed teeth.

Erin, still in the sled, began to whimper.

"It's okay, Baby," Clare called to her. She turned to the woman. "Wait here a moment," she said. She pulled the sled up the driveway and down the sidewalk several yards, then went back to the woman who stooped over her sack. Clare helped her put in the last of the groceries--powdered milk, a loaf of white bread.

"How far do you have to go?" she asked.

"I'm almost home," the woman said. "That's my house."

She pointed to a small green house. The walk to its porch began just beyond the spot on the sidewalk where Clare had parked Erin.

"I can make it now," she said. "Thank you."

"Let me help you with the groceries," Clare said. The woman allowed Clare to pull the cart the short distance to the house.

"What's your name?" Clare asked as they approached the door. Clare couldn't hear what she said--something like Ippy. "Pardon Me?" Clare said.

"Impi," the woman said. "Impi Nelson."

Clare scanned her face quickly, searching amid the wrinkles for the impish child that must have prompted somebody to call her that. Or maybe it was one of those gaudy turn-of-the-century names, short for Imperial or something.

"It's Scandinavian," Impi said. "My parents were immigrants." Clare could see that now. The large frame and high coloring, the white hair that was once white-blonde. Impi fumbled in her pocket for a key and reached for the handle of the grocery cart. "Thank you again," she said.

"Impi," Clare said, "is there anybody around here who can get groceries for you? Relatives or neighbors? These icy sidewalks can be murder."

"I don't really know anybody here." Impi was standing very straight now and her mouth was drawn again into that thin, tight line. "We were farmers in eastern Montana," she added in response to Clare's puzzled look. "We sold out and came here a couple years ago, just before my husband died."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Could I get groceries for you?" Clare caught Impi's glance at the sled and added, "When I have a car, I mean."

"I'm a country girl, you know." Impi said. "The walk does me good--if I watch where I'm going."

"Well, I'll stop by now and then. You're sure there's not a neighbor who can help?"

Impi turned away from Clare and put her key in the lock. "The child..." she began.



"There's a child who can?" Clare said quickly.

"No, your child," Impi said. "She's crying."

Clare had to carry Erin the length of the block until she stopped sobbing and consented to sit in the sled again. Clare found a lollipop from the bank in her parka pocket while looking for a kleenex. She unwrapped it and stuck it in Erin's mouth. It might soothe her throat if she were getting sick.

Clare seemed to be watching Erin for symptoms constantly lately and thinking about illness in general--and accidents--even death. She had caught herself wondering as she watched that old woman take off her gloves if the spots on her hands were melanoma.

It was probably the book that was doing it. She'd entered a Publisher's Sweepstakes for five million dollars and you had to check on the envelope if you were or were not going to buy the Complete Family Medical Guide. Even though the brochure said you were eligible for the sweepstakes if you checked "no," Clare was sure the "no" envelopes were thrown in the trash as soon as they got there. So she checked "yes." Her plan was to keep the book for the ten-day trial period then send it back saying she found it unsatisfactory, and her "yes" envelope would stand a chance.

But she began to read it the day it came. She let the trial period elapse and read it all, everything from skin disorders all the way through to death and the drug index. She'd never realized before what a terribly fallible instrument the human body is. Every little lump or ache could signal the start of disaster.

And then there had been that strange girl at the party they'd

gone to Saturday night. It was an odd party that reminded Clare of the smoky gatherings she had drifted through as an undergraduate in the early 70's. She knew some of the people, including the host who taught in the history department with Will. But most of them were strangers to her, graduate students in philosophy and environmental studies who wore flannel shirts and anachronistic ponytails. They talked quietly and seriously in little clusters around the dimly-lit room.

Will smoked a joint for the first time in years. After that he leaned against the wall, glassy-eyed and grinning, nodding to everything said by two older colleagues who stood beside him. Clare sat at one end of the couch nursing a beer and wishing they hadn't ridden with the Taylors so she and Will could leave--at least she could. The Taylors had joined another conversation in the kitchen.

A thin, dark-haired girl in a flowered skirt and Sorel boots came out of the kitchen and wandered over to the couch where she sat down without looking at Clare. She had a glass in her hand half full of what looked like apple juice--or possibly straight whisky. She shook the glass and stared into the swirling liquid as if she saw pictures there. When she spoke, Clare glanced around quickly, unsure she was being addressed since the girl still gazed at her drink.

"January is the dead month," the girl said.

"That's for sure," Clare replied, laughing shortly and taking a sip of her beer. The girl looked at her then--dark eyes and a sharp, thin nose in a pale face. She was very young.

"It's true," she said. "The earth is dead and it pulls the rest

of us toward death. More people die in January than in any other month. Not just old people and suicides either. Unexplained deaths. Perfectly healthy babies." She waited. When Clare said nothing, the girl took a gulp of her drink and winced. Whisky then, Clare thought.

"I'm doing my thesis on death," the girl said. "The research just blows your mind."

Ah philosophy! Clare thought, trying not to smile.

She wondered now what that woman, that Impi, would think of a smooth-faced girl expounding on the earth's pull. She had probably sat at a few deathbeds in her long life--her husband's surely, maybe children too. And now she woke every day to the very real possibility that it would be her last. Was she terrified? Or had the thought of death become domesticated, like a house cat that keeps you company at a cool distance, silent and waiting?

Clare tried to tell Will about Impi after dinner that night. He was studying a forest service map that he'd spread on the table to look for new ski trails.

"I think we should try renting skis for Erin next time we go," he said. "When she gets tired, I can just put her on my back for a while."

"I met this woman today, Will," Clare said. "Helped her home, in fact." Will looked up at her, waiting. She described Impi's fall and her old, lined face--the narrow dimensions of her lonely life and even her hands with the dark spots between thick veins.

"Well?" she said to Will when she finished. He was studying the map again.

"Well what?" Will said. He glanced at her with that amused look he usually reserved for Erin.

"Well, don't you think that's sad?" Clare said.

Will looked back down at the map and traced a thin vein of road with his finger. He spoke slowly. "I think...you've finally found her."

"Found her? I don't even know this woman, Will."

"What do they call that in literature? Objective correlative? Yeah. You've found your objective correlative. The actual, physical, living embodiment of your own depression. You know, you've been cheerful as hell lately. A real party to live with."

"Oh good Christ!" Clare turned and strode into their bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She sat on the edge of the bed and began unlacing her shoes. How stupid to tell smiling Will about anything that had to do with feelings. He'd have to make a joke of it--or some smart-ass observation.

"Clare," Will said. He stood in the doorway holding a sack of chocolate chips she'd bought at the store. He wasn't smiling. "Did I ever tell you about my grandma? She lived with us the last couple years she was alive. My dad's mom." He paused to open the bag with his teeth. "She thought my mother was trying to poison her. She paid us kids to sneak out to the store and buy her canned sardines. She figured Mom would have a hard time doctoring those. The last few months she just lay there and peed in her bed. Poor old Mom--the poisoner--got to change her five times a day."

He shook a few chips out of the bag and leaned against the door

jamb, chewing thoughtfully. "Sounds to me like this old gal you met has it pretty good. She has her house. She can walk. She must have more of a mind than old granny did. There's probably even some old coot who takes her dancing."

"She said she doesn't know anybody here," Clare said. She still looked at her shoes. Will sat on the edge of the bed beside her, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip.

"You want to be sad," he said, "I can think of depressing things--real biggies. You got your quadraplegics." He popped a chip into his mouth. "You got your starving Africans." Another chip. "Oh, your kids with cancer, your droolers in the state hospital..."

"Oh, stop!" Clare said.

Erin ran into the room shouting, "Daddy! I looking for you." She saw the chocolate chip bag and made a lunge for it.

Will held it away from her, shook out a few chips and put them in her mouth. "Then there are all the children of the world who haven't once eaten chocolate chips," he said. He nudged Clare in the ribs. "Or me. You could feel sorry for me."

Clare snatched the bag away from him and twisted the top closed. "Those are for cookies, damn it," she said. "What about you, poor William?"

"Here I am, dying to go skiing, and the body shop won't fix the car so I can drive up in the mountains." He was grinning again.

Clare didn't try to talk to Will about Impi after that, but she thought of her at odd moments during the next several days. As she baked cookies or made salads, she thought of the few cans of soup and

beans in the bottom of Impi's grocery sack. As she read to Erin, it occurred to her that Impi must go for days without using her voice. She told herself that Impi's awful loneliness should be a lesson, should make her grateful for her own family. But for some reason, she just became more irritable. Erin had lost interest in all her toys and had taken to emptying the cupboards for amusement. Every time Clare walked into the kitchen she tripped over something or Erin would be sitting on the floor banging pot lids together and yelling at the top of her voice. The car was finally fixed but Will did other things that bothered her--left his clothes and books around the house, talked too much about his students or what he'd read.

At the end of the week, Clare stopped by Impi's house on her way to the store. It took several rings before Impi came to the door. When she did, she only opened it part way. What Clare could see of the room behind her was just as she had imagined it--dim lighting, a nubby purple sofa and small television in one corner, threadbare green carpeting. No, she didn't need any groceries; she'd just been to the store. Without her coat, Impi was thinner than Clare had thought. Although it was just after noon, there was no smell of cooking in the stale air that drifted out the door. It occurred to Clare as she walked away that Impi might be starving to death--out of pride, maybe, or poverty or grief. She'd heard of such things happening.

She waited several days then went back again. She'd read in the paper about a program called "Meals on Wheels" that delivered food from one of the hospitals to shut-ins. She wasn't sure Impi qualified because she had no obvious handicap, but Clare could see if she were

interested. There was no answer when she rang the doorbell. She waited and rang again three more times. She told herself Impi might be at Albertson's but she couldn't stop a rising panic as she imagined the old woman lying on the bathroom floor with a broken hip, or wrapped in a blanket on her bed, weak with hunger.

Clare was turning to step off the porch--wondering if she should call the police--when she caught sight of a movement in the Venetian blinds that covered the front window, just a little click as two blinds that had been held open snapped together. Automatically, she started back toward the door to ring the bell, then stopped and blushed furiously as she realized what that click meant. Impi had been standing at the window the whole time, waiting for Clare to go away.

Clare tried to forget about her after that. She caught a flu that hung on for two weeks and Will did the grocery shopping then.

He asked Clare once what had happened to her "sad old lady" and she blushed again remembering the snap of the blinds, as sharp as a slap on the cheek. She told Will she thought Impi was getting along okay. Will had taken to skiing by himself on the weekends when Clare was sick and he continued to do so after she got over the flu. Sometimes he took Erin or went with friends, but more often he disappeared for long hours alone.

It snowed again in February and remained cold and snowy well into March. Then, one morning the eaves started dripping and a warm wind, so unusual for Missoula that rarely had wind of any kind, began to blow. Clare was struck by the balminess of it as she stepped out the back door to go to the store. As she and Erin slogged through the

rapidly melting snow to the garage, she thought of Impi again. This slush, after such a heavy snow last week, would make it impossible to pull that wire cart.

As Clare backed the car out, she thought she really should stop by Impi's. She'd been reading in her medical book about senile dementia. The book said it could make people belligerent or paranoid--like Will's grandma. It was possible that Impi suffered from it. Clare just had to be brisk and professional, like a nurse. She couldn't take anything personally.

As she turned onto Impi's block, she caught sight of the old woman on the porch of the green house sweeping off slush with a broom. Only then did Clare definitely decide to stop. She pulled over to the curb and took Erin out of her car seat, steeling herself for rejection. She didn't look Impi in the eye until she was quite close to her. When she did, she was taken aback by the canniness in the old woman's expression, a shrewd amusement that made Clare think, just for a moment, that Impi somehow knew all that Clare had been thinking--about senility, starvation--everything.

"Well, hello there," Impi said. She stopped her sweeping to lean on the broom. She wore a red, bulky sweater and her head was bare. "Don't you just love this weather? It reminds me of March on the farm. Boy did the wind blow there."

Clare smiled politely. "I was just driving by and thought I'd see if you needed anything at the store. This slush will make it hard to pull your cart."

"Oh, that's okay," Impi said. "If I need anything I'll just put



my big boots on and carry the groceries."

"Well, okay," Clare said. "Just thought I'd check." She turned to go, still embarrassed.

Impi put a hand on Clare's arm. Clare glanced down at it briefly, at the brown spots and knotted veins, then up at the pale blue eyes that smiled into her own.

"Thank you," Impi said. "I'm really all right, but thank you just the same. Look." She waved her hand at something behind Clare.

Clare turned and looked, but wasn't sure where Impi pointed--at Mt. Sentinel that gleamed wetly above them--or at the little puffs of clouds that scudded rapidly across a bright sky--or maybe at Erin, stamping up and down the sidewalk through the slush, her cheeks flushed with the effort.

"Look dear," Impi said again. "It's almost spring."

\* \* \*

## BRANDING

The day before the branding, Diana locked me in the tack room again.

She'd done it once already an hour after I arrived for my three-day visit. While my dad was still there talking to Florence and Jack, she took me first to the bathroom and pointed to Jack's razor strop hanging dark and gleaming like a flattened bull snake on its nail by the sink.

"You act up one bit," she hissed in my ear, "and Uncle Jack will turn you over and whip your butt with that thing. That fast." I looked at her, tried to laugh. "That fast," she repeated, taking the end of one of her long brown braids and whapping it twice on the palm of her chubby, dirt-creased hand.

Then, after my dad had unloaded my horse from the trailer and I watched the boiling dust of his departing pickup, too stunned even to wave, Diana said she'd show me the barn.

That first time, as soon as she jumped out of the tack room and shot home the two-by-four bolt that locked it from the outside, I began to howl. The tears that had been waiting since my dad left in the truck came so quickly that I couldn't even hear what she chanted at me through the cracks in the weathered door--some na-na-nuh-na-na thing like "Patty is a baby," or "Patty is a fraidy."

The tack room wasn't a particularly scary place. The cracks in the door let in long dust-speckled bars of light and the woolen blankets, matted with sorrel hair and resting upside-down on the saddles, held the comforting odor of horse. I'd been locked in smaller, darker places before by my brothers--lots of times. Mostly I cried because I was seven and had never been away from home for longer than two days, and then only to stay with my Grandma who gave me Tootsie Rolls and let me sleep in her bed. Now I was stuck for three days on this river-bottom ranch with two adults who were supposedly my godparents but were closer to strangers. And this girl who was "just my age" and was going to show me "such a good time" was mean as a snake.

I didn't stop howling; in fact, I huddled on the floor and purposely increased the volume until Diana got tired of it and opened the door before Jack could hear us and come running with the strop, which had been my hope. She came in and stood over me with her hands on her hips, tapping at my shin with the toe of her boot until I stopped crying and looked up at her. "Come on," she said. "I'll show you the loft."

The next day, she locked me in again. Her uncle Jack had picketed our Welch ponies in the yard between the house and the barn and we sat on their bare backs braiding their manes as they grazed beneath the cottonwoods. Diana finished her braiding and turned around backwards on her horse, resting her cheek on the fat, spotted rump.

"Go get a curry comb," she said. "We can do their tails."

I slid off my horse and stepped over the rope that tethered his right foreleg to a tree. It didn't occur to me to say no. I was

digging through the pile of halters and brushes on a shelf in the back of the tack room when the door slammed and I heard Diana's triumphant whoop.

This time I didn't cry. I'd made it through one night and had only one more to go before I would see my parents at the branding. Besides, I didn't want to give Diana that satisfaction again. I shoved a yellow metal rope can over to the door where I could sit on it and look out through one of the cracks.

The tack room was the front part of a long tin-roofed shed attached to the side of the barn. The door, like the big sliding barn door beside it, faced the house so I was able to watch Diana walk away. She didn't stay to taunt me this time. Instead, she scurried back to the trees in her funny toed-out, stiff-legged walk--braids swinging, chunky little legs moving like scissors. When she reached the tree where her horse was picketed, she sat down, cross-legged, facing me. Her horse shuffled over and stuck his nose in her lap, but she shoved him away. He was blocking her view of the barn. She wasn't very far away and I could clearly see her little raisin eyes watching the door--her sly, waiting smile.

I didn't make a sound, didn't move. Neither did she, except to occasionally bat at the flies that hovered around the horse beside her. I got bored with watching her and looked around the tack room instead, after closing my eyes for a moment so I could see.

The walls were dusty and draped with hackamores and bridles. One bridle had black leather straps and round silver ornaments at each of the joints and a thick curved bit with a hard metal triangle at

its center. I opened my mouth wide trying to imagine that bit pressing down on my tongue, pulling at the corners of my lips. We kids had made bridles for each other out of binder twine and that's where they hurt--right at the corners.

I studied the toes of my boots that curled up like sultan's slippers. Diana's didn't do that. My mother said that mine did because my foot was so narrow. I didn't fill up my jeans the way Diana did either. They hung on my skinny legs, pooched out at the knees.

Wrapping my arms around those knees, I rested my head on my thighs. It was mid-afternoon of what Florence had rightly predicted at breakfast to be the first really hot day of the summer. It was getting stuffy in the tack room.

I closed my eyes for a few minutes but opened them again and looked out the crack in the door when I heard Florence's voice. She was carrying a sawhorse to the cottonwood grove to set up a table for the branding dinner. She had stopped by Diana's tree, the sawhorse held against her wide hip.

"Where's Patty?" she asked.

Diana didn't say anything. She just looked at the barn. She appeared to be calmly waiting for me to shout, to get her in trouble. But that seemed to me too easy a solution to what had now become a standoff. I held my breath wanting to hear what she would say.

"Well?" Florence said, shifting the sawhorse to the other hip.

"She's in the barn," Diana said. She wrapped the end of her braid around a finger, not looking at Florence. "She's playing with the kittens in the loft." She said the last part loudly, looking

right at me as if she could see my eye at the narrow crack.

"Oh," Florence said. "I thought you two were going riding."

"We are," Diana said. "As soon as Patty gets done playing with the kittens."

Florence carried the sawhorse to a clearing at the center of the grove and set it down then started back toward the house. Again, I thought of shouting but was too stubborn to do it. I wanted Diana to let me out herself. And first I wanted her to think that maybe I had fainted or died. I wanted to see remorse and even fear in those hard, dark eyes.

So I kept my silence and watched Florence's retreating back. Diana's mother was Florence's sister, and it was clear that Diana had inherited her build and her walk from that side of the family. Florence was short and wide and moved with that same quick toed-out stride. I never thought of her as fat, though her large breasts strained the fabric of the sleeveless cotton blouses she wore in the summer and her bare upper arms were like freckled slabs of meat. There was a solidity about her, a quick energy that seemed to demand that exact mass of flesh to sustain it. The energy carried into her smile--centered in a moon-shaped face framed by dark, pin-curved hair--and into her laugh, rich and fruity, which I remember best booming from the kitchen late at night as I lay sleepless beside Diana in her twin bed, while Florence and Jack huddled at the table over coffee and a cribbage board.

When Florence left, Diana stuck her legs out in front of her

and leaned back against the tree. She appeared comfortable, happy even. It looked like it might be quite a while before regret or fear for my life would strike her. I crossed my arms on my knees and rested my head on them. Then I did go to sleep.

I'd been sleeping with my shoulder against the door, and when Jack opened it, I nearly fell out at his feet. I caught myself by grabbing at the rim of the rope can, then sat there staring stupidly at him.

Jack's big red horse stood behind him looking worn out, its head hanging down, eyes droopy. Jack held the bridle reins in one hand and with the other took the cigarette out of his mouth so he could talk to me with the side that moved. He'd been in an accident of some kind that had left a long scar on his cheek and one side of his mouth dead. It was strange to watch him talk--still stranger when he smiled. He always brought the moveable side way up and winked the eye that met it as if to compensate for the corner of his mouth that didn't operate. He scared me a little, though, in spite of Diana's threats, he had been nothing but kind.

"Hi there, Missy," he said. "This your snoozin' spot?"

I didn't say anything, just sat there blinking and trying to wake up. Jack took a drag on his cigarette and kept looking at me, bushy eyebrows raised, as if he were listening to a joke. The horse began to rub his head against the sleeve of Jack's work shirt. I don't ever remember seeing the skin of Jack's arms. He swathed his small wiry frame in faded denim, even on the hottest days, and always wore a misshapen felt hat. That day, beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

I realized that he was probably waiting to get something out of the tack room, so I stood up, embarrassed, and shoved the rope can out of the way. I stepped aside and, as casually as I could, looked past him to Diana's tree. He noticed and turned to look too. She was nowhere in sight.

"Miss Diana lock you in there?" he asked.

I hesitated and looked away. He still wore that amused, waiting expression and I imagined it, in an instant, turning to devilish wrath and saw his arm upraised, wielding that snake of a strop. Then I looked straight at him, hoping that my face was as blank and secretive as Diana could make hers.

"It's a game," I said.

The next day, my dad came early with two of his horses in the trailer. I had envisioned his return as a rescue, but when he actually arrived I felt a strange disappointment knowing my life was about to return to normal.

Dad saddled one of the horses and left the other in the barn. He always brought two horses to brandings, rising at dawn to go to our rented pasture at the edge of town and catch them. And when he unloaded them he always mumbled something like "maybe your mama will want to ride." Of course, she never did. She would spend the day with the other women who laughed and smoked in Florence's steamy kitchen or hauled bowls of salad from the house to the table in the grove,



my brother Matt and the other toddlers trailing at their heels. My parents had been married eleven years then and I didn't think she had ever happily ridden a horse. Only Florence would do both: She'd be at the kitchen counter one moment gulping coffee and slicing a ham or turkey, out in the corral the next, vaccinating or castrating-- and all the time, wherever she was, laughing and talking non-stop.

Diana and I helped Dad and Jack gather the cows and calves from the pasture by the river and force them into one of the corrals where the cows milled around, nudging their calves and each other, bellowing and rolling their eyes. Then the men built a fire to heat the irons and began separating the cattle by reading their brands. A few of them belonged to neighbors. Diana and I climbed to the top rail of the pole fence in front of the house where we could sit and watch the people arrive.

My mother drove up in our station wagon around noon with Pete and Andy, my twin nine-year-old brothers--still in the Little League caps and shirts they'd worn to a morning game--my five-year-old sister Bridgit, and baby Matt. She parked the car in the pasture beside the others then stepped out looking cool and colorful in an embroidered blouse and bright blue skirt she'd bought in Mexico. She had her art bag over her shoulder, full of sketch pads and charcoal pencils, that she always brought to gatherings like this. Later she'd sit under a tree and smile dreamily as her pencil raced over paper.

I waited, my heart pounding, for her to run over and wrap me in a perfumed hug and tell me she missed me. But she just waved gaily and touched her fingers to her red lips, blowing me a kiss, then

opened the doors for the other kids and ducked back into the car to take Matt out of his carseat.

"My mother might come today," Diana said. "Maybe my sisters too." I looked at her, surprised. I had only seen her mother once and the memory was a fuzzy one of a shadowy, dumpy woman surrounded by babies. She lived in Great Falls. Diana's parents had split up for a while when she was a baby and her sister Susan was about to be born. Jack and Florence took Diana for a few months. Her stay stretched into the entire summer the next year. For the past ~~two~~ years she had lived at the ranch full time. Myron Kennedy, Diana's father, would come back to Great Falls for a few months at a time then disappear again. The babies kept coming. All this I had gathered from the edges of conversations between my mother and Florence.

"She might," Diana repeated. "My dad too. He called Uncle Jack last week." She glared at me when she said this.

"Oh," was all I could think of to say. Then my mother was there, pulling me off the fence. I wrapped my legs around her waist and buried my face in her soft neck while she spoke pleasantly to Diana. I walked with my mother into the house holding one of Matt's hands while she held the other.

When I came out, Diana and Bridgit were at the branding corral hanging on the fence. Dad had put the twins to work wrestling calves as soon as they arrived. Andy sat on the neck of a white-faced baby bull and Pete held the rear. The calf lay on its side bawling and rolling its eyes beneath Andy's knee. Every now and then it tried to

kick the back legs that Pete held spread, his sneakered foot wedged against the thigh of the calf's lower leg. He pulled with all his strength on the upper leg.

Jack chose an iron from among the five or six that rested in the fire, tapped the ashes off, and trotted quickly over to the calf with the iron held out before him in gloved hands, the tip of it glowing red. He braced his foot on the calf's ribs and planted the iron on its hip where it hissed softly as the hair began to burn. When the heat reached the flesh, the calf bawled loudly and kicked its hind legs again. Pete puffed his cheeks out and closed his eyes, turning his face away from the smoke.

"Hang on to this one, son," Jack said to Pete. "We ain't done with it yet."

"Yeah, hang on Petey," we chorused from the fence.

Andy smiled shyly up at Diana. Pete glared at all of us as he momentarily lost his grip and the calf kicked him in the stomach. A man I didn't know stapled a yellow tag to the calf's ear. Another stuck a needle in its flank. Florence squatted beside Pete holding a knife.

"Hold on now Peter," she said, smiling. "He won't like this a bit."

Pete and Andy wrinkled their noses and looked at each other. Florence probed carefully around the small furry balls between the calf's legs then made several deft cuts as the calf bleated and struggled feebly. She tossed what she had cut out into a pan by the fence. We had seen this before but felt it needed some sort of comment.

"Eeeew," we said, looking at each other. Then we burst into nervous fits of laughter. "Eew," we said again when Florence picked up a can beside her and squirted thick, purple medicine into the wound she had created. Then she stepped back.

"Okay, kids. Let him up."

The twins let go and sat back as the calf struggled to its feet then stood still, dazed. The purple medicine began to drip down its hind legs. Florence pointed its head toward the end of the corral where the rest of the calves crowded against the fence and their mothers bellered at them from the next pen.

"Go tell mama all about it," she said, giving him a shove.

While they were working on that calf, Dad had been easing his mare through the bunched herd swinging his rope. As soon as Florence let the first calf up, he was dragging another by the heels across the corral. The twins pounced on it before the rope could go slack and the calf had a chance to get up. They switched positions each time.

We watched them brand several more. Then the breeze shifted, sending acrid smoke from burning hair directly into our faces.

"Peeew," Diana said. "Peeew," Bridgit and I echoed, giggling. We scooted down the fence away from the smoke, our arms still draped over the top rail.

Diana leaned over and whispered something to Bridgit who stood between us. Bridgit glanced doubtfully at me, then whispered something back. Before I could say anything, they had both jumped off the fence and were running, hand in hand, toward the barn. I stayed on the

fence, immobile with outrage, until Bridgit glanced back at me, smiling triumphantly. I could move then. Jumping down, I tore after them, furious. I caught them at the end of the corral. Caught Bridgit, rather. Diana had left her behind and was already at the barn door.

I grabbed Bridgit by the two black pigtaails that stuck out above her ears and whirled her around, punching her hard in the stomach before she had even stopped moving. Her mouth contracted into a surprised little "oh" and her eyes filled with tears. I felt a momentary regret then. Bridgit and I hardly ever fought. We were allies and conspirators in an on-going struggle with the twins. And she was skinnier even than I, with big eyes and a five-year-old's funny, toothless smile. But then I heard Diana's laugh and looked over to see her standing in the barn door, mockery in her eyes. I was filled again with fury. I grabbed Bridgit by the shoulders and stuck a foot behind her ankle, shoving her roughly to the ground. She got up crying with slick, mustard-colored calf manure stuck to her sleeve and smeared on the leg of her jeans.

"I'm going to tell," she choked. She stumbled around the corner of the barn and headed toward the house, sobbing loudly.

"Go ahead," I shouted after her. "See if I care."

Diana walked over to me and linked her arm with mine. We went back to watch the branding again.

As soon as we had climbed the fence, Jack called to Diana.

"Miss Diana," he said. "This here's your heifer. You want to brand her?"

Diana scrambled over the fence and dropped into the corral.

Jack wrapped a rag around the handle of one of the irons so Diana could hold it, then placed his gloved hands over hers.

"Let me," she said. "I can do it alone."

"Okay," he said doubtfully, stepping back. "But don't smear it or it won't be worth a damn."

Diana carried the iron over to the calf and planted a foot on its stomach, aiming carefully at a spot on the calf's hip. When the hair began to hiss, she grinned first at Andy then at Pete who held the struggling heifer. She worked the iron around on the seared flesh, etching all the corners of the "M" that was part of Jack's brand, until Jack said that was enough and completed the brand with another iron. All that time, I kept glancing nervously back toward the house expecting my mother to round the corner of the barn with Bridgit. After a while, when they didn't come, I began to relax. Mom had probably been too distracted to listen to Bridgit's tattling, or didn't think the damage was serious enough to come all the way out and get me for it. Possibly Bridgit hadn't told. Or, more likely, I'd get it later.

Some teenagers from the next ranch took over the calf wrestling and the twins ran off to explore the barn. Diana and I followed them. She said she wanted to play with them, even if I didn't. We all poked around in the loft for a while, chasing the kittens, sliding on some broken bales of hay.

Diana found some binder twine and suggested that we play branding. Andy made the twine into a lasso and Diana found a stick to use for a branding iron. She insisted on being the calf first and said

Pete and Andy should be the wrestlers and I the brander. Andy looped the twine around her wrist and dragged her around in circles while Diana said "maaa, maaa" like a frightened calf. Then both twins tackled her and wrestled her to the floor where she fought and continued to "maaa, maaa" between fits of hysterical laughter. When she was still for a moment, I poked her hip lightly with the stick and the twins and I all said "sssss" as Diana continued to laugh.

The twins took their turns being the calf and we wrestled and poked and prodded at each other until all of us were red-faced and gasping. But when it was my turn to be branded, the game lost its appeal for me. The twins tackled me and shoved me down as they had countless times before. Andy knocked my head against the floor, bringing tears to my eyes, and Diana poked me too hard with the stick.

"Quit it! Quit it!" I shouted with such ferocity that they let me go and stood back. I got up and brushed myself off, blinking back tears.

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

"Wait," Diana said. "I want to be the calf one more time, then we will."

She began prancing around shouting "maaa, maaa" before I had a chance to answer. The twins chased her with the twine rope, then Pete dove for her legs and Andy grabbed her shoulders and they all fell in a heap.

This time Diana fought harder than before. She forgot to say "maaa, maaa," instead just gasped and laughed breathlessly as the twins grunted and struggled to hold her down. At one point, Pete was trying

to hold her legs and she kicked him, hard, on the chin with the heel of her boot. His face reddened and he let go of her legs and jumped on her chest, pinning her braids to the floor with his hands. He glared at her, teeth clenched. Diana gazed fully into his face, her dark eyes wide with laughter, lips parted in a delighted smile. When she reached up to grab Pete's wrists, trying to free her braids, Andy scrambled over and tickled her armpits, sending her into gales of laughter again. I dropped the branding stick and went over to look out the loft window, dimly realizing then that it was a game that had excluded me from the beginning. I was relieved to see Florence standing in the grove below, ringing the cowbell that called us all to dinner.

I thought it best to avoid my mother since I still didn't know if I was in trouble or not. So, I waited until she went into the house before going to the table to fill my paper plate. Diana and I found a spot in the side yard and sat under one of the cottonwoods to eat. Bridgit was wandering around carrying her plate, peering at strangers and biting her lip, until Diana called to her and she came over and sat beside me. The manure was still on her clothes, brown and flaky now, and her face was dirty and tear-streaked. I decided she hadn't told since Mom didn't fuss over her and clean her up. All Bridgit had put on her plate were three different kinds of jello with marshmallows on top so I gave her one of my chicken drumsticks. She flashed me her gappy grin then, and I relaxed.

Several late-comers drove up while we were eating. Each time she heard a car, Diana put her plate on the grass and ran to the corner



of the house to look at it. Each time, she walked back scowling.

After we took our plates to the garbage can by the table, Diana went over to Jack who sat on the back porch drinking a beer and listening to a big, florid, loud-talking man whose bib overalls stretched tightly over an immense stomach. Jack glanced at us and reached out an arm to encircle Diana, still looking at the man and lightly rubbing Diana's shoulder. Diana tapped Jack's chest with her index finger at intervals in the conversation until he turned to look at her. She put an arm around his neck and pulled his head toward her, cupping her other hand around his long-lobed ear. As Diana began to whisper, Jack half-smiled and squinched up his eye at Bridgit and me. But he stopped smiling as she continued and looked down at the ground.

"I don't know, honey," he said. "They musta got hung up somewhere."

He patted her back awkwardly then sat up straight, as if suddenly struck with a great idea.

"Say!" he said. "Why don't we saddle up that horse of yours and you can help Bill with the roping. Did you gals know that Diana is a first-class roper?" He grimaced and winked at Bridgit and me, talking too loudly.

"No," Diana said, pushing him away and stalking off toward the barn. Bridgit and I trotted after her. She stopped at the corral and leaned against the fence, staring moodily at the milling cattle on the other side. Bridgit edged up close to her and was just getting her arms crossed exactly like Diana's on the fence rail when Diana turned and shoved her viciously, knocking her down and growling, "Get

away from me you goddamn little shit."

Even I was shocked by that. We kids called each other brats and idiots, and even mouthed swear words and mumbled them to ourselves, but we'd never have dared to shout them at each other. I could see that Bridgit was getting ready to cry again, so I picked her up and steered her back toward the table, saying something about cake.

Diana caught up with us before we reached the people scattered in groups around the grove. She pushed her way between us and wrapped both arms around me, pinning my own arms to my sides, and looked up into my face with a strange expression in her eyes.

"You can stay tonight, Patty. Your dad has to come back for your horse tomorrow. He said so. He can get you too."

I hesitated and tried to pull away. I was ready to go home, to sleep in my own bed instead of lying awake at night squished up beside Diana who smacked her lips and flailed her arms in her sleep. And I was tired of being on my guard, wondering what she was going to do to me next.

"Stay with me Patty Patty Patty," she said, squeezing harder. The pleading voice and demanding--almost threatening--clinch seemed impossible to refuse. She cried at night too, little whimpers that came out of her sleep. I thought of those as I looked into her eyes.

"Sure," I said. "Sure. They'll let me."

My parents were pushovers. Diana spotted them sitting together on a bench by the back door and went over to stand in front of them. Bridgit and I trailed after her. In a sweet lisp I had never heard her use before she asked them if I could stay one more night, reminding

my dad about the horse. My mother seemed to sense my reluctance, even though I stood there nodding to everything Diana said.

"I don't know, Bill," she said, cupping my chin in her long, cool fingers and tilting my head up so I had to look into her eyes. "This one looks a little peaked to me." She raised her dark, shapely eyebrows. "Are you feeling okay?" she asked me.

I nodded, looking away.

"Are you peakedy pretty Patty?" My dad laughed at himself as he stumbled over the words. He'd had some beer.

"Nope," I said.

"I want to stay too," Bridgit said. Everyone ignored her.

"Okay," my dad said. "But be ready early. Your grandma has dinner plans for us tomorrow."

He drained his beer can and pulled on his leather gloves. Then he put his arm around my mother and kissed her loudly on the neck. She twisted away from him, laughing and shrugging helplessly at the three of us lined up staring at them.

"Get out of here," she said to him. "Go ride your horse and rope those doggies...or whatever."

He grinned and stood up, tapping each of us girls on the head as he walked away.

My mother began digging in her art bag and Diana leaned against her leg to look in it with her.

"What's in there?" she asked.

"Sketch pads and pencils," my mother said, smiling softly at

her and picking bits of hay from Diana's hair. "Shall I draw your picture?"

That night, after everyone had left and the last of the calves had been checked and turned out, Jack came clumping down the hall to Diana's room and stood in the doorway. It was the first time I'd even seen him after supper since I'd been there. Usually he did something out in the barn while Florence told us stories and tucked us in and made us say prayers aloud to her. I'd never done that before and I hated it. They couldn't be regular prayers either; I think I'd have mumbled a Hail Mary or Glory Be without embarrassment. But she wanted original ones.

Jack usually went straight to the kitchen when he came in. He never said goodnight or talked to us. He didn't talk to us much during the day either, or to anyone for that matter, except Florence and my dad. Florence talked for both of them in a crowd. My mother called Jack's silence his "natural Indian reticence," since he was part Blackfeet. Then my Dad would say "Yeah, well the rest is Irish so how do you explain that?" From my seven-year-old perspective it seemed perfectly simple. With that half-frozen mouth he looked funny when he talked and he probably knew it so he kept quiet as much as he could.

Florence had left us lying in bed with a picture book about rabbits, telling us we could look at it for ten minutes. Diana had been teasing me with the book, making me guess what was on the next page

before showing it to me. If I guessed wrong, she called me "stupid." If I refused to play any more, she called me "baby" and shoved me against the wall. When I got mad and shoved her back, she opened the book and showed me the picture. She'd been like that all evening: pushing me just to the point where I wanted to hurt her or tell on her, then backing off.

We stopped shoving at each other when we heard Jack coming and lay still looking at him when he stood in the doorway. I thought he had probably come to tell us to be quiet. We followed him with our eyes as he walked across the room and sat on the edge of our narrow bed. There was a streak of dirt on his cheek, parallel to the scar, and what looked like manure on his sleeve. His jeans had splotches of dried blood and purple medicine around the knees and he smelled like the medicine and tobacco. He sat there for a moment, then glanced at Diana.

"You done a good job branding that heifer today, honey."

Diana smiled faintly but didn't say anything. Jack was silent again. He clasped his hands loosely and stared across the room. I moved my leg to get comfortable and Diana kicked me sharply under the covers. Jack turned and looked at her.

"Listen, Diana," he said, his voice funny and tight. "If you want, we can call your folks tomorrow and fix up a time when you could go visit them. Auntie Flo and me can take you any day of the week."

Diana sat up then and put her arms around his neck. She didn't say anything for a while, then she turned her head and whispered into the good side of his face. I could just hear what she said.

"I like it here. I love you, Uncle Jack."

He spread his hands on her back. The were dirty and black grime rimmed all the fingernails. He closed his eyes.

The next morning Diana and I watched Florence get ready to go to Mass in Valier. She'd have taken us with her if my dad hadn't planned to come so early. She wanted Diana to go anyway, and almost insisted upon it until Diana talked her out of it by saying that the only polite thing to do was stay home and say goodbye to me.

Florence sat on the edge of her bed in a white slip and Diana and I squeezed together in a worn armchair facing her, fascinated by the way she eased her foot into the nylon stocking then slowly unrolled it up her leg, even more fascinated by the deep coulee that formed between her breasts as she bent. She hooked the stockings to her girdle, then grunted as she reached into the closet. She pushed her blood-spattered boots out of the way and brought out a pair of black high heels with round silver ornaments on the toes. She put the shoes on, then glanced at us and smiled.

"There's pancake batter in the bowl by the stove. Can you girls make some breakfast for everybody?"

We nodded. "I'm going to make eggs too," Diana said. "I like to make eggs."

"Me too," I said, although I'd never even been allowed near the stove at home.

Florence took a black and white knit dress out of the closet and pulled it over her head. She asked Diana to zip it up, then glanced at her watch and whispered "yikes" and began snatching pins out of her hair. She gave her hair a quick brushing and each of us a kiss. Then she was gone.

The four of us--Dad, Jack, Diana, and I--sat at the kitchen table trying to get down our burnt, rubbery pancakes when we heard a car drive up. Jack glanced at the clock, then at my dad.

"That Father Flynn gets faster every Sunday. Must be running out of things to say."

But it wasn't Florence returning from church. Whoever got out of the car walked to the door slowly, then knocked.

"Come in--it's open," Jack shouted. Dad got up and began scraping the awful pancakes from the plates as the visitor walked down the hall to the kitchen.

I had never seen the man who stood in the kitchen doorway, but I knew after a quick glance at Diana that it was her father, Myron Kennedy. Her eyes were wide and very dark and, as they met mine for a moment, there was an odd expression in them--something between excitement and fear.

For some reason, the first idea I had about Kennedy was that he was a race car driver, but I realized almost immediately that it was only that he reminded me of one I had seen on the cover of a magazine. He had the same baby-fat cheeks and loose, pouting mouth. The eyes were like the driver's too--blank and dark as stones. He was a big man--not fat, but he looked soft. There was a roll around

his waist under a knit golf shirt and soft pouches beneath his eyes. His blondish hair was parted on one side and slicked down.

Jack was the first one to speak. "Well, Myron," he said, rising from the table and crossing the kitchen, hand extended. "How the hell are you? It's been a long time."

They shook hands. The man nodded and said, "Jack."

"Come and sit down," Jack said, pulling out a chair. "We got coffee--or breakfast if you want it. You know Bill. This here's his daughter Patty. And Diana, of course."

Kennedy nodded at each of us then stood by the table staring at Diana.

"Hi, Daddy," she said, smiling slightly.

"Jesus!" Kennedy whistled. "Jesus! Kids grow." He glanced at Jack as if for confirmation of this fact, then looked back at Diana. "How are you, baby?"

"Fine," she said.

Kennedy ignored the chair Jack had pulled out for him and went around the table to Jack's place between Diana and me. He was still looking at her with a kind of awe. He sat down and kissed her awkwardly, upsetting her empty juice glass as he did so and righting it quickly.

"How are you, baby?" he repeated.

"Fine," she said again.

Jack handed Kennedy a cup of coffee. "You want breakfast, Myron?"

"No, thanks. I ate in Conrad on my way up here."

I slipped out of my chair when he turned again to look at Diana. I went to stand beside my dad at the counter.



"We was sort of expecting you folks yesterday," Jack said, sitting in the chair he'd pulled out.

"Yeah, well I got a job this week at the Chevy dealership and they always put the new guy on the lot Saturdays. Then Jean was going to come but one of the little kids got sick, so I thought I'd just come today." He'd been looking nervously around the room as he said this, but now he leaned forward and looked straight at Jack.

"I got this job, Jack, and I want to get the family together. We want Diana back with us in Great Falls."

Jack looked up from the cigarette paper spread in his hand. "You mean you want her to start school there in the fall?"

"I want to take her today. I'm gonna be real busy for a while and don't know when I can get back up here again." Kennedy stretched with exaggerated casualness and rested his large hand on Diana's shoulder. "Good thing pushing cars comes easy to me," he said to my dad. "They like to work a guy."

"Diana," Jack said. She had been staring at the table with that blank look in her eyes and continued to do so when he spoke. "Why don't you go get that picture of you on War Bonnet to show your dad? It's real nice."

Diana glanced at him then and slid out of her chair. I grasped my dad's hand and edged closer to him so he wouldn't try to send me out of the room too. I knew he wanted to when he looked down at me with the same pained, protective expression he'd worn the time he took me with him to the Shelby stockyards to sell a horse. I'd been the only child and the only female there, but none of the cowboys had

toned down their language or their stories because of me.

Jack continued to roll his cigarette as Diana walked out, but his hand shook enough to spill some of the tobacco off the paper. He licked the cigarette and lit it before looking at Kennedy again.

"Jesus, Myron. That kid's my top hand. I could use her this summer." He tried to make it a joke, squinting his eye and attempting a smile, but his voice tightened up on him and cracked.

Kennedy sighed and shook his head, making swirls with his finger in some spilled sugar on the plastic tablecloth.

"I've messed up my life pretty good, Jack. But I'm off the bottle now and I'd just like a chance to get to know my kids before they grow up." He glanced at Jack, then Dad, with sad eyes.

"Well, at least wait until Florence gets back from church," Jack said. "Maybe we can work something out."

"Yeah, sure," Kennedy said. "But I gotta get going pretty soon," he added. "I'm driving a demo from the dealership and they want it back on the lot later today."

Kennedy probably had a fairly good idea that Florence wouldn't take this lying down. I found myself listening for her car as the conversation switched to yesterday's branding and Diana stayed in her room much longer than it took to get a picture.

I was growing more and more horrified by the stiff courtesy of these two men as each tried to put his brand on Diana. I wanted Florence to rush in shouting and clutch Diana to her ample bosom, shooing Myron Kennedy away like she chased the bull out of her vegetable garden in the evenings. And I thought somebody should at least ask Diana where

she wanted to live.

In the end, Diana did make the decision. She came down the hall from her bedroom carrying a suitcase rather than a picture. She glanced around the kitchen without really looking at anyone, then turned and walked stiffly out the front door and got into Kennedy's demo car.

Kennedy said, "well." He clapped his hands together once and stood up. "Looks like the boss is ready to go." He placed a big hand on Jack's shoulder. "Say, Jack. I really appreciated everything. We'll see that she gets up here to visit."

Jack just sat there staring at the table. Even the dead side of his face was sort of crumpled and he didn't look at Kennedy or get up.

"Well," Kennedy said again. He shook my dad's hand, nodded and winked at me, and followed Diana out the door.

Jack continued to sit there after they drove away and while Dad and I put our dishes in the sink and went to the bedroom for my bag. When we came back to the kitchen, Dad squatted beside Jack's chair so he could look into his friend's downturned face. "You want us to wait for Flo with you?" he asked quietly.

Jack shook his head.

I was relieved when we left. I didn't want to look at Jack sitting there, at his broken face and the cigarette between his fingers that had smouldered down to a long gray snake of ash.

I saw Diana once more when I was thirteen. At least I think I saw her. I was in Great Falls with my family on our annual shopping-for-school-clothes expedition and all of them were mad at me. I had just pitched an unholy fit in Kinkle's because my parents insisted on buying me saddle shoes for school instead of the pointed-toe flats I'd been coveting all summer. I trailed behind the rest of them down the sidewalk feeling teary and misunderstood, as I had most of that year, when a young couple passed us walking the other way.

The boy was long-haired and looked about nineteen or twenty. The girl looked sixteen or seventeen, but mostly because her hair was teased into a honey-colored bubble around her head and her eyelashes were thick with mascara. Her body was that of a plump child. It was her walk rather than her face that made me think of Diana, and of Florence too.

I hadn't seen Diana since that day she left the ranch. We heard from Florence that Myron Kennedy had disappeared for good a year after he took Diana to Great Falls--"the terminal toot" Florence called it, trying to laugh, though she had little to laugh about at that time. Jack was in the first stages of a quick and fatal cancer, and she was exhausted from trying to run the ranch and care for him, too exhausted to ask for Diana back. He died the fall before a June flood swept down the Marias river, carrying off everything in its path, including most of the ranch buildings. Florence was in Cut Bank taking care of her aged father when I thought I saw Diana.

The girl looked sideways at me as we passed one another and the glance was familiar too--deadpan, a little sly. But she didn't say

anything, though I stared and turned to watch them go by. The boy's skinny arm was tight as a cinch around her waist, but they weren't strolling. They walked quickly and her turned-out feet, in black pointed-toe flats, were slightly ahead of his. She seemed to know where they were going.

\* \* \*

## WITH ALL THIS RAIN

When Flanagan, the border collie, pushed his long nose under her arm, Florence woke to see the window spattered with rain for the third day in a row. The Marias River had been high the day before; more of this could send it out of its banks. Still, she felt strangely grateful for the rustle of raindrops in the lilacs outside the screen and the gloom that filled the corners of her bedroom.

Jack had died in November, nearly seven months before. After the first week or so of raw pain following the funeral, Florence's feelings settled into a dull, numbed state that seemed to correspond with the weather. All winter, banks of clouds spilled over the western mountains then hovered above the ranch, sometimes spitting hard, dry snow, mostly just sitting there like a thick gray lid on the world. She couldn't remember a winter like it in this northern Montana country known for its quick blizzards and frigid days of sparkling clarity.

Florence had felt muffled. She moved through her winter chores as if drugged, feeding cattle and repairing equipment in mechanical slow-motion. She slept heavily and Jack only skirted the edges of vague, senseless dreams. She told herself she'd feel better in the spring when those clouds went away.

But when the chinook winds came in March and the spring run-off

began, her frozen pain seemed to thaw and swell with the river behind the house. On a particularly bright, mild day in April, Florence finished pulling a late calf from its mother's womb, then lay down in the greening grass of the cottonwood grove by the barn and cried longer and harder than she had on the day of her husband's death.

The renewed intensity of her feelings frightened her. She had never grieved like this before. Her father and sisters were still alive; her mother had died when Florence was too young to understand her loss. She had believed--hoped--that Jack's death was something she'd get over in measured stages, like the flu.

Instead, through the soft days of April and May and the busy work of calving and branding, she felt as newly raw and tender as the fresh brands looked on her fifty head of Hereford calves. These past few days of rain seemed to bring back some of the numbness of winter--to take off the edge.

Flanagan nudged her again and she threw back the covers and dressed quickly. Her boots, still caked with mud, were on the back porch, so she slid into a pair of moccasins and hurried to let the dog out before starting her coffee.

Flanagan was an outside dog--he'd never set foot in the house before this winter--so she believed him when he let her know he had to get out. Jack had loved his dogs and spent hours training them to work with stock, but he'd no sooner have let a dog in the house than he would his registered quarter horse. The three of them, two border collies and a blue heeler, slept in a tangled knot under the lilacs until Florence invited Flanagan into the porch in December when

he cut a foot on the ice. He gradually worked his way into the bedroom where his scratching and snuffling seemed to help her sleep.

She made coffee in the kitchen without turning on the bright overhead light. She'd given Nels, the hired man, a week off to visit his daughter when they finished branding Sunday, so she didn't bother with breakfast. She wasn't hungry.

When the coffee was ready, she filled her cup half full, then topped it up with canned milk. Morning was the time she missed having a milk cow. They'd had to let Sissy go dry when Jack was in the hospital. Nels continued to milk the first couple weeks; but he never drank any of it--said it clogged up an old man's liver--so it sat in the refrigerator and in cans on the porch and soured. When she came home from the hospital for clean clothes or a few days' rest, the smell of sour milk had filled the house. It became for her the smell of cancer, and of her own sick fear.

She had put her boots on and was halfway out the door when the telephone rang. She briefly considered not answering it--they'd assume she was outside and would call back. But on the fourth ring she changed her mind and went back, trailing dried mud across the kitchen floor.

"Hello, Flo? This is Bill."

She could picture Bill at the other end of the line in Shelby--that anxious, boyish lift of his eyebrows and eager forward stance, probably a finger in one ear since a couple of his kids were making an unholy racket in the background.



"Hi, Bill," she said. "What you got going there--a war?"

"Yeah, hand on a sec."

She should have known he'd be the one to call first to check on her in this rain. He'd been Jack's oldest and dearest friend. He called every few days now, sounding so hopeful she sometimes thought he expected a miracle--that someday Jack would be there to talk to him.

He'd covered the receiver but she still heard the squabbling and Bill's muffled shout.

"Hey, you kids! Can't you see I'm on the phone here?"

"Sorry," he said into the receiver.

"That's okay. It's your nickel."

"Say, Flo, there's been something on the radio about Swift Dam. They're afraid it might not hold if this rain keeps up. Anybody call you from up the line?"

"No, no..." She was trying to think. Swift Dam. That was way up there at the base of the mountains by Heart Butte. It dammed Birch Creek, which fed into the Two Medicine, then met Cut Bank Creek. They came together to form the Marias five miles upstream from the ranch, by Sullivan Bridge.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Well, it hasn't gone yet. But some guy in the sheriff's office thinks it's going to. If it does, there could be a whole hell of a lot of water down at your place today. I thought maybe I should come down and help you clear out. Just in case."

"What do you mean--clear out? You think water could get to the house?"

"There's a lake behind that dam, Flo, and the rivers are full already with all this rain. Seems to me water could get about anywhere. And if it does come, it's likely to come all at once."

Florence was silent, trying to take this in.

Finally Bill said, "Flo?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I guess I'll just listen to the radio and take the stock up on the ridge if worse comes to worse. I don't know what you could do. You'd get stuck up to your ears if you tried to drive in here today."

"I was thinking of flying."

"Flying? Jesus Christ, Bill. Did you look outside? You better just sit tight. If I get in a panic, I'll give you a call, okay?"

Bill didn't say anything.

"Okay?" she repeated. "I'll ride over to the Johnson's and call you from there--if it floods."

"Okay," Bill said slowly. "But you be sure to call now."

When she hung up the phone, Florence reached over and flipped on the radio on the counter. She tuned it to KSEN, the Shelby station. Music. Just music. Sipping her coffee, she listened through to the end of the whiny country song, then an advertisement for Anderson Implement. When another song began, she turned the radio off. Nothing disastrous had happened yet. Could be Bill heard it wrong. He hadn't sounded very sure. Still, it wouldn't hurt to saddle her horse and

gather the cows and calves.

The dogs jumped up when she opened the door, scattering a shower of raindrops from the leaves of their lilac bush nest. They followed her single-file to the barn, heads ducked down against the drizzle that became a downpour again before they got there.

Florence had never seen it so wet. The dirt in the corral, trampled to silt, had absorbed all the water it could, and what fell now formed connecting pools on the surface. Her boots were heavy with sticky mud when she reached the barn door.

She'd heard Piegan, Jack's sorrel stallion, snorting and thumping at the side of the barn from the time she left the house. When she slid open the door, he whinnied and kicked hard at the back of his stall.

"God almighty, horse!" she shouted. "You don't have to break the place to pieces."

She opened the stall to let Piegan stretch his legs in the corral while she did her other chores. She stood back as he rushed out and down the center of the barn and hit the slick mud of the corral at a full gallop. He slid, then regained his footing and trotted around the corral's perimeter, whinnying loudly.

Piegan's restlessness had always bothered her. One time, several years before, she and Jack were sitting on the grass by the barn puzzling over a tractor manual. Piegan ran back and forth in the corral behind them, stopping at the corners to whinny and snort, his head raised. Finally, Florence couldn't stand it any more. She jumped up.

"Shut up!" she screamed. "Just shut up and be happy!"

She looked at Jack then, amazed by her own fury and a little embarrassed. He looked back at her with his black eyes squinted in amusement, a cigarette hanging from one side of his crooked smile. When she sat down beside him, he said, "You know, Flo, it's the good Catholic girl in you old Piegan gets to. You get bothered by all that raw lust." He growled the last two words and reached over and touched her large breast like he'd chuck a baby under the chin.

Florence had laughed and slapped his hand away. "Maybe," she said, shaking her head as Piegan snorted again. "Maybe."

But there was something else to it. Piegan behaved that way when he was with the mares too--as if there were something just beyond the horizon that was everything he desired. Each of those whinnies seemed filled with insatiable longing.

Jack had called Florence that often during their eighteen years together--his good Catholic girl. He'd been a drinker and a hell-raiser before they met, with a reputation all up and down the Highline for wild foolishness. He seemed to like the idea that Florence brought some order to his life. He wasn't a stranger to religion; his family was as Catholic as hers. But until he met Florence, Jack seemed to be doing his best to break all the rules.

Florence had been a good Catholic girl. She went to Mass every Sunday, even when they were busy or the weather was bad. She accepted as God's will their failure to have children. She even accepted, as much as she could, the sad fact that the niece Diana they'd hoped to raise as their own had been taken back by her mixed-up parents. And she'd always believed, from the time she was very small, that the

mother she knew only from a wrinkled photograph was in heaven watching her girls with rapt attention. But after Jack's death, when she needed it most, her faith began to fail her--like the time she went to Billings to visit her favorite sister's family.

She went in February after her sister had written three letters urging her to come. The sisters fell easily into old patterns of conversation. Florence laughed and talked. She ate too much. At night, she stayed up late with her teenage nephews watching movies on television. On the fourth morning of her visit, she woke with the guilty realization that she hadn't really thought about Jack for two days. She lay in that strange bed listening to the morning traffic of Billings and tried to picture his face.

She saw it as if her mind's eye had fallen victim to glaucoma: the periphery was clear, but the center was gone. She could see the battered hat he always wore and his brown, square chin. She even saw the long, raised scar on his left cheek from the accident that had paralyzed that side of his face. But, try as she might, she couldn't conjure up his peculiar sideways smile. And his black, canny eyes were lost in a blur.

She lay there, her heart pounding, wondering if somehow, through inattention she'd killed his soul as dead as his body. It occurred to her then, with a kind of horror, that her idea of heaven may have been terribly naive. As she sprinkled the casket with holy water, Father Flynn said that Jack had been washed in the water of baptism, that he would live with God forever. And Jesus told the Samaritan

woman he could give her living water that would become a fountain springing up into everlasting life. But Jesus was a storyteller, a master of metaphor. Suppose his "everlasting life" and "kingdom of God" were simply metaphors for memory? And what if heaven, as a separate place where even the unmourned are loved, had been invented by people like herself--survivors grown weary of their grief who wanted off the hook?

All that day in Billings she caught glimpses of Jack. A man walking out of a bar had his stiff cowboy's gait; another, in the next car at an intersection, lit a cigarette in just Jack's way. As each of these strangers turned to meet her eager stare, she was freshly disappointed. And she still couldn't picture Jack's smile.

Against her sister's protests, Florence cut her visit short and went back to the ranch. She knew that dull cloud of pain would be waiting for her. But she also knew that there, amid Jack's animals and belongings, his face would come clear.

Florence watched Piegan complete another circle, then she climbed to the loft and pitched hay through square holes into the stalls--Piegan's and another where she'd been keeping two pairs of cows and calves. Both calves had scours and didn't seem to be getting better. Their eyes were dull, tails and back legs caked with manure. She'd tried medicine to stop the killing diarrhea; now all she could do was keep them quiet and dry.

She climbed down and filled the water buckets, then kicked straw into the stalls and spread it around with her foot. The cows backed away, snorting and nuzzling their sick babies, when she came too close. The stalls needed to be cleaned out, but they'd have to wait. She still had to take care of the chickens. And most of all she needed to look at the river and decide what to do if Bill was right about a flood. The rain had slowed to a drizzle again, but if that dam went anyway, she might have to move the stock.

On the way to the river, Florence realized she hadn't even thanked Bill for calling, or for helping her brand Sunday. She couldn't quite figure out why she resisted him so much when he seemed to need to help her. She hadn't told him about the branding. He'd called Nels to find out what day they'd picked, then just showed up with his twin boys. He was clearly hurting that day. Branding was something he and Jack had done together since they were teenagers and Florence knew it was hard for him to come. But she'd been distant with him. Friendly and joking, but distant. She stonewalled every attempt he made to talk about Jack. By the end of the day, all three of them--Nels and Bill and Florence--were working in silence.

The river had reached the very lip of the bank. Like an overfull cup of coffee, it looked as if all it would take was a few more drops to send it spilling over the rim. Downstream, where the bank wasn't so high, the water had already spread into the grass and washed around the trunks of birches. It was the color of lightened coffee too, an odd tan with sticks and leaves bobbing along its rushing, rain-dimpled surface.

The dogs stuck their noses into the water, then backed away as if something in it frightened them. A willow bough floated by, turning slow circles until one end caught on something under the water and the other rose into the air, spreading branches like splayed fingers. Something man-made and square went by--a box lid, maybe, or some kind of sign.

Florence shivered and wiped the rain out of her eyes. She turned and counted her paces back to the chicken coop, wishing she knew some mathematical formula for how long it would take so much rising water to go so many yards. In any case, if it rained more--or if the dam went out--it could reach the coop some time during the day. She'd just have to let the birds out and hope the hens had sense enough to keep their babies out of the water.

She chased the chickens out into the rain, but left the eggs on the nests. There were too many in the house already. The egg compartment in the refrigerator door was full. Cartons of eggs were stacked on the shelves. She'd forgotten to give them to Nels to take to his daughter. And he was no help. Last winter, some doctor in a bar in Valier told him eggs were bad for him. He hadn't eaten one since. Some of these hens would have to be butchered.

Florence went back to the barn and stopped at the tack room for Piegan's bridle and some oats. She looped the bridle over her shoulder and stood in the barn door shaking the oats in a pie pan. Piegan trotted around the corral once, pretending to ignore her. Then the dry hiss of the oats was too much for him. He stopped in front of



her and scooped up a mouthful with long, nervous lips. But when she reached for his neck, he jumped away.

"You old bastard," she whispered.

She turned and walked the length of the barn and into his stall, still shaking the pan, not letting herself look back even when she heard him following. She dumped the ~~oats~~ into the **wooden** feed box on the manger, then sidled out of the stall and stood against the back wall of the barn. He walked toward her warily until he reached the gate, then shied and rushed into the stall as if he'd tricked her. Florence closed the gate and leaned against it watching Piegan's red tail swish like a puppy's as he ate.

They'd been odd friends, Jack and Bill. For one thing, they looked so different--Bill with his tall, dark movie-star good looks--Jack small and wiry with high Indian cheekbones and a hawk beak of a nose. And Jack was so quiet except with people he knew well. Bill talked happily and easily to everybody, and every emotion he felt registered at once in his big eyes, pretty as a woman's.

Bill had been a pilot during the war and now he sprayed crops from a plane for a living. He'd been decorated in the Pacific for some feat of bravery, but none of it seemed to have toughened him, or turned him into one of those tight-lipped, tragic pilot heroes they showed in movies.

They'd married different kinds of women too. Florence had simply moved from her **father's** ranch to this one--Jack's grandfather's homestead. Bill's wife, Faye, grew up in Missoula. She and Bill met there

at college where Faye studied art. She still drew and painted-- pictures of her five children, landscapes of the eastern Montana prairies that she described as "starkly beautiful." Faye was fine-boned and lovely and she wore unusual clothes. Around her, Florence worried about funny things: that she might have manure on her pants--that her grammar might go bad.

There was some bond of history that connected Jack and Bill, something Florence couldn't quite understand that probably went back to the days before the war when they rodeoed together or went helling around in bars from Havre to Glacier Park. But even then, when they were drinking, they were different. Bill just got happier and more child-like when he drank; Jack always seemed to be fighting devils.

Bill was the only person Jack had asked to see in the hospital. Florence thought he might ask for their niece Diana near the end, especially since the hospital was in Great Falls where Diana lived at the time. But the only indication that he still hurt from losing that niece, that almost-daughter, was a slight tightening of his mouth when Jean, Florence's sister and Diana's mother, called Jack's room and Florence asked her about the child.

Bill had called the hospital often and even came to Great Falls several times, but Jack was sleeping or in intensive care and the nuns wouldn't let him in. After his second surgery, Jack started asking for Bill, so Florence sent for him.

She'd never forget the look on Bill's face when he came into the room. Maybe that's what she couldn't forgive him--his honesty,

his seeming inability to mask his feelings. It was a look of such horror and despair--everything Florence herself had felt throughout the ordeal, but thought she'd successfully hidden from Jack behind encouraging smiles and bright chatter.

The only times she allowed herself to cry were when she was home or sometimes late at night when Jack slept and she sat by his bed. They'd started giving him oxygen after the surgery because his remaining lung was weak, and she'd sit there and cry and listen to the hiss of his breathing, wondering how Jack had become that figure beside her with sunken cheeks and wispy hair.

Jack had turned forty the day before the last operation. She'd thought off and on that he might die young. He took foolish chances working on the ranch, and when he was drinking a lot he did crazy things, usually on that crazy horse Piegan. His paralyzed cheek came from a fall on a rock after a wild midnight ride across the prairie. She'd been so angry then. They'd been married only a month and she could hardly bring herself to talk to him or care for his injury. But during those black nights in the hospital, a quick, senseless accident seemed almost preferable to that terrible, passive wasting.

Jack's eyes had slid open just as Bill walked into the room, and he caught the look. Bill recovered quickly. He ducked his head and came up smiling grotesquely. But it was that first look that registered with Jack. He nodded slightly and closed his eyes. Later in the day he drifted into a coma. That seemed to have been all he was waiting for--the confirmation in the eyes of his most trusted friend that he was, in fact, dying.

Florence stepped into the stall with Piegan and put her hand on his neck. He turned his head quickly, dripping saliva and mashed oats on her sleeve. When he put his nose back in the feed box, she slipped the bridle over his head and worked the bit between his teeth as he chewed. She stood, leaning against him and lightly scratching the stubble of his roached mane, until he finished the last of the oats. Then she led him out and looped the reins over a corral pole by the tack room.

She decided to use Jack's high-pommeled roping saddle. Hers was still damp from the day before. When she lifted Jack's, her heart lurched as she saw the saddle had been resting on the one Jack made for Diana. She thought Nels had taken it to one of his grandchildren. It looked so small to her now. Like a toy. The stirrups were so short they stuck straight out to the sides. She noticed for the first time that the "Diana," tooled in fancy curling letters behind the seat, was slightly crooked.

Florence had never seen Jack so obsessed by a project. He tanned the cowhide himself with some foul, lye-smelling mixture that left the house reeking for days. He bought a heavy-duty sewing machine and leather tools. When it was finally finished, he told Florence he'd made the most expensive saddle in Montana--figuring in equipment, labor, mistakes, and also child care since three-year-old Diana had been right in the middle of it the whole time. The next winter he made Diana a pair of chaps. Bill's youngest was wearing those now.

That was another thing Bill and Jack had done together: let Diana's drunk of a father take her away for good while Florence was at church. She couldn't blame Jack--not for long anyway. He'd been so hurt by that loss, so defeated. She sometimes thought it was what really killed him, since that odd cough started only a month later. But Bill--she thought he'd have fought for their right to keep Diana, or stalled the father until Florence could fight. Bill--with all those children. Children that seemed to come as easily and naturally as rain.

A calf bawled and Florence remembered the cattle in the barn. Better let them out into the big pasture with the other cows and calves. Just in case. She looked to the west where the river curved out of sight between two bluffs. It was hard to believe that any water, even water from a broken dam could get to the barn. The rain had completely stopped now. If the story was false, she might not even have to worry about the chicken coop. But if it was true...She finished tightening the cinch, then left Piegan tied and trotted down to the big end stall in the barn. How long had she been out of the house? She should have listened to the radio a little longer, or called the sheriff or the Sullivans up by the bridge.

One of the calves was nursing when she got to the stall. A good sign. The other slept in the straw in a corner. Florence had to nudge him with her foot to wake him. He looked up at her with clouded eyes, then let his head flop down again. She put her hands around his middle and lifted him, then held him upright on wobbling legs until he got his balance.

"Poor sick kid," she murmured. "Poor little guy. Stand up there now like a big boy."

The cow that had been snorting since Florence first touched the calf, finally could stand it no longer. Bellowing, she butted at Florence who let go of the calf and stepped back to the wall. "Okay, okay, Mama. Take it easy," she said.

Florence crossed her arms and looked doubtfully at the calf as his mother nuzzled him, checking him over for damage. It might be possible to carry him up to the ridgetop if the water rose. Jack used to drape calves over his saddle. He'd had more control over Piegan than she did though.

But then the calf surprised her. Both cows seemed to see the open gate at the same time. They pushed out, bumping each other in their hurry. The healthier calf ran right behind them. The sick one stood for a moment, then jumped after the others. With the jump, a stream of liquid manure shot out behind and splattered his already dirty legs.

Florence chased the cattle out of the corral on horseback. The big pasture spread across the river bottom on both sides, but the water had been so high since the branding Sunday that the cattle had all stayed on the near side of the river. Red clusters of cows and calves dotted the pale green meadow. If the pasture flooded, she'd have to get the dogs--she'd last seen them sniffing around behind the barn--and push the cattle to the gate in the southwest corner. Beyond it, a draw angled up to the ridgetop where the bull and the rest of the horses were already. But first, she wanted to check out the radio

again--or call somebody about that dam.

As she turned Piegan toward the house, she could just hear the drone of a motor. At first she thought it was someone driving along the riverside road into the ranch. Then she saw the plane approaching from the southeast. It banked with the curve of the river and continued west, flying low. It was a small plane, like Bill's Piper Cub, only this one was red and she was almost sure his was blue and white. New, dark clouds were blowing in from the west and the wind had picked up. As the plane reached the spot between the bluffs, it wobbled and dipped, then climbed and steadied. Florence watched until it flew out of sight--a tight, sick knot growing in her stomach.

She tied Piegan to the picket fence by the back gate. As she crossed the yard, she thought she heard the phone ringing, but the house was silent when she walked in. Dark, too. The black clouds had followed her and rain began pelting the windows.

She flipped on the overhead light and went to the radio. At first she thought she'd tuned into a game of some kind. It was the same guy who did the basketball play-by-play and he spoke in that same frenzied, almost jubilant tone. There was a background roar too, like a crowd in a gym.

"...see some debris coming down now, but there's still no sign of a crest. The debris is mostly branches--huge branches and some trees that look like they were torn out by the force of the water. There's been no sign yet of that mobile home reportedly swept in upstream and...uh...excuse me..." The man spoke in muffled tones to

somebody. The background roar continued.

"Where are you?" Florence said aloud. "Where the hell are you?"

She turned up the volume as the man started speaking again.

"Several of the bystanders here said they did see some livestock in the debris passing under the bridge. They're not sure if they were cows or horses. The water is really high here, Jerry. They've road-blocked both sides of the bridge now. According to the sheriff's deputy we just spoke with, they don't expect it to withstand the crest if it does come. Right now, all we can do is wait."

The studio announcer's voice broke in, calm and so loud that Florence jumped.

"This is Jerry Black at your KSEN studio in Shelby, Montana. We've just heard from our reporters who are on location at the Sullivan Bridge on the Marias River. We'll get back to them shortly for more news on flood conditions. But first, this word."

Music began, and a high child's voice singing a jingle.

Sullivan Bridge. Jesus God. Florence stood in the center of the kitchen feeling heavy--immobile. She knew she should do something. But what? She picked up the telephone receiver, then put it back down. Who could she call that could help her now? And what could they do? She seemed to come unstuck then and began lifting things, moving around the kitchen in a frenzy. She picked up a rug and the kitchen chairs and put them on the table. She stooped down and turned off the gas valve behind the stove, though she wasn't sure why. There were some saddle bags on the porch and she ran to get them, stumbling in her mud-laden boots.



In the bedroom, she threw her wallet and a framed wedding photograph into one of the bags, then stopped, unable to think what else should go in. There wasn't room for dry clothes. She ran to the living room and took her Bible off the desk and tried to stuff it into a bag but it wouldn't fit. She opened the Bible and shook it until papers began fluttering to the floor--birth and wedding certificates, a copy of her will. She scooped these up and shoved them into the bag then stood, looking around. All those books--some had been here since Jack's grandfather's time. On the bottom shelf on the bookcase, she found their photo album. Halfheartedly, she tried jamming it sideways into the bag but knew beforehand that it wouldn't fit. She sat on the floor and began ripping out the black pages with their carefully pasted pictures--baby pictures of Diana...stiff, posed shots of Jack's parents...Jack on horses...Diana on horses...herself--round-faced and big-breasted--smiling, always smiling. When she had a pile at her side, she folded it and stuffed it into her bag.

Piegan whinnied from the yard and Florence jumped up. He'd broken reins before, tied up like that. She didn't want to go looking for another bridle. But when she passed through the kitchen, they were talking flood on the radio again and she stopped.

"We have a report now," the studio announcer said in his cool, deep voice, "from a Cut Bank pilot who flew over the Birch Creek Valley just moments after the dam burst."

Another voice came on, thin and distant and embedded in static.

"It was an unbelievable sight. The crest when the dam broke was at least twenty feet high and was spread out approximately two

hundred feet. We saw about fifteen horses in a herd stranded, walking around. The horses didn't know the water was coming. The water engulfed them. For a while their noses stuck out from the water, and then they were gone." The voice faded into the static then came clear again, describing a man in his pickup watching a ranch wash away and water "snapping telephone and power lines like matches."

Florence stood, open-mouthed, until she heard Piegan whinny again.

He was still tied to the fence. With shaking hands, she fastened the bags to the back of the saddle then called to the dogs who were under the bushes. She looked back at the cottonwood grove and saw chickens pecking at the feed she'd scattered and thought of the horses on the radio. Didn't even know the water was coming. Poor dumb animals.

When she got down to open the gate into the big pasture, Florence glanced back at the house. The windows were dark, even in the kitchen. She was sure she'd left the light on--almost sure. If she had, the flood crest was at the bridge now, since that's where the power lines crossed.

It didn't take long to gather the cattle into a bunch since they'd already started moving together, away from the storm. She didn't take time to count them or check the little pockets by the river where one or two could be hidden. She had sixty-three cows, fifty of them with calves this year. It looked close enough.

The dogs knew their business. They bunched the herd and moved them away from the river, taking little nips at the heels of stragglers. But Florence realized she'd trusted them too much when she saw Chub, the blue heeler, tearing around to the west end of the herd

to move them toward the barn. It was a logical move, but the wrong one. She stood in the stirrups and waved her arm. She shouted at Chub to stop but her yell blew back at her on the wind. Jack had had a piercing whistle that he swore was improved by the damage to his face. But she could only shout.

The cattle were trotting toward the barn now, away from the wind. She dug her heels into Piegan's sides until he was running beside the herd. Then he passed the lead cow, ~~th~~it stopped short before turning toward the south. Florence waved her arms and yelled at the cows that milled in confusion, until the dogs--who had the idea now--got behind them and pushed them into the storm.

It was slow going at first, but the dogs worried them and darted at heels until the cattle were lined out and moving toward the gate. Piegan had his ears back against the rain but he moved eagerly. He was a good cow pony. There was something in him that really loved the work. She'd once seen him bite the back of a cow that refused to cross the river. And Jack had trained him well. Once he knew what you wanted, you just had to hang on.

Florence had been watching the river since they started gathering the cows and she saw now that it had grown. It was out of its banks, spreading into the pasture, and large chunks of debris floated by. She rode ahead to open the gate, and when she climbed back on Piegan she heard it--a dull roar that grew louder as they pushed the cows through the gate. She'd been watching the bluffs, waiting for the crest, but still wasn't prepared for what she saw. A wall of water burst out of the canyon as if the dam were there--on the edge of her ranch--

instead of miles upstream. It poured out, brown and churning, and spread rapidly across the pasture. It was going to fill the bottom where the ranch buildings sat--maybe more.

Piegan jumped to the side and nearly unseated her. One of the cows had turned back. It faced the dogs and the horse--snorting and refusing to go through the gate. Flanagan ran at her, but the cow put her head down and butted him aside. Florence rode at the cow. She screeched and waved her hand, but the cow just snorted and stood her ground. Florence looked around. It had to be a calf. This looked like the cow with the scoury baby. They must have left it behind.

She spotted the calf just before the water got to him. He was halfway across the pasture, tottering along on spindly legs. He'd stopped to stretch out his neck and bleat, when the water swept up behind him and lifted him, turning him upside down so that four legs waved for a moment in the air before they disappeared.

The cow butted at the dogs again and bellered. Florence untied the coiled rope by her saddle horn and swung the knot of the lasso at the cow. The cow flinched when the knot hit her nose, but still didn't move.

"Go!" Florence screamed as she swung the knotted rope again, hitting the cow this time on the ear. "Forget that one, Mama. Save your own fat hide!"

The cow backed away until she was through the gate and Florence jumped down to close it so the cow couldn't sneak back. When she remounted Piegan, the water was swirling within yards of her. The other cows and calves had run up the draw, away from the roar of the water.

With the help of the dogs and her rope, Florence pushed the balky cow part way up the hill, then left her to beller at the churning flood. Florence followed the other cows up the draw. Just below the ridgetop, the draw opened up and Florence rode out to a point where she could look down at the house.

The flood had reached the buildings now. Water poured through the corral and into the barn. A quonset hut behind the barn lifted off its foundation and began to float. Her pickup that she'd parked by the house was moving too, tumbling like a crashing racecar with the force of the water. As she watched, the gas tank behind the house detached from the wall and floated down the slope to the chicken coop. When it hit, the coop burst into flames. Florence watched, amazed, as the roof of the coop burned amid swirling water, until more water washed over it and put the fire out.

Florence felt calm watching this, and curiously detached. It was like a film of a disaster--the spectacle was too much to feel anything right now but simple awe.

She thought she heard another plane over the river, but couldn't see it through the clouds and rain. Then she heard it again--behind her--coming in very low over the ridgetop. This one had to be Bill's, and it sounded as if it were landing. By the time she got to the top, it had taxied near the edge of the ridge. He must have seen the cattle coming up the draw and thought she'd be with them.

Bill climbed out of the plane, but didn't seem to see her as she rode up behind the last of the cows. He ran to the lip of the ridge and peered down into the valley, shaking his head and looking around

frantically. He glanced her way, then down into the draw. He leaned forward with his hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched, eyes wide. Jack and Bill had had a name for the way he looked--the "buckin' chute willies" they called it--a private and loving reference to their rodeo days--and an acknowledgement, so rare in these Montana men, of fear.

Florence wanted to go to Bill and put a hand on his cheek, or maybe put her arms around him to calm him and say it's okay--it will be okay.

The rain slanted into his face and he stood for a few moments, wiping his eyes.

"Bill," Florence called, but the wind whipped away her shout.

Bill turned and started back toward the plane. He hugged his arms, shivering. Florence told herself he was getting a coat. But she couldn't help feeling a jolt of panic, thinking he might be going away. She dug her heels into Piegan's sides and felt in her legs the ripple of his muscles as he bolted forward.

"Bill!" she screamed, waving her arm. "Bill! Bill! I'm here!"

\* \* \*