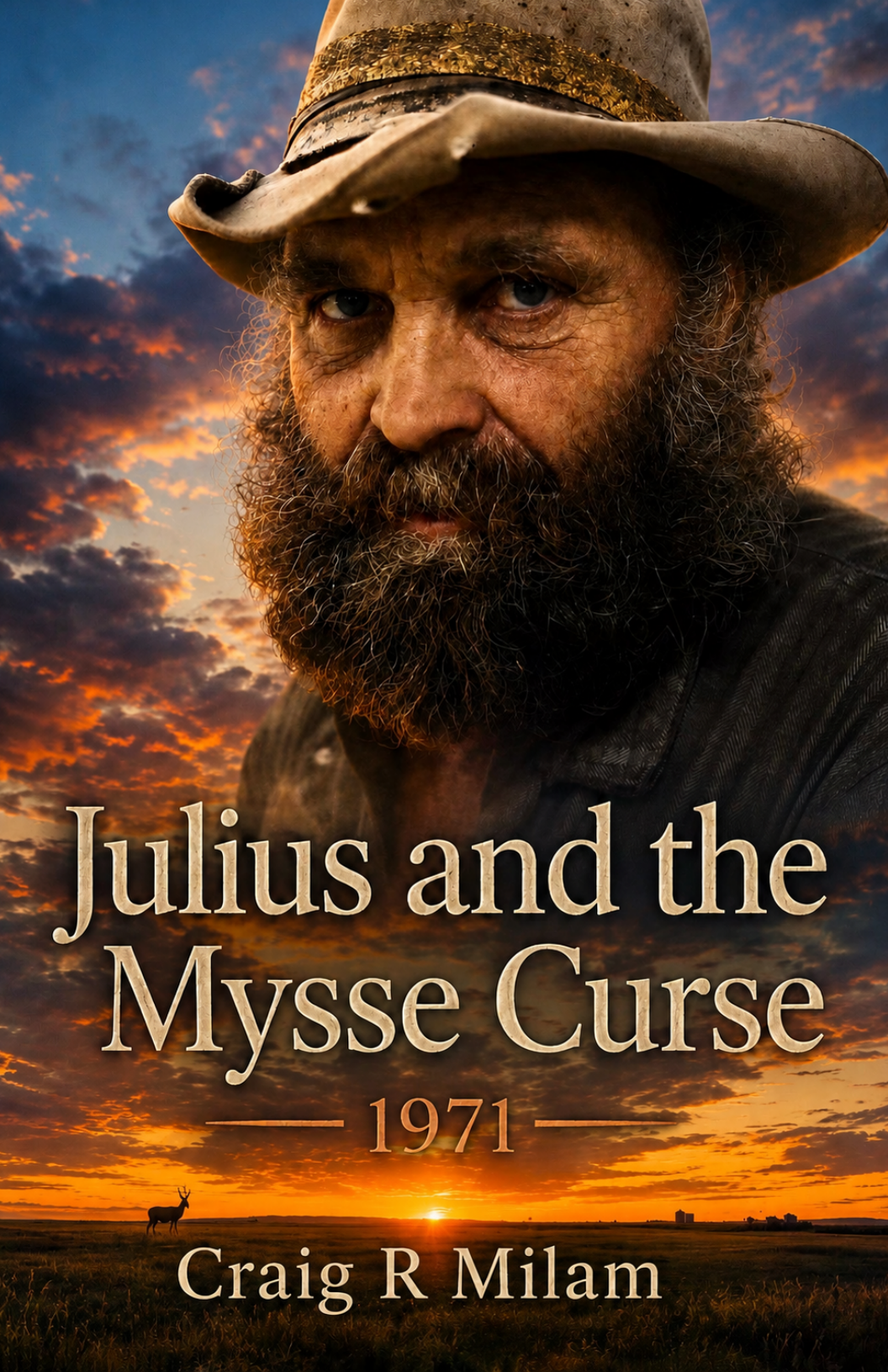

Julius and the Mysse Curse
1971
Craig R Milam

Julius and the Mysse Curse

A Memoir of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company



— 1971 —

Craig R. Milam

Before my seventy-fifth birthday, I began revisiting my two books to clarify Sivert and Janet's views of Cherry Creek, Merton's insight, Julius's role, and my own enduring connection to Granddad Mysse. As I reflected on how these experiences shaped my understanding of my family and my place within it, I felt compelled to preserve what I witnessed and carried with me—not someone else's version, but the memory, identity, and truth through which I have come to know who I am.

November 6th, 2026 Edition - Final is not yet completed.

Different Versions of the Same Story

One family's history is lived by many people.

Each experiences the same events, yet each remembers them differently and tells a different version of the past.

The only people who become angry when the truth is told are those who have something they wish to keep hidden.

I believe the histories of both the Mysse and Milam families are deeply troubling.

You may choose to look away from their reality, but you cannot erase the events that made those stories possible.

Had my father, my mother, and my brother chosen to tell the truth, I probably would never have written either Julius and the Mysse Curse: 1971 or The Final Payback—Erased and the Milam Curse.

Craig R. Milam
October 26, 2004

A Note on Names

Some of the names in this book may be unfamiliar to readers outside eastern Montana. To help, here is how the principal family names are pronounced:

Milam	—	My-Lamb
Bernice	—	Bur-niss
Sivert	—	See-vert
Mysse	—	My-See
Merton	—	Mer-ton
Wiefrich	—	Wee-frich

Granddad Mysse's Cherry Creek Sheep Company Brand



Cherry Creek Sheep Company Acreage 1971

- **22 1/2 Section - 14,400 acre Horse Pasture**
- **60 Section - 38,400 acre North Pasture**
- **90 Section - 57,600 acre Headquarter on Big Porcupine**
- **1 Section - 640 acre Ram Summer Pasture Ingomar**
- **1 Section - 640 acre Subulsky addition to Headquarter**

A Note About Editing and AI

These books were edited with the assistance of ChatGPT for grammar, clarity, and editorial review. The stories, memories, words, and photographs are my own, drawn from my life, journals, and recollections. For *Julius and the Mysse Curse*, ChatGPT also assisted in recovering and enhancing photographs from 1971 that were unusable in their original condition. The experiences and story I chose to tell remain those that I lived.

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Dedication

For Julius Sebulsky

Julius,

Thank you for believing in a twenty-one-year-old before he knew how to believe in himself.

You became my friend, my teacher, and in many ways, the father I never had.

You taught me to work hard, keep my word, think for myself, stand on my own, and find my way through a life I was not prepared to face.

You taught me lessons no classroom ever could.

I never told you how much you meant to me.

More than fifty years later, these pages are my way of finally saying:

Thank you, Julius.

I never forgot you.

Prologue

What Time Cannot Erase

Time takes more than we realize. People disappear from our lives. Promises go unfulfilled. Questions remain unanswered. Eventually, the people who might have explained what happened are gone, leaving us to make sense of the pieces they left behind.

For more than fifty years, I carried those pieces with me.

It began in June 1971. I was twenty years old, a college student planning to become a physician, when my family sent me to the Cherry Creek Sheep Company near Ingomar, Montana. I expected to spend a few weeks observing a construction project in eastern Montana. Instead, I entered a world of family conflict, competing interests, unspoken suspicions, and promises whose significance I would not fully understand for decades.

And I met Julius Sebulsky.

Julius was a retired railroad welder and sheepherder who never finished the eighth grade. He possessed, however, a practical wisdom that no classroom could teach. He became my mentor, my friend, and the father figure I had not known I needed. Through him, I began learning about work, loyalty, responsibility, and the importance of a man's word.

I also kept a journal.

I wasn't writing a book. I was a young man trying to understand the people around me and make sense of what I was witnessing. I recorded conversations, described events, and wrote down details without knowing how important they might become.

More than fifty years later, I returned to those pages.

What I found unsettled me. The young man who had written them had noticed things I had forgotten. He had recorded conversations whose meaning became clearer only with time. He had documented events before he understood their consequences.

Most unsettling of all, he had trusted people whose promises he would eventually question.

That young man was me.

My journals, photographs, and memories gave me something increasingly rare: a record of events as I experienced them, before the years had reshaped my understanding. They could not tell me what everyone else believed or intended. They could not answer every question. But they allowed me to return to the beginning and examine what I had seen, what I had heard, and what I had once believed.

This is the story that emerged.

It is a story about the Cherry Creek Sheep Company, the Mysse family, and the forces that can turn family relationships into struggles over money, ownership, and control. It is also a story about the cost of trusting promises and the damage that follows when trust disappears.

But at its heart, this is the story of Julius.

He taught me lessons that stayed with me throughout my life, even during the years I spent away from Montana in the harsh extremes of Saudi Arabia.

He showed me that education and wisdom are not the same, that a man's word should carry weight, and that sometimes the person who sees us most clearly is someone we never expected to meet.

I was twenty-one when I left Cherry Creek. I believed I was returning to the life I had planned. I did not understand that the

people I had met, the things I had witnessed, and the questions I carried would change and remain with me for the rest of my life.

I could not yet see where those questions would lead. I only knew what I had written down.

Now, the journal is open.

I have written this account from what I recorded, what I witnessed, what I remember, and what I came to understand. Others may remember some events differently. Some are no longer here to speak for themselves. I cannot claim to know every person's thoughts or motives, and I will not pretend otherwise.

I can only tell the story as honestly as I know how.

This is not the story I wish had happened. It is the story I lived.

It began with a family meeting in Granddad Mysse's old house in Ingomar, Montana, in June 1971. I had no idea that the months ahead would change how I understood family, loyalty, and the promises people make to one another.

I thought I was going to the Cherry Creek Sheep Company to observe a construction project.

I had no idea what I was about to learn about life.

This is the story of Julius Sebulsky.

This is the story of Cherry Creek.

This is the beginning of the Mysse Curse.

Craig Raymond Milam
October 26, 2026

Chapter 1

June 1971

The Meeting That Changed Everything

The old screen door slammed against the weathered back porch with a sharp crack that echoed through Granddad Mysse's abandoned house.

Every conversation stopped.

For nearly an hour and a half, the partners of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company had waited in growing frustration for Sivert Mysse to arrive. Cigarette smoke hung motionless beneath the stained lath-and-plaster ceiling, mixing with the smell of coffee, whiskey, and the damp, earthy odor drifting up from the gumbo basement. The June afternoon had become hot, stale, and increasingly tense long before Sivert finally stepped through the doorway.

I was twenty years old.

At the time, I believed I was simply attending another uncomfortable family business meeting because I happened to own five shares of Cherry Creek Sheep Company stock—shares my "Granddad," Sivert Mysse I, had given me when I was born.

I had no way of knowing that I was about to witness the first unmistakable signs of the destruction of my grandfather's life's work, the beginning of the collapse of a corporation that had supported generations of my family, and the unraveling of two families whose futures had become inseparably linked.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I recognize that June afternoon in Ingomar as the moment everything changed.

Only a few weeks earlier, I had made one of the most important decisions of my young life.

I transferred from Montana State University in Bozeman to the University of Montana in Missoula for the fall quarter of 1971. It would be my junior year. My goal had never wavered. I intended to become a physician and was fully committed to completing my pre-medical education.

Even so, I still believed my future somehow remained connected to the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

That belief had been planted long before I was old enough to question it.

Every summer my brother Gary and I worked on the ranch. We learned to repair fences, move sheep, stack hay, and do whatever work needed doing. We were repeatedly reminded that one day Cherry Creek would become part of our lives. As a young man, I accepted that future without hesitation. It never occurred to me that my parents' dreams for me might differ from my own.

Like most twenty-year-olds, I believed the adults around me understood the world better than I did.

I trusted them.

I also knew very little about the financial realities of operating a large eastern Montana ranch. My contribution had always been simple: work hard, do what I was asked, and keep my word. I assumed the people making the important decisions knew exactly what they were doing.

I could not have been more mistaken.

Years later I would come to understand that what eventually destroyed Cherry Creek was not drought, predators, harsh winters, or even declining wool prices.

It was people.

Pride.

Broken trust.

Promises made and forgotten.

Secrets carefully guarded.

Family members who believed they alone knew what was best for everyone else.

Eventually I would give those destructive patterns a name.

The Mysse Curse.

But on that June afternoon, I knew nothing about curses.

I believed I was attending an ordinary partnership meeting.

Before the day was over, I would begin to understand just how extraordinary—and how devastating—it would become.



Dividends

By the spring of 1971, I had no idea how dependent my parents had become on the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

My father, Paul, taught school in Bigfork. My mother, Bernice, was a homemaker. They lived modestly, but every year the dividend checks from Cherry Creek provided an important part of our family's income. Those distributions helped pay bills, covered unexpected expenses, and occasionally allowed purchases that otherwise would have remained beyond our family's reach.

Then, without warning, the checks stopped.

Not one dividend had been issued since early 1968.

At first, no one seemed overly concerned. Ranching had always been unpredictable. Wool prices fluctuated. Lamb markets rose and fell. A drought or a hard winter could wipe out an entire year's profit. Everyone assumed the interruption was temporary.

One missed year was understandable.

A second was not.

My mother repeatedly asked her brother, Sivert Mysse, when the distributions would resume.

His answers never changed.

"Soon."

"The market has been poor."

"Next year will be better."

“Just be patient.”

The reassurances continued.

The dividend checks did not.

As months became years, uncertainty slowly gave way to suspicion.

The strange part was that almost no one outside the daily operation of the ranch seemed to know exactly what was happening financially at Cherry Creek. Questions were answered politely but vaguely. Financial records remained out of sight. Important decisions appeared to be made by one man.

That man was Uncle Sivert Mysse II.

As president of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company, Sivert carried an enormous responsibility. He hired employees, managed the ranch, bought and sold livestock, negotiated loans, purchased equipment, and oversaw nearly every aspect of the operation. Granddad had entrusted him with that responsibility years earlier, believing no one understood the ranch better than his oldest son.

Whether that trust was still justified had become the question everyone wanted answered.

The annual partnership meeting offered the only opportunity for the shareholders to gather face-to-face and ask those questions.

That was why we had all driven to Ingomar during the first week of June.

The meeting would be held in Granddad’s abandoned house.

As a boy, I remembered that house filled with laughter, holiday meals, and family gatherings. Now the rooms felt strangely empty. Some furniture remained, but the warmth had disappeared. Dust had settled where conversation once lived, and the old house seemed to hold memories more comfortably than people.

The partners were Marie Mysse Straw, Bernice Mysse Milam, Sivert Mysse, and me.

Legally, I owned five shares of Cherry Creek stock—shares Granddad had given me when I was born.

Practically, I had no voice.

My mother made that perfectly clear before the meeting ever began.

I was there to listen.

Not to ask questions. Not to offer opinions.

Certainly not to challenge anyone.

At twenty years old, I accepted those instructions without protest. I knew very little about corporate finance or ranch management.

What I did know how to do was observe.

So I watched.

I watched expressions change whenever money entered the conversation.

I watched people carefully choose their words.

I noticed long pauses where answers should have been.

What struck me most was what no one discussed.

No one asked about the spring lamb crop.

No one asked about the condition of the range.

No one asked how the sheep herders had survived another eastern Montana winter.

Every conversation eventually returned to the same subject.

Dividends.

Looking back, I realize everyone sitting inside Granddad Mysse's old house believed they were protecting the future of Cherry Creek.

None of them realized the future they were trying to protect had already begun slipping away.

❖



Waiting for Sivert

Before the annual meeting, everyone gathered for lunch at the Jersey Lilly Bar and Café.

The meal itself was almost incidental.

Coffee cups were refilled without being emptied. Cigarette smoke drifted beneath the pressed-tin ceiling. Beer bottles and an occasional shot of whiskey appeared on the tables as conversations wandered from ranching and politics to the unusually dry spring. Every now and then someone glanced toward the old Regulator clock hanging across from Bill Seward's framed pro-boxing photograph.

No one needed to say why we were there.

Everyone had come to Ingomar for the same reason.

They wanted answers.

Shortly before one o'clock, we walked the two dusty blocks back to Granddad Mysse's abandoned house. The June sun had already baked the gumbo streets into a hard crust that crumbled beneath our boots. Heat shimmered above the empty road, and the still air carried the familiar smell of dust, sagebrush, and old cottonwoods.

Inside the house there was little relief.

The windows stood open, but not the slightest breeze stirred the curtains. Stale cigarette smoke hung beneath the stained lath-and-plaster ceiling. The smell seemed trapped there by decades of coffee, coal heat, laughter, arguments, and the conversations of family. Beneath it all lingered the damp, earthy smell rising from the basement.

Within minutes my eyes began to burn.

I had never tolerated cigarette smoke very well.

Everyone else seemed perfectly comfortable.

The meeting had been scheduled for one o'clock.

One o'clock came.

Then it passed.

Uncle Bill Straw leaned back in his chair, quietly checking his pocket watch every few minutes. After each glance, he spit tobacco juice into his spit cup. Every so often, a little brown tobacco juice would collect at the corner of his mouth. He would wipe it away with his sleeve, glance at his watch again, and continue waiting.

Aunt Marie sat silently, smoking one cigarette after another while staring out the front window.

My mother tried to keep small talk alive, but every conversation eventually died after only a sentence or two.

Paul couldn't sit still.

He paced from the living room into the dining room, paused at the bedroom window overlooking the road to the Jersey Lilly, then turned and retraced his steps.

Again.

And again.

Each circuit became quicker than the one before.

The silence grew heavier with every passing minute.

Finally Paul muttered, more to himself than to anyone else,

“Where in the hell is Sivert?”

No one answered.

At last my mother looked toward me.

“Craig, walk over to the Jersey Lilly and see if Bill Seward has seen your Uncle Sivert.”

I welcomed the assignment.

Stepping outside felt like escaping.

After breathing cigarette smoke for more than an hour, the warm prairie air felt wonderfully fresh.

I walked quickly toward the Jersey Lilly.

There were no cell phones in 1971.

If someone was running late, there were only a handful of ways to let people know.

Bill Seward looked up from behind the counter before I had a chance to speak.

“You’re looking for Sivert, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

Bill slowly shook his head.

“Haven’t seen him. He hasn’t stopped in and he hasn’t called.”

Not wanting to return immediately, I bought an ice-cold Pepsi and lingered for another minute, staring at the penny candy and candy bars Bill kept behind his large glass display case that was next to the pool table. I remember standing there, looking at the candy and simply passing the time before finally walking back toward Granddad's house.

Nothing had changed.

Paul was still pacing.

Bill and Marie had quietly begun discussing whether they should simply drive back to Forsyth.

My mother sat silently, a cigarette burning between her fingers. She had quit smoking years earlier. Seeing her smoking again unsettled me in a way I couldn't explain. I felt the stress building inside me, mixed with a growing sense of disbelief. I didn't know what was going to happen that afternoon, but I knew something was coming.

The house somehow felt even hotter than before.

It was well after two o'clock.

Then it happened.

The old screen door exploded against the back porch with a sharp crack.

The boot room door creaked open.

Every conversation stopped.

Every head turned.

Uncle Sivert Mysse had finally arrived.

He walked inside without the slightest sign of urgency, removed his straw cowboy hat, nodded politely around the room, and calmly explained that Janet had remained in Forsyth because of a family obligation involving her father.

No one seemed interested in the explanation.

Everyone wanted to know why the president of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company had kept the rest of the partners waiting for nearly an hour and a half.

Sivert crossed the room and lowered himself into Granddad's old royal-purple velvet chair—the chair Granddad had always occupied during family gatherings and partnership meetings.

Without a word, he placed a yellow legal pad across his lap, removed a pen from his shirt pocket, and glanced at his watch.

He wrote something neatly across the top of the page.

The room became perfectly still.

Without another word, Sivert prepared to begin the annual meeting of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.



The Meeting Begins

Sivert slowly surveyed the room after opening his yellow legal pad.

No one spoke.

Every eye remained fixed on him.

The only sounds were the steady ticking of Granddad's old wall clock, the occasional scrape of Paul's chair across the worn bird's-eye maple floor, and the faint crackle of cigarettes burning in ashtrays scattered around the table. Blue-gray smoke drifted lazily toward the ceiling as everyone waited.

Sivert cleared his throat.

"I'll call the annual meeting of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company to order."

He glanced once more at his watch.

"Two twenty-five."

Carefully, he wrote the time across the top of the page.

Without looking up, he asked quietly,

"Would anyone like me to read the minutes from the last shareholders' meeting?"

Silence.

Finally, Marie Straw leaned forward.

"We were all here, Sivert."

She paused only long enough to let the words settle.

“We don’t need the minutes.”

Her voice hardened.

“We want to know where our distributions are.”

Several heads nodded in agreement.

Sivert looked down at his legal pad as though he had not heard the question.

Instead of answering, he began reciting the corporation’s history.

“As everyone knows, Merton exchanged his interest in Cherry Creek for the Basin Creek horse pasture.”

No one interrupted.

“My father gave me one additional share of stock and appointed me president of the corporation. Since then, I have been responsible for the day-to-day operation of Cherry Creek.”

Again, no one spoke.

Everyone already knew the history.

History was not why anyone had driven to Ingomar.

Marie folded her arms.

Bernice quietly lit another cigarette.

Paul leaned back in his chair, staring across the table without taking his eyes off Sivert.

I watched each of them.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I realize every person in that room had arrived expecting something different.

Marie wanted accountability.

Bernice wanted dividend checks.

Paul wanted control.

Sivert wanted authority.

I simply wanted to understand why the people I loved found it so difficult to speak honestly with one another.

Finally, Sivert answered the question everyone had been waiting to hear.

“There haven’t been any distributions because Cherry Creek has changed.”

No one moved.

“The labor isn’t there anymore.”

He explained that experienced Mexican sheep shearers had become increasingly difficult to hire. Reliable sheep herders willing to spend months alone in isolated sheep camps were becoming almost impossible to find. Without skilled labor, operating eight bands of sheep had become far more difficult than it had been only a few years earlier.

Then he spoke about transportation.

“The Milwaukee Railroad no longer serves Ingomar.”

Without dependable rail service, shipping wool had become increasingly expensive, cutting deeply into the ranch's profits.

He paused.

"And Merton isn't here anymore."

That sentence carried more weight than anyone acknowledged.

For years Merton had quietly supervised the sheep camps, solved problems before they became crises, and kept much of the ranch operating smoothly. His departure had left a void far larger than one man's salary.

Sivert looked around the room before speaking again.

"So I diversified."

The room remained silent.

"I sold approximately two thousand ewes."

No one reacted.

"I used part of the corporation's cash reserves."

Marie's expression tightened.

"I borrowed additional operating money."

Paul slowly leaned forward.

"And I purchased fifteen hundred Black Angus steers."

The room went silent.

For one long moment no one spoke.

Then everything erupted.

“You sold sheep?”

“Who approved that?”

“You borrowed money?”

“How much?”

“You bought steers?”

“What happened to the cash reserves?”

“Why weren’t we told?”

“When did this happen?”

“Who authorized the loans?”

Voices crashed over one another until individual questions became impossible to distinguish.

Everyone was talking.

No one was listening.

Sivert tried repeatedly to answer, but each sentence disappeared beneath another accusation before he could finish.

The annual meeting had ceased to resemble a business meeting.

It had become a family trial.

Then my father’s chair scraped sharply across the floor as he slowly rose to his feet.

Until that moment, the meeting had been loud and tense, with voices rising and sharp disagreements erupting around the room. Even so, no one expected what was about to happen.

The room fell silent as Paul stood, his face turning a deep crimson.

Bernice turned and looked at him knowingly, though she acted surprised.

No one else had any idea what was coming.

The muscles in his jaw tightened.

He planted both hands firmly on Granddad's old dining room table and leaned toward Sivert.

When he spoke, his voice exploded through the old house.

"It's time to divide up the Goddamn ranch!"

❖



Granddad Mysse's Old House and Garages

The Dividend Promise

For several long seconds, no one spoke.

Paul's words seemed to hang motionless in the cigarette smoke.

"It's time to divide up the Goddamn ranch!"

Sivert stared across the room.

I had known my uncle my entire life, yet I had never seen him look as he did that afternoon.

The confidence that usually surrounded him seemed to evaporate. His face reddened. His fingers absentmindedly worked the ends of his mustache while his eyes slowly searched the room, looking from one family member to the next.

He found no ally.

Finally, he spoke.

"Let's have a little civility."

The request almost sounded out of place.

"Civility?" Marie answered sharply.

"Civility?" Paul echoed.

"We've gone over two years without a distribution, and you want civility?"

Sivert raised both hands.

"Please… let me finish."

This time no one interrupted.

Everyone sensed he was about to make the promise that would determine the future of Cherry Creek.

“I’ve done what I believed was necessary to save this ranch.”

He looked first at Marie.

Then at Bernice.

“The way Dad, Merton, and I operated Cherry Creek can no longer continue.”

He explained once more that reliable sheep herders had become increasingly difficult to hire. Experienced Mexican shearing crews were becoming scarce. Wool prices continued to fall while transportation costs continued to rise after rail service disappeared from Ingomar.

“I had two choices.”

“No,” Paul interrupted.

“You had one choice.”

“You should have called a shareholders’ meeting.”

Sivert ignored him.

“I could continue doing things the old way…”

He lowered his eyes to the yellow legal pad.

“…and watch Cherry Creek slowly fail.”

Then he looked back up.

“Or I could change.”

The room remained silent.

“So I changed.”

No one challenged his reasoning.

They challenged his authority.

“You sold two thousand ewes without asking us.”

Marie leaned forward.

“You borrowed money.”

Bernice’s voice remained controlled, but her disappointment was unmistakable.

“You spent the corporation’s cash reserves.”

Paul folded his arms.

“And you made every one of those decisions yourself.”

Sivert nodded.

“Yes.”

For the first time that afternoon, everyone received a direct answer.

Then came the question that truly mattered.

“When do we get our money?”

Sivert hesitated only briefly.

“This fall.”

No one moved.

“When the steers are sold, Cherry Creek will make a substantial distribution.”

Almost instantly the mood in the room changed.

“We’ll also reduce the sheep operation,” Sivert continued.

“We’ll sell four additional bands of ewes and approximately half the breeding rams.”

No one objected.

Looking back today, that silence troubles me more than all the shouting that came before it.

Moments earlier everyone had demanded answers.

Now the questions simply stopped.

No one asked what selling half the breeding flock would mean for the ranch’s future.

No one asked how much money had actually been borrowed.

No one questioned whether replacing sheep with cattle was financially sound.

No one returned to the subject of why the shareholders had never been consulted.

The promise of immediate money had changed everything.

People who only moments earlier had been leaning forward now settled comfortably back into their chairs.

Voices softened.

Someone laughed.

The tension that had gripped Granddad's old house for more than an hour slowly drifted away with the cigarette smoke.

I sat quietly watching.

At twenty years old, I understood almost nothing about corporate finance.

I knew nothing about operating loans, cash flow, or debt.

But even then, I recognized when people stopped asking difficult questions—it was because the answers had become too uncomfortable to hear.

That afternoon the future of Cherry Creek Sheep Company ceased being about what was best for the ranch.

It became about what was best for each individual shareholder.



Alone

When the meeting finally ended, I noticed something I had completely missed while it was taking place.

Sivert had been alone the entire afternoon.

Whether anyone intended it or not, the seating arrangement told its own story.

Sivert sat by himself near the back of the living room.

Bill and Marie occupied one side of the room.

Paul and Bernice sat together near the opening into the dining room.

Everyone faced Sivert.

No one sat beside him.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I realize that was probably the loneliest meeting my uncle ever attended.

No one left Granddad's old house believing the ranch had been saved.

They left believing their immediate concerns had been answered.

Those are not the same thing.

The meeting quietly dissolved.

Chairs scraped across the worn bird's-eye maple floor.

Coffee cups were gathered.

Bill emptied his chew cup.

Ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts were routinely carried into the kitchen and emptied into the old 1915 Majestic stove.

One by one everyone stepped onto the back porch and into the bright June sunshine.

Almost immediately the conversation returned to ordinary life.

Who was driving back to Forsyth?

Was anyone planning to attend the Miles City Bucking Horse Sale?

Would Paul and Bernice be back in Ingomar later that summer?

It was as though the argument had never taken place.

I lingered behind.

Granddad's old house suddenly felt enormous in its silence.

Sivert's yellow legal pad still rested on the dining room table.

Across the top of the first page were only four words and one time.

CHERRY CREEK CORPORATE MEETING

2:25 P.M.

A few wisps of cigarette smoke drifted through the shafts of afternoon sunlight.

Nothing in that room suggested history had just changed direction.

Yet it had.

Years later I came to understand that the collapse of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company did not begin with bank loans, missing dividends, or declining sheep prices.

It began when trust disappeared.

The financial collapse merely followed.

As I stepped off Granddad's back porch and looked once more at the old house, I believed I had simply attended another unpleasant family business meeting.

I could not have been more wrong.

It was the last shareholder meeting of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. It was also the last time our family would gather under one roof.

That June afternoon marked the beginning of the end of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company as my Granddad Mysse had known it. The business he had built, and the family he had brought together around it, were beginning to slip away.

I had no idea that afternoon marked the end of something far greater than a business partnership.

It also marked the beginning of the unraveling of two families whose stories would become impossible to separate.

No one standing in that yard could see it.

But the Mysse Curse had already begun its work.



The Beginning of Something Larger

Two or three days later, we left Ingomar for the long drive back to Bigfork.

Paul was behind the wheel. Bernice sat beside him in the front seat. I rode alone in the back, watching the vast prairie of eastern Montana slowly disappear through the rear window.

The drive home was unusually quiet.

For mile after mile, the only sounds were the steady hum of the tires, loose gravel rattling beneath the Oldsmobile, and the wind slipping through the vent windows as Paul chain-smoked one cigarette after another. The prairie rolled endlessly toward the horizon, unchanged by the turmoil we had left behind.

No one seemed eager to talk.

Finally, Paul broke the silence.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” he muttered without taking his eyes off the highway. “Your mother’s brother is screwing every one of us.”

I wasn’t sure whether he was speaking to my mother or to me.

Bernice stared straight ahead.

For once, she offered no defense of her brother.

No one argued.

No one disagreed.

The silence that followed said more than another conversation ever could.

I said nothing. I knew too little to judge anyone, and I wasn't about to take sides in a family dispute I barely understood.

At twenty years old, I believed the meeting had simply been about money, management, and differing opinions over how to run a ranch.

Looking back, I know it was about something far more important.

It was about trust.

Once trust disappears from a family, every conversation becomes a negotiation.

Every decision is questioned.

Every success becomes suspect.

Financial problems can often be repaired.

Broken trust rarely can.

As the miles slipped beneath us, the rolling prairie slowly gave way to the mountains of western Montana. I watched the landscape change without realizing that something else had changed as well.

Years later, I would come to understand that the first crack had already appeared in the legacy my Granddad Mysse had spent a lifetime building.

It was almost invisible but its presence couldn't be denied that June afternoon. Once trust began to fail, everything else would eventually follow.

None of us knew that as we drove north toward Bigfork.

We were simply going home.

Or at least I believed we were.



The Jersey Lilly Bar and Cafe
- 1971-
THE iconic Montana Western saloon and restaurant located in the tiny prairie town of Ingomar, Montana. Ingomar. Located on US Highway 12 between Sumatra and Vananda or using larger towns Roundup and Forsyth.



Bill Seward and his boxing photo.

Chapter 2

July 1971

The Assignment

Looking back, I can now see that the annual partnership meeting in June 1971 changed far more than I ever realized.

I thought I had simply witnessed a difficult family business meeting. Instead, it became the first move in a chain of events that would alter the course of my life.

At the time, however, I knew none of that.

My plans for the summer were already in place.

I wasn't working for the Forest Service that year. Through a series of unfortunate circumstances—and trusting a few people I shouldn't have—that opportunity had slipped away. Instead, I was working part-time for Don and Jude Thomson at the Bigfork Summer Playhouse, earning enough money to prepare for my transfer to the University of Montana that fall.

My future seemed clear.

I had completed the paperwork to transfer from Montana State University to the University of Montana in Missoula, where I would begin my junior year as a pre-medical student. Becoming a physician remained my goal, and by the end of June my thoughts were focused on college—not ranching.

Then my mother interrupted those plans.

A few weeks after we returned from Ingomar, Bernice asked if we could talk.

There was nothing unusual about that. In our family, however, conversations that began quietly often ended with obligations.

She explained that the Cherry Creek Sheep Company was building a large log lambing barn at the Cherry Springs corrals in the remote northern reaches of Rosebud County. A contractor from Thompson Falls named Dean—someone my father knew personally—had been hired to oversee the entire project.

Then she made her request.

Would I be willing to spend about a month at Cherry Springs helping with the construction?

According to Bernice, my responsibilities would be simple. Dean and his crew would erect the log building. I would help construct the portable lambing jugs that would eventually fill the interior of the shed, working alongside one of Sivert's sheep herders.

It sounded straightforward enough.

Then she added something that caught my attention.

"I'd like you to keep your father and me informed about how the project is progressing."

I nodded.

"Call us from the pay phone at the Jersey Lilly."

She paused before adding another instruction.

"Don't call from Sivert's house."

That seemed oddly specific.

At the time, I didn't question it.

Today, I recognize that one sentence revealed far more than I understood.

The trust that had fractured during the partnership meeting only weeks earlier *had already disappeared.*

Bernice no longer trusted her brother.

The assignment, she assured me, would take about thirty days.

"Forty-five at the most," she said confidently.

Before I could answer, Paul spoke from across the room.

"Don't question your mother," he barked. "After all, you're a shareholder."

The comment caught me completely off guard.

I hadn't questioned anyone.

In fact, I hadn't said a word.

Finally, I reminded Bernice of something she already knew.

"I've transferred to the University of Montana," I said. "I'll need time to get ready for school."

She looked directly at me.

"If you do this for us," she said quietly, "I'll help you buy a newer car."

She knew exactly where to aim.

At the time I owned two antique automobiles—a 1929 Model A Cabriolet and a 1921 Model T. I loved both of them, but neither was dependable transportation for a college student driving between Missoula and Bigfork.

The promise of a reliable vehicle immediately caught my attention.

I thought about it for several moments before agreeing.

Looking back, I can now see exactly what Bernice had done.

She understood me well enough to know that two things outweighed almost every hesitation I had.

Family.

And a promise.

She used both.

What neither Bernice nor Paul told me was that building a lambing barn would become only a small part of why they wanted me on the Cherry Creek Ranch.

Had they simply trusted me with the truth, I might have made a very different decision.

Instead, they chose manipulation in the name of family.

I believed I was volunteering for a month.

I had no idea I was about to step into the middle of a family war.



Packing for Ingomar

Bernice instructed me to pack enough clothing and supplies for a month—perhaps six weeks at the most.

"If everything stays on schedule," she assured me, "you'll still have plenty of time to start the fall quarter in Missoula."

I wanted to believe her…

I did believe her.

Yet somewhere deep inside me, a doubt lingered. Maybe it was something in her voice, or the way Paul listened without saying a word. Something about the conversation simply did not feel right. It was not a clear suspicion, only a small, persistent unease—a sense that something in her explanation did not settle properly, no matter how often I turned it over in my mind. I couldn't quite identify what was wrong, and I wasn't ready to question her. I trusted my mother completely, even as some quiet part of me wondered whether that trust was blinding me to the truth.

After all, I had already committed myself to the University of Montana. Both Paul and Bernice had graduated from Montana State University and were Bobcats to the core. Bernice, especially, never let me forget that she considered the University of Montana to be the "hippie, dope-smoking university."

She wasn't particularly happy that I had transferred.

Even then I couldn't help wondering if my decision to leave Montana State had something to do with the sudden urgency of this assignment.

Neither of my parents showed much interest in my plans for college nor my plans to be a doctor someday.

Instead, they seemed far more interested in getting me to Cherry Creek.

The more I thought about it, the more one question kept returning.

What wasn't I being told?

According to Bernice, I would be staying in Granddad Mysse's old house in Ingomar.

That news didn't bother me.

The old house held some of my happiest childhood memories. I had spent many enjoyable days there with Granddad, and every room seemed to remind me of another story or another adventure.

The house itself, however, wasn't exactly luxurious.

There was no running water.

No shower.

No indoor plumbing.

That meant using the outhouse.

To set the record straight, I have always hated outhouses.

There is simply no graceful way to use one.

Although I had stayed in the old house many times with family, I had never spent an entire month there by myself.

Still, I convinced myself it would be an adventure.

Besides, I was doing it for family…

and for the promise of a newer vehicle.

Truth be told, I already had a particular vehicle in mind.

Not a shiny new car.

A dependable used pickup.

That sounded perfect to me.

Over the next two days, I gathered everything I thought I might need.

A sleeping bag Paul donated to me went onto the pile first, followed by a heavy wool blanket to place underneath it. If I unexpectedly had to spend a night out on the range, I wanted at least a little padding between me and the ground.

Neither Bernice nor Paul had suggested camping.

I simply preferred to be prepared.

After all, I was an Eagle Scout.

"Be Prepared" wasn't just a motto.

It was a way of thinking.

My large blaze-orange backpack quickly filled with enough clothes to last several weeks.

I packed my prized Buck folding knife, leather gloves, long underwear, and four boxes of .22 ammunition for my Remington single-shot bolt-action rifle. The rifle itself was already stored

safely at the Old House in Ingomar. Paul believed it was better kept there than in Bigfork.

Into another bag went my toiletries.

Then came four rolls of toilet paper.

Fresh toilet paper has always ranked surprisingly high on my list of necessities.

One roll per week seemed like a reasonable estimate until I returned to civilization.

For food, I packed a box of Pop-Tarts.

I was told I could eat most of my meals at the Jersey Lilly Café and simply charge them to the Milam account.

By the second evening, everything was packed and waiting by the front door.

I stood looking at my gear with the quiet confidence only a twenty-year-old can possess.

I honestly believed I was ready.

Looking back now, I wasn't prepared at all.

Not for Cherry Creek.

Not for what my parents had set in motion.

And certainly not for the people I was about to meet.

Five days had passed since Bernice first asked me to go.

Oddly, neither she nor Paul had ever told me exactly when I would leave.

That uncertainty didn't surprise me.

Paul rarely explained his decisions. One of the ways he maintained control was by keeping everyone else slightly off balance. Plans changed without warning, questions went unanswered, and explanations usually came only after the decisions had already been made.

At twenty years old, I should have recognized the pattern—and perhaps, without realizing it, I had.

Instead of worrying about what I did not pack or trying to prepare for the unknown,

I simply waited.

Experience had taught me that Paul would tell me what I needed to know only when he was ready.

As it turned out, I wasn’t left wondering for long.



The Road to Cherry Creek

Very early on the morning of July 3, 1971, I was jolted awake by my bedroom door crashing against the wall.

Paul stood in the doorway.

“We’re leaving for the ranch.”

His voice was loud enough to eliminate any thought of sleeping another minute.

I glanced at the alarm clock beside my bed.

It was somewhere between 4:30 and 5:00 a.m.—a time neither Paul nor Bernice normally considered morning.

Perhaps it was the early hour. Perhaps it was the way Paul interrupted, as though my thoughts and feelings didn’t matter. I was still fighting off sleep, my mind slow to catch up with the conversation, not yet fully aware of what was being said. Whatever the reason, I felt an unmistakable rudeness in the moment, though I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

“Be ready in twenty minutes.”

Without another word, Paul turned and disappeared down the basement hallway to climb the stairs leading to the upstairs kitchen.

I sat on the edge of my bed, trying to clear the sleep from my head.

For five days, my parents brought up my trip to Cherry Creek from time to time. We talked about it, then moved on to other things. Yet through all those conversations, neither of them ever told me when I was expected to leave.

Now, apparently, it was an emergency.

I called up the stairs.

“Can I at least take a shower?”

Paul didn’t hesitate.

“Make it quick.”

Everything with Paul was treated like an emergency.

Whether it actually was seldom mattered.

Twenty minutes later I carried my gear outside and loaded it into the trunk of Paul’s powder-gold 1968 Oldsmobile Delta 88.

I had always admired that car.

Paul loved owning new automobiles, but he never seemed particularly interested in taking care of them. They were meant to be driven, smoked in, and traded for another new one a few years later.

A moment later he walked out of the house, already smoking his first cigarette of the day.

He glanced at my blaze-orange backpack, stuffed to the brim, along with my sleeping bag, hat, and coat.

“Got everything?”

“I think so.”

I turned toward the front door.

“I want to tell Mom goodbye.”

Paul stopped me.

“She’s not feeling well.”

He opened the driver’s door.

“You can call her from the Jersey Lilly after you get to Ingomar.”

I stood there for a moment.

The explanation didn’t feel right.

Bernice had been the one who wanted me to go to Cherry Creek. Now, on the morning I was leaving, she wasn’t even coming outside to say goodbye.

At the time, I accepted Paul’s explanation.

Looking back, I’ve often wondered if Bernice simply didn’t want to face me.

Perhaps she knew she hadn’t told me everything.

Perhaps she truly wasn’t feeling well.

After more than fifty years, I still don’t know.

We pulled away from the house just as the first light of dawn touched the Swan Range above Bigfork.

Within minutes the town disappeared behind us.

For nearly two hours, very little was said.

Paul chain-smoked one cigarette after another, filling the Oldsmobile with stale tobacco smoke until my eyes began to sting.

Finally, I asked, “Would you mind rolling your window down a little?”

“No.”

The answer came without a glance in my direction.

I reached for the window crank on my side of the car.

“Leave it alone.”

His voice hardened.

“It’s my car. I’ll decide when the windows are open.”

That ended the conversation.

I leaned my head against the passenger window and watched western Montana drift by until exhaustion finally caught up with me.

I fell asleep.



The blast of the Oldsmobile’s horn jerked me awake.

Another car had drifted across the centerline near Deer Lodge.

Paul gripped the steering wheel with both hands as he swerved toward the shoulder. Gravel rattled beneath the tires before the other driver corrected course and disappeared behind us.

For several seconds neither of us spoke.

My heart pounded in my chest.

Paul muttered one of his familiar curses.

“Som’ bitch.”

He lit another cigarette as though nothing had happened and continued driving.

A few miles later he pulled into the parking lot of one of his favorite restaurants.

“We’re getting breakfast.”

The 4B’s Restaurant always smelled the same.

Fresh coffee.

Bacon.

Hash browns on a hot grill.

And cigarette smoke.

In 1971, smoking sections weren’t necessary.

The entire restaurant was a smoking section.

Paul ordered biscuits and gravy, black coffee, and got himself another pack of cigarettes from the vending machine near the entrance.

I ordered my usual breakfast—two eggs, bacon, sour dough toast, and a Pepsi.

We ate quietly for several minutes.

Only after the waitress refilled Paul’s coffee did he finally explain why I was really going to Cherry Creek.

He stirred his coffee without looking at me.

“Whether you know it or not,” he said, “Sivert’s screwing us.”

I waited.

“He and Janet are living high on the hog while the rest of us haven’t seen a dividend in over two years.”

He leaned across the table.

“They’re putting up new buildings.”

“They’ve bought new equipment.”

“New vehicles.”

“Janet’s expanding her knitting business with our money and our wool.”

“They’re throwing parties.”

He paused long enough to light another cigarette.

“And they’re doing it with money that belongs to all of us.”

The words hung between us.

“That’s corporate money,” he continued quietly. “Not theirs.”

I sat there trying to make sense of everything he had just said.

Finally, I asked the only question that seemed to matter.

“What do you want me to do?”

Paul looked directly at me for the first time that morning.

His answer would change everything.

“You’ll meet a sheep herder in Harlowton this afternoon,” he said. “He’ll take you to Ingomar. He’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

I frowned.

“Does this sheep herder have a name?”

“You’ll find out this afternoon.”

That was my father. He rarely told the whole story. He revealed only enough information to keep everyone dependent on him, asking questions, and waiting for the next piece. At the time, I didn’t recognize it as manipulation. I simply accepted it as the way Paul operated.

Then, without warning, he changed the subject.

“Besides,” he said, “you’ve been drinking and partying with your Playhouse friends way too much this summer.”

The accusation stunned me. I wasn’t even old enough to drink legally.

Trying to return to the subject, I said, “Mom told me I was going to Granddad’s Old House in Ingomar.”

Paul pushed his breakfast plate aside and looked at me without expression.

“Those plans have changed,” he said. “You’ll just have to live with it.”

For a moment I wondered whether Bernice even knew what was happening.

Years of being taught not to question my parents took over. I said nothing more. I simply stared out the restaurant window until it was time for us to leave.



Meeting Julius

By early afternoon on July 3, 1971, Paul turned off the highway and pulled the Oldsmobile into the gravel parking lot in front of Shep's Antiques on the east side of Harlowton.

He shut off the engine, took one last drag on his cigarette, and looked over at me.

"This is where you'll meet the sheep herder."

I reached into the back seat for my hat and coat before looking back at him.

"What's his name?"

Paul hesitated just long enough for me to notice.

"Julius."

That was it.

Just Julius.

I couldn't help thinking that information might have been useful back in Deer Lodge.

As I unloaded my sleeping bag and backpack from the trunk, Paul lit another cigarette.

"Try to call your mother and me at least once a week," he said. "We want to know everything that's going on out there."

Then he looked directly at me.

"Especially anything involving Sivert and Janet."

I nodded, although I wasn't entirely sure what I was supposed to be watching for.

As far as I knew, I had agreed to spend a month helping build a new log lambing barn. I was supposed to help construct lambing jugs, report on the progress of the project, and somehow keep an eye on my Uncle Sivert.

The pieces simply didn't fit together.

Something important was missing.

Paul took one last drag on his cigarette before climbing behind the wheel.

"That bastard Sivert isn't going to steal another damn cent of our money," he said through the open window. "You make sure he doesn't."

He said it as though stopping the president of a corporation was a perfectly reasonable assignment for a twenty-year-old college student.

I simply stared at him.

How in the world was I supposed to stop my uncle from spending company money?

Before I could ask another question, Paul rolled up the window, shifted the Oldsmobile into gear, and drove away in a cloud of dust.

Within seconds he disappeared down Main Street.

The dust lingered for a moment.

Then even the dust settled.

The silence surprised me.

For the first time since leaving Bigfork, I realized I was completely alone.

The afternoon sun settled over Harlowton with the dry, shimmering heat that only eastern Montana can produce. My backpack rested at my feet, my sleeping bag leaned against my leg, and I found myself wondering whether I had just made the biggest mistake of my young life.

If this assignment was so important…

Why hadn't Paul stayed long enough to introduce me?

For nearly three hours I waited outside Shep's Antiques.

Every pickup that drove down Main Street caught my attention.

Every cloud of dust made me think someone was finally coming for me.

No one did.

Eventually the heat won.

I picked up my gear and walked inside.

The temperature dropped immediately.

The building smelled of old leather, weathered pine, machine oil, tobacco, and decades of prairie dust.

It looked less like an antique store than the collected history of eastern Montana.

Branding irons.

Horse collars.

Lanterns.

Weathered saddles.

Old photographs.

Handmade tools whose purpose I couldn't even guess anymore.

Mixed among the ranch relics were genuine treasures—beautifully beaded American Indian necklaces, hand-made moccasins, tribal clothing, and two enormous buffalo skulls displayed proudly behind glass cases.

I carried my gear to the counter.

The man behind it looked up from whatever he had been doing.

"You mind if I leave my pack here for a while?" I asked.

He glanced toward the front window and smiled.

"Why not?" he said. "It's too damn hot to be standing out there."

"Thanks."

I wandered slowly through the aisles, pretending to study the merchandise while occasionally glancing toward the man behind the counter.

Until then, he had simply been the man tending the store.

Now I really looked at him.

He stood a little over six feet tall with broad shoulders and the heavy hands of a man who had spent his entire life earning a living outdoors. Time, hard work, and the relentless Montana wind had weathered his face until it looked almost carved from leather.

A thick gray-and-black beard covered most of it, leaving only a pair of remarkably alert blue-gray eyes that seemed to miss absolutely nothing.

He wore faded powder-blue Sears Big Mac coveralls over a dark green work shirt whose best years were long behind it.

Perched slightly crooked on his head was a sweat-darkened felt Stetson wrapped with a rattlesnake hatband. Tucked behind the band was a single feather.

At first glance I thought it might be an eagle feather.

Then I remembered possessing eagle feathers without a federal permit was against federal law.

Knowing nothing else about the man, I wasn't entirely convinced that would have stopped him.

Nothing about him looked polished.

Nothing about him looked sophisticated.

Everything about him looked genuine.

He wasn't dressed to impress anyone.

He looked exactly like a man who had spent his life sleeping under the stars when necessary, making a living with his hands, and feeling perfectly comfortable in places where most people wouldn't last a day.

There was an easy confidence about him—not arrogance, but the quiet assurance of someone who knew exactly who he was and had nothing left to prove.

Meanwhile, my own thoughts kept circling back to the last five days.

Bernice wanted reports.

Paul wanted someone watching Sivert.

Neither of them had trusted me enough to tell me the whole story.

The longer I thought about it, the less I liked it.

After a while I realized the man behind the counter had begun watching me.

Not staring.

Just watching.

Every time I glanced his direction, he returned to whatever he had been doing.

A few minutes later I'd catch him looking again.

Finally he spoke.

"What brings you to Harlowton?"

His voice was quiet.

Friendly.

"I'm headed to Cherry Creek."

He nodded.

“I’m supposed to meet a sheep herder named Julius.”

The old cowboy chuckled softly.

He reached up and slowly tugged on his beard.

“Well…”

he said,

“I guess you must be that Milam kid.”

I stopped walking.

“Yes…”

I answered cautiously.

“And who might you be?”

He stood, wiped his hand on his powder-blue coveralls, and reached across the counter.

“Julian N. Sebulsky.”

Then he smiled.

“But everybody just calls me Julius.”

I shook his hand.

It was rough, calloused, and as hard as saddle leather.

Before I could say another word, Julius looked me squarely in the eye and said, as casually as if he were discussing the weather,

“Paul hired me…”

I nodded.

“…to help you spy on your Uncle Sivert.”

Julius laughed.

I didn’t.

For the first time that day, I realized my parents had brought someone else into their plan.

And for the first time since leaving Bigfork, I began to wonder exactly what I had agreed to.



The Skunk Wagon

At precisely six o'clock, Julius walked to the front door of Shep's Antiques, flipped the sign to CLOSED, locked the door, and slipped the keys into his pocket.

Without saying a word, he motioned for me to follow him.

I grabbed my gear.

We crossed the gravel parking lot in front of Shep's Antiques and walked a ways down the Main Street sidewalk.

Parked by itself was the strangest vehicle I had ever seen.

It was an aging powder blue Chevrolet three-quarter-ton pickup with a tall battered aluminum-plywood camper bolted to the bed. The fading paint had surrendered years earlier to the relentless eastern Montana sun, and every dent, scrape, clump of gumbo dirt and patch hinted at thousands of miles on lonely ranch roads. Dust and splattered mud coated nearly every surface, making it almost impossible to tell what color it had originally been. It looked less like a pickup and more like a machine that had simply refused to die.

Julius stopped beside it and patted the driver's door with obvious affection.

"This," he announced, "is the Skunk Wagon."

I looked from him to the pickup.

"The Skunk Wagon?"

He grinned beneath his beard.

“You’ll understand the name soon enough.”

He opened the camper door and tossed my orange backpack inside.

Carrying my sleeping bag, I walked toward Julius.

The instant I reached the open camper door, a wave of overpowering odor poured out of the camper and hit me squarely in the face.

I had never smelled anything like it before.

Part skunk.

Part wet wool.

Part campfire smoke.

Part old boots.

The smell was so powerful it seemed to have taken on a life of its own.

I instinctively stepped back.

Julius burst into laughter.

“Gets everybody the first time.”

He climbed into the driver’s seat as though nothing were unusual.

“Come on,” he called through the open window. “By the time we’re done together, skunk smell is going to be the least of your worries.”

I wasn’t entirely convinced.

But I climbed aboard anyway.

We made our way to Ingomar.



Ingomar, Montana—the prairie stretched endlessly beneath a vast, lonely sky. The wind whispered through the grass, and the empty road disappeared beyond the horizon. I was young, unaware of the mysteries surrounding me and the truths life had yet to reveal. **I could see to the edge of the world, but I had no idea what lay ahead of me.**

My Story of Ingomar

It was nearly eight o'clock on the evening of July 3, 1971, when Julius and I crested the last ridge overlooking the little town of Ingomar.

Julius eased the Skunk Wagon to a stop at the top of the hill without saying a word.

For several moments he simply looked out across the prairie.

Then he pointed toward the valley below.

"There it is… Ingomar."

I followed his finger.

The little town seemed to float in a sea of endless grass. The setting sun had transformed the prairie into a tapestry of gold, amber, and deep crimson, while long shadows stretched across the rolling hills. Here and there, a street or porch light flickered on as evening quietly settled over eastern Montana.

From where I sat, Ingomar looked impossibly small.

Only fourteen people officially called it home.

There was the Jersey Lilly Bar and Café, the collapsing Ingomar Hotel, the old railroad depot, the old sheep corrals, a scattering of weathered homes, abandoned buildings, the wool storage barn and Granddad Mysse's Old White House. All standing like lonely sentinels against the horizon, and the miles upon miles of open country stretching farther than my eyes could follow.

At first glance, it appeared to be a town the rest of the world had forgotten.

In many ways, it had.

I had been to Ingomar before many times, but this was different.

This time I wasn't visiting.

I was about to live there.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I realize that Ingomar changed me as profoundly as any person I have ever known.

People often ask me whether it was Julius who influenced me the most during the summer of 1971.

The answer is yes.

But Julius was only part of the story.

The prairie itself became one of my greatest teachers.

Before that summer I thought loneliness meant simply being by yourself.

Ingomar taught me otherwise.

The isolation surrounding Ingomar—and much of Rosebud and Garfield Counties—was unlike anything I had ever experienced.

The prairie reached endlessly toward every horizon until the earth and sky became almost impossible to separate. There were days when the wind never stopped blowing and nights so still that the silence became a sound all its own.

It was the kind of silence that forced you to listen to yourself.

The prairie had a curious way of changing people.

I watched it happen over and over again.

Some people became tougher.

Some became gentler.

Some discovered a peace they had never known anywhere else.

Others slowly unraveled beneath its loneliness.

Out there, there was nowhere to hide—from the weather, from your thoughts, or from yourself.

I know because it happened to me.

There were days when I found myself questioning my own thoughts simply to make certain I was still seeing life clearly. Looking back, I suspect many people who lived on that vast prairie did the same thing without ever speaking of it.

Isolation has a way of magnifying everything.

A disappointment feels larger.

A fear lingers longer.

A beautiful day becomes unforgettable.

The prairie tested every person who tried to make a life there.

Every drought.

Every blizzard.

Every scorching July afternoon.

Every subzero morning.

The land demanded respect.

It didn't care who you were.

It didn't care how much money you had.

It didn't care whether you succeeded yesterday.

Sooner or later, it humbled everyone.

Yet for all its hardships, I have never known a place more beautiful.

The prairie taught patience.

It taught gratitude.

It stripped away life's unnecessary distractions until only the essentials remained.

A sunrise mattered.

The smell of rain drifting ahead of a summer thunderstorm mattered.

A hot meal mattered.

A warm bed mattered.

Another day alive mattered.

And so did the people beside you.

Even today I can still see those magnificent sunsets that looked as though Charles M. Russell himself had painted them across the Montana sky. I can still smell sagebrush cooling in the evening after a blistering July day. I can still hear meadowlarks greeting the

dawn and coyotes calling across the prairie long after darkness settled over Ingomar.

Those memories have never left me.

Most people today will never know true solitude.

They have never lived where the nearest neighbor is measured in miles instead of yards, where darkness still belongs to the night, and where silence becomes as familiar as an old friend.

Perhaps that is why Ingomar has always been difficult for me to explain.

It was beautiful.

It was lonely.

It was unforgiving.

It was honest.

And it was unforgettable.

A piece of the man I eventually became was forged there on the eastern Montana prairie.

Julius finally shifted the old Chevrolet back into gear.

Without another word, the Skunk Wagon started down the hill toward the little town waiting below.

Neither of us knew it then.

But before that summer ended, Ingomar would become far more than a place where I lived.

It would become part of who I was.

❖



The Ingomar Hotel 1971 — A Witness to Time

Empty for years, its rooms stripped bare, the old Ingomar Hotel still stands against the Montana prairie. Weathered by wind and time, it refuses to surrender to the silence. Within its walls lie the echoes of lives once lived, people's faces long forgotten, and dreams carried away by the years. If only those walls could speak, what stories they would tell. The people are gone, the rooms are silent, but the old hotel still stands—holding a lifetime of memories the prairie will never reveal.

The Jersey Lilly

As the Skunk Wagon rattled down the long hill into Ingomar, Julius seemed unusually pleased with himself.

He turned toward me, grinning beneath his gray-and-black beard, and held my gaze as he talked. The vehicle drifted from one side of the road to the other. I knew where we were going. I wasn't sure Julius did.

"Your dad worked out a pretty good deal for me."

"Oh?" I asked.

"I get all my meals paid for by the Milams while I'm helping you," he said. "And I'm still drawing my wages from Cherry Creek."

He laughed.

"I guess you could say I'm eating out of two feed bags."

Then he added with another laugh, "Makes me feel a little like James Bond."

I looked over at him.

"James Bond?"

"Sure."

He gave me another one of his famous Festus Haggen winks.

"Double agent… spy… 007."

I smiled because Julius was smiling.

Inside, however, I wasn't smiling at all.

Everyone connected with this assignment seemed to know more than I did.

Bernice had been careful about what she told me.

Paul had been even more careful.

Now Julius casually referred to himself as a spy, as though everyone involved understood the arrangement except me.

To this day I still do not know exactly what agreement my parents made with Julius beyond paying for his meals while he helped me and allowing him to continue drawing his wages from Cherry Creek. Julius never volunteered the details, and my parents never explained them.

Once again, I had been given only enough information to do what someone else wanted.

The rest remained hidden.



Julius eased the Skunk Wagon next to the horse hitching post in front of the Jersey Lilly Bar and Café.

If Ingomar had a town square, this was it.

The Jersey Lilly was far more than a café or a bar.

It was Ingomar's newspaper…

its gathering place for coffee and gossip…

a refuge from the routines of everyday life…

its town hall…

where cowboys and ranchers gathered for no particular reason except to see who else might walk through the door…

where hours could disappear over a game of cribbage, with cards dealt, stories exchanged, gossip shared, and a few dollars changing hands between neighbors and friends…

and, when necessary, its courtroom.

News reached the Jersey Lilly long before it reached the newspaper. Rumors arrived there before they became facts. Business deals were made over coffee. Friendships were renewed over hamburgers. Arguments often began over whiskey and somehow ended over breakfast the next morning. If something happened anywhere in Rosebud or Garfield County, sooner or later the story found its way to the Jersey Lilly. Walking through its front door was like stepping into the living room of eastern Montana.



The screen door squeaked as Julius pushed it open.

Immediately I was greeted by the comforting aroma of frying hamburgers, fresh coffee, cigarette smoke, homemade pie, and hardwood floors that had absorbed half a century of ranch stories.

Mounted deer, antelope, moose and elk watched silently from the walls.

Old ranch brands.

Faded rodeo posters.

Yellowing newspaper clippings.

Oil paintings of Plains Indians.

Handwritten notices advertising lost horses, stray cattle, hay for sale, and church suppers.

Nothing matched.

Everything belonged.

The Jersey Lilly wasn't decorated.

It had simply accumulated a lifetime of memories.



Bill Seward was running the place alone.

Owner.

Cook.

Bartender.

Waiter.

Cashier.

Dishwasher.

In Ingomar, job descriptions were merely suggestions.

Bill looked up as we walked in.

“You boys hungry?”

Before I could answer, Julius grinned.

“Starving.”

Bill laughed.

“I figured as much.”

We settled into a table beside the old wooden telephone booth nearest the front door.

A handful of ranchers occupied the bar, quietly nursing beers while exchanging conversations that required remarkably few words.

No one seemed interested in me.

Everyone already knew Julius.



Bill returned carrying two empty bowls and a plate of what Bill proudly called Sheep Herder Hors d’oeuvres.

Saltine crackers.

Sharp cheddar cheese.

Sweet onion.

Orange slices.

Nothing fancy.

Nothing expensive.

Yet after a long day on the prairie it looked like a feast and tasted incredible.

I ordered a bacon cheeseburger, potato chips, and a Pepsi.

Julius studied the menu with exaggerated concentration before finally looking up.

“If the Milams are buying…”

he announced,

“…I’m having the pork chop and potatoes.”

Then he narrowed one eye toward Bill.

“The bean soup isn’t sour tonight, is it?”

Bill didn’t even look up.

“It wasn’t yesterday.”

“I asked about today.”

Only then did Bill smile.

“You’ll know soon enough.”



While Bill disappeared into the kitchen, I stepped into the old wooden telephone booth.

The folding door barely closed behind me.

I dropped two quarters into the pay phone.

Nothing.

Not even a dial tone.

Only a loud, angry buzz.

I tried again.

The same thing.

A moment later Bill tapped on the booth door.

“Phone lines have been down for three days.”

“When’ll they be fixed?”

He shrugged.

“When the phone company gets around to it.”

That seemed to be answer enough.

Life in eastern Montana operated on its own schedule.

I returned to the table.

Julius was staring thoughtfully at a mounted moose head hanging on the wall.

Without taking his eyes off it, he asked,

“Why would somebody stick a cigarette in a dead moose’s mouth?”

I looked up.

Sure enough, someone had tucked a cigarette between the moose's lips.

Later I heard the guilty party was probably my Uncle Merton.

Julius continued studying the moose.

"It can't enjoy it."

"It's dead."

I couldn't help laughing to myself.

One minute Julius was talking about espionage.

The next he was worried whether a stuffed moose appreciated tobacco.

At twenty years old, I couldn't decide whether Julius was one of the wisest men I had ever met…
or one of the craziest.

It didn't take me years to figure out. That first month at Cherry Creek was enough to convince me he was both.



Supper with Julius

About forty minutes later Bill emerged from the kitchen carrying a massive aluminum pot of Jersey Lilly pinto bean soup.

The heavy ladle clinked softly against the rim as he carried it toward us.

Before setting the pot on the table, Bill slipped an old handmade potholder beneath it to protect the well-worn red-and-white checkered vinyl tablecloth.

“When you boys get a minute,” he said quietly to Julius, “I need to visit with you.”

Julius looked surprised.

“About what?”

Bill smiled.

“It can wait.”

Then he disappeared back into the kitchen.

Neither of us asked another question.

We were too hungry.



Julius filled his bowl nearly to the top.

Then, without hesitation, he attacked it.

I’d never heard anyone slurp soup with such enthusiasm.

Heads slowly turned.

Julius never noticed.

Or cared.

Between spoonfuls he glanced at me.

“Soup tastes better when you slurp it.”

I smiled politely.

“And it fills you up quicker.”

Whether there was any scientific truth behind that statement I have no idea.

What I do know is that nobody else in the Jersey Lilly appeared interested in testing his theory.

The cowboys gave no notice to our table. They studied their drinks, absent mindedly turning glasses and beer bottles in their hands, carefully pretending the rest of the room didn’t exist.

People in Ingomar possessed a remarkable talent for minding their own business.



A few minutes later Bill returned with Julius’s pork chop and potatoes.

Julius stared at the plate the way a child looks at Christmas morning.

Without hesitation he grabbed the ketchup.

Then the mustard.

He buried the potatoes beneath enough ketchup to lose sight of them before covering the pork chop with what looked like half a bottle of bright yellow mustard.

I couldn't resist.

"Need another bottle of each?"

Julius slowly looked up.

One eye narrowed.

For the second time that day, he instantly reminded me of Festus Haggen from Gunsmoke.

"You eat your food your way…"

he growled.

"…and I'll eat mine my way."

I wisely decided my career as Julius's culinary advisor had just ended.



For several peaceful minutes we simply ate.

Then the front screen door opened.

A rancher stepped inside, removed his hat, and slowly scanned the room.

The moment he spotted Julius, his attention shifted to me.

Without hesitation he walked directly to our table.

“You Craig Milam?”

“Yes.”

He glanced from me to Julius.

“What in the hell are you doing running around with Julius?”

Before I could answer, Julius calmly laid down his fork.

“What we’re doing…”

he said evenly,

“…is none of your Goddamn business.”

Julius’s eyes met mine for an instant. The message was unmistakable—say nothing.

The room grew noticeably quieter.

Donald John Cameron locked eyes with Julius.

Neither man blinked.

For several long seconds no one spoke.

Then, as calmly as though nothing had happened, Julius picked up the pork chop bone.

He examined it with great seriousness.

Placed one end between his teeth.

And began noisily sucking every last bit of marrow from the center.

The sound echoed through the café.

Donald John finally shook his head.

“For crying out loud, Julius.”

“Wasn’t the meat enough?”

Without looking up, Julius answered,

“I never stole your gas can.”

Donald John frowned.

“What?”

Julius lowered the bone.

“You can quit telling people I did.”

Silence settled over the Jersey Lilly.

Then Julius smiled.

“Otherwise…”

he said softly,

“…one day I just might really steal something from you.”

He paused.

“Maybe something bigger than a gas can.”

Donald John stared at him for another moment.

Then he shook his head, laughed quietly, and walked toward the bar.

Almost immediately the conversations around the room resumed, as though nothing unusual had happened.

I looked across the table.

Julius calmly returned to his pork chop.

I wasn't entirely sure what I had just witnessed.

Everything about Ingomar seemed different from the world I had left behind.

People spoke in unfinished stories.

Old feuds resurfaced without explanation.

Everyone knew everyone else's history.

Everyone…

except me.



Donald John stood motionless for another moment.

Finally, he shook his head, muttered something under his breath, and walked toward the bar.

Almost immediately the conversations inside the Jersey Lilly resumed, as though nothing unusual had happened.

I looked across the table at Julius.

He calmly picked up another bite of pork chop and potatoes.

The matter was already settled in his mind.

Mine was only beginning.



As we stepped out into the warm July evening onto the Jersey Lilly boardwalk, I finally asked the question that had been bothering me.

“What’s Donald John’s problem with you?”

Julius unlocked the Skunk Wagon but didn’t answer right away.

Instead, he climbed behind the wheel, started the engine, and pulled away from the curb.

Only after we had driven a block in silence did he speak.

“Donald John’s had an easier life than most.”

His eyes never left the road.

“He doesn’t understand what it’s like when a man has nothing.”

Another block passed.

Then Julius spoke again, this time more quietly.

“Out here…”

he said,

“…sucking the marrow out of a bone can mean the difference between life and death.”

I looked over at him a bit stunned.

For the first time since we’d met, there wasn’t the slightest trace of humor on his face.

No grin.
No Festus wink.
No joke.

He wasn’t trying to make a point.

He was simply telling me what he knew.

At twenty years old, I didn’t understand what he meant.

To be honest, I’m not sure I ever completely did.

But I never forgot him saying it.



The Skunk Wagon rumbled through the quiet streets of Ingomar before turning toward Granddad Mysse’s old house.

Darkness had settled across the prairie.

Only a handful of lights still glowed in town.

Beyond them stretched mile after mile of open country disappearing into the night.

Julius eased the pickup to a stop beside the back porch at Grandad's house.

The headlights swept across the old house before he shut off the engine.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

The prairie became perfectly still.



Granddad's old house looked exactly as I remembered it.

Weathered.

Lonely.

Patient.

Its white asbestos-cement siding was scarred by years of hailstorms and prairie winds. The paint had long since surrendered to the Montana sun, and the back porch sagged just enough to remind you of its age. The old screen door creaked gently whenever the evening breeze touched it, sounding exactly as it had throughout my childhood.

Every board seemed familiar.

Every window held a memory.

Every nail reminded me of my grandfather.

For years this had been Granddad Mysse's home—a place filled with family dinners, laughter, and stories that stretched late into the evening.

Now it stood empty.

Waiting.



We unloaded my backpack, sleeping bag, and the few supplies I had brought from Bigfork.

When everything was stacked on the porch, I turned toward Julius.

"Where are you staying?"

A slow smile spread beneath his beard.

"I've got places."

I waited for him to explain.

Instead, his smile grew wider.

"What's my business…"

he said,

"…isn't your business."

Then he paused just long enough to soften the remark.

“Maybe someday I’ll tell you.”

I was dumbfounded.

I didn’t know whether he was joking, avoiding my question, or simply testing me.

I was beginning to learn that Julius answered only the questions he wanted to answer—and the rest would have to wait until he decided I was ready to hear them.



He climbed back into the Skunk Wagon.

The old Chevrolet coughed once before settling into its familiar rumbling idle.

Julius leaned out the driver’s window.

“I’ll pick you up in the morning, some time around 9:00.”

“Sivert and Janet never get up until 9 or 10…”

Then came another Festus Haggen wink.

“Sleep well, One Share.”

With a wave, he shifted into gear.

The Skunk Wagon rolled slowly down the dusty street until its taillights disappeared into the prairie darkness.

For several moments I stood listening.

The sound of the engine grew fainter…

and fainter…

until it vanished completely.

Then came something I had never truly experienced before.

Absolute silence.

There were no passing cars.

No neighborhood dogs.

No distant highway.

No airplanes overhead.

Only the whisper of the prairie wind moving through the grass…

and somewhere far beyond town…

high above the prairie, a lone nighthawk punctuated the evening with its sharp, buzzing call as it twisted through the gathering darkness in pursuit of insects.

I had never realized silence could have a sound of its own.

“One Share?”



I picked up my sleeping bag but didn’t move.

I simply stood there in the fading light, staring at Granddad’s old house.

The day had left me numb.

My mind struggled to make sense of everything I had seen and heard. Julius was unlike anyone I had ever met. This version of our family story was nothing like the one I had grown up believing. Everywhere I looked, there were questions, yet no one seemed willing to answer them.

I was physically exhausted, but my thoughts refused to settle. I stood there for several minutes, listening to the evening settle over the prairie, trying to gather myself before taking that first step.

In a way it felt like coming home.

Yet something was different.

For the first time since leaving Bigfork, I understood that I was truly alone.

Until then, everything about my trip had seemed temporary.

A month on the ranch.

Helping build a lambing barn.

Doing a favor for my parents.

Standing outside Granddad's empty house, I suddenly realized I had crossed an invisible line.

There was no one left to ask what was really going on.

No one left to explain why I had been sent to Cherry Creek.

Only Julius.

And somehow, after knowing him only a few hours, I suspected he already knew far more than he had told me.



The First Morning

I stood on Granddad's back porch listening.

Nothing.

No engines.

No voices.

No barking dogs.

Only the whisper of the prairie wind moving through the grass.

The silence felt almost alive.

After a few moments I reached beside the back door where Granddad had always hidden the old skeleton key. My fingers found it exactly where I remembered. Even so, it took four or five attempts before the stubborn lock finally surrendered with a loud metallic click.

The house was pitch black.

I couldn't see my hand in front of my face.

Only then did I realize I had forgotten one of the most important things I could have packed.

A flashlight.

"Nice going, Craig," I muttered to myself.

Some Eagle Scout.

I knew the breaker box was just inside the back door beside the staircase leading into the dirt basement.

Finding it wasn't the problem.

Finding it without stepping into the open stairwell was.

One cautious step at a time, my hand sliding along the wall, I finally reached the old breaker panel.

I flipped the switches.

The house suddenly came alive.

Light spilled into the kitchen, then into the dining room, revealing furniture that hadn't changed since my childhood. Every chair, every cupboard, every worn doorway looked exactly as I remembered.

Some things had disappeared.

Nothing had changed.

Yet somehow…

everything had.



Before turning in for the night, I made one final trip to the outhouse.

Time had done nothing to improve it.

If anything, it smelled worse than I remembered.

To this day, I have never understood how an outhouse can sit unused for months and still smell as though someone had been there five minutes earlier.

Some mysteries simply aren't meant to be solved.



Later that evening I stretched out on an old mattress in the back bedroom, my sleeping bag spread across it, and stared at the ceiling.

Sleep refused to come.

Questions simply replaced one with another.

Was I being punished for something?

Why hadn't Bernice told me everything?

Why hadn't she come outside to say goodbye?

When had Paul first met Julius?

Why had Paul left me standing outside Shep's Antiques when he knew Julius was working inside?

I couldn't understand it. Paul had brought me there, yet he left me in the parking lot instead of introducing us.

At the time, it felt like a sick joke.

More than fifty years later, I still feel resentful when I think about it.

If Julius was helping us…

why all the secrecy?

Most of all…

why me?

Why me and Julius?

Paul and Bernice wanted me to observe.

They wanted me to report.

They wanted me to watch Sivert… watch Janet.

But what did they honestly expect a twenty-year-old college student to accomplish?

Eventually I reminded myself that none of it really mattered.

Forty-five days. Max.

That was the promise.

Then I'd return to Missoula, begin my junior year, and this strange assignment would become nothing more than another story to tell someday.

I couldn't have been more wrong.



The old house held the July heat long after sunset.

There wasn't enough breeze to cool the rooms, and my sleeping bag seemed determined to trap every bit of warmth my body produced.

Worse yet, the unmistakable odor of skunk had already invaded my backpack, my clothes, and even my sleeping bag.

I became convinced I would smell exactly like Julius's camper before the week was over.

Several times I caught myself rubbing my face before remembering where my gear had spent the afternoon in the back of the Skunk Wagon.

I sincerely hoped there wasn't any skunk essence left on my hands.

Sometime during the night, exhaustion finally won.



The next thing I remember was the sound of meadowlarks.

Eastern Montana never seemed to wake up all at once.

Daylight arrived quietly.

The eastern sky slowly turned pink, then orange, then brilliant gold as the sun climbed above the horizon.

For a few precious minutes the prairie seemed perfectly still.

It was one of the most peaceful mornings I had ever experienced.

Then nature reminded me there was still one unavoidable destination behind every old prairie house.

The outhouse.

I had barely stepped off the back porch when the peaceful morning exploded.

The Skunk Wagon came charging into the yard in a cloud of gumbo dust, bouncing through every rut as though Julius were qualifying for the Indianapolis 500.

He slammed on the brakes.

The driver's window rolled down.

"I've got to gas up the Skunk Wagon."

He looked at me.

"Have your gear packed."

I blinked.

"I thought I was supposed to be staying here most of the time. Bernice told me that before I left for Ingomar."

"Nope."

He shrugged.

"Plans changed."

Before I could ask another question, he jammed the pickup into gear and disappeared once again in another cloud of dust.

I couldn't help smirking.

Julius answered questions almost as selectively as Paul.

The difference was that somehow Julius made it seem perfectly natural.



I gathered my belongings, added the flashlight I should have packed in the first place, shut off the electricity, wrestled once again with the old skeleton key, and locked Granddad's house behind me.

Then I sat on the weathered back porch and waited.

The smell of bacon drifted across town from the Jersey Lilly.

Immediately my stomach reminded me that breakfast had consisted of one lonely Pop-Tart.

It wasn't much of a breakfast.



When Julius returned, we loaded my gear into the Skunk Wagon and headed toward Cherry Creek.

As we bounced along the rough gumbo county road toward Sivert's ranch house located on the Big Porcupine Creek drainage, Julius resumed one of his more unusual habits.

Every few minutes he thoughtfully sucked on his beard, apparently searching for something left over from last night's supper.

Finally he glanced over.

"What'd you have for breakfast?"

I wasn't about to admit I'd eaten a stale Pop-Tart.

"The same as you."

Julius studied me for a moment.

Then came another slow Festus Haggen wink.

Neither of us said another word.



Twenty miles later we rolled into the headquarters of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. Sivert and Janet's house was located on Big Porcupine Creek.

The first building Julius showed me wasn't a bunkhouse.

It wasn't the sheep corrals.

It wasn't even Sivert's house.

It was a brand-new Quonset.

The enormous steel building stood like a monument to change.

Inside sat equipment unlike anything I had ever seen on Cherry Creek.

A new tractor.

A new baler.

A new rake.

New toolbars.

Front-end loaders.

Everything gleamed as though it had just left the factory.

Outside, the older equipment I remembered from childhood sat abandoned beside the Quonset, rusting quietly in the prairie weather.

It looked as though one generation had simply been pushed aside to make room for another.

Julius watched me studying everything.

Then he spoke quietly.

“Make sure your dad hears about this.”

I looked back at him.

“Everything.”

He nodded toward the far end of the Quonset.

Parked inside sat a brand-new 1971 Chevrolet split-shift stock truck.

It still looked like it belonged on the showroom floor.

“It doesn’t even have a hundred miles on it,” Julius said.

Without saying another word, I reached into my backpack and pulled out my camera.

I began photographing everything.

The Quonset.

The equipment.

The new truck.

The old machinery sitting forgotten outside.

Julius watched me for a minute before breaking into a grin.

“Well…”

he said,

“…if you’re taking pictures…”

he adjusted his hat…

“…you might as well take a few of me.”

So I did.

Neither of us realized it that morning, but from that day forward I would photograph almost everything we did together.

Looking back now, those photographs became far more than souvenirs.

They became the witnesses to my journals that I would one day call upon to tell my story.



Uncle Sivert

After taking a few photographs of Julius beside the new stock truck, I turned just in time to see an old friend racing across the ranch yard.

Rink.

His full name was Rinky Dink. Years earlier, he had belonged to an old Cherry Creek sheepherder named Patty Ryan. Somewhere along the way, Rink decided that Sivert, his children, and their ranch were his new family. No one had asked him to move in; he simply adopted them. He was an aging red-and-white sheepdog whose best working days were behind him, although no one had ever bothered to tell Rink he was retired.

He simply loved people.

A few years earlier Uncle Sivert had offered to give Rink to my brother Gary and me, but Bernice refused. She had no interest in taking on the responsibility of an old retired sheep dog, besides our family already had a cat.

Looking back…

I wish she had.

Rink had one unforgettable habit.

The instant someone scratched behind his ears or rubbed his belly, he became so overwhelmed with happiness that he completely lost control of his bladder.

Not a little.

A lot.

Without thinking, I knelt down and rubbed his neck.

His tail began wagging furiously.

He rolled onto his side.

Then I remembered.

Too late.

A stream of dog urine shot almost straight into the air.

Unfortunately, Julius happened to be standing in exactly the wrong place.

By the time Rink finished expressing his affection, Julius was soaked nearly to his belt.

He stared silently at his wet coveralls.

Then he looked at me.

“I should’ve shot that damn dog my first week working here.”

He paused just long enough for me to wonder whether he meant it.

“I didn’t have the heart.”

Then he pointed one finger directly at me.

“And don’t you ever pet that damn dog while I’m standing nearby.”

Rink, completely satisfied with himself, simply grinned.

I decided right then that petting Rink required better timing.



As the excitement settled, I noticed Uncle Sivert standing quietly on the porch of the ranch house.

Until that summer, almost everything I knew about him had come secondhand.

I had overheard countless conversations between him and my parents on the phone—usually from another room where children weren't supposed to be listening. During childhood visits to Cherry Creek, I had seen him only briefly.

Yet a few memories had stayed with me.

I remembered watching him count bands of freshly shorn sheep crossing the prairie with an accuracy that seemed almost impossible.

I remembered hauling water from Yoakum Springs when I suddenly realized he had fallen asleep behind the wheel. Somehow the pickup never wandered from the ranch road. Years of driving those trails had become instinct.

I remembered three men struggling with a gate chain that refused to loosen. Sivert quietly walked over, took the wrench, gave the chain one sharp twist, handed it back, and walked away without saying a word.

That was Uncle Sivert.

He never wasted words.



Walking towards us, he looked exactly as I remembered.

He was slightly shorter than I was, broad-shouldered, and weathered by a lifetime beneath the eastern Montana sun. His thick handlebar mustache framed a face deeply lined by years of wind, dust, and hard work. Beneath his sweat-stained straw cattleman's hat, his eyes seemed to measure everything around him.

What always surprised people was his voice.

It didn't match the man.

Instead of sounding rough and commanding, it was soft—almost high-pitched—forcing people to lean in and listen carefully whenever he spoke.

He watched Julius and me for a moment before completing his walk toward the Quonset.

Oddly, he never greeted me.

Instead, he spoke directly to Julius.

"I absolutely don't think we need that new lambing barn."

Julius said nothing.

Sivert continued.

"Paul and Bernice are trying to divide up my ranch."

He glanced toward Janet's knitting building before continuing.

"That isn't going to happen while Janet and I are alive."

His words caught me completely off guard.

Only a few days earlier, Paul had accused Sivert of stealing from our family.

Now Sivert was accusing Paul and Bernice of trying to take “his ranch”.

At twenty years old, I didn’t know who to believe.

Looking back now, I understand Sivert’s position far better than I did that day. To him, I wasn’t a nephew coming to help with a building project that would improve lambing at Cherry Creek. I was Paul and Bernice’s son, arriving uninvited in the middle of a bitter family conflict. More than once, Sivert made it clear there was no reason for me to be on Cherry Creek. He never treated me like family because, from his perspective, I wasn’t there as family. I was an outsider sent by people he no longer trusted.

Standing there that afternoon, I felt more like an intruder than a welcome guest. Even then, I was beginning to realize this entire situation had been created by Paul and Bernice—not by me.



Without another word, Sivert reached into his pocket and tossed me a set of keys.

I caught them.

“Don’t wreck it.”

Parked beside the Quonset stood a brand-new 1971 three-quarter-ton Chevrolet pickup, finished in brilliant orange-gold paint.

“I bought it from Boggs Chevrolet in Forsyth last week.”

He nodded toward it.

“It still needs the ranch radio installed.”

Then, for the first time since I arrived, he looked directly at me.

“You know how to drive?”

“I’ve got a driver’s license.”

He nodded.

“Had to ask.”

Then, with the faintest hint of a smile, he added,

“Your mother never did. Did she?”

There were some questions better left unanswered.

I decided that silence was probably the safest response.



Cherry Creek communicated almost entirely by shortwave radio.

Sivert’s house served as the base station for Cherry Creek and neighboring ranches. Six ranch pickups and both family Suburbans carried radios. Neighboring ranch pickups used these same radios. allowing everyone to stay in contact across hundreds of square miles of prairie.

It was a communication system built for a ranch world where telephones were few and neighbors were many miles apart.



Julius broke the silence.

“We need supplies for Cherry Springs.”

“I’m taking some meat.”

Sivert shrugged.

“Fine.”

Before we reached the freezer, Janet’s voice echoed across the yard.

“Sivert!”

“The boys! We have to leave for Forsyth!”

Sivert Jr., Richard, and little Jonathan hurried toward the waiting Suburbans.

Janet glanced in my direction.

I smiled and waved.

She recognized me.

She simply turned away without acknowledging me.

Within minutes both Suburbans disappeared down the ranch road.



Julius and I filled one large cooler with frozen meat and another with blocks of ice.

Then he walked into the pantry used to supply the sheepherders.

When he returned, he was carrying four heavy flour sacks stuffed with canned goods.

I looked at him.

Before I could ask the obvious question, he grinned.

“It isn’t stealing.”

He swung another sack over his shoulder.

“They didn’t tell us we couldn’t take this much.”

Then came the familiar Festus wink.

“Besides…”

“…we’re saving Sivert another trip **up** to Cherry Springs.”

That was my first lesson in the language of eastern Montana.

You didn’t go **north**.

You went **up**.

You didn’t go **south**.

You went **down**.

You went **out** to the west.

You came **back** from the east.

Those weren’t colorful expressions.

They were directions.

And if you misunderstood them, you could spend a long day getting lost on the prairie.

While loading shovels and tools into the pickup, something caught my eye.

Half buried beneath a pile of rusted scrap iron lay an old claw hammer.

I picked it up.

The leather handle was worn smooth from years of use.

I recognized it instantly.

It had belonged to my grandfather.

“Who threw this away?”

I asked.

Julius glanced over.

“Sivert.”

“He was cleaning up.”

“He planned on hauling that whole pile to the Ingomar dump.”

I turned the hammer over slowly in my hands.

For reasons I couldn’t explain then—and still can’t completely explain today—I couldn’t bear to leave it there.

I carried it to the pickup.

That old hammer has remained with me for more than fifty years.

Looking back, I realize I hadn't simply rescued an old tool.

I had rescued one of the last ordinary things that still connected me to my grandfather.



Before we left, Julius proudly showed me the portable lambing-jug panels he had designed.

"They lock together."

"No nails."

"No bolts."

He smiled with obvious satisfaction.

"I've built about fifty."

He looked toward the stack of lumber.

"Only another hundred and fifty to go."

He spoke about those panels the way a master cabinetmaker might speak about handcrafted furniture.

He was proud of his work.

And he should have been.



When everything was finally loaded, Julius checked the oil in my pickup, kicked each tire, crawled underneath to make sure the front hubs weren't engaged, neither the front end or rear end leaked and finally nodded with approval.

Rink wandered over one last time, hoping someone might take him along.

This time Julius scratched him gently behind the ears.

"Not today, old boy."

Rink stood in the yard watching as we pulled away.

With Julius leading in the Skunk Wagon and me following in my new ranch pickup. We headed north toward Cherry Springs leaving Sivert's home ranch.

I thought I was driving to a construction project.

Looking back, I realize I was driving toward the most important classroom of my life.



Cherry Springs

Julius led the way as we headed up to the North Pasture of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. I followed close behind in the brand-new orange-gold Chevrolet pickup Uncle Sivert had entrusted to me only minutes before.

As we drove north, memories began returning with every mile.

I had traveled these same roads many times as a boy, usually sitting beside Granddad or Uncle Sivert. Every familiar cattle guard, every distant rim rock, and every stretch of open prairie stirred another memory. Back then, Cherry Creek had simply been part of my family. I had never questioned whether I belonged.

I simply did.

The farther north we drove, the fewer signs of civilization remained.

The county roads became little more than two dusty tire tracks winding through endless grassland and an occasional wheat field. Clouds of fine gumbo dust billowed behind both pickups, hanging motionless in the hot July air long after we had passed Acorn Flats. Occasionally a meadowlark burst from a fence post, and once an antelope bounded effortlessly across the prairie before disappearing over a distant rise.

Eventually, the familiar corrals of Cherry Springs appeared on the distant horizon, standing alone in an endless sea of rolling prairie. There were no neighboring ranches, no power lines, and no signs of civilization—only miles of open range stretching in every direction.

A short distance northeast of the corrals, tucked into a shallow draw, lay the spring that gave Cherry Springs its name. Thick stands of chokecherry bushes surrounded the water, creating one of the few patches of green in an otherwise dry and unforgiving landscape. The spring provided enough hard, alkaline water to sustain sheep, antelope, deer, and other wildlife, although it was unpleasant for people to drink. Julius explained that, for generations, local Indians had stopped at Cherry Springs to gather chokecherries, hunt the game drawn to the dependable water, and water their horses before continuing across the vast prairie.

I had been there many times before.

As a boy, I had helped load wool bags into semi-trailers bound for market. I had worked sheep through the corrals, watched bands being counted after shearing, helped dock lambs' tails, band ram lambs, and paint-brand ewes and lambs. During shearing season, the place had been alive with activity. Men shouted over the constant bleating of thousands of sheep. Horses moved through swirling dust. Semi-trucks and pickups came and went throughout the day.

In my memory, Cherry Springs had never been quiet.

Now it stood silent.

The corrals were empty.

The holding pens were deserted.

The only sounds were the wind and the occasional screech of a red-tailed hawk drifting across the prairie.

I shut off the pickup and climbed out.

For a long moment, I simply stood there.

The wind pushed steadily against my shirt as it swept across miles of open country. There were no mountains rising in the distance, no forests, and no tree lines to soften the horizon. In western Montana, mountains always seemed to watch over you wherever you went.

Here…

there was nothing but sky.

For the first time in my life, I truly understood why eastern Montana was called Big Sky Country.

The emptiness was almost overwhelming.

Cottontail rabbits darted between weathered fence posts while jackrabbits bounded through the sagebrush beyond the corrals. Flocks of blackbirds gathered where thousands of sheep had once crowded together.

It was beautiful.

It was lonely.

It felt abandoned.

Oddly enough…

so did I.

With the exception of Julius, I hardly knew anyone living or working for Cherry Creek. Most of the sheepherders were strangers to me. The hired cowboys were complete strangers. During the weeks ahead, men would drift in and out of our camp on horseback or in ranch pickups, nearly all of them seeming to know exactly who I was while I struggled to remember their names even after being introduced.

No one introduced me as Sivert's nephew.

No one called me family.

I was Bernice Milam's son.

The college kid from Bigfork.

The young shareholder.

The outsider who had suddenly appeared on Cherry Creek.

Everyone seemed curious why I was there.

I was beginning to wonder the same thing.

The eastern Montana prairie has a way of making a person feel very small.

There were no nearby neighbors.

No telephone poles.

No traffic.

Nothing interrupted the endless sweep of grass meeting the sky.

During the day, the wind seldom stopped blowing.

At night, darkness swallowed everything beyond the reach of a lantern. When the moon failed to appear, the Milky Way stretched across the heavens with a brilliance I had never seen anywhere else.

It was both breathtaking…

and unsettling.

Julius climbed out of the Skunk Wagon, stretched his back, and slowly surveyed the country with the contentment of a man returning to a favorite place.

“Home,” he announced.

Then, pointing beyond the corrals, he added, “At least for a while.”

I followed his hand.

Sitting by itself on a slight rise was an old sheep wagon.

Its weathered wooden sides had been bleached by decades of prairie sun. The faded paint was peeling, and the iron wheels looked as though they had not turned in years.

For a moment, I waited.

Surely we would unload our gear there before heading to a bunkhouse.

Or perhaps to one of the ranch houses.

Without a word, Julius reached into the Skunk Wagon, pulled out my bedroll, and started walking toward the sheep wagon.

He never looked back.

Then it hit me.

That sheep wagon wasn’t a storage shed.

It wasn’t a lunch wagon.

It wasn’t where we kept tools.

It was where we were going to live.

It was where I was going to sleep.

Only a few hours earlier, I had arrived believing I was a partner in the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

Now I stood in the middle of the North Pasture, unwelcome by much of my own family, realizing my home was going to be a weather-beaten sheep wagon sitting alone on the prairie.

For the first time since arriving in eastern Montana, I understood just how far from home I really was.



Julius studied the mule deer buck who frequented Cherry Springs and decided he was too old and tough to be worth eating. For a man who lived off the prairie, that settled the matter—or so I thought. But as fall approached, Julius began looking at the old buck a little differently. Maybe the deer hadn't gotten any younger, but Julius was getting hungry. Eventually, practicality won out over principle. What we didn't eat fresh we made into jerky.

Home on the Prairie

Julius led me past the loading chute and through a maze of weathered sheep pens. I followed without giving much thought to where we were going. After all, I had been told I would be staying in Granddad Mysse's old house in Ingomar. I assumed we had simply come to Cherry Springs to unload supplies before returning to town at the end of the day.

Instead, Julius stopped beside an aging sheep wagon parked next to a large patch of sagebrush. A stock water tank stood nearby, its weathered sides stained by years of use.

He pointed toward the wagon.

"That's where you'll be sleeping."

For a moment, I simply stared at him.

Surely he was joking.

He wasn't.

Looking back now, I realize the sheep wagon itself wasn't what disappointed me.

It was what it represented.

Only hours earlier, Paul and Bernice had spoken as though I were coming to Cherry Creek as a partner and family member. Standing beside that weather-beaten wagon, I suddenly understood that those titles carried very little weight out here. Whatever role my parents imagined I had, it certainly wasn't reflected in my living arrangements.

More than once, Sivert had made it clear there was no reason for me to be on Cherry Creek. I wasn't welcome. Whether intended or not, assigning me to the sheep wagon felt like one more reminder that I wasn't there as family.

The realization stung.

Julius, however, acted as though nothing was unusual.

He climbed the steps, opened the door, and looked back at me with a grin.

"Come on in."

Then, with a look that suggested I should be very happy about it, he added, "Welcome to your new home."

I ducked through the doorway.

The smell hit me first.

Old grease.

Mouse droppings.

Weathered canvas.

Stale air trapped by weeks of July heat.

As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, the inside slowly came into focus.

It wasn't simply cluttered.

It was filthy.

Trash lay where it had been dropped. Mouse droppings covered the floor and benches. Spider webs stretched from one side of the wagon to the other, and a long tear in the aging canvas roof hung directly above the fold-down table.

Standing there at twenty years old, I couldn't believe people actually lived this way.

The narrow bunk along the back wall was littered with rock-hard scraps of leather from an old saddle. Dust coated nearly every surface. Even the windows had become so clouded with grime that very little light found its way inside.

I stood there in silence.

Only a few days earlier I had been sleeping in my own bed in Bigfork. Before that, I had been living in a college dormitory with electricity, running water, hot showers, and all the comforts I had taken for granted.

Now my home was a worn-out sheep wagon sitting alone in the middle of the eastern Montana prairie.

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Creek, I wondered if Sivert was trying to send me a message.

If he was…

I understood it.

Julius seemed completely unaware of my disappointment.

Or perhaps he understood it perfectly and simply knew there was no point discussing it.

He looked around the wagon, nodded once, and said matter-of-factly,

“We’ve got a little work to do.”

Near the front door sat a small cast-iron camp stove. At first glance it looked serviceable, but when Julius lifted the heavy lid, he stopped.

The firebox was packed with half-burned garbage. Someone had poured bacon grease into one side until it had hardened into a rancid, foul-smelling mass.

Julius slowly shook his head.

“Damn it, Sivert.”

There was no anger in his voice.

Only disappointment.

He quietly set his hat on the bench, found an old stove shovel, and began scraping the firebox clean.

He never complained.

He never blamed anyone.

He simply went to work.

Watching him, I began to understand something about Julius.

He accepted reality exactly as it was.

If something needed fixing, he fixed it.

If something needed cleaning, he cleaned it.

Complaining accomplished nothing.

Only after every bit of garbage and grease had been removed did he step back, inspect the stove, and nod with quiet satisfaction.

“There,” he said.

“Now it’ll cook.”



Looking west toward Acorn Flats and the animals Julius affectionately referred to as the “Antelope People.”

Making a Home

For the next several hours, neither of us said much.

We worked.

Not just a little.

We cleaned every square inch of the sheep wagon.

Julius handed me an old broom.

“You sweep.”

“I’ll tackle the rest.”

It wasn’t a suggestion.

It was simply how the job would get done.

Trash disappeared first, carried to a fifty-five-gallon burn barrel standing a short distance from the wagon. Then came the mouse droppings, years of dust, and the spider webs that had claimed every corner of the canvas-covered ceiling. Shelf by shelf, drawer by drawer, we emptied the wagon, scrubbed every surface, and wiped everything dry before putting it back.

The July sun beat down relentlessly outside, but inside the little wagon it was even hotter. Before long, sweat dripped from the brim of my cap and soaked through my shirt. Dust clung to my arms and face until I hardly recognized myself.

Julius never slowed down.

He worked steadily, never wasting a movement.

There was no rushing.

No complaining.

Only the quiet rhythm of a man who had spent a lifetime doing whatever needed to be done.

As the wagon slowly came back to life, I noticed something.

Julius wasn't cleaning because he enjoyed cleaning.

He was restoring order.

Every shelf had a purpose.

Every hook had been placed where it would be needed.

Every storage compartment had been built for a reason.

Nothing inside the sheep wagon was accidental.

Only after the wagon was clean did Julius begin carrying in the supplies we had brought from Sivert's ranch.

That was when I discovered how a sheepherder really lived.

He never stopped to decide where something belonged.

He already knew.

The coffee pot hung from one hook.

The frying pan fit inside a particular cabinet.

Cooking utensils slid into a narrow compartment beside the stove.

Matches were tucked into a dry corner where they would stay usable during storms.

The lantern rested in its own bracket.

The axe, shovel, water bucket, wash basin, and every other piece of equipment had a permanent home.

Watching Julius unpack was like watching a craftsman assemble a familiar set of tools.

His hands moved with quiet confidence, guided by years of experience rather than thought.

I finally asked, “How do you remember where everything goes?”

He smiled without looking up.

“You only have to learn it once.”

Then he paused and added, almost as if he were talking to himself,

“When everything’s in its place, you never waste time looking for it.”

At the time, I thought he was talking about a sheep wagon.

Years later, I realized he was talking about much more than that.

Life on the prairie didn’t leave room for carelessness.

A missing match.

A misplaced lantern.

An axe left somewhere in the dark.

Any one of them could become a serious problem when a storm rolled in, when lambing started in the middle of the night, or when winter temperatures dropped far below zero.

Out there, organization wasn't about neatness.

It was about survival.

Only one problem remained.

Above the fold-down table, a long tear ran through the aging canvas roof. During the next rainstorm, water would drip directly onto the table below.

Julius studied it for a moment.

Without saying a word, he walked back to the Skunk Wagon.

A few minutes later he returned carrying a roll of heavy canvas, waxed thread, stout needles, a pair of scissors, and a small can of waterproofing compound.

By then I was beginning to understand the Skunk Wagon.

If Julius didn't already have what he needed…

he usually knew where to find it.

Standing on a small step stool, he carefully stitched a patch over the tear.

Each stitch was perfectly spaced.

Each knot was pulled tight.

There was nothing hurried about his work.

When the sewing was finished, he brushed waterproofing over every seam before climbing down to inspect the repair.

Finally, he smiled.

“That ought to outlast both of us.”

I looked around the sheep wagon.

Only a few hours earlier, I had wondered how anyone could possibly live there.

Now it looked different.

Not because it had become luxurious.

It hadn’t.

It was still cramped.

It was still hot.

It still smelled faintly of old wood, canvas, and years of hard use.

But it was clean.

Everything had its place.

Everything worked.

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Springs, the little sheep wagon no longer felt like a punishment.

It felt, somewhat, like a home.

Looking back now, I realize Julius wasn’t simply teaching me how to live in a sheep wagon.

Without ever saying so, he was teaching me how to live with whatever life handed me.

Take care of what you have.

Do the job right.

Respect your surroundings.

And never waste time wishing things were different when there's work to be done.



I had no idea that this sheep wagon would become my home for the next five and a half months—a place I would sometimes love, sometimes despise, and never quite get used to. It was a small box on an endless prairie, yet within its walls I would discover just how much a person could endure, how deeply loneliness could settle in, and how a place you never would have chosen could become part of who you are.

Learning the Prairie

With the sheep wagon finally in order, Julius looked around one last time and nodded with quiet approval.

“There,” he said.

“Now we can get to work.”

He disappeared outside and returned carrying another flour sack we had loaded that morning.

Looking directly at me, he handed it over.

“Now you know where everything goes.”

“Put this stuff where it belongs.”

It wasn’t a test.

It was trust.

Carefully, I opened each cabinet and storage compartment, placing every item exactly where I had watched Julius put it before. When I finished, he glanced around the wagon.

Nothing had to be moved.

He simply nodded.

“Good.”

That single word meant more to me than he probably realized.

Outside, Julius wasted no time organizing our camp.

The cooler of frozen meat disappeared into the sheep wagon's built-in ice compartment. Canned goods were stacked inside a mouse-proof storage bin beneath the wagon. Axes, shovels, fencing tools, and buckets were arranged where they could be reached without searching.

Again, everything had its place.

Watching Julius work reminded me of Uncle Sivert.

Neither man hurried.

Neither wasted motion.

Both believed that doing a job correctly the first time was usually faster than doing it twice.

By late afternoon the July sun stood directly overhead.

Heat shimmered above the corrals.

The dry ground reflected the sunlight until every breath seemed hot.

Before long, sweat soaked completely through my shirt.

Julius noticed.

"You'll get used to it."

"I hope so."

He chuckled.

"You won't."

Then he laughed.

“Nobody ever does.”

That was Julius.

Even his encouragement came wrapped in honesty.

When everything had finally been unloaded, Julius frowned.

“Where’s the damn can opener?”

I smiled.

For once, I knew exactly where something was.

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled my key ring free and removed a tiny piece of folded steel no larger than my thumb.

I handed it to him.

“You know what this is?”

He turned it over in his rough hands.

“No.”

“It’s called a P-38.”

He raised one eyebrow.

“Canned-goods opener.”

I showed him how the tiny blade hooked over the rim of a can and opened the lid one small bite at a time.

It wasn’t fancy.

It wasn’t fast.

But it worked.

Julius grinned.

“Best invention the Army ever came up with.”

“Don’t lose it,” I told him.

“You’ll miss it.”

Without hesitation, he slipped the little opener into his pocket beside the keys to the Skunk Wagon.

At the time, neither of us realized that before summer’s end Julius would use that little Army can opener so often he would jokingly claim he couldn’t live without it.

As I looked around, another question came to mind.

“So where’s the kitchen?”

Julius looked at me as though the answer should have been obvious.

He spread both arms toward the endless prairie.

“The whole prairie is the kitchen.”

He paused, taking in the open land around us.

“It’s also our church. Some days it can be Heaven… some days Hell… depends on the mood of the Big Guy Upstairs.”

He said it with a quiet reverence, as though the prairie itself held a sacred place in his life. To Julius, the outdoors wasn’t simply where he worked. It was where he belonged.

Then he pointed toward the sheep wagon.

“That’s the pantry.”

He pointed toward the Skunk Wagon.

“That’s the hardware store.”

Finally, he tapped the brim of his sweat-stained hat.

“And this…”

he said with a grin,

“…is the headquarters.”

I laughed.

For the first time that day, I wasn’t thinking about where I was sleeping.

I was thinking about how different Julius was from anyone I had ever known.

As the afternoon drifted toward evening, I walked a short distance away from the sheep wagon and looked across Cherry Springs.

The corrals stood silent.

There wasn’t another building in sight.

No traffic.

No telephone.

No electricity.

Only the sheep wagon…

the Skunk Wagon…

Julius…

and me.

That morning I had arrived believing I was coming to Cherry Creek as a family member, a shareholder, and a partner.

By sunset, none of those titles seemed to matter.

Out here, a man wasn't measured by his last name.

He wasn't measured by how much of the ranch he supposedly owned.

He was measured by whether he could do the work, keep his word, and earn the respect of the people beside him.

As the sun settled lower over the prairie, I realized my education had already begun.

It just wasn't the one I had expected.



Supper at Sunset

By the time we finished cleaning the sheep wagon and putting everything in its proper place, the July sun had begun its slow descent toward the western horizon. The harsh afternoon heat softened, and long shadows stretched across the empty corrals of Cherry Springs.

Julius looked around our little camp with quiet satisfaction.

“That’ll do for today.”

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Springs, the sheep wagon looked as though someone actually lived there.

It wasn’t fancy.

It wasn’t comfortable.

But it was clean, organized, and ready for another season on the prairie.

Julius smiled.

“A man takes care of where he lives.”

He paused before adding,

“Even if it’s only for a little while.”

Then he reached for the cast-iron skillet.

“Supper first.”

“We’ll talk afterwards.”

Within minutes a small fire crackled beside the sheep wagon. As always, coffee water went on before anything else. Bacon soon followed, filling the evening air with a smell that somehow made the vast prairie feel a little less lonely.

To this day, I don't believe there is a finer aroma than bacon cooking over an open fire as the sun sets over eastern Montana.

We ate quietly, watching the last light settle across the prairie.

Only after supper did Julius pour two cups of coffee.

Mine contained enough sugar to disguise the coffee.

His was black enough to float a horseshoe.

"I don't drink coffee," I reminded him.

He chuckled.

"Tonight you do."

"It's cowboy medicine."

I took a cautious sip.

It wasn't nearly as bad as I expected.

For several minutes neither of us spoke.

The fire popped softly.

A meadowlark sang somewhere beyond the corrals before falling silent for the night.

The breeze carried the smell of sagebrush across Cherry Springs.

Finally, Julius leaned back against the sheep wagon wheel.

“So…”

“What did your folks send you out here to do?”

I hesitated.

“They wanted me to keep an eye on things.”

“What things?”

I looked into the fire.

“Sivert.”

“And Janet.”

“They’re convinced Cherry Creek money isn’t being spent the way it should be.”

Julius listened without interrupting.

When I finished, he poked another stick into the fire.

Then he asked quietly,

“How’re you supposed to do that?”

I wasn’t sure I understood.

“Do what?”

“Keep an eye on Sivert.”

He slowly swept his hand toward the empty prairie surrounding us.

“You’re thirty miles from headquarters.”

He pointed toward the sheep wagon.

“Your folks wanted you right here.”

He smiled.

“How much bookkeeping you reckon you’re going to see from Cherry Springs?”

I had no answer.

The question had never occurred to me.

After a long silence Julius nodded toward the new Chevrolet pickup parked nearby.

“That’s a nice pickup.”

“It sure is.”

“Brand new.”

“Yes.”

He smiled again.

“If your folks thought Sivert and Janet were wasting Cherry Creek money…”

He let the sentence hang in the evening air.

“…why’d they let him hand you the newest pickup on the ranch?”

I stared toward the truck.

I had admired it all afternoon.

Now I saw it differently.

“If they wanted someone watching every dollar…”

Julius continued quietly,

“…wouldn’t an old pickup have done just as well?”

He wasn’t accusing anyone.

He wasn’t trying to change my mind.

He was teaching me to think.

I found myself asking the question that had been building since I arrived.

“Julius…”

“Where do I fit into all this?”

“The fighting.”

“The division of Cherry Creek.”

“The family.”

He was quiet for so long I wondered if he had heard me.

Finally he spoke.

“I don’t know.”

It was the most honest answer anyone had given me since leaving Bigfork.

Then he added,

“I’ve been wondering the same thing.”

“You have?”

He nodded.

“Your folks have made me some promises, too.”

“What kind of promises?”

He smiled.

“The kind you don’t count on until they’re standing right in front of you.”

That was all he said.

He never criticized Paul.

He never criticized Bernice.

He never defended Sivert.

He simply left me with questions I would spend years answering.

Looking back now, I realize Julius began mentoring me that evening without either of us recognizing it.

He wasn’t teaching me how to build a lambing barn.

He wasn’t teaching me how to cook over a campfire.

He wasn’t even teaching me how to live in a sheep wagon.

He was teaching me something much more valuable.

Think for yourself.

Listen more than you speak.

Never accept one side of a story until you've heard the other.

Those lessons didn't come from books.

They came from a quiet sheepherder who had spent a lifetime watching people as carefully as he watched sheep.

The last glow of daylight disappeared beyond the western horizon.

Julius stood and stretched.

"Time for bed."

Then he looked over at me with that familiar Festus Haggen wink.

"Oh…"

"I snore."

"Loud."

I laughed.

"So do I."

He grinned.

"Then I guess we'll see which one of us scares the coyotes away first."

For the first time since arriving in eastern Montana, I laughed without thinking about Paul, Bernice, Cherry Creek, or the uncertainty that had followed me across the state.

That evening, beneath the immense Big Sky of eastern Montana, I thought I had simply shared supper with a sheepherder.

Years later, I realized I had just met my first real mentor.



Blackbirds lined the Cherry Springs corral fence, silent sentinels against the endless prairie. Even with Julius beside me, the stillness felt unnatural. The birds watched, the wind whispered, and the vast emptiness seemed to swallow every sound. We had each other, but out there, it was easy to feel as though the rest of the world had forgotten we were there.

Waiting

The contractor from Thompson Falls still hadn't arrived.

So we waited.

For Julius, waiting didn't mean sitting.

It meant preparing.

Every morning he was up before sunrise. By the time I crawled out of the sheep wagon, coffee was already brewing over the fire and breakfast was nearly finished.

"The prairie doesn't wait for sleepyheads," he said with a grin.

That was all the explanation he ever offered.

From sunrise until evening we worked.

Every gate had to swing freely.

Every loose board had to be replaced.

Every broken hinge was replaced and oiled.

Every nail driven flush.

Every corral had to be ready before the first log was ever peeled for the log lambing barn.

Julius worked with a relentless intensity I had never seen in anyone before. Every post, every gate, every detail of the Cherry Springs corral system had to be just right. At the time, I couldn't understand what drove him to such lengths. He seemed to be

preparing for something I knew nothing about, something that demanded every detail be perfected before the moment arrived.

Nothing less would do.

By the third day, my hands were covered with blisters despite wearing leather gloves. The blisters developed blisters. Every muscle in my body ached. Climbing into the sheep wagon each night had become as much work as climbing out of it the next morning.

Julius noticed.

“Sore?”

I laughed.

“I don’t think there’s a part of me that isn’t.”

He smiled.

“Good.”

I looked at him.

“Good?”

“It means you’re working.”

Then he winked.

“In another week you’ll quit hurting.”

He paused.

“Mostly.”

That became one of Julius's favorite words.

Mostly.

What puzzled me was Julius himself.

He was decades older than I was, yet he worked beside me from daylight until sunset without asking for an easier job or taking a longer break. Still, I began noticing small things that twenty-year-old eyes might otherwise have missed.

Occasionally he stopped to straighten his back before picking up the maul again.

Sometimes he rubbed one shoulder as though it bothered him.

Once or twice each day he quietly took medicine from a small pill bottle he kept tucked away in the Skunk Wagon.

I never asked what it was for.

He never volunteered an explanation.

A few minutes later, he would be back at work as though nothing had happened.

Watching Julius made me think about Paul and Bernice.

Neither of them had ever lived this life.

Neither had repaired corrals from sunrise until sunset.

Neither had swung a hammer or post maul hour after hour beneath a July sun.

In truth, I doubted either of them could have kept up with Julius for a single day.

So why had they sent me?

Was this really about watching Sivert and Janet?

Or was something else going on?

Had they sent me to prove I deserved to be called a partner?

To prove I was worthy as a son?

The longer I worked beside Julius, the less certain I became.

Late one afternoon, as we finished repairing another section of corrals, I looked over at him.

“Julius…”

“Why did you agree to help Paul?”

He rested both hands on the top of his hammer and looked out across the prairie before answering.

“I didn’t.”

I frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“I agreed to help you.”

There was a long silence.

Then he smiled.

“Big difference.”

At twenty years old, I wasn’t sure what he meant exactly.

Looking back now, I understand exactly what he was trying to tell me.

Julius wasn't working for Paul.

He wasn't working against Sivert.

He wasn't interested in the Mysse family war.

He had quietly decided to look after a young man who had been dropped into the middle of something he didn't yet understand.

Neither of us realized it then, but we had both come to Cherry Springs because of promises made by other people.

Those promises would shape both of our lives before the summer was over.



Early July 1971. Julius was beginning to understand what he had gotten himself into.

Nothing Happened

The days slipped by one after another.

Then another.

Still no contractor.

No log trucks.

No Dean from Thompson Falls.

No lambing barn.

Every morning I expected to hear diesel engines climbing the road into Cherry Springs.

Every evening I wondered why they hadn't come.

Julius never seemed concerned.

"They'll get here."

"Eventually."

Eventually.

That became another of Julius's favorite words.

While we waited, he found enough work to keep two men busy from sunrise until sunset.

Every corral had to be repaired.

Every gate had to swing freely.

Every loose board had to be replaced.

Every pile of lumber had to be stacked where it would stay dry.

Every piece of old steel roofing from the stock weighing shed had to be moved where Julius wanted it.

Nothing escaped his attention.

By the end of each day, I was exhausted.

My hands had hardened into calluses.

The blisters were finally disappearing, replaced by muscles that seemed to ache in places I never knew existed.

Julius acted as though this was an ordinary day's work.

I wasn't so sure.

The longer we worked together, the more I wondered why Paul and Bernice had sent me to Cherry Springs.

Neither of them had ever done hard work like this.

Neither had lived in a sheep wagon.

Neither had spent ten or twelve hours a day rebuilding corrals beneath a July sun.

Yet somehow they expected me to.

Why?

Was this intended to demonstrate that I belonged within Cherry Creek?

Was it meant to prove I was worthy of being called a partner?

Or was I simply put out of the way? Out of the way of what?

The harder I worked, the less certain I became.

One afternoon the answers didn't come.

Instead, the sky changed.

Far to the west, towering black thunderheads began climbing thousands of feet above the prairie. Within minutes they swallowed the blue sky, their tops glowing white while their bases turned the color of charcoal.

Julius stopped hammering.

"We're in for a good one."

The wind arrived first.

It swept across Cherry Springs with a force that sent tumbleweeds racing through the corrals and carried sheets of dust high into the air. The temperature dropped so quickly that I reached for my jacket without thinking.

Then came the lightning.

Not the brief flashes I was accustomed to seeing in western Montana.

These bolts ripped across the prairie from horizon to horizon, striking so often they seemed to split the sky apart. Some exploded into the ground with a crack that shook the corrals beneath our feet. Others branched across the clouds like giant roots searching for the earth.

Seconds later the thunder arrived.

It didn’t rumble.

It exploded.

The sound rolled across the open prairie with such force that it seemed to come from every direction at once.

Julius simply watched.

He had seen storms like this all his life.

I hadn’t.

Standing beside him, I realized that the storm outside wasn’t nearly as violent as the one growing inside my own mind.

Every day brought more questions.

Every conversation revealed another contradiction.

Paul blamed Sivert.

Sivert blamed Paul and Bernice.

Julius took neither side.

And there I stood, working myself to exhaustion in the middle of a ranch where I wasn’t entirely welcome, trying to understand a family war no one seemed willing to explain. I was living in the middle of nowhere with a sheepherder I was only beginning to know and trust, with no real opportunity to do the things my parents had sent me there to do.

So what was the real reason I was there?

It felt as though lightning was striking all around me while I searched for solid ground.

The rain finally came.

Not gently.

Sheets of water swept across Cherry Springs until the corrals disappeared behind a curtain of rain. Water poured off the patched canvas roof of the sheep wagon exactly where it was supposed to, and not a single drop found its way through Julius's repair.

He noticed.

A faint smile crossed his face.

"Told you it'd hold."

By morning the storm had passed.

The prairie smelled clean.

The dust had settled.

The grass seemed greener than it had the day before.

Inside me, however, nothing had changed.

The questions remained.

As two weeks drew to a close, I realized something else.

I hadn't called home.

Not once.

Paul had instructed me to telephone every week.

Bernice wanted reports.

Instead, I had forgotten.

Partly in the back of my mind I remembered the telephone at the Jersey Lilly probably wasn't working. More importantly, the miles from Cherry Springs made getting to the phone practically out of the question.

All I could think about was eating supper and getting ready for tomorrow's work.



One evening after supper, Julius stretched out beneath the sheep wagon and folded his hat over his face.

"How can you sleep on the ground?" I asked.

Without moving, he answered,

"Practice."

After a long pause he added,

"And being tired helps."

I thought he had fallen asleep.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he spoke again.

"One of these days…"

He paused.

"I'll show you something Paul and Bernice have been working on. Some maps. Plans for Cherry Creek and the new Milam Ranch."

Before I could ask another question, his slow, steady snoring drifted out from beneath the brim of his hat.

I stared into the darkness, unable to stop thinking about it.
Maps?
Whatever story Paul and Bernice had sent me to uncover, I was beginning to suspect I hadn't even reached the first chapter.



Maps?

The word echoed in my mind long after Julius had fallen asleep beneath the sheep wagon.

Maps.

Paul's voice still rang in my ears.

"It's time to divide up the Goddamn ranch!"

Now Julius was telling me that Paul and Bernice had drawn maps showing how Cherry Creek was supposed to be divided.

Why hadn't anyone told me?

If I was truly going to be part of Cherry Creek's future, shouldn't I have been included in those discussions? Shouldn't my parents have explained what they were planning and where I fit into it?

Instead, I had been sent to observe, to watch, and to report.

Were they preparing me to become part of the ranch's future, or were they simply using me to serve their own purposes?

And what about Julius?

He knew about the maps. He knew about the proposed division. His relentless work on the corrals suddenly seemed to carry a significance I had not understood. Perhaps he was playing a far greater role in the future of Cherry Creek than I had ever imagined.

I had arrived in eastern Montana believing I was there to observe a construction project. Now I was beginning to suspect that decisions were being made about the ranch—and my future—without anyone bothering to tell me.

The financial picture made even less sense.

Why did I need a new pickup? Why not use Julius's? If Cherry Creek was facing a financial crisis, as Paul and Bernice insisted, why was the ranch paying for a new pickup for me to use while constructing an expensive new log lambing barn?

Neither expense would solve a shortage of money. Both required substantial expenditures before they could provide any return.

And if Paul and Bernice truly believed Sivert and Janet were recklessly spending Cherry Creek's money, why approve two more major expenses?

The contradictions kept multiplying.

But beneath the questions about money was something more personal.

Why hadn't my parents treated me like an adult?

If they expected me to accept the responsibilities of a partner, shouldn't I have been trusted with the truth? After all, I was a stockholder in Cherry Creek. Partners discuss plans. Partners

debate ideas. Partners understand the risks before decisions are made.

Instead, I had been given assignments.

Not explanations.

Sitting outside the sheep wagon beneath the enormous eastern Montana sky, I realized how little I knew about the future everyone else seemed to be planning.

Julius knew pieces of the story. Sivert knew pieces. Paul and Bernice certainly knew. Even the maps existed.

Yet I had been left out of the conversation.

Me.

I had come to eastern Montana believing I was helping uncover the future of Cherry Creek. Instead, I was beginning to suspect that my own future had been quietly unfolding without anyone ever asking what I wanted.



Waiting for Answers

By the third week of July, the contractor still hadn't arrived.

Neither had the log trucks.

So Julius kept us working.

If a gate needed another board, we replaced it.

If a corral needed strengthening, we strengthened it by replacing the rotten posts.

Julius wanted Cherry Springs corral system ready before the first log was ever unloaded. Ready for the Milam Ranch.

The work was relentless.

By evening I was exhausted. I had never worked so hard in my life.

What surprised me most was Julius.

Although he was decades older than I was, he worked beside me every step of the way. Still, I began noticing more small changes. Occasionally he paused before lifting another board or quietly rubbed his wrist when he thought I wasn't looking. He was taking more breaks for water each day and looking for his medicine pill bottle.

Without thinking much about it, I began doing more of the cooking. It wasn't much, but it gave Julius a chance to sit down or nap while I fixed supper. It seemed like the least I could do.

As the days passed, another question kept bothering me.

Paul and Bernice insisted Cherry Creek was in financial trouble.

Yet I have a brand-new pickup, plans for an expensive log lambing barn, and a steady stream of ranch improvements.

Only Julius behaved as though every dollar mattered.

He saved bent nails, straightened baling wire, and repaired broken tools instead of replacing them.

Nothing was wasted.

The harder Julius and I worked to save Cherry Creek money, the less I understood why everyone else seemed willing to spend it.

I also found myself wondering about the rest of the ranch.

Were the other sheepherders working this hard?

Were the cowboys?

Was Sivert?

Or had Paul and Bernice sent me to Cherry Springs to prove something?

To prove I deserved to be a partner?

To prove I was worthy of being their son?

I didn't have the answers.

But with each passing day, I found myself thinking less about the lambing barn…

and more about the people behind it.



Questions Without Answers

By the fourth week of July, my thirty days at Cherry Springs were nearly over.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

Every swing of the hammer brought me one day closer to leaving for Missoula and beginning my junior year at the University of Montana. Becoming a physician had been my goal for years, and I couldn't imagine giving it up.

Yet no one mentioned my return.

Not Paul.

Not Bernice.

Not Julius.

The contractor from Thompson Falls still hadn't arrived.

No semis carrying logs came over the hill.

No construction crew.

No new lambing barn.

Every morning I expected that to change.

Every evening another Montana sunset slipped behind the prairie, and nothing had changed from the time I arrived on Cherry Creek.

Julius never seemed concerned.

If a windbreak needed another board, we replaced it.

If a gate sagged, we straightened it.

If a corral looked weak, we reinforced it.

He believed maintenance wasn't something you did after something failed.

You did it so it never failed in the first place.

The work never stopped.

By evening I was completely exhausted. My hands had become callused, my jeans were torn, and my boots carried a permanent mixture of grease, gumbo mud, and sheep manure.

I had never worked this hard in my life.

What troubled me wasn't the work.

It was the uncertainty.

Had Paul and Bernice always intended for me to stay longer than thirty days?

If so, why hadn't they simply told me?

If they expected me to become part of Cherry Creek—or whatever future they had planned—why hadn't they talked to me about it?

What about medical school?

Had they already decided my future without ever asking what I wanted?

Those questions followed me through every day's work.

I found myself asking the same questions over and over.

One afternoon Julius stopped beside the old loading chute.

He rested his hand on one of the massive upright timbers.

“Your Granddad helped build this,” he said quietly. “He carved his name into this post with his pocketknife. Look at the date.”

I reached out and traced the weathered carving with my fingertips.

The letters had nearly disappeared beneath decades of sun, wind, and sheep rubbing against the wood.

As far as I could see stretched land my Granddad Mysse had dreamed about, fought for, and slowly built with the proceeds from countless bands of sheep.

For the first time, I wasn’t looking at Cherry Creek as a business or as the source of endless family arguments.

I was looking at my grandfather’s life.

Every pasture.

Every reservoir.

Every fence.

Every loading chute.

Every weathered corral.

Each one represented years of sacrifice, risk, drought, blizzards, and relentless work.

He hadn’t built Cherry Creek arguing over dividends.

He had built it one season at a time.

Standing there, I wished he were beside me.

What would he have told me?

Would he have wanted me to protect what he had spent a lifetime creating?

Would he have encouraged me to continue toward medical school?

Or would he simply have told me to slow down and learn the truth before judging anyone?

I would never know.

As I stood there with my hand resting on his faded carved name, another realization slowly settled over me.

Neither Paul nor Bernice had ever asked me about the sheep.

They never asked whether the corrals were safe.

They never asked about the fences, the windmills, the reservoirs, or the condition of the ranch.

They asked about one person.

Sivert.

Always Sivert.

That troubled me.

If their real concern was Cherry Creek, why weren't they asking about Cherry Creek? About the ranch?

For the first time, I wondered if I had been sent east to help build a lambing barn…

or simply to gather information about my uncle.

Those were two very different assignments.

One evening after supper, Julius noticed I had grown unusually quiet.

“What’re you thinking about?”

I poked at the campfire with a stick before answering.

“I’m beginning to wonder why I’m really here.”

He watched the sparks drift into the dark prairie sky before speaking.

“I figured you’d ask yourself that sooner or later.”

“You already know?”

He nodded.

“I know enough.”

“Then why don’t you tell me?”

That familiar smile crossed his face.

“Because, Craig…”

“…some things you’ve got to figure out yourself.”

At twenty years old, that answer frustrated me.

Today, I believe it was one of the greatest gifts Julius ever gave me.

He could have filled my head with his opinions.

Instead, he quietly taught me to observe.

To listen.

To question.

And to reach my own conclusions.

Looking back, Julius wasn't keeping the truth from me.

He was protecting me from accepting someone else's version of it before discovering my own.

As July drew to a close, my thirty days had nearly expired.

I had fulfilled the promise I made to Paul and Bernice.

Yet I still had no idea whether I would be leaving for Missoula or remaining at Cherry Creek.

The future everyone else seemed to know remained a mystery to me.

For the first time in my life, I realized I wasn't simply trying to understand what was happening to Cherry Creek.

I was trying to understand what was happening to my own life.



The End of July

By the end of July, nearly four weeks had passed since Julius picked me up at Shep's Antiques in Harlowton.

It hardly seemed possible.

When I left Bigfork, Paul and Bernice assured me I would only be gone thirty to forty-five days.

Now July was ending.

The contractor from Thompson Falls had never arrived.

No semis carrying logs had climbed the hill to Cherry Springs.

No lambing barn had been started.

Instead, Julius and I had spent nearly every day rebuilding corrals, repairing fences, replacing windbreaks, organizing tools, and trying to stay one step ahead of the next thing that needed fixing.

Mainly working on the new windbreak.

When we finally ran out of lumber, posts, and nails, we simply found something else that needed attention.

Waiting had become part of the job.

By then, my hands no longer resembled those of a college student. The blisters had hardened into calluses. My arms were scratched from barbed wire. My jeans were stained with grease, gumbo mud, and dust. Even my boots had molded themselves to my feet.

Hard work had become routine.

One afternoon I caught my reflection in the pickup's side mirror.

My face was deeply sunburned.

I had grown a respectable beard.

My hair hung longer than it ever had before.

For a moment I smiled.

Bernice probably wouldn't have recognized me.

The truth was…

I wasn't sure I recognized myself.

Late that afternoon Julius and I sat in the shade of the sheep wagon with cups of his gritty coffee, saying very little.

Silence had become comfortable between us.

During my first weeks at Cherry Springs, Julius had measured every word he spoke. But by the end of July, I began noticing subtle changes.

Sometimes he repeated stories he had already told me.

Occasionally he drifted into memories without explaining how he got there.

At other times he would stop in the middle of a sentence, stare across the prairie, and quietly pick up the conversation again several minutes later as though no time had passed.

At twenty years old, I didn't know what to make of it.

Looking back now, I wonder if it was simply age… too many years living alone on the prairie… the relentless summer heat… or perhaps the illness that required the medicine he quietly took each day.

Whatever the reason, the careful guard he normally kept over his thoughts seemed to be slipping.

Without any introduction, he looked out toward Cherry Springs and said quietly,

"You know what started all this?"

I shook my head.

"Money."

He let the word hang in the air.

"Sivert wanted a raise."

Julius explained that, according to Bernice, the only time Sivert ever ventured away from the ranch to visit her was after Richard was born, when Sivert came to Bigfork to ask her to approve an increase in his salary as president of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

Bernice refused.

Her reasoning was simple: if she could support her two sons from her partnership distributions, she believed Sivert should be able to support himself on his Cherry Creek salary as president and the partnership distributions he was receiving.

In Bernice's mind, Sivert was already being paid more than enough.

Julius stared into his coffee.

“Sivert went home…”

He paused.

“…and gave himself the raise anyway.”

Neither of us spoke.

After a while he quietly added,

“That’s when the family war really started.”

I didn’t know what to think.

The story sounded so simple.

Too simple.

Families don’t destroy themselves over a single raise.

Or do they?

Several minutes passed before Julius spoke again.

Almost absentmindedly.

“Your folks already had maps drawn.”

I looked at him.

“Maps!”

Yes I knew that.

“For the new Milam Ranch.”

Julius took another sip of coffee as though he hadn't told me about the maps before.

"Paul figured you'd manage the new ranch with me."

I stared at him.

No one had ever told me that.

Not Paul.

Not Bernice.

Not anyone.

I had been worrying about getting back to Missoula to begin my junior year and continue my pre-med studies.

Apparently my parents had been planning an entirely different future.

A ranch.

A home.

A career.

Yet no one had ever asked whether I still wanted to become a doctor.

Before I could ask another question, Julius slowly stood up, brushed the dust from his pants, and picked up his hammer.

"Come on," he said.

"We've still got work to do."

He never mentioned the conversation again.

Looking back, I don't think Julius intended to tell me that much.

He had simply let a piece of the story slip.

A piece that changed everything.

As darkness settled over Cherry Springs that evening, I realized I had fulfilled the promise I made to Paul and Bernice.

What I didn't know was whether they intended to keep theirs.

At twenty years old, I wasn't angry.

I was stunned.

For the first time, I began to understand that the biggest decisions about my future might already have been made… without me.



Chapter 3

August 1971

Running Out

August arrived without a single log being delivered to Cherry Springs.

Nearly a month had passed since Paul and Bernice had sent me east to observe the construction of a massive log lambing barn. According to them, the project would only take thirty to forty-five days.

By now, I should have been helping raise log walls.

Instead, Julius and I had spent the month rebuilding corrals, repairing fences, and constructing a new windbreak that neither of us had expected to become such a large project.

Somewhere along the way, my priorities had changed.

The lambing barn no longer mattered very much.

Finishing the windbreak did.

As we rebuilt it, I began suggesting small changes to better protect the corrals from the relentless eastern Montana wind and winter storms. Julius listened, studied each idea, and more often than not nodded his approval.

“That’ll work,” he would say.

Or simply,

“That’s better.”

Coming from Julius, there was no higher compliment.

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Springs, I wasn’t just following directions.

I was contributing.

The windbreak had quietly become our project.

To finish it, however, we needed more lumber, more ring nails, and enough groceries to keep going.

That seemed simple enough.

Unfortunately, very little about Cherry Creek was simple anymore.

By August, I was no longer naïve about why Paul and Bernice had sent me to eastern Montana.

I understood that Julius and I had both become pieces in a much larger family struggle.

Whether we wanted those roles or not, no longer mattered.

What mattered to me was far more immediate.

Finish the windbreak.

Do the job right.

Then figure out whether I was ever going to make it back to Missoula.

As we drove down from Acorn Flats toward Cherry Creek headquarters that morning, I expected little more than to load slabs, pick up ring nails, and restock our food supplies.

Instead, the day answered questions I hadn't known enough to ask.

And raised even more.



View from Sivert and Janet's Home Ranch
Looking west at the Porcupine Rimrocks

Paul's Project...Not Sivert's

Our first stop that morning was the Big Porcupine headquarters.

We needed more slabs, posts, lag bolts, and ring nails to finish the corral windbreak. We were also running low on groceries and other supplies for Cherry Springs.

The contractor was the furthest thing from my mind.

By then, I no longer cared whether the log lambing barn was ever built.

My commitment was simple.

Help Julius finish the windbreak.

Keep my promise to Paul and Bernice.

Then, if everything went according to my plan, return to Missoula in another two weeks and begin my junior year as a pre-med student.

Sivert was outside when we pulled into the yard.

He glanced at me before turning to Julius.

"I might need Craig's pickup back."

Before I could answer, Julius spoke.

"You'll have to take that up with Paul or Bernice. They're the ones who told you to get a pickup for him to use."

Sivert studied Julius for a moment, then simply nodded.

The subject was over.

I still found it curious that Julius could invoke Paul and Bernice's names so easily with Sivert. Whatever agreements existed among them had been made long before I arrived.

I wasn't part of those conversations.

I walked up closer to Sivert as he tried to turn around and walk away. He looked at me as if I wasn't there.

"We've run out of slabs, posts, and ring nails. We need enough to finish the windbreak."

Sivert didn't hesitate.

"That's not my problem."

He spoke matter-of-factly, without anger.

"That's Paul and Bernice's project. The windbreak was absolutely fine the way it was."

He paused.

"They're the ones who wanted the new lambing barn."

"…and the new windbreak."

"They should be the ones paying and working for it."

Then he looked directly at me.

"Not you."

Those two words stayed with me.

Not you.

For the first time, I realized Sivert wasn't criticizing my work.

If anything, he was trying to separate me from a project he believed belonged to Paul and Bernice.

I decided to ask him the question that had been bothering me.

"My understanding was that you were supposed to keep us supplied with lumber, nails, food, and information from Paul and Bernice."

He shook his head.

"I've got enough to do running this ranch."

"If you need supplies, you'll have to figure out how to get them."

"If you need to talk to your folks, I've got a telephone."

"Beyond that…"

He shrugged.

"…I've got my own problems."

His answer didn't surprise me.

By then, I had already figured out that whatever role Paul and Bernice imagined for me wasn't going to happen.

I lived thirty miles away at Cherry Springs.

I rarely saw Sivert or Janet.

There was nothing to report.

The more time I spent on Cherry Creek, the less interested I became in carrying stories back to Bigfork.

That wasn't why I got up every morning.

My concern had become much smaller—and much simpler.

Finish the windbreak.

Help Julius.

Keep my promise.

Then go home and return to college.

Whatever war was being fought between Paul and Bernice and Sivert no longer seemed to have much to do with me.

Or so I believed.



The Mysse Curse

As Julius and I walked toward the Quonset, neither of us said much.

My thoughts weren't on the lambing barn anymore.

They were on the windbreak.

We had come for slabs, ring nails, groceries, and whatever else we needed to finish the job.

Instead, we were leaving with nothing.

Off to the side of the Quonset sat years of old Cherry Creek equipment.

Broken hay wagons.

Worn-out machinery.

Hay baling equipment.

The old John Deere tractor.

Sheep wagons that had been pushed aside and forgotten.

I couldn't help wondering why no one had repaired them. Surely some of it could still have been useful.

Julius pointed toward an old flatbed trailer.

"We'll use that one."

It looked as though it hadn't moved in years.

One tire was flat.

The other was ruined by the sun.

The tongue had cracked where years of hard use had finally caught up with it.

Sivert glanced at it before climbing into his pickup.

“It isn’t usable,” he said. “We kept it for parts.”

Then he drove away.

I watched the dust disappear down the road.

Why wouldn’t Sivert at least try to repair it?

We needed that trailer to haul slabs for the windbreak.

Without it, our work at Cherry Springs had come to a standstill.

As I looked around the Quonset, another thought struck me.

This wasn’t the Cherry Creek my grandfather had built.

Granddad Mysse had spent a lifetime creating one of the finest sheep ranches in eastern Montana.

He believed in maintaining what he owned.

He believed in working together.

Most of all, I think he believed family should remain family.

Standing there among the abandoned equipment, I found myself wishing he were still alive.

Somehow, I couldn’t imagine him allowing his family to drift this far apart.

To me, that was the real Mysse Curse.

Not broken machinery.

Not old trailers.

But a family that no longer trusted one another enough to solve problems together.

Julius broke my thoughts.

“Take those wheels to Melstone.”

He pointed toward the trailer.

“They need new tires.”

“What about the tongue?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

That was enough for me.

Whether the trailer had been abandoned for months or years didn’t matter anymore.

If we could get it rolling, we could haul slabs.

If we could haul slabs, we could finish the windbreak.

At that moment, that was all I cared about.



Melstone

The drive west to Melstone gave me time to think.

The farther I got from Cherry Creek, the more confusing the morning became.

Sivert insisted the lambing barn and the new windbreak were Paul and Bernice's projects. If they wanted the improvements, they should be the ones paying for them.

Yet Julius seemed able to accomplish almost anything simply by mentioning my parents' names.

Then another thought occurred to me.

Bernice and her sister, Marie, had always remained close. I had to wonder if Marie also supported dividing the ranch. I had never asked. The truth was, although Marie was my aunt, we rarely visited and seldom talked.

Somewhere among all of them was the truth.

I simply hadn't found it yet.

One thing, however, had become increasingly difficult to ignore.

I was a partner and shareholder in Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

If I was expected to share ownership, shouldn't I also understand what was happening?

About an hour later I pulled into the Texaco station in Melstone.

Before I had a chance to climb out of the Skunk Wagon, a large man came striding out of the service bay, wiping his hands on an oily shop rag.

In a voice loud enough for the entire town to hear, he barked,

“What the hell can I do for you?”

Then, without waiting for an answer, he narrowed his eyes.

“And who in the hell are you?”

For a split second I wondered if I’d done something wrong.

I introduced myself and explained that Julius had sent me to have two trailer tires mounted.

The man’s expression softened ever so slightly.

“So you’re Sivert Mysse’s nephew.”

He nodded toward the office.

“Larry’ll fix you up.”

Then, just as quickly as he’d appeared, he disappeared back into the shop.

I couldn’t help smiling.

How did he know I was Sivert Mysse’s nephew?

If first impressions meant anything, Jake Zaharko could scare the bark off a cottonwood tree.

A few moments later I stepped inside the office.

Larry Zaharko was leaning back in an old swivel chair with his boots propped on the desk, completely absorbed in the Billings Gazette.

Without looking up, he asked,

“What can I do for you?”

I explained why I was there.

He folded the newspaper, grinned, and said,

“I hear you’ve already met my dad.”

“I have.”

Larry laughed.

“Don’t let him fool you.”

“He sounds like a grizzly bear, but he’s really just a pussycat.”

That was exactly the opposite of my first impression.

Larry finally stood up and looked me over.

“So…”

“You’re Bernice’s boy.”

I nodded.

He smiled to himself.

“I knew your mother years ago.”

Then he paused.

“She was by far the prettiest of the Mysse girls.”

He looked me over once more before grinning.

“Hard to believe you’re Bernice’s boy.”

I wasn’t sure whether that was meant as a compliment or an insult.

Judging by the grin on Larry’s face, I wasn’t supposed to know.

He walked over to the tire rack and scanned the shelves.

“You’re in luck.”

“I’ve got exactly what you need.”

As he wrestled the old tires off the rims, he explained that the replacements had originally been ordered for C. M. Coffee but had never been picked up.

“Guess C.M. will have to wait for another set.”

For the next hour and a half, I watched Larry work.

He wasn’t in any hurry.

He worked methodically, giving each task the time it required.

He carried on a steady conversation as though we’d known each other for years.

Small towns have a way of making strangers feel like neighbors.

Before long, I found myself relaxing.

When the job was finished, I asked where to pay.

Larry smiled.

“Cherry Creek account.”

That was all he needed to say.

As I drove away from Melstone with two new trailer tires rattling in the back of the Skunk Wagon, I realized something I hadn’t considered before.

Outside the Mysse family, no one seemed interested in taking sides.

Jake and Larry didn’t see heroes or villains.

They simply saw people they had known for years.

That simple realization stayed with me all the way back to Cherry Springs.

Inside the Mysse family, everyone seemed convinced someone else was the problem.

Outside the family, people simply saw the Mysses as neighbors.

It made me wonder if the truth lay somewhere between those two views.

I was determined to keep watching, keep listening, and make up my own mind.



On the Cherry Creek Account

When Larry rolled the mounted tires into the sunlight, he wiped his hands on a shop rag and smiled.

“That ought to do it.”

I asked what I owed.

He looked almost surprised.

“I’ll just put it on Cherry Creek’s account.”

I signed my name in the receipt book, filled the Skunk Wagon with gasoline, grabbed a couple of cold Pepsis and a handful of Pearson’s Salted Nut Rolls, and charged everything to the same account.

That was how business was done in eastern Montana.

A handshake, a signature, and your word.

With the new tires rattling in the back of the Skunk Wagon, I headed straight for the Big Porcupine headquarters.

Daylight was burning.

The questions about Paul, Bernice, Marie and Sivert could wait.

My only concern was getting back to Julius.

We still needed slabs, ring nails, groceries, and a trailer that would haul them.

More importantly, we had a windbreak to finish before it was time for me to leave for Missoula.

When the Quonset came into view, Julius was already under the trailer, working on the cracked tongue.

He glanced up as I pulled in.

“Took you long enough.”

“I’ve got the tires.”

That was all either of us needed to say.

There was still work to do.

.



Sivert sold two bands of ewes that fall to fund the partnership dividends. The finished windbreak stood behind him, but he never acknowledged the work or offered a word of praise. Julius and I had built something to be proud of; what hurt was that Sivert never seemed to notice.

A Railroad Welder

By the time I pulled back into the Big Porcupine headquarters, Julius already had the old trailer blocked up inside the Quonset.

The August heat trapped beneath the steel roof was unbearable.

Even standing still, sweat rolled down my face.

Julius didn't seem to notice.

He was too busy preparing the cracked trailer tongue for welding.

The damaged metal had been cleaned until it shined.

His welding leads were stretched across the concrete floor.

Everything was laid out as though he had done this a thousand times before.

Maybe he had.

He glanced at the new tires in the back of the Skunk Wagon and smiled.

"I knew you'd get it done."

Then he pointed toward the trailer.

"My turn."

I had watched people weld before, but never anyone like Julius.

He lowered his helmet, struck an arc, and suddenly the Quonset filled with the sharp hiss of electricity.

Blue-white flashes reflected off the walls.

The smell of hot steel drifted through the building.

Molten sparks showered across the concrete floor.

His hands never seemed to hesitate.

The bead he laid down was smooth, even, and deliberate.

When he finished one pass, he chipped away the slag, examined his work for a moment, then calmly began another.

There was no wasted motion.

No uncertainty.

Everything about the way he worked suggested years of experience.

I finally asked the question.

“Where did you learn to weld like that?”

Without looking up, he answered,

“The Milwaukee Railroad.”

That explained everything.

Years before, Julius had worked for the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad in Harlowton.

Railroad welding wasn’t something a person learned in an afternoon.

Equipment had to work.

Repairs had to hold.

Mistakes could cost lives.

As I watched him rebuild the broken trailer tongue, I realized I was seeing a side of Julius I hadn't expected.

Behind the beard…

behind the battered Stetson…

behind the Skunk Wagon…

was a highly skilled craftsman.

He wasn't guessing.

He knew exactly what he was doing.

When the welding was finished, Julius stepped back and admired his work.

"There."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his glove.

"Good as new. Better than new!"

I walked over and looked closely at the repair.

It honestly appeared stronger than the original steel.

Julius caught me staring.

"What?"

"I didn't know you could weld like that."

He laughed.

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

He was right.

There was.

As the repaired tongue cooled, we mounted the newly shod wheels onto the trailer. Then hitched the trailer to the Skunk Wagon bumper.

The fresh black tires almost looked out of place beneath the weathered old flatbed.

Julius retightened the last lug nut, stood up, and stretched his back.

“Now…”

he said with a grin and a Festus wink,

“…let’s go get ourselves a load of slabs.”

For the first time all day, I felt like we were finally making progress.



A Load of Slabs

With the trailer finally repaired, Julius climbed into the Skunk Wagon and motioned for me to get in.

“We’re going down to Ingomar,” he shouted through the open window.

“Then out to Gebhart’s.”

By then, I had learned enough eastern Montana geography to translate Julius’s directions without thinking.

“Down” meant south.

“Out” meant west.

It was a language all its own, and before long I found myself using it as naturally as everyone else.

The repaired trailer followed faithfully behind us as we headed toward Ingomar.

Every bump in the road made me glance in the rearview mirror, half expecting the newly welded tongue to fail and the old wooden trailer bed to come apart behind us.

It never did.

By the time we reached the Jersey Lilly, we were both hungry.

We were always hungry.

Before sitting down, I walked to the phone booth and placed a collect call to Bigfork. The operator rang our number, then came back on the line.

“No answer. You might try again later.”

That surprised me.

Bernice rarely left the house except to work in her flower beds.

I had hoped to talk with either her or Paul, but no one was home.

When I stepped out of the phone booth, Julius had already ordered cheeseburgers for both of us.

Neither of us talked much while we ate.

The morning had already been long, and the hottest part of the day still lay ahead.

Before leaving Ingomar, I tried calling Bigfork a second time.

Still no answer.

The silence left me with more questions than answers.

The miles between us had become more than distance.

The miles between Cherry Springs and Ingomar made communication difficult. I rarely got into town, and my parents were no longer communicating with Sivert. The weekly reports they had asked me to make were becoming impossible. The physical distance was one thing. The silence between all of us was something else entirely.

Julius stood up.

“No sense wasting daylight.”

Gebhart’s Lumber sat on the west side of Melstone, its yard stacked high with rough-cut lumber, fence posts, and slabs from its

milling operation. Most of the bull pine had come from the Bull Mountains.

Julius always said bull pine was pitchy, but that was exactly what made it good corral wood.

“It’ll last for years,” he said.

The owner knew Julius.

He also knew Cherry Creek.

Out there, introductions weren’t necessary.

Julius explained what we needed, and before long the three of us were loading the trailer.

The slabs weren’t pretty.

Most still had bark clinging to one edge.

Some were twisted.

Some were green and wet.

Others were warped.

To Julius, they were exactly what we needed.

Before long they would become the windbreak protecting newborn lambs from the relentless north wind.

Julius loaded every slab as though he were assembling a giant puzzle.

Heavy pieces went on the bottom.

Straighter slabs lined the sides.

Fence posts and treated timbers filled every remaining space.

He wasn't simply loading lumber.

He was balancing the trailer.

When I finally stepped back, I wondered if we'd overloaded it.

Julius looked at the springs, kicked one of the new tires, and smiled.

"It'll haul just fine."

I wasn't nearly as confident.

The trip back seemed twice as long.

The roads were rough, and every washboard made the trailer groan under its load.

Neither of us talked much.

Once, almost to himself, Julius muttered,

"Those damn new tires better hold."

Somewhere near the Ingomar-Cohagen road, where the pavement ended, Julius looked over at me.

"You drive."

It wasn't a request.

The day had caught up with him.

Within a few miles, he was asleep.

I let him rest.

By then we had covered well over a hundred miles.

We had replaced trailer tires, repaired a broken trailer, loaded a mountain of slabs and posts, and still had one more job waiting for us at Cherry Springs.

By the time we reached the corrals, the sun was dropping low in the western sky.

Neither of us had much energy left.

Even so, we unloaded until darkness started to settle across the prairie.

For the first time in weeks, I could finally see we had a fighting chance to finish the windbreak.

It wasn't much to look at.

Not yet.

But it was ours.

Sometimes progress on a ranch doesn't come in giant leaps.

Sometimes it comes one slab…

one post…

and one long, dusty August day at a time.



One Gallon of Chokecherry Wine

By the time we finished unloading the trailer at Cherry Springs, both of us were exhausted.

The August sun had started to slip below the western horizon, leaving behind a deep orange glow that stretched across the prairie over the hills of Yoakum Springs.

My shirt was soaked with sweat.

Every muscle in my back reminded me how many slabs I had lifted that day.

I was thinking about nothing more complicated than supper and sleep.

Julius, however, had something else on his mind.

He stood quietly for a moment, looking toward the distant hills as though trying to remember something.

Then he grinned.

“I’ve got to do something.”

Before I could ask what he meant, he climbed into the Skunk Wagon, started the engine, and disappeared over the nearest ridge in a cloud of dust.

I watched until his taillights vanished.

Then I shrugged.

With Julius, asking questions usually didn’t help.

I finished stacking the last of the slabs and started supper.

Hamburgers.

Again.

By August, hamburgers had become breakfast, lunch, and supper more often than I cared to remember.

Julius claimed there wasn't much point in cooking anything fancy.

"Just means more dishes."

His solution was simple.

Cook one thing.

Burn it if it smelled funny.

Eat it anyway.

Julius had his own way of deciding when food was safe to eat. The worse it smelled, the longer it stayed over the fire.

For reasons I still can't explain, I believed him.

Tonight's hamburger was already beginning to emit a slightly suspicious aroma. Even though we had "acquired" several frozen packages of hamburger from Sivert's freezers, along with fresh blocks of ice, Julius insisted we finish the old hamburger first.

Nothing was ever wasted.

By the time the burgers were finished, I heard the familiar rattle of the Skunk Wagon climbing the hill.

Julius jumped out wearing the satisfied grin of a man who had just discovered buried treasure.

Cradled in his arms was a dusty, brownish gallon jug.

He carefully brushed the dried gumbo mud from the glass as though he were polishing a priceless antique.

“There she is.”

He held it up proudly.

“My chokecherry wine.”

I stared at the jug.

“Where’d you get it?”

He looked at me as though the answer should have been obvious.

“Dug it up.”

“You buried it?”

He nodded.

“One of hundreds.”

Hundreds?

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or believe him.

With Julius, either answer seemed possible.

He uncorked the jug and inhaled deeply.

“Perfect.”

I wasn't nearly as convinced.

The smell drifting from the jug was unlike anything I had ever encountered.

Sweet.

Sharp.

Wild.

It smelled as though someone had bottled the prairie itself… and forgotten about it for several years.

Julius found two glasses.

Then, almost as an afterthought, he looked at me.

"You got a weak stomach?"

I hesitated.

"I don't think so."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"Good."

Then he said something I have never forgotten.

"I fermented the chokecherries with the pits still in 'em."

He took another deep sniff.

"Means there's probably a fair amount of cyanide in it."

He smiled.

“Hasn’t killed me yet.”

I wasn’t sure whether he was joking.

Knowing Julius…

he probably wasn’t.

I looked from the jug…

to Julius…

then back to the jug.

Everything inside me said this was a terrible idea.

Everything.

I should have never let Julius sleep on the way back to Cherry Springs.

To this day, thinking about that night still stirs deep emotions.

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“Try the Goddamn Wine!”

I looked at the gallon jug for several seconds before saying anything.

“No thanks.”

Julius raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t drink?”

“Oh, I drink once in a while.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

I pointed toward the jug.

“You just told me it might contain cyanide.”

He shrugged.

“So?”

“So…”

I laughed nervously.

“Cyanide kills people.”

Julius reached for one of the hamburgers, took an enormous bite, and chewed for what seemed like forever before answering.

“So do automobiles.”

“So do horses.”

“So do rattlesnakes.”

He swallowed another bite.

“You planning on giving up those too?”

I couldn’t help smiling.

“Getting bitten by a rattlesnake isn’t exactly something I do for fun,” I replied. “So it isn’t something I’d have to give up.”

Julius just grinned.

Then he picked up the gallon jug and poured himself a full glass.

The wine was a deep reddish-purple, almost black in the fading evening light.

Without the slightest hesitation, he took a long drink.

Then another.

Finally, he looked at me.

“See?”

“I’m still here.”

That was difficult to argue with.

He slowly pushed the second glass toward me.

“Go on.”

I didn’t move.

The silence stretched between us.

Julius leaned back against the old cottonwood stump and studied me.

“You don’t trust me.”

It wasn’t a question.

I thought about denying it.

Instead, I answered honestly.

“I don’t know you well enough yet.”

Then I added with a nervous smile,

“And I really don’t want to find out whether your wine is stronger than a rattlesnake.”

Julius laughed.

Looking back now, I realize my hesitation had very little to do with cyanide.

Long before I met Julius, I had heard the stories about old sheepherders. They would come to town after months alone on the range, collect their wages, and drink until the money—or the whiskey—ran out. Then they would drift back to their sheep camps, carrying the same loneliness and the same demons they had tried to leave behind.

When Julius returned to camp carrying a gallon jug of homemade chokecherry wine, every one of those stories came rushing back.

I hoped Julius wasn’t one of them.

Only years later did I understand that my concern wasn't really about Julius's wine.

Alcohol had already woven itself through both sides of my family.

At twenty years old, however, I wasn't thinking about family history or the possibility that I might be vulnerable myself. I was simply looking at the glass of homemade chokecherry wine sitting in front of me.

Only a few weeks earlier, Paul had accused me of drinking too much with my friends from the Bigfork Summer Playhouse. His accusation irritated me because it wasn't entirely wrong. I had already discovered that I enjoyed hard liquor and beer more than I probably should have. I was tired, hungry, emotionally worn out, and I knew enough about myself to realize that if I started drinking, I might not stop when I should.

The cyanide made for a convenient excuse.

The truth was considerably more complicated.

Later in life, after I assumed most of the responsibility for managing the Milam Basin Creek Ranch during the summer months, there was little time left to think about much beyond the next day's work. Keeping the ranch operating while staying one step ahead of the ever-changing expectations of Paul, Bernice, and later Gary demanded my full attention.

Alcohol was not an option.

There was simply too much work to do and too many people depending on me for me to allow alcohol to become the center of my life.

Looking back, I have often wondered whether the ranch saved me in more ways than one.

For just a moment, Julius studied me without saying a word.

Then he nodded.

“Fair enough.”

I thought the conversation was over.

It wasn’t.

He pushed the glass toward me once more.

“But you’re going to have to know me sometime.”

His voice remained calm.

Almost gentle.

Then it changed.

“Now quit insulting me…”

he said.

“and try my Goddamn wine!”

There wasn’t any anger in his face.

No threat.

Just absolute certainty that I would accept his hospitality.

Looking back now, I realize refusing that glass would have meant far more to Julius than refusing a drink.

Out on the prairie, sharing food or drink wasn't simply good manners.

It was trust.

I slowly picked up the glass.

The smell hit me first.

Wild chokecherries.

Earth.

Something sharp I couldn't identify.

I took the smallest sip I thought I could get away with.

It wasn't nearly as bad as I expected.

Rough?

Absolutely.

Sweet?

Somewhat.

Strong?

Without question.

It tasted like someone had taken Thanksgiving cranberry sauce, added enough alcohol to stop a charging bull, and then forgotten the whole mess in a gallon jug to age out on the prairie.

Julius watched my face with obvious anticipation.

“Well?”

I swallowed, finally caught my breath, and looked at him.

“What in the hell is in this stuff?”

He slapped his knee and burst into laughter.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Then he filled my glass again before I had a chance to object.

Apparently surviving the first sip meant I had just volunteered for the second.



The storm above mirrored the one within me. The Montana sky was unsettled, and so was I.

An Unlikely Rescue

Julius was reaching for the gallon jug again when we both heard the distant rumble of a diesel engine.

He stopped in mid-pour and cocked his head toward the south.

For several seconds neither of us spoke.

The sound grew louder.

For a moment I wondered who could possibly be coming to Cherry Springs that late in the day.

Then the Cherry Creek road grader crested the hill, bouncing across the prairie in a huge cloud of dust.

Julius muttered something under his breath.

As the grader drew closer, his expression changed completely.

“Oh, hell…”

He slowly set the wine jug back on the table.

“That’s my brother.”

The grader rolled to a stop beside the sheep wagon.

Behind the wheel sat Julius’s younger brother, John Sebulsky. Tall and painfully thin, with bulging eyes and a restless energy, John always looked as though his mind was racing somewhere ahead of the conversation. I could tell he and Julius had shared their disagreements over the years, although Julius never spoke about them. Riding beside him was Jack Rumdahl, whom everyone simply called “Rummy.”

Neither man bothered shutting off the engine before climbing down. The grader sat there idling.

Julius looked at the nearly full gallon jug and groaned.

“They must’ve seen me digging.”

He shook his head.

“Damn that John.”

Then he glanced toward Rummy.

“And he brought company.”

Julius looked back at me.

“There isn’t enough wine here for four Goddamn alcoholics.”

I looked at the gallon jug.

Until that moment, I would have sworn there was enough wine in it for half of eastern Montana.

I quietly dismissed Julius’s comment about four alcoholics as just another one of his exaggerations.

John laughed as he walked over.

“What’ve you got there?”

“Medicine,” Julius answered without hesitation.

Rummy grinned.

“Looks like mighty good medicine.”

Without another word, Julius disappeared into the sheep wagon and returned carrying two more glasses.

No introductions.

No discussion.

He simply filled them.

John took one.

Rummy took the other.

John raised his glass.

“To Cherry Creek.”

I thought to myself that John’s toast to Cherry Creek was odd and unexpected. I wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Before I had time to lift mine, all three men had already emptied theirs.

The evening suddenly took on a life of its own.

The stories began immediately.

The two brothers argued over whose memory was failing first.

Rummy laughed so hard he nearly spilled what little wine remained in his glass.

I mostly listened.

These men had known one another for years.

They spoke in unfinished sentences.

Interrupted one another constantly.

Half the conversation made no sense to me.

The other half probably wouldn't have, even if I had known them all my life.

What did make sense was how quickly the wine disappeared.

The gallon jug that I thought would last several evenings was empty in less than twenty minutes.

John wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"That's a good batch."

Julius puffed out his chest.

"I've made better."

Looking back now, I understand something that never crossed my mind that evening.

John and Rummy arrived at exactly the right time.

Without intending to, they changed the entire course of the evening.

Before they appeared, Julius and I had been settling in for what could have become a very long night around a gallon jug of homemade chokecherry wine.

Instead, the conversation shifted.

The wine disappeared almost as quickly as it had been opened.

The evening ended with laughter instead of another round.

At twenty years old, I thought John and Rummy had interrupted our supper.

More than fifty years later…

I believe they rescued me.



“TO CHERRY CREEK”

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A Long Line of Proud Alcoholics

John and Rummy climbed back onto the road grader.

The diesel engine roared to life, drowning out any final words they might have spoken.

Julius stood watching as the grader disappeared over the next rise, shaking his head the entire time.

“They’re headed down to Beer Bill’s,” he muttered.

“You two are the scum of the earth!”

he shouted after them.

“Dumb bastards!”

The men were far enough away that there was little chance they heard him over the sound of the engine.

If they did, they gave no sign.

Within a few moments, the prairie was quiet again.

Only the evening breeze moved through the grass.

Julius looked down at the empty gallon jug and sighed.

“That was good wine.”

Then he smiled.

“I think I’m sufficiently drunk.”

He glanced over at me.

“You were lucky.”

“Lucky?”

He nodded.

“If those two hadn’t shown up…”

he grinned,

“…you’d probably still be drinking.”

I wasn’t entirely sure whether he was joking.

Knowing Julius, he probably wasn’t.

I gathered the empty glasses while Julius carefully wiped the rest of the dust from the gallon jug. He turned it in his hands, checking the glass for cracks, then rubbed the faded label with his thumb. He had dug that jug out of the ground after how many winters out in the open prairie, and used it so many times the glass seemed to remember every hand that had drunk from it. He placed it beside him near the campfire and smiled at it like an old friend.

If Julius kept something, it was because he believed it would have a use someday.

As we finished cleaning up, he looked at me for several seconds without saying a word.

Then, almost out of nowhere, he spoke.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“What look?”

“That look like you think I’m some kind of drunk.”

I hadn't said a word.

Apparently my face had.

Julius jabbed a finger toward me.

"***You know damn well you come from a long line of proud alcoholics."***

The words caught me completely off guard.

I did everything I could to keep the surprise from showing on my face.

I wasn't about to confirm—or deny—what Julius had just said.

Instead, I simply looked back at him.

Looking back more than fifty years later, I still don't know whether Julius was making an educated guess or whether someone had shared more about my family than I ever realized.

What I do know is that he was painfully close to the truth.

Alcohol had touched both sides of my family for generations.

Some acknowledged it.

Most never did.

Hearing Julius say those words aloud felt different.

It was as though he had spoken something everyone knew but no one was willing to discuss.

Julius continued watching me.

Finally, he nodded.

“Thought so.”

He turned toward the darkening prairie.

“I’m not judging them.”

He shrugged.

“I’m just telling you the way I see it.”

After a long pause, he quietly added,

“A man ought to know where he comes from.”

Neither of us spoke again for several minutes.

We simply stood beside the dying fire, listening to the prairie settle into the night.

Julius had given me something far more difficult to think about than a gallon jug of chokecherry wine.

He had given me a truth I wasn’t ready to face.

It would take me years to understand just how right he had been.

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“Do I Need Stitches?”

Darkness settled quickly across Cherry Springs.

Out on the open prairie, there were no streetlights, no porch lights, and no distant glow from a nearby town. When the sun disappeared, night arrived all at once.

Julius picked up the empty gallon jug and carried it toward the Skunk Wagon.

I gathered the last of the dishes and poured the dishwater well away from camp, just as Julius had taught me.

Neither of us had much left to say. The long day had worn us both out.

As I turned toward my sheep wagon, I heard a loud metallic crash, followed by a string of words that would have made a sailor blush.

I spun around just in time to see Julius lying beside the Skunk Wagon.

In the darkness, he had walked directly into the trailer tongue of my sheep wagon. The heavy steel hitch had caught him squarely in the forehead.

For a second he didn’t move.

Then he slowly sat up.

“Son of a…”

He reached up and touched his forehead. When he pulled his hand away, it was covered with blood.

Head wounds have a way of looking far worse than they actually are, but blood was already running down his face and into his beard.

Julius looked at his hand.

“Huh.”

That seemed to be his entire medical evaluation.

I hurried over.

“You all right?”

“I’ve been better.”

He wiped the blood away with the sleeve of his coveralls, adding another stain to dozens that had accumulated over the summer.

I stood there frozen.

The amount of blood stunned me. At twenty years old, I had already seen enough accidents to know how badly head wounds could bleed, but I had never watched someone injure himself so severely and react as though nothing had happened.

I stepped closer.

“I think we ought to get you to a hospital.”

Julius shook his head.

“No.”

There was no hesitation.

No discussion.

In Julius's mind, the matter was settled.

Then he looked directly at me.

"Do I need stitches?"

The question caught me completely off guard.

I wasn't a doctor, and I couldn't even see the cut clearly through all the blood and darkness.

"I… I don't think so."

Looking back now, I realize I wasn't certain of anything. I was simply a frightened twenty-year-old trying to make the best decision I could.

Julius accepted my answer without another word.

He climbed into the Skunk Wagon as though cracking his head open had been little more than an inconvenience.

I remained standing outside for several minutes.

The fun and games were over.

Until that evening, I had quietly assumed Julius always knew what he was doing. He knew the country, the sheep, the weather, and always seemed to have an answer for every problem that came our way.

Watching him refuse medical attention reminded me that Julius wasn't indestructible.

He could make mistakes.

So could I.

Eventually, I climbed into my sheep wagon, but sleep didn't come easily.

Every few minutes I found myself listening for movement from the Skunk Wagon.

What if I had been wrong?

What if Julius really did need stitches?

What if he didn't wake up?

Sometime after midnight, I finally heard the unmistakable sound of Julius snoring.

Relief washed over me.

If a man could snore that loudly, he was probably going to survive.

I rolled over, pulled the sleeping bag around my shoulders, and smiled to myself in the darkness.

Tomorrow would be another day.

Only now, I knew I couldn't leave all the thinking to Julius.



Mr. One Share

The next morning I woke feeling as though I had swallowed a large rock.

Nothing from the previous evening seemed to have digested.

For a while I blamed the hamburgers.

Then I remembered Julius's homemade chokecherry wine.

I couldn't help wondering if the cyanide—or perhaps just Julius's winemaking skills—had managed to kill every useful bacterium in my stomach.

Fortunately, Julius was still alive.

He stumbled out of the Skunk Wagon rubbing his forehead where he had cracked it open the night before. The dried blood in his beard suggested the wound had finally stopped bleeding.

"I've been thinking," he announced, as though nothing had happened the night before.

That statement alone made me nervous.

"We're going down to Billings today."

"What for?"

"You still need ring nails, but more important than that, you need to be outfitted properly."

He looked me up and down.

“I still can’t believe Paul and Bernice sent you out here with so little.”

His eyes settled on my little single-shot .22.

“That’s all they sent with you?”

I nodded.

Julius slowly shook his head.

“That’s damn near criminal.”

The Julius I climbed into the pickup with that morning wasn’t the same quiet, deliberate man I had been working beside all summer. Whether it was the wine, the bump on his head, or something else entirely, he was restless, loud, and unlike himself.

Truthfully, I didn’t need much convincing. I desperately wanted a day away from Cherry Springs. The thought of spending a day in Billings sounded like a vacation.

The promise of looking at a new rifle held some appeal, although I had never hunted a day in my life. I knew almost nothing about deer rifles. My experience was shooting paper targets with my single-shot .22.

Either way, I wasn’t about to argue.

We climbed into my Cherry Creek pickup and headed south toward Billings, following the Bull Mountains toward Roundup.

South of Roundup, about halfway to Billings, **Julius suddenly lunged forward in his seat.**

“Stop! Goddamn it! Stop the pickup!”

I slammed on the brakes.

The pickup skidded to a halt, leaving two long black streaks of rubber on the steep grade.

Before I could ask what was wrong, Julius threw open the passenger door.

In his haste, he struck the fresh wound on his forehead against the edge of the door.

Blood immediately began running down into his beard.

He never seemed to notice.

Instead, he sprinted toward the borrow pit beside the highway.

There, lying in the grass, was a large aluminum extension ladder that had apparently fallen from a commercial truck.

Julius wrestled it onto his shoulder with a grin that stretched from ear to ear, blood dripping into his beard once again.

“We need this.”

Back at the pickup we quickly discovered the ladder extended nearly eight feet beyond the bed.

Julius studied the problem for only a few seconds.

“We’ll run it over the cab.”

I stared at him.

“Won’t that scratch the paint?”

“A little.”

He shrugged.

“It won’t scratch it too badly.”

Before I realized what he intended to do, Julius grabbed a pair of Klein fencing pliers from the pickup bed, walked over to the roadside fence, and clipped a long section of the bottom strand of wire.

“Julius!”

He ignored me.

Using the fence wire, he lashed the ladder securely to the pickup.

I couldn’t believe what I was watching.

The careful, practical man I had come to know over the past several weeks had suddenly become **reckless—and, in my eyes, downright stupid.**

“You’re not cutting another man’s fence apart,” I protested. “And you’re scratching up Sivert’s brand-new pickup.”

Julius looked at me as though I had completely missed the point.

“Got a better idea, Mr. One Share?”

I remained silent.

“Screw it,” he continued. “We’ve got a job to do. If that rancher wants his Goddamn wire back, I’ll give it back. If whoever lost this ladder wants it back, they can have it.”

Then he looked directly at me.

“Paul and Bernice want that building finished so they can divide Cherry Creek.”

He paused.

“I want the job they promised me.”

Then came the sentence that stayed with me.

“And this is your Goddamn ranch too… whether you’ve figured that out yet or not, Mr. One Share. So we need this ladder!”

That was at least the third time Julius had called me “Mr. One Share.”

It troubled me.

How much had Paul told him?

Had Paul promised Julius something he couldn’t deliver?

More importantly…

What hadn’t Paul told me?

Looking back now, I believe Paul was motivating Julius with promises about the future of Cherry Creek after the ranch was divided.

Whether those promises were realistic, I had no way of knowing.

As we continued toward Billings, I found myself thinking less about the ladder than about everything Julius had just said.

I still hoped the ladder didn’t catch the first traffic light—or any traffic light—once we reached Billings.

But that was no longer my greatest concern.

Why did Julius seem to know more about my family's plans for Cherry Creek than I did? Had Paul, or Paul and Bernice, made promises to him? Had they told him things they had never shared with me?

Knowledge was power. And somehow, Julius held the key to the future of a ranch in which I was a stockholder—while I stood outside, shut out from the truth.

For the first time, I began to wonder whether the assignment that had brought me to Cherry Springs wasn't really about building a windbreak or a barn at all.



Julius helping Carl Watson move his band of sheep to another reservoir. — August 1971 —

Butler's Kitchen

Our first stop in Billings wasn't a hardware store.

It was Butler's Kitchen on Grand Avenue.

Julius announced that he was damn hungry and that they served the best crispy chicken in Billings.

Then he patted his shirt pockets.

"I don't have a dime."

I wondered why he didn't have his wallet, a checkbook, or even a dime.

As the weeks passed together, I would discover that whenever we went to town or something needed to be paid for, Julius frequently claimed he had forgotten his wallet. Eventually I learned his wallet was almost always safety-pinned inside the left pocket of his work shirt.

To this day, I still don't know whether he actually had money or simply preferred spending someone else's.

"You're buying," he said matter-of-factly.

Before I could object, he was already walking toward the entrance.

The moment we stepped inside, I became painfully aware of how we looked.

Neither of us had showered in well over a month.

Both of us wore full beards and were filthy from head to toe.

Julius still had dried blood in his beard from the night before, along with fresh blood from reopening the wound that morning.

His faded powder-blue Sears Big Mac coveralls were stained with grease, dirt, sweat, and blood.

His battered Stetson still carried its rattlesnake hatband, although I noticed the feather was gone.

Compared to Julius, I probably looked respectable.

Compared to everyone else in the restaurant…

I wasn't so sure.

Several customers quietly turned to look at us.

Some quickly looked away.

Others didn't.

I felt every one of those stares.

Julius never seemed to notice.

When it was finally our turn to order, Julius leaned toward the young woman behind the counter.

"We'll take two buckets of your best extra-crispy chicken."

He paused.

"We don't want any of your Goddamn potatoes or gravy."

Then he added,

"And a couple of drinks."

Trying to soften the moment, I quietly added,

“Please.”

The young woman froze.

Her eyes never left the dried and fresh blood in Julius’s beard.

Without saying a word, she disappeared into the kitchen.

A few moments later, she returned with the owner.

He tried to smile politely.

“Gentlemen,” he began, “my wife and I certainly appreciate your business.”

Then his eyes drifted toward Julius’s beard.

“I wonder if you’d mind waiting outside while we prepare your order. We’ll bring it out to you.”

Julius slowly tipped back his hat.

The look on his face could have frozen water.

The owner’s smile disappeared.

“I’ll give you one bucket free…”

He hesitated.

“…and your drinks are on the house.”

For several long seconds Julius simply stared at him.

Then, without saying a word, he turned and slowly walked toward the door.

I quickly paid for the chicken and followed behind him.

Just as Julius reached the door, he suddenly stopped.

He turned around and shouted loud enough for everyone in the restaurant to hear.

“I’ve eaten in better shit holes than this one!”

The restaurant fell silent.

“You can be damn sure I won’t be back!”

Then, as though he had forgotten something important, he looked over at me.

“Oh…”

“Don’t forget the barbecue sauce.”

“And make mine a root beer.”

I wished the floor would open up beneath my feet.

Every eye in the restaurant seemed fixed on me.

I quietly gathered the chicken, the drinks, and what looked like enough barbecue sauce to last a month.

When I finally climbed into the pickup, Julius acted as though nothing unusual had happened.

To him, it had simply been another stop for lunch.

To me, it had been one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.

We sat in the parking lot to eat our chicken. As we sat there, Julius cracked another chicken bone between his teeth, sucked the marrow from it, and casually tossed the bone out the pickup window onto the pavement.

It skidded across the parking lot.

“Julius!”

He looked over at me.

“What?”

“Go pick it up.”

He frowned as though he couldn’t understand why I cared.

“It’s just a chicken bone.”

“No.”

I looked him straight in the eye.

“You don’t throw garbage in somebody else’s parking lot.”

For a moment he simply stared back at me.

Then, without another word, he climbed out of the pickup and picked up every bone he had thrown onto the pavement.

When he climbed back inside, I said quietly,

“Don’t ever do that again when you’re with me.”

Julius looked at me for a long moment.

Then he shrugged.

“All right.”

He never argued.

Looking back now, I don’t believe Julius understood why I was so upset.

Out on the prairie, there were no restaurants, no parking lots, no crowds, and very few social expectations beyond respecting another man’s livestock and property.

In that world, Julius knew exactly how to behave.

But once we came to town, it was as though those unwritten rules no longer existed for him.

Whether it was the previous night’s chokecherry wine, the bump on his head, or simply because civilization had never suited him, I still don’t know.

What I did know was this.

I never wanted to feel that embarrassed again.

EVER!



Outfitting for the North Country

After finishing our chicken in the pickup outside Butler's Kitchen —and after teaching Julius that chicken bones belonged in a garbage can instead of scattered across a parking lot or thrown into the back of my pickup bed—our day continued.

Our next stop was Scheels Sporting Goods.

By then, I was hoping the rest of the afternoon might resemble a normal shopping trip.

I should have known better.

Julius wandered through the camping department as though he had a list already prepared in his head.

The first item was a sleeping bag rated to ten below zero.

As he looked it over, he casually mentioned that if the lambing barn wasn't finished, I'd probably still be at Cherry Springs until the snow started flying.

The words seemed to slip out before he realized what he had said.

He suddenly stopped talking.

For just an instant, he had that unmistakable look on his face.

Oh… I probably shouldn't have said that.

I didn't ask what he meant.

I didn't need to.

I didn't believe him.

Not for one second.

Whatever Paul and Bernice may have been planning, I wasn't staying that long. Still, hearing Julius use the phrase ***"until the snow flies"*** caught my attention. That was one of Paul's favorite expressions.

I had promised myself forty-five days.

College was waiting for me in Missoula.

Nothing was going to interfere with that.

Still, Julius was right about one thing.

The old sleeping bag Paul had handed down to me wasn't nearly warm enough if the weather turned much colder. By August the nights on the prairie were already becoming chilly, and mice had chewed so many holes in the old bag that it resembled Swiss cheese.

So I bought the sleeping bag and a foam pad to go underneath it.

I still have that sleeping bag today.

Next came a goose-down coat.

Then a matching reversible down vest, green on one side and hunter orange on the other. New work boots, socks and long underwear.

Those purchases actually made sense.

If nothing else, eastern Montana had already taught me that weather could change without asking anyone's permission.

Then Julius found a Buck hunting knife.

“I’m going to need one too. I love yours.”

That made enough sense. Ever since I wore my Buck knife, Julius had admired it. Every chance he got, he’d pull it from its sheath, open the blade, study it, and work it through his hands before reluctantly handing it back. It was obvious he wanted one of his own.

Then Julius found me in an aisle and handed me a Chinese bomber hat just like the one he wore. “Don’t say no,” he said. “You’ll need this cap so your ears don’t freeze off.” I couldn’t understand why he was so insistent. I had no intention of staying long enough to need a winter hat, but I reluctantly bought it anyway. Later, during the windy, icy mornings that followed, I discovered Julius had been right.

As I walked toward the checkout counter, a green Teflon frying pan caught my eye. It was unusually deep—almost like a pot—and looked large enough to hold four cans of pork and beans.

Compared to the battered aluminum pan and the grease-blackened cast-iron skillets we had been using at Cherry Springs, it looked almost luxurious.

Cleaning burnt hamburger or canned spaghetti from a non-stick pan sounded far better than scraping it off cast iron every evening.

Into the pile it went.

In 1971, stores still accepted out-of-town personal checks without much concern.

A few minutes later everything was loaded into the pickup alongside the extension ladder and what remained of our bucket of chicken.

The pickup was beginning to resemble a traveling junk wagon.

Julius, however, looked completely satisfied.

Then, without warning, he changed plans again.

“We’re heading up to Judith Gap.”

“What for?”

“You need some protection.”

He paused.

“I want you to meet a friend of mine.”

“Fred Wiefrich.”

“He’s a gun dealer.”

I glanced over at my little single-shot .22.

“What do I need another rifle for?”

Julius simply smiled.

Little did I know how often I would ask myself that same question over the months ahead.

With more than half a bucket of chicken still riding between us, we stopped for gasoline in Billings Heights and started north.

We hadn’t gone very far before Julius suddenly sat upright.

“We’ll never make Judith Gap before midnight.”

He shook his head.

“Fred might shoot us.”

I looked over at him.

“Fred might shoot us?”

“Yep.”

That was all the explanation he offered.

I have never been comfortable around people who change directions every few minutes.

Make a decision.

Stick with it.

Right or wrong.

By then, I wasn’t interested in Judith Gap anymore.

I turned the pickup back toward Ingomar.

Within minutes Julius was asleep, snoring loudly enough to compete with the engine.

As the miles slipped beneath the tires, I found myself replaying the day.

The ladder hadn’t struck a traffic light.

The police hadn’t stopped us.

No rancher had appeared demanding his missing fence wire.

No one had claimed the ladder.

Considering how the day had begun, I supposed that qualified as success.

Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that something had changed.

Julius had never behaved the way he had that day.

His outburst at Butler's Kitchen had embarrassed me more than I cared to admit.

The episode left me deeply unsettled. There was an intensity about Julius that defied explanation, and I was beginning to realize I had no idea what he might do next.

His comments about staying until the snow flew bothered me even more.

What did he know that I didn't?

I couldn't prove it, but I had a nagging suspicion Paul had said something to Julius that no one had bothered telling me.



By the time we reached Ingomar, Julius had stopped snoring.

He directed me to leave the ladder inside the tall garage at Granddad's old house so no one would steal it.

Only then did he point across the yard.

“That’s my place.”

About a hundred yards away sat a tiny travel trailer beside a weathered garage.

“There isn’t room for two of us in there,” he said.

“But come over in the morning.”

“We’ll have breakfast.”

For some reason, the invitation surprised me.

Perhaps Julius was beginning to trust me.

Or perhaps he simply wanted someone to drink his terrible coffee.

That night I was far too dirty to crawl into my new sleeping bag.

Besides, it was still much too warm for a bag rated to ten below zero.

I stretched out on the old mattress with my clothes still on.

Sleep didn’t come easily.

The log lambing barn still hadn’t been started.

Paul and Bernice’s plan made no more sense than it had the day I arrived. Yet I knew more than I had a month earlier. I understood there were plans being made—plans everyone seemed to know about except me.

I certainly wasn’t spying on anyone.

I’d only seen Sivert a couple of times in the past month.

Most days I simply worked, got sunburned, and tried to survive mosquitoes, deer flies, horseflies, and the tiny buffalo gnats Julius insisted weren't nearly as bad as I thought.

So why was I really there?

The more I thought about it, the less any of it made sense.

One thing was certain.

I wasn't interfering in Sivert's or Janet's lives.

One thing, however, was perfectly clear.

I wasn't staying until the snow flew.

I wasn't staying until Christmas.

Whatever Julius thought he knew…

Whatever Paul and Bernice had planned…

In another two weeks I was going home.

College was waiting for me in Missoula.

That was my plan.

At least…

I believed it was.



Breakfast, Phone Calls, and Blueprints

The next morning I was up before Julius.

One question had stayed with me through the night.

Until the snow flies?

Did Julius really know I was going to be at Cherry Springs until winter?

He had spoken as though it were an established fact.

No one—not Paul, Bernice, nor anyone else—had ever said anything like that to me.

As far as I knew, I would be back in Missoula long before then, beginning my junior year of college.

I walked the short distance to Julius's tiny travel trailer, determined to ask him exactly what he meant.

The trailer looked like a miniature Airstream parked beside a weathered garage surrounded by what most people would have called junk.

To Julius, they were treasures.

Smoke drifted lazily from the open door.

Inside, Julius was happily attempting to make biscuits and coffee.

Before I could ask my question, he handed me a steaming cup.

Trying to be polite, I took a drink.

It was the worst coffee I had ever tasted.

It wasn’t simply bitter.

It tasted like soap, mold, and something I couldn’t identify.

I looked at Julius.

“This tastes like a dirty dishcloth.”

Without saying a word, he lifted the lid from the old aluminum coffee pot.

Floating inside was exactly that.

A filthy, moldy dishcloth.

Julius stared at it for a moment.

“Well…”

he muttered.

“I wondered where that thing went.”

He fished it out with two fingers as though discovering a dishcloth in the coffee pot was a perfectly ordinary occurrence.

That one cup cured me.

I never voluntarily drank coffee again.

Meanwhile, the biscuits had turned black, and smoke filled the tiny trailer.

Completely unfazed, Julius proudly looked around his little home.

“I got this whole place for back taxes,” he said.

He pointed toward the garage.

“Trailer… garage… freezers… the whole works.”

Then he smiled.

“Nobody else wanted this little piece of heaven.”

He truly meant it.

To me, it wasn’t much.

To him, it was everything.

Before I could bring up the subject of staying until winter, Julius became distracted.

He excitedly explained that another amateur radio operator in Alaska had contacted him during the night.

He proudly told me he had stayed awake for hours talking over the radio.

Then he showed me the radio itself.

He had built the entire HAM radio set with nothing more than a soldering gun, mail-order parts, and electronic schematics printed in a magazine.

I was genuinely impressed.

Julius possessed talents that continually surprised me.

Unfortunately, his biscuits hadn’t improved. After that morning, I became the official biscuit maker at Cherry Springs.

By then I was starving.

“Meet me at my pickup,” I said.

“We’re eating at the Jersey Lilly.”

For once, Julius didn’t argue.

He knew breakfast was going on the Milam tab.

After breakfast, Julius settled onto a bench outside the Jersey Lilly, quietly staring across the street at the old hotel. **The hotel had once been operated by Emil Lura, one of Granddad Mysse’s longtime friends from Norway.**

I stepped into the phone booth.

It was my third attempt to reach my parents.

This time Paul answered.

I explained that no one had contacted me about the log lambing barn.

There were no messages waiting at the Jersey Lilly.

Sivert hadn’t heard from him.

Neither had Julius.

Before I could ask another question, Paul exploded.

“Can’t you do one damn thing right?”

“Do I have to do everything myself?”

“What are the two of you doing over there… if anything?”

For a moment my mind simply went blank.

Then he launched into another one of his blowups, reminding me that he was busy teaching driver's education in Bigfork.

It was summer. If this project was really that important, I couldn't understand why he couldn't take a little time off to see our progress or give us guidance.

Again, Paul insisted he couldn't leave to straighten out the mess Julius and I had supposedly created.

Then came another accusation.

"Why haven't you been calling every week like I told you?"

I remember thinking…

I created this mess?

When Paul finally paused long enough to take a breath, I interrupted.

"We've been working our asses off out here."

"We're tired of waiting."

"If you want this damn barn built, then give me the contractor's name and phone number."

"I'll call him myself."

"I have my own questions."

Silence.

For the first time during the conversation, Paul stopped yelling.

Looking back, I realized I had finally learned something.

Paul always believed whoever yelled the loudest controlled the conversation.

I had discovered that asking the right question stopped him cold.

He finally gave me Dean's phone number.

Then he barked,

"I want to talk to Julius."

"Now. Goddamn it."

In any other situation I would never have allowed someone to speak to me that way.

I would have simply hung up the phone.

I had always tried to respect both of my parents.

Looking back now, I no longer wonder what that loyalty ultimately cost me.

I motioned for Julius to come inside.

"Careful… Paul's mad about something," I quietly told him.

Julius took the receiver and closed the phone booth door.

The conversation lasted more than forty-five minutes.

When Julius finally emerged, he never said a word about what Paul had told him.

He never would.

Whatever had been discussed changed him.

Over the next several days he became quieter.

More guarded.

He spent more time talking to himself than usual.

I had seen this pattern before. Rather than telling me what he was thinking, Paul often talked to other people first. I couldn't help wondering what he had told Julius during that forty-five-minute phone call.

After Julius finished his phone call with Paul, I called Dean.

Finally someone gave me straight answers.

Or at least the closest thing to them.

I introduced myself as Paul Milam's son and explained that as far as I understood the situation a construction crew from Thompson Falls would soon be arriving to build the lambing barn.

There was a long silence.

Then Dean quietly explained what Paul had told him.

It wasn't the same story.

Not even close.

The more Dean talked, the more confused I became.

It quickly became obvious that Paul had given each of us different versions of the same project.

I no longer cared which story—if either one—was true.

I simply wanted the barn built.

In the same thought, I wondered if, in reality, Paul and Bernice wanted the barn built…

“When will your crew arrive?” I asked.

“What crew?” Dean answered.

I explained that Julius and I were the only people at Cherry Springs.

Dean was stunned.

“Paul promised me at least five men would already be there before we ever started.”

Instead…

there were only two of us.

I asked Dean why he needed five men.

Dean explained that a log building of that size required a full crew just to unload, fit, and raise the logs safely. Two men simply couldn’t build it.

After another long silence, Dean finally said,

“I’d better drive over tomorrow with the blueprints.”

“I guess I’d better straighten this out with Paul.”

I stopped him.

“Leave Paul out of it.”

“From this point forward you’re dealing with Julius and me.”

Dean agreed.

The following morning Dean drove through the night from Thompson Falls and met us for breakfast at the Jersey Lilly.

Bill Seward packed sandwiches for the three of us before we headed toward Cherry Springs.

Of course Julius charged all the food to the Milam account.

The farther we drove into the North Country, the quieter Dean became.

When we reached the Devil's Dancing Ground between Acorn Flats and Benny Olson's ranch, he asked me to stop.

He climbed out of the pickup and stood silently looking across the badlands.

"I've never seen anything like this," he finally said.

"It's as incredible as the Grand Canyon."

When we reached Cherry Springs, Dean slowly walked around the corrals and overlooked the Cherry Springs Coulee.

Again and again he shook his head.

"We're in the middle of nowhere."

"What a mess."

"There is absolutely nothing here."

He wasn't exaggerating.

No electricity.

No running water.

Nothing.

Dean asked if either of us knew how to read blueprints.

Julius answered first.

“I’m guessing we’re going to learn.”

Dean spent the rest of the morning explaining every page of the plans and making a detailed list of everything that had to be completed before the logs and roofing materials could be delivered.

When I decided to drive Dean back to Ingomar later that afternoon, both Julius and Dean looked exhausted.

I left Julius at the sheep wagon. Hopefully to sleep.

As we drove back toward Ingomar, Dean finally started talking.

“I had no idea this was the situation,” he admitted.

“Paul didn’t tell me half of what I needed to know.”

Once again I repeated,

“Leave Paul out of it.”

“We’ll handle it from here.”

After dropping Dean off, I tried calling Bigfork again.

It was probably for the best that no one answered.

I bought a Pepsi and two bags of Cheetos, hoping they might improve my attitude.

As I slowly drove back toward Cherry Springs, I found myself staring through the windshield without thinking about anything at all.

For the first time since arriving, I felt emotionally empty.

By then, I no longer cared who had started the mess Paul insisted Julius and I had created.

A small part of me simply wanted to see the first log laid on that lambing barn.

After everything Julius and I had endured—the heat, the dust, broken equipment, endless trips for supplies, spoiled meat, contradictory stories, and weeks of uncertainty—I needed proof that all of it had been leading somewhere.

Otherwise…

what had those two months been for?

I even found myself wondering about Granddad Mysse.

Had he worked this hard?

Had he ever questioned whether the sacrifices were worth it?

Or was I simply trying to convince myself there had to be a purpose behind everything Julius and I had endured?

By the end of August, we had finished every bit of the windbreak surrounding the Cherry Springs holding corrals.

In my opinion it was absolutely beautiful.

Dean now had his men preparing the logs for the lambing barn.

For the first time since I arrived, the project seemed real.

Ironically…

that was exactly when I should have left.

Classes at the University of Montana would begin in less than a week.

My dorm room would soon be waiting.

So would the terrible dorm food I used to complain about. After two months at Cherry Springs, it sounded like a gourmet banquet.

So would the future I had spent years planning.

Instead, I remained at Cherry Creek.

That evening over supper, Julius quietly said,

“I’d rather not tackle that barn alone.”

“I sure hope you’re still around to help me.”

Oddly enough, I never did ask Julius what he had meant by “until the snow flies.” By then, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

His words stayed with me.

For years I told myself I stayed because Julius needed help.

There is probably some truth in that.

I told myself I stayed because I wanted to see the first log laid.

That was certainly true.

But looking back now, I don't think those reasons tell the whole story.

Somewhere along the way I had invested nearly two months of my life in Cherry Creek.

Sweat.

Sunburn.

Mosquitoes.

Dust.

Broken machinery.

Long days.

Longer nights.

I needed those weeks to mean something.

College had been my dream.

Not Paul's.

Not Bernice's.

Mine.

Yet somewhere along the way, my dream quietly became less important than everyone else's plans for Cherry Creek.

What troubles me most today isn't simply that I stayed.

It's that not one adult ever sat me down and said,

"Craig, you've done enough."

"Go back to school."

"Finish your education and become a doctor."

"We'll finish this."

Not Paul.

Not Bernice.

Not Julius.

Not Dean.

Not anyone.

At twenty years old, I was still young enough to believe that if every adult around me acted as though staying was the right thing to do…

perhaps it was.

So I stayed.

I watched the future I had carefully planned begin slipping quietly out of reach.

At the time, I believed I could always catch up later.

I couldn't.

Looking back across all these years, I sometimes wonder how different my life might have been if I had climbed into my Cherry Creek pickup, pointed it west toward Missoula, and simply driven away.

Instead…

I stayed.

Waiting for the first log to arrive.



Looking South from Cherry Springs to Beer Bill's

Chapter 4

September 1971

The Ground Finally Gives Way

September finally brought something I had almost stopped believing would happen.

Julius and I were finally going to build the log lambing barn.

Dean's blueprints were pinned to the wall of my sheep wagon, and for the first time we had something we hadn't enjoyed since arriving at Cherry Creek—a real plan.

If everything stayed on schedule, the log walls and roof would be completed by the third week of October. During the Montana Teachers Convention, Paul planned to come to Cherry Springs and help Dean hang the massive barn doors, the final step in completing the building.

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Creek, I could actually see a finish line.

Whatever frustrations had filled the previous two months seemed to disappear overnight.

Julius and I attacked the project with renewed purpose.

Renewed energy.

Renewed hope.

Our first assignment was preparing the site for the concrete footings.

There was one problem.

The barn site still had to be leveled.

Julius drove over to Brown's Gulch and explained our situation to John Sebulsky.

John looked over the hard gumbo ground and shook his head.

"It'll get leveled," he said, "but not until it gets some moisture."

The baked prairie clay was almost as hard as concrete.

Without rain, even a bulldozer would struggle.

Two nights later, someone must have been looking out for us.

A powerful thunderstorm rolled across eastern Montana.

By morning the storm had settled into a slow, soaking drizzle that continued for hours.

When daylight arrived, John was already waiting at the corrals with his equipment.

He spent most of the day leveling the barn site with the Cherry Creek Sheep Company's road grater.

The rest of the work then belonged to Julius and me.

Now came the footings.

There was no backhoe.

No trencher.

No auger.

Just two shovels.

A digging bar.

And eastern Montana gumbo.

Unless you've driven a shovel into sun-baked gumbo clay, it's difficult to appreciate how exhausting that work can be.

Every inch had to be earned.

The deeper we dug, the slower our progress became.

The footing trenches seemed endless.

By the end of the first week our callused hands had blistered all over again, even though we both wore gloves.

Soon the blisters split open and bled.

Julius looked down at his hands and slowly shook his head.

"I've never had blisters on top of blisters in my whole life."

Neither had I.

Personal hygiene had quietly disappeared from our priorities.

July.

August.

Now September.

Neither of us had taken a proper bath or shower in months.

Neither of us cared.

The barn mattered more than how we looked—or smelled.

Julius occasionally glanced at my beard with open envy.

“I still can’t grow one worth a damn,” he grumbled.

After another trip to Gebhard’s near Melstone for rough lumber, we started building the footing forms.

Watching the outline of the lambing barn slowly appear on the prairie was one of the most satisfying moments I had experienced since arriving at Cherry Creek.

For the first time…

I could stand in the middle of the forms and imagine the finished building.

The project wasn’t just lines on Dean’s blueprints anymore.

It was becoming real.

Setting the forms, however, required precision.

Every corner had to be square.

Every footing had to be level.

For that we needed a surveyor’s transit.

Only Sivert had one.

Julius contacted him over John Sebulsky’s ranch radio.

Sivert said he'd bring it over.

So we waited.

One hour.

Then two.

Nothing.

Finally Julius looked over at me.

"We've waited long enough."

By then, Julius and I had developed an unspoken rule.

If something hadn't happened after two hours…

we stopped waiting for someone else.

We found a way to make it happen ourselves.

Looking back, I realize something else had quietly changed.

Only a week earlier my thoughts had been consumed by the college education I was leaving behind.

Now…

I hardly thought about it at all.

Every day revolved around Julius.

His swollen ankles he blamed on gout.

His need for more afternoon naps.

Me worrying about his failing health.

And the barn.

Somewhere along the way, Cherry Creek had become my entire world.



As darkness settled over the Montana prairie, I stared west toward ***Devil's Dancing Ground***. I was twenty, living beside Julius, with little understanding of the mysteries surrounding us—or of how much life still had to teach me.

The prairie kept its secrets. My family had its own. **I watched the last light disappear beyond the horizon, never imagining that some of the darkest mysteries of my life were already unfolding, hidden from view, waiting for their time to find me.**

The Waiting Ends

Sivert had promised to bring the surveyor's transit.

Two hours came and went.

He never showed.

Without saying much, Julius climbed into the Skunk Wagon.

"We're going to him."

I didn't argue.

If we wanted the barn to move forward, waiting any longer wasn't an option.

Before leaving, I grabbed my backpack containing every dirty piece of clothing I owned, my last clean set of clothes, and my toiletries.

Julius immediately understood what I had in mind.

Without saying a word, he gathered his own dirty laundry and stuffed the assorted items into the our grocery flour sacks we used for storing and carrying food. He piled them into the back of the Skunk Wagon beside mine.

His pile was considerably larger.

Especially the socks.

He refused to wash his Levi's or his coveralls.

"If you wash 'em," he insisted, "they'll just fall apart."

When we arrived at the home ranch, neither Sivert nor Janet was anywhere to be found.

Of course.

By then, I had almost come to expect it.

While we searched for the transit, I finally convinced Julius that we both needed showers.

Not tomorrow.

Not next week.

Today.

He reluctantly agreed.

We used the tiny shower in the camping trailer beside the main house.

For me, it was my first real shower since the third of July.

For Julius…

I wasn't sure either of us knew.

The water smelled like the sulfur springs at Yellowstone National Park.

I didn't care.

It was hot.

It was wet.

It was wonderful.

The water carried away layers of gumbo dust, dried sweat, and weeks of hard labor.

It also found every blister and scrape on my hands.

They burned like fire.

I didn't care about that either.

For the first time in months, I felt clean.

I felt human again.

Then I looked over at Julius.

For the first time since I had met him, I realized his beard wasn't gray from dirt.

It was naturally dark gray—black.

Without weeks of dust, dried food, and the remnants of his head wound clinging to it, he looked like an entirely different man.

Even his eyes seemed brighter.

He looked healthier.

Or perhaps he simply looked like the man he had once been.

Julius dug through the back of the Skunk Wagon looking for something clean to wear.

The search wasn't encouraging.

Nearly everything was as dirty as the clothes he had just taken off.

Then he carefully unfolded a double-breasted wool suit with matching trousers.

He handled it with remarkable care.

“These are my Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes,” he said.

“I want to be buried in this suit someday.”

He paused.

“I’ve only worn it twice.”

“Both funerals.”

I never knew whether Julius was joking.

Sometimes I don’t think he knew either.

I suggested we take the suit into Billings and have it dry-cleaned.

“It’ll look brand new.”

Julius answered with that familiar sideways grin—the expression I had come to think of as his Festus wink.

Then he carefully folded the suit and put it away.

Instead, I gathered every dirty shirt, towel, pair of pants, coveralls, and socks we owned and carried them into Janet’s laundry room.

Six loads later, we finally reached the bottom of the pile.

I remember wondering whether all the gumbo clay would clog the washing machine.

Fortunately, it survived.

While we were getting dressed, Julius picked up my bottle of Head & Shoulders shampoo.

He sniffed it.

“This stuff smells a whole lot better than Lava Soap.”

I looked at him.

“You’ve been washing your hair with Lava Soap?”

“Sure.”

“For everything.”

I stared at him.

Lava Soap contains pumice.

It’s made for scrubbing grease off a mechanic’s hands.

The thought of using it on your hair—or anywhere else—made me cringe.

Julius simply shrugged.

“I just hope your fancy shampoo don’t give me a rash.”

I couldn’t help laughing.

Of everything Julius had survived in his life…

he was worried about Head & Shoulders.

Clean for the first time in what felt like forever, we loaded the transit into the Skunk Wagon and headed back to Cherry Springs.



I had used a surveyor's transit while working for the Forest Service, so I understood the basics.

Julius held the leveling rod while I worked behind the transit.

Slowly…

one form after another…

the foundation settled into perfect level.

Late that afternoon we stepped back and looked across the prairie.

The forms were square.

They were level.

The footings were finally ready for concrete.

For the first time, the lambing barn existed somewhere besides Dean's blueprints.

It existed in front of us.

Julius didn't say anything.

Neither did I.

We simply stood there for several minutes, looking at what we had accomplished.

For nearly two months, it had felt as though every day ended with another delay.

Another excuse.

Another disappointment.

This day was different.

The waiting was finally over.

At twenty years old, I don't think I had ever been prouder of a day's work.

The shower and being clean had made me feel human again.

The footings made me believe we were finally building something that would last.

For a little while, life at Cherry Creek felt exactly like where I was supposed to be.

Looking back now…

that may have been the most dangerous feeling of all.



Pink Eyes on the Prairie

With the concrete forms finally leveled, Julius and I drove into Ingomar in my pickup and called Dean from the phone booth at the Jersey Lilly.

Dean wanted to make absolutely certain Julius and I had calculated the concrete correctly before I ordered a single truckload.

“I’ll be there tomorrow,” he promised.

He also wanted to inspect the forms himself to make certain they were square, level, and strong enough to withstand the weight of wet concrete.

For once…

everything sounded organized.

I thought about calling Paul and Bernice.

Then I remembered our last conversation.

I quietly hung up the receiver.

Neither Julius nor I mentioned calling them again.

Some silences are easier to live with than arguments.

We lingered over lunch at the Jersey Lilly longer than usual.

For once, there wasn’t a crisis waiting for me or us.

We talked about hunting.

About rifles.

About the coming fall.

Julius asked if I knew how to shoot anything besides a .22.

I admitted that I didn't.

The conversation somehow drifted to the Vietnam draft.

I explained that I had been classified 4-F because of sports injuries.

Julius became unusually quiet.

After a long pause he simply said,

"Wars ought to be fought by the politicians."

"Not somebody else's kids."

Then he looked out the window.

"You were lucky."

It wasn't a political statement.

It sounded more like something life had taught him.

The ride back to Cherry Springs felt different.

For the first time since July, Julius and I weren't chasing another emergency.

We had accomplished something.

Even our attitudes seemed lighter.

Perhaps it was because we were finally clean.

Every few minutes Julius would lift his arm and smell his freshly washed shirt.

He looked over at me.

“This shampoo smells pretty good.”

I laughed.

“So you don’t miss Lava Soap?”

“Nope.”

A few minutes later he was admiring my beard.

“It’s getting almost as thick as mine.”

He studied us for a second.

“Somebody might think we’re brothers.”

“I sure hope not.”

That earned me the sideways grin I had come to know as Julius’s trademark wink.

After supper we sat quietly outside the sheep wagon watching the sun disappear behind the distant buttes.

Neither of us felt much like talking.

There was nothing left to fix that evening.

Nothing left to haul.

No emergency trip to Melstone.

No broken trailer.

No flat tires.

No missing supplies.

For the first time in weeks…

life seemed wonderfully ordinary.

Julius suddenly stood.

“We’re going rabbit hunting.”

“Tonight?”

“Yep.”

He reached into the Skunk Wagon and pulled out his scoped semi-automatic .22.

“The jackrabbits are eatin’ everything over near Brown’s Gulch.”

We drove slowly across the prairie after dark, passing Beer Bill’s place as Julius swept the sagebrush with a spotlight.

Then I saw them.

Thousands of tiny pink eyes.

Everywhere.

The prairie seemed alive.

Jackrabbits bounded through the sagebrush in every direction.

I’d never witnessed anything like it.

Julius handed me the rifle.

“One shot.”

“One rabbit.”

“If you miss…”

“You hand me the rifle.”

It sounded simple enough.

Until the first rabbit started running.

Before long we were both laughing.

The rifle passed back and forth.

Every miss meant surrendering it to the other shooter.

Every good shot earned another chance.

After we had filled the back of the Skunk Wagon with more jackrabbits than I could have imagined, Julius explained why we were there.

Years earlier, ranchers throughout eastern Montana—including Sivert—had worked hard to eliminate coyotes to protect their sheep.

They had succeeded.

Perhaps too well.

Without enough predators, the jackrabbit population exploded.

The rabbits consumed enormous amounts of grass—the same grass the sheep desperately needed to survive.

To Julius, this wasn't hunting.

It was ranch work.

Necessary work.

Almost every day, we'd see the turkey buzzards circling overhead, riding the thermals and waiting for their next meal.

Julius would look up at them and grin.

I never knew why…

"Besides… all these rabbits gotta feed something."

He pointed toward the sky.

"Those turkey buzzards will eat 'em. They're butt ugly, but they keep the prairie clean."

Julius chuckled.

"Everything's gotta eat."

To Julius, even shooting rabbits had a purpose. Nothing on the prairie was wasted.

As we bumped slowly across the prairie beneath a sky overflowing with stars, I realized how completely my life had changed.

Only a few months earlier I had been working at the Bigfork Summer Playhouse.

My days had revolved around rehearsals, actors, music, and college friends.

Now my evenings were spent hunting jackrabbits with an aging sheep herder who drank homemade chokecherry wine, believed Lava Soap was suitable shampoo, built his own HAM radios from magazine schematics, and somehow managed to solve nearly every problem with stubborn determination.

Oddly enough…

it no longer seemed strange.

It simply felt like life.

Looking back now, I think that's what I remember most about those first weeks of September.

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Creek, I wasn't worried.

The barn was finally moving forward.

Julius seemed happier than he had been in weeks.

Even his health appeared a little better.

For a brief time, I allowed myself to believe the hard part was finally behind us.

No one was arguing.

No one was making impossible demands.

No one appeared to be lying to me.

At least…

not that I knew of.

Sometimes life becomes most convincing just before it changes.

I didn't know it then…

but I had quietly drifted into a false sense of security.

The prairie was perfectly calm.

The storm was still over the horizon.



My ranch pickup parked in front of the Jersey Lilly
— 1971 —
After a two-day rain.

Everything Was Falling Apart

Dean never arrived.

One day passed.

Then another.

Then another morning.

Julius and I looked at one another without saying much.

There wasn't much left to say.

Waiting had accomplished very little during the past two months.

Once again, we climbed into the Skunk Wagon and headed toward Ingomar.

As usual, we stopped at Sivert's place first.

Neither of us was prepared for what we found.

Before we even shut off the engine, we heard shouting.

Janet was standing outside the house screaming at Sivert.

The three children stood nearby, frozen in place, saying nothing.

According to Julius, Sivert had accused Janet of having a relationship with one of the cowboys hired to watch the Black Angus steers grazing on the northern range.

One cowboy stayed in a sheep wagon near Beer Bill's.

The other bunked inside Beer Bill's weathered shack about a mile and a half south of Cherry Springs.

I had never met either man.

Julius had.

Whatever had happened between Sivert and Janet hadn't started that morning.

It had obviously been building for a long time.

We had simply arrived in the middle of the explosion.

Sivert turned toward his blue Suburban.

Janet wasn't about to let him leave quietly.

She stormed into the garage, flung open one of the freezers, and began throwing frozen packages of meat.

Steaks.

Roasts.

Hamburger.

Whatever her hands landed on first.

Most of it missed Sivert completely.

Her aim wasn't especially good.

His Suburban, however, wasn't nearly as lucky.

Frozen packages slammed into the doors and quarter panels with dull metallic thuds, leaving fresh dents before he finally climbed inside.

The children never moved.

Neither did Julius.

Neither did I.

Within seconds Sivert backed out of the driveway and disappeared down the road.

Janet gathered the children, climbed into her brown Suburban, and drove away in the opposite direction.

Just like that…

the ranch headquarters stood empty.

Julius and I remained in the yard, looking at each other without saying a word.

Neither of us knew what we had just witnessed.

I couldn't help wondering how many scenes like this had taken place before I ever arrived at Cherry Creek.

Years later, I would hear more stories about Janet throwing frozen food at Sivert.

Apparently, this wasn't the first time and would not be the last.

As the silence settled over the ranch, I walked inside and called Dean from Sivert's telephone.

After several attempts I finally reached him.

"I'm leaving Thompson Falls now," he said.

"I'll be there this evening."

I thanked him and slowly hung up the receiver.

I wanted to believe him.

But by then…

promises had become little more than educated guesses.

As I stepped back outside, I heard Julius whistle.

He had somehow found a large cooler.

One by one he was gathering every frozen package Janet had thrown into the yard and driveway.

Many had burst through the butcher paper.

“Dogs’ll clean this up before dark,” he said.

I laughed.

“I don’t think even Rink could eat this much.”

Julius grinned.

“We’re eating T-bones tonight.”

He tossed another package into the cooler.

“We just saved Cherry Creek a whole freezer full of meat.”

I wasn’t entirely convinced everyone else would see it that way.

Putting everything back into the freezer probably would have made more sense.

But that wasn’t how Julius looked at life.

To him, every problem contained an opportunity if you looked long enough.

Over the next week, nearly everyone who stopped by our camp ate steaks instead of hamburgers.

In the middle of complete family chaos…

Julius somehow found a reason to celebrate.

Looking back now, I think that's one of the greatest lessons Julius ever taught me.

He couldn't control other people's anger.

He couldn't control delays.

He couldn't control broken promises.

He couldn't even control whether Dean showed up.

But he could control how he responded.

While the adults around us seemed to be coming apart at the seams, Julius kept looking for the next job that needed doing.

The next meal.

The next laugh.

The next reason to keep moving.

The next reason to live life.

I wish I had understood more about construction during those weeks.

If I had, perhaps I wouldn't have depended so heavily on everyone else to tell me what came next.

Instead, I kept waiting for adults who always seemed to have another explanation.

Another delay.

Another promise.

The strange part was that the only person who never pretended to know more than he actually did…

was Julius.

Everything around us seemed to be falling apart.

Yet somehow…

little by little…

the barn was beginning to come together.



Mr. One Share

Dean finally arrived.

Two days later than he had promised.

By then, I wasn't even surprised.

Everyone connected with the lambing barn seemed to have a reason for being late.

Dean's explanation, however, was one I never would have imagined.

Somewhere near Lewistown he had been stopped for speeding. The conversation with the sheriff quickly deteriorated. The deputy believed Dean had been drinking beer during the long drive across Montana. Instead of spending the night at Cherry Springs, Dean spent it in the county jail.

He even showed me the citation.

I believed him.

Looking back, I sometimes wondered if the years Dean had spent in the Air Force had shaped him in ways I didn't yet understand. He carried himself with a quiet military bearing. He expected plans to be followed, measurements to be exact, and jobs to be done correctly. Yet there were moments when I sensed he carried a weight he rarely talked about. Whether the beer had anything to do with that, I couldn't honestly say. It was simply an impression that stayed with me over the years.

At twenty years old, none of that mattered very much.

I was simply relieved he had finally arrived.

By then I had grown weary of trying to decide who was telling me the truth.

Paul.

Sivert.

Janet.

Dean.

Every conversation uncovered another surprise.

Every promise came with another explanation.

Every explanation seemed to create two more questions.

Dean went straight to work.

The distractions disappeared.

The blueprints came out.

He inspected every footing form with the same attention to detail I had seen in the Forest Service engineers.

He checked each corner against the plans.

Measured elevations with the transit.

He then examined every brace.

He pushed against the forms to make certain they were rigid enough to withstand the pressure of wet concrete.

Finally, he nodded.

“They’ll work.”

It was the first uncomplicated answer I had heard in quite some time.

Then Dean looked toward the livestock corrals.

“We’ve got a problem.”

The concrete trucks from Forsyth couldn’t reach the back side of the forms.

The corrals blocked the only practical route.

The three of us stood quietly studying the situation.

No one spoke for several minutes.

Finally I broke the silence.

“We’ll take the fence apart.”

Dean turned and looked at me.

After another moment, he nodded.

“It’ll work.”

Julius wasn’t convinced.

“Sivert’s gonna blow his stack if he comes out here and finds his corrals torn apart.”

I looked back at Julius.

“So what?”

“You taught me how to build them.”

“You also taught me how to repair them.”

The words surprised even me.

Julius slowly nodded.

“You’re right.”

“We’ve rebuilt enough fence and corrals this summer.”

“We can tear ’em apart and put ’em back together.”

“No one will ever know.”

I pointed toward the forms.

“The concrete has to get in here somehow.”

Julius still hesitated.

For weeks he had been calling me “Mr. One Share.”

It had become his favorite nickname.

I smiled.

“Well…”

“I guess Mr. One Share just made a decision.”

Julius didn’t smile.

Not immediately.

He studied the corrals one more time.

Then he looked back at me.

“Tough shit.”

He grinned.

“You’ve got a stupid idea.”

He paused.

“It’ll probably work.”

“I just don’t like making more work for myself.”

Since you know everything about repairing corrals… you can repair it!

Then he laughed.

“Let’s tear it apart.”

Within an hour the three of us had removed enough fence rails, posts, and panels to create a temporary lane wide enough for the concrete trucks.

As it turned out, the plan worked perfectly.

When the trucks arrived from Forsyth, they backed through the opening exactly as we had hoped.

The concrete was poured without damaging either the forms or the remaining corrals.

Looking back, removing part of the fence seems like an obvious solution.

At the time, it felt like a turning point.

Until then, I had been waiting for someone older to tell me what to do.

Someone with more experience.

Someone who surely knew more than I did.

Standing there beside that unfinished barn, I realized something.

Experience matters.

But waiting forever for someone else to make every decision doesn't build much of anything.

Sometimes you study the problem.

You make the best decision you can.

Then you live with the results.

That day, the decision happened to be mine.

And for once…

it worked.



The Concrete Finally Flows

When the concrete trucks from Forsyth finally rolled through the opening we had made in the corrals, I stood quietly beside the forms and watched.

For nearly three months the lambing barn had existed only in conversations, arguments, blueprints, measurements, and endless delays.

Now it was becoming something solid.

Something permanent.

Dean immediately took charge.

The easy-going conversation disappeared.

His military bearing surfaced the moment the first truck backed into position.

Every movement had a purpose.

Every instruction was precise.

He checked the slump of the concrete.

He watched each chute.

Directed where every load was to begin and end.

Nothing escaped his attention.

This wasn't simply another construction project.

His reputation traveled with every building he erected.

There would be no shortcuts.

No guesswork.

No excuses.

Julius and I worked beside him until every footing was filled.

We shoveled.

Raked.

Leveled.

Smoothed.

Dean made sure all the rebar was in exactly the position it should be.

Finally, Dean places all the concrete anchors exactly where they were marked.

By late afternoon the last truck pulled away.

Silence settled over Cherry Springs.

The footings stretched across the prairie exactly where Dean's blueprints said they should. Everything was in the place it should be. The footings were perfect.

For several moments none of us spoke.

Dean finally broke the silence.

"Looks good… really good."

Those four words probably meant more to me than he ever realized.

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Creek, I felt as though we had actually won.

Not a small victory.

A real one.

Months of sweat.

Months of delays.

Months of wondering whether the barn would ever become more than another promise.

Now there was concrete curing beneath the September sun.

I was twenty years old.

I don't think I had ever been prouder of anything I had helped build.

Even Julius couldn't hide his smile.

He slowly walked the length of the footings, hands resting on his hips, nodding to himself as if he were already picturing the log walls rising from the concrete.

Dean looked satisfied.

Julius looked relieved.

I felt something I hadn't experienced in months.

Hope.

For one afternoon, everything seemed exactly as it should be. I had quietly convinced myself the difficult part was finally over.

I couldn't have been more wrong.



Looking back, I sometimes wonder why people so often celebrate life's accomplishments with alcohol.

Dean decided it was beer time. He reached into his truck, pulled out a couple of cans, and handed one to Julius and one to me. After taking a long swallow, Dean made a face.

"That's awful," he said. "It's boiling hot."

Julius just smiled. Without saying a word, he set his beer aside, climbed into my pickup, and drove off across the open prairie toward nowhere I could recognize.

Neither Dean nor I paid much attention. We simply sat around the campfire, talking while the daylight slowly faded.

About forty minutes later, Julius returned carrying something hidden behind his back. When he stepped into the firelight, I immediately recognized the gallon glass jug.

Another one.

This one was an old clear A&W Root Beer jug, still wearing tattered remnants of its original label and smatterings of gumbo.

He hadn't bought it. There were no stores.

He hadn't carried it with him.

Somehow, like the other jugs before it, the jug had been buried somewhere out on the prairie, hidden beneath the endless grass where only Julius seemed to know its resting place. I never saw him bury one, and I never stumbled across one by accident. Yet whenever Julius decided an occasion deserved celebrating, another gallon jug would mysteriously appear, as though the prairie itself had been keeping it for him.

He grinned from ear to ear.

"This," he announced proudly, "is the good stuff."

Dean laughed.

I didn't.

The sight of that jug instantly brought back memories of the first time I had tasted Julius's homemade chokecherry wine, the night he cracked his head open, and his explosive outburst in Billings the following day. Those memories were still far too fresh to ignore.

I quietly warned Dean to be very, very careful.

By then I knew Julius's homemade chokecherry wine far too well. It wasn't the kind of wine you sipped while telling stories around a campfire. It was unpredictable. One jug might taste almost pleasant. The next could strip the lining from your throat. Worse yet, it had a way of turning good judgment into bad judgment with remarkable speed. I'd already seen sensible people become loud, reckless, sick, and occasionally too drunk to remember much of anything the next morning.

Then another realization struck me.

Julius hadn't driven off just to get away for a while. He had gone straight to another secret hiding place because he already knew exactly where this jug was buried. Long before we ever arrived, he had hidden another gallon of his "potassium cyanide" chokecherry wine somewhere out on that vast, empty prairie. Once again, I found myself wondering how many of those buried jugs were actually scattered across eastern Montana—and how Julius always managed to find them.

Needless to say, Dean and Julius celebrated our accomplishment well into the evening. Between them, they emptied far more of Julius's homemade chokecherry wine than either one should have.

Neither Dean nor Julius paid any attention when I warned them to go slow. Even I made the mistake of taking a little, despite knowing better. Maybe it was my first insincere attempt at suicide—or maybe I simply wanted to numb my mind from thinking too much. Whatever the reason, I was grateful I drank only a fraction of what they did. I guess it was that "trust thing."

Within a couple of hours, the gallon jug was empty.

That night was unforgettable.

The sounds of Dean and Julius being violently sick echoed across the prairie, drowning out the howls of the coyotes. Between the vomiting, groaning, and colorful language, even the coyotes seemed offended by the racket. I sometimes think they couldn't sleep any better than I could.

The next morning, Dean couldn't wait to get back to Thompson Falls to make sure his semis were properly loaded with logs, 1×4s, steel roofing, and fiberglass for the skylights.

As he climbed into his pickup, he shouted back at Julius.

“I’ll never drink any of that shit with you again! You poisoned me! Damn you, Julius Sebulsky!”

Julius didn’t miss a beat.

“Your loss, you ungrateful piece of shit!”

Looking back now, I often wonder what Dean’s drive back to Thompson Falls felt like.

Knowing Julius’s wine…

I doubt it was a pleasant trip.



Forms for the Concrete Footings of the Log Lambing Barn.

Autumn at Cherry Springs

By the third week of September, Julius and I had finished building the rest of the massive windbreak along the west side of the Cherry Springs corrals.

Now there was nothing left to do but wait.

The logs hadn't arrived.

Neither had the roofing tin.

Until they did, construction on the lambing barn couldn't continue.

For the first time in months…

there wasn't another job demanding our attention.

One project had been completed.

The next hadn't yet begun.

For a little while, life slowed down.

During those quiet days another realization gradually settled over me.

Classes had already begun in Missoula.

My classmates were attending lectures, buying textbooks, and settling into another year of college.

I wasn't.

Looking back now, I don't remember making a decision to give up that semester.

I simply never left.

One ordinary day became another.

Then another.

Somewhere along the way, my future quietly changed directions.

I had given my family my word.

Keeping that promise mattered to me.

Even now, I don't regret honoring it.

But I have often wondered whether Paul and Bernice ever understood what keeping my family promise to them ultimately cost me.

No one ever cared to ask me what I was giving up by staying.

Autumn quietly settled across eastern Montana as though the prairie itself understood another season was ending.

The cottonwoods lining the creek blazed in brilliant shades of gold and autumn green.

Every breeze sent shimmering leaves dancing across the ground.

The prairie grasses had faded from summer green to warm amber, stretching toward distant buttes beneath an endless Montana sky.

Almost every evening, the western horizon erupted into layers of crimson, lavender, pink, and orange before fading into darkness.

The ranch had never looked more beautiful.

The nights, however, carried an unmistakable reminder that winter wasn't far away.

Each morning frost lingered a little longer.

Canadian geese passed overhead almost every day, their wavering V-formations pointing south.

Even they knew it was time to leave.

I stayed.

By then I had traded my summer clothes for thermal underwear.

On the colder nights, I crawled into my new sleeping bag, grateful for every ounce of warmth it provided.

During the day I locked it safely inside my pickup.

Partly to keep the mice out.

Mostly to keep Julius out.

He had developed the habit of climbing into the back of my pickup, unrolling my sleeping bag, and taking afternoon naps whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Every time I caught him, he'd grin.

"I won't do it again."

He always did.

The mice were even less trustworthy.

No matter what I tried, they found their way into my sheep wagon.

One night I woke to a sharp pain in my right foot.

Something was chewing on my big toe.

I jerked my foot away just in time to see one of the little bandits disappear into a corner.

The mouse had chewed through Paul's old sleeping bag.

Through my sock.

Then into my toenail.

My big toe bled most of the following morning.

Julius wasn't impressed.

"A mouse bite never hurt anybody."

Easy for him to say.

By then Paul's old sleeping bag looked as though it had survived a shotgun blast.

The mice had reduced it to little more than patches of cloth holding loose stuffing together.

My old wool blanket wasn't much better.

Eventually, I threw what remained beneath the sheep wagon, hoping the mice would leave everything else alone.

They didn't.

From then on, anything important stayed locked inside my pickup.

Waiting has a peculiar effect on people.

Some become patient.

Others become restless.

Julius belonged firmly in the second group.

Hard work gave him purpose.

When there wasn't a problem to solve, he went looking for one.

One morning he climbed into my sheep wagon and casually announced,

"We're going to Judith Gap."

"Why?"

"I want you to meet Fred Wiefrich."

I had no idea that simple introduction would become one of the most memorable days of my entire time at Cherry Springs.



That was explanation enough for Julius.

Before leaving Ingomar, I cashed a four-hundred-dollar check at the Lilly, tried calling my parents once again, and, of course, got no answer.

Why isn't Bernice answering?

Julius insisted we take the Skunk Wagon instead of my pickup.

"Fred's roads will tear your new pickup apart."

I believed him.

On the way we stopped in Harlowton to visit Bill "Shep" Shepherd at Shep's Antiques—the same place where I had first met Julius.

The moment introductions were over, Julius and Shep settled behind the counter with bottles of Great Falls Select and Brown Derby beer, swapping stories as though they hadn't seen each other in years.

While Julius and Shep swapped stories over their beers, I drifted through the store at my own pace. Every aisle invited another discovery. Weathered saddles, lanterns, old firearms, hand tools, bits of ranch history, and forgotten keepsakes filled every available space. Shep's wasn't just an antique store—it was a collection of lives waiting to be remembered. Among those treasures were several handmade knives that quietly caught my attention. I admired them without a second thought, never imagining they had been crafted by the very man we were about to meet. Looking back now, it seems fitting that my introduction to Fred's work came long before my introduction to Fred himself.

Eventually Julius looked at Shep.

“Want to go see Fred?”

Shep smiled.

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

He wanted to pick up several handmade knives Fred had been making for the antique shop.

As we neared Fred’s property, Shep suddenly said,

“Let’s burn some black powder.”

Julius didn’t need any convincing.

He stopped the Skunk Wagon, climbed into the back, and returned carrying his .50-caliber muzzleloader.

Then he did something that made me laugh.

He unfolded my old wool blanket—the very one I had thrown beneath my sheep wagon weeks earlier because the mice had nearly destroyed it.

Apparently Julius had rescued it.

Without saying a word.

He spread it across the hood of the Skunk Wagon to protect the paint before laying the rifle across it.

Then, like a patient instructor, he showed me every step of loading a traditional black-powder rifle.

He carefully measured the powder.

Poured it into the barrel.

Placed a lubricated patch over the muzzle.

Set a round lead ball on top.

Then slowly rammed everything firmly into place.

Finally he capped the nipple and handed me the rifle.

Shep walked roughly a hundred yards across the prairie and placed three empty gallon wine jugs beside a barbed-wire fence.

I rested the rifle on the blanket and looked down the open sights.

Just before I pulled the hammer back, a familiar thought crossed my mind.

What if this is another setup?

Another opportunity to fail?

I lowered the rifle.

“How hard does it kick?”

Shep laughed.

“It’ll shove you pretty good.”

“But you’ll survive.”

I nodded, pulled back the hammer, took a deep breath, and gently squeezed the trigger.

The rifle exploded with a roar unlike anything I’d ever heard.

A thick cloud of white smoke swallowed the targets completely.

By the time the breeze finally cleared it away…

all three jugs were still standing.

The only sound was meadowlarks singing across the prairie.

Julius silently reloaded.

His shot fared no better.

Shep burst into laughter.

“If that had been a buffalo, you’d have had to shoot into the whole herd just to hit one!”

Julius didn’t appreciate the joke.

Not one bit.

Looking back now, I don’t think I fully understood it at the time, but something about that afternoon stayed with me.

It wasn’t about hitting the jugs.

It was about the people I was with.

For a few hours, there was no pressure to prove anything.

No expectations I couldn’t meet.

Just smoke drifting across the prairie, old friends laughing, and a rifle that kicked harder than I expected.

And for once, that was enough.



No One Laughs at Julius

For a long moment, Julius stood perfectly still.

His eyes never left the three untouched wine jugs standing beside the fence.

Shep was laughing so hard he could barely catch his breath.

I wasn't laughing.

By then, I had already learned there were times when Julius's temper could change as quickly as an eastern Montana thunderstorm.

This was one of those times.

Without saying a word, Julius climbed into the back of the Skunk Wagon.

When he returned, he was carrying his M-14.

The same rifle he had shown me some weeks earlier.

The one he insisted I would never need.

His face had turned bright red.

He looked at me.

Then at Shep.

"Plug your ears."

He slammed a loaded magazine into the rifle.

Pulled back the operating lever.

A round snapped into the chamber.

There wasn't the slightest attempt to aim.

Julius simply pointed the rifle toward the three one gallon jugs and squeezed the trigger.

The M-14 erupted.

The rifle climbed violently as it fired on full automatic.

The roar echoed across the prairie.

Dust exploded everywhere.

When the shooting stopped…

all three jugs were still standing.

For a long second, no one moved.

Then the top half of a nearby fence post slowly leaned sideways before crashing into the grass.

Shep completely lost control.

He doubled over laughing.

"I've seen better shooting than that at the county fair!"

Julius's jaw tightened.

"No one…"

"…makes fun of me."

He reached into the Skunk Wagon for another magazine.

“This time…”

“…those damn jugs are history.”

He marched toward the fence until he stood no more than ten yards from the targets.

Again, there was no careful aim.

No hesitation.

Only determination.

The M-14 roared once more.

Glass exploded in every direction.

The gallon jugs vanished into a cloud of flying fragments that exploded into the prairie sky.

By the time the rifle clicked empty, nothing remained except sparkling pieces of brown and clear glass scattered across the prairie.

Julius lowered the rifle.

“There.”

“Happy now?”

Shep wiped the tears from his eyes.

“I never doubted you’d get ’em.”

It was the last time I ever saw anyone laugh at Julius’s shooting.

Julius wasn’t smiling.

He removed the empty magazine, checked the chamber, and slipped the rifle back into its case with the same deliberate care he had shown before firing it, as though nothing unusual had happened.

Then he disappeared into the back of the Skunk Wagon once more.

When he returned, he was carrying a quart Mason jar filled with a perfectly clear liquid.

He held it up.

“This is for Fred.”

I looked at the jar.

“Water?”

Julius grinned.

“Tipple!”

I decided not to ask another question.

After spending nearly three months with Julius, I had learned there were some answers better left undiscovered.

We climbed back into the Skunk Wagon and continued toward Fred Wiefrich’s place.

Looking back now, it seems fitting that my introduction to Fred’s work came before my introduction to Fred himself.

Before the day was over, I would meet one of the finest craftsmen —and one of the finest men—I would ever know.



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The Man at the End of the Road

Part One: Fred's Place

The farther we drove, the farther it seemed we traveled back in time.

Miles of empty prairie slipped behind us as the road grew narrower and rougher. The ranches became fewer, the fences farther apart, until it seemed the only companions left were the wind, the sagebrush, and an endless Montana sky.

Then Fred's place appeared on the horizon.

It wasn't much to look at.

A small one-room house stood alone against the prairie. Nearby sat a weathered corral with no horse in sight, a tiny barn that looked as though it had surrendered years earlier and was simply waiting for gravity to finish the job, and not a single power line stretched across the landscape.

There was no electricity.

No modern conveniences.

Nothing but quiet.

Scattered around the barn rested fifteen or sixteen abandoned automobiles, each slowly surrendering to rust and prairie grass. An ancient Model A Ford tractor sat among them, looking as though it had retired long before I was born.

Nothing about the place suggested wealth.

Everything about it suggested independence.

As we rolled into the yard, the sun settled toward the western horizon, washing the prairie in deep shades of gold and amber. Long shadows stretched across the grass, and for the second time in only a few weeks, I found myself thinking the entire scene belonged in one of Charles M. Russell's paintings.

The only thing missing was Russell himself, standing behind an easel.

Before Julius had even shut off the engine, the front door burst open.

A tall, weathered man stepped outside carrying a rifle.

For one brief moment, I wondered if we had made a serious mistake.

Then the man broke into a grin.

"Were you idiots the ones I heard shooting this afternoon?"

He rested the rifle against one shoulder.

"Soon as I heard that M-14, I knew it had to be you, Julius."

Everyone laughed except me.

I was still deciding whether we were about to be welcomed…

or arrested…

or shot.

Fred's face looked as though it had been carved from old saddle leather. Decades beneath the eastern Montana sun had etched deep lines across his cheeks and forehead. In my mind I joked that there

was probably enough gumbo dust settled into those wrinkles to grow another prairie.

His eyes, however, told a different story.

They were sharp.

Curious.

And full of life.

Julius climbed out of the Skunk Wagon carrying the familiar quart Mason jar—the same one he had shown us earlier while shooting the gallon jugs.

Without a word, he handed it to Fred.

Fred smiled as though he had just been given a priceless gift.

He unscrewed the lid, raised the jar, and took one long, determined swallow.

No hesitation.

No cough.

Not even a blink.

He calmly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and nodded in approval.

“Best pick-me-up a man could ask for.”

Only then did he turn his attention to me.

“Who’s the greenhorn pilgrim?”

Before I could answer, Fred spotted Shep climbing out of the Skunk Wagon.

“Goddamn it, Shep!”

His voice echoed across the yard.

“Where’s the Goddamn money you owe me for the last knives I made?”

Apparently that question had been waiting for quite some time.

Shep just laughed.

“I figured you’d remember.”

“I remember every dollar.”

The two of them grinned at each other like old friends who had been carrying on the same argument for years.

I introduced myself.

Almost instantly Fred’s expression softened.

“Well, come on in.”

As he held the door open for us, he paused long enough to take another generous swallow from Julius’s Tipple.

He sighed with satisfaction.

“Best damn moonshine in all of Montana.”

He looked at the jar.

“Bar none.”

That was my introduction to Fred Wiefrich.

Looking back now, I realize I noticed the cabin…

the old vehicles…

the prairie…

and even the moonshine…

long before I noticed the man.

That would soon change.



Part Two: A Cabin Filled with Character

The little cabin felt surprisingly warm.

As Fred closed the door behind us, the cool September evening disappeared, replaced by the comforting smell of propane, old pine boards, leather, and years of lived-in simplicity. Nothing inside had been chosen for appearance. Every chair, every table, every shelf had earned its place by being useful.

Fred paused just long enough to take another swallow from Julius's Tipple.

"The best moonshine in all of Montana," he declared. "Damn… this is good."

Everyone in eastern Montana seemed to talk at full volume.

For months I had wondered whether years of shouting across windy pastures had permanently damaged everyone's hearing. After listening to Julius empty an M-14 on full automatic that afternoon, I was beginning to suspect rifles deserved at least part of the blame.

Fred looked across the room at Shep.

"I've got more knives finished out in the shop," he said. "Pay me for the last batch first, then I'll bring the new ones in tomorrow."

Shep only smiled.

"I knew you'd remember."

"I remember everything."

There wasn't the slightest trace of anger in Fred's voice.

It sounded more like an old ritual than an argument.

He turned toward Julius.

"So…"

"What's the pleasure of your company this time?"

Julius pointed his thumb at me.

"The kid needs a rifle."

"And a scope."

"He's greener than spring grass."

By then, I had become convinced I was living in a John Wayne western. The irony was that neither Julius nor Dean had ever

watched television or gone to the movies. They weren't acting like movie cowboys. They were simply being themselves.

Fred ignored Julius's comment as though he hadn't heard a word.

Instead, he rescued the quart jar before Shep could help himself again and took another slow swallow.

Only then did he set the jar aside and begin preparing supper.

Fred took his time, seemingly unconcerned with the approaching darkness. He lit the propane lantern hanging above the table, bathing the little cabin in a soft golden light that chased the darkness from the corners of the room.

Then he opened three cans of chili, warmed it all slowly on the propane stove, and sliced thick pieces from a loaf of homemade bread.

No one talked very much.

Nobody needed to.

There was an easy comfort among the three older men that only came from years of shared experiences.

As I watched them, it occurred to me that I was sitting among men who measured wealth differently than most people.

None of them apparently had much money.

None seemed to care.

What they valued couldn't be counted in dollars.

When Fred finally placed a steaming bowl of chili in front of me, I thought it tasted wonderful.

The homemade bread, however, had developed a noticeable shade of green around the edges.

Fortunately, soaking it in the chili softened both the mold…

and the crust.

No one else appeared to notice.

Or perhaps they simply didn't care.

Either way, I decided not to complain.

Good manners—and hunger—won the argument.

Looking back now, I sometimes smile at how quickly my standards changed during those months.

A little mold on homemade bread hardly seemed worth mentioning after weeks of hamburgers, dust, mice, and sleeping in a sheep wagon.

Besides…

I was beginning to discover that some of the richest evenings of my life would be spent around tables that looked very much like Fred's.



Part Three: Initiation

Supper had barely ended before Fred looked across the table at me with a grin.

“Well…”

“I suppose it’s time.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what he meant.

Julius was.

Without a word, he reached for the familiar quart Mason jar sitting in the middle of the table and slid it toward me.

Shep leaned back in his chair wearing the kind of smile that usually meant someone else was about to become the evening’s entertainment.

I had a feeling that someone was me.

“You’ve made it this far,” Fred said.

“Might as well find out what real Montana hospitality tastes like.”

I looked at Julius.

He simply nodded.

“Only a little.”

Those three words sounded reassuring.

They weren’t.

After several minutes of encouragement—and what I suspect was a considerable amount of good-natured peer pressure—I finally raised the jar to my lips.

Just half a swallow.

That was all.

The Tipple reached my lips first.

Then my tongue.

Within an instant it felt as though every taste bud I possessed had caught fire.

The burn swept into my nose, climbed behind my eyes, and raced into my ears with such force that I became convinced Julius's M-14 had gone off inside my head.

By the time it reached my throat…

I wasn't sure whether to swallow…

or call for a doctor.

When it finally settled into my stomach, I became convinced I had just swallowed liquid fire.

For one terrifying moment I couldn't draw a full breath.

The room blurred.

My eyes watered uncontrollably.

I was absolutely certain I was dying.

Fred watched calmly.

Julius folded his arms.

Shep couldn't hold it together another second.

The three of them erupted into laughter.

Not the kind meant to embarrass someone.

The kind shared among old friends who knew exactly what was coming.

Eventually I managed to breathe again.

"I think…"

"…paint thinner would've been smoother."

That only made them laugh harder.

Fred wiped tears from his eyes.

"First swallow's always the worst."

Julius nodded.

"Second one's easier."

I had absolutely no intention of finding out.

When Shep finally emptied the quart jar, I quietly congratulated myself.

The ordeal was over.

Or so I thought.

Without saying a word, Julius stood, walked out to the Skunk Wagon, and disappeared into the darkness.

A few moments later he returned carrying another quart Mason jar.

My heart sank.

The laughter around the table started all over again.

I surrendered.

One more cautious swallow.

No more.

That was enough to convince me that Julius's Tipple could probably strip paint, remove rust, and power a small tractor.

It certainly wasn't helping my lack of sleep.

The warmth of the lantern…

the full stomach…

the long day…

and two reluctant swallows of Tipple finally began winning the battle.

My eyelids grew heavier by the minute.

The conversation drifted comfortably from one story to another as the three old friends laughed about people and places I had never known.

Mostly, I listened.

Looking back now, I wish I could remember every word spoken around that table.

At the time, it sounded like three old ranchers trading stories.

Years later, I realized I had been listening to a lifetime of eastern Montana that no history book would ever record.



Part Four: Buck Comes Home

As the evening wore on, the stories became funnier.

Or perhaps it was simply the Tipple talking.

Either way, laughter filled the little cabin.

The propane lantern cast a warm glow across the table while the prairie wind rattled softly against the windows.

I was doing my best to stay awake.

The long days at Cherry Springs, weeks of restless nights, and two reluctant swallows of Julius's Tipple had become a powerful combination.

My eyelids grew heavier with every passing minute.

Then came a scratching at the front door.

Without looking up, Fred spoke.

"Shep…"

“Let the dogs in.”

Shep opened the door.

Two dogs charged through the doorway as though they’d been waiting all evening for permission.

Then, without the slightest hesitation, another set of hooves crossed the threshold.

An antelope.

Yes…

An antelope.

Buck trotted into the cabin as confidently as any family dog, weaving around chairs until he reached the kitchen.

No one acted surprised.

Except me.

Apparently Buck considered himself part of the household.

Fred set three bowls on the floor.

The dogs buried their noses in theirs immediately.

Buck attacked his supper with equal enthusiasm.

“Damn it, Buck,” Fred growled.

“Slow down.”

“You’re going to throw it all right back up.”

Buck ignored him completely.

Fred shook his head.

“Goddamn mental defect.”

The rest of us laughed.

Then Fred pointed a finger around the room.

“And don’t any of you pet him.”

Naturally…

that only made me want to.

There was something about Buck that seemed impossible not to like.

He wasn’t a pet.

He wasn’t livestock.

He was simply Buck.

Another member of Fred’s unusual family.

As I watched him eat alongside the dogs, it occurred to me that there wasn’t much difference between the animals and the people gathered around that little table.

None of them quite fit where the rest of the world expected them to.

And none of them seemed to care.

Years later, after thinking often about that evening, I came to understand something I couldn't have appreciated at twenty years old.

Most people would have seen Fred's place as lonely.

I don't think Fred ever did.

He had his cabin.

His tools.

His work.

His friends.

His dogs.

And an antelope named Buck.

What more could a man reasonably ask for?

That was the last clear thought I remember having.

The room slowly drifted away.

The laughter faded into the background.

The warm glow of the propane lantern blurred into darkness.

When I closed my eyes that night, I thought I had simply spent an unforgettable evening with three colorful old ranchers.

Looking back now, I realize I had been given something far more valuable.

Without knowing it, I had just stepped into the lives of two remarkable men.

One would become the finest craftsman I would ever know.

The other had already become my teacher.

Together, they would change the course of my life in ways I could never have imagined.



Fred's Shop

The next morning, I awoke to the most vile smell I had ever experienced.

For a moment, I had no idea where I was.

Then I opened my eyes and found myself staring at a pair of gray wool socks riddled with holes.

When I tried to sit up, the top of my head slammed into the low ceiling of the Skunk Wagon camper.

That finally brought everything back.

Julius was sprawled out below me with his feet pointed in my direction, snoring like a grizzly bear.

We had both slept in the Skunk Wagon.

I suddenly understood what had awakened me.

All I wanted was fresh air.

I pushed open the camper door.

Julius never stirred.

Standing outside was Fred, wearing the broadest grin I had yet seen on his weathered face. In one hand he held a steaming cup of coffee.

My first thought was,

Why is he smiling like the Cheshire Cat?

Then another crossed my mind.

What happened last night? I remember taking a couple of swallows of Tipple…Then everything simply disappeared.

Fred chuckled before I had a chance to ask.

“Julius has never been much for holding his liquor,” he said. “But compared to you, he’s an old professional.”

His grin grew even wider.

“At least you shouldn’t have much of a hangover.”

He looked entirely too pleased with himself.

“Come on inside,” he said. “And wake Shep while you’re at it. He slept in the pickup.”

A few minutes later the four of us were gathered around Fred’s kitchen table, staring at two empty quart jars that had once held Julius’s Tipple.

Shep rubbed his temples and groaned.

“I tippled a lot last night.”

He shook his head slowly.

“You know, if you poison a coyote once and he survives, he’ll never make the same mistake again.”

He pointed toward the empty jars.

“Humans aren’t nearly that smart. We just keep repeating the same foolishness until it finally puts us in the grave.”

Then he pointed a finger at Julius.

“And damn you for doing this to me again.”

Julius looked genuinely offended.

“There wasn’t any poison in it,” he replied proudly. “I distilled it three times in my copper still. That cleaned all the bad stuff out.”

Whether that was true or not, I had no interest in testing his theory.

As I ate toast—yes, the same slightly moldy bread—covered with homemade chokecherry jam and washed it down with Fred’s coffee, which tasted remarkably similar to Julius’s infamous washcloth coffee, one question refused to leave my mind.

Had there really been an antelope sleeping in Fred’s kitchen… or had Julius’s Tipple finally reached my imagination?

I honestly wasn’t sure.

Neither was my stomach.

The morning unfolded at an unhurried pace.

No one seemed anxious to go anywhere.

Eventually Fred stood and looked at me.

“Come on,” he said.

“Let’s go out to the shop.”

I had no idea that before the morning was over, I would discover the gift that would shape the rest of my life.



The Birth of a Knife

Fred's workshop was the old, weathered barn I had noticed the evening before.

From the outside it looked as though it had surrendered to time years ago.

Inside, however, it was another world.

The barn revealed the man.

Every tool had its place. Every piece of steel, every file, every hammer, and every block of hardwood rested exactly where Fred expected to find it. The shop wasn't fancy, but it possessed something far more important.

Purpose.

The worn workbench bore the scars of countless projects, while a forge occupied one corner beside a hand-operated bellows polished smooth by years of use. Near the center of the shop stood a massive anvil, its face worn bright from decades of hammer blows.

Nothing was there for decoration.

Everything had earned its place.

Fred smiled as he arranged a few tools on the workbench.

"You ever made a knife?"

I shook my head.

He returned the smile.

“Then today you’ll see how one is born.”

Together, we built a charcoal fire inside the forge. Fred showed me how to work the bellows, each steady stroke feeding fresh air into the glowing coals until they burned a brilliant orange. Before long the heat became almost unbearable.

Fred reached for a thick billet of Damascus steel.

Holding it in his hands, he explained that he had spent nearly a week making it—heating, folding, welding, and hammering different steels together over and over again until they became a single piece.

I had never imagined that so much work could go into making a piece of steel before the knife itself had even begun.

When the billet reached the proper temperature, Fred carried it to the anvil.

The shop came alive.

The rhythmic ring of hammer against steel echoed through the old barn.

Again and again he returned the glowing billet to the forge.

Again and again he shaped it beneath the hammer.

Nothing was rushed.

Nothing was forced.

Every blow had a purpose.

Every movement reflected years of experience.

Watching Fred work wasn't like watching a blacksmith.

It was like watching an artist.

The hammer was simply his brush.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the rough outline of a knife began emerging from the glowing steel.

Fred heated the blade one final time before touching it gently with a small magnet.

"There."

He smiled quietly.

"That's the temperature."

He laid the blade aside and allowed it to cool naturally.

"Almost a knife."

Next came the grinder.

Like nearly everything else in Fred's shop, it wasn't powered by electricity.

It was powered by Fred.

As his foot worked the pedals, the grinding belt came alive.

Bright orange sparks showered across the floor while he patiently shaped both sides of the blade, checking the balance with practiced hands after nearly every pass.

I lost all sense of time.

I wasn’t merely watching anymore.

I was completely captivated.

The little barn disappeared around me.

The prairie disappeared.

Even the outside world seemed to disappear.

There was only Fred…

the glowing steel…

and the unmistakable feeling that I was witnessing something extraordinary.

Looking back now, I realize I wasn’t simply watching a knife being made.

I was watching one man’s lifetime of knowledge being poured into a single piece of steel.

Long before I understood craftsmanship…

Fred was teaching it.



The Craftsman

When the blade had been hardened and was ready for its handle scales, Fred leaned against his workbench and smiled.

“You know why I make knives?”

I shook my head.

He picked up the unfinished blade and turned it slowly in his hands.

“It’s one of the things that keeps me sane.”

For a moment he studied the steel before continuing.

“Look close enough at any person and you’ll find they’re a little crazy.”

He smiled faintly.

“Some folks spend their lives finding ways to become even crazier. Others spend their lives trying to hold on to what’s left of their sanity.”

He held the knife up where the light caught the patterns in the Damascus steel.

“When I’m making a knife, I can’t think about anything else. If I do, I’ll ruin it.”

He looked directly at me.

“This keeps the demons quiet.”

He didn’t smile when he said it.

Neither did I.

Those words settled over the shop with a weight I couldn't explain.

At twenty years old, I wasn't sure I understood exactly what Fred meant.

Years later, I would.

I have never forgotten those words.

Before we left the shop, Fred walked over to another workbench.

Resting on top was a black powder rifle unlike anything I had ever seen.

"I make these, too."

He handed it to me.

The workmanship was extraordinary.

The wood and steel fit together so perfectly they looked as though they had grown that way.

Fred explained that he purchased only the octagonal barrel.

Nearly everything else—the stock, lock fittings, trigger guard, patch box, ramrod thimbles, sights, and dozens of smaller parts—he made himself.

I slowly turned the rifle over in my hands, trying to imagine the patience required to create something so beautiful.

Then Fred walked over to a rack filled with carefully stacked hardwood.

He studied the boards for a moment before selecting one long, heavy blank of black walnut.

He carried it back to the bench and laid it gently between us.

“This has been drying in here for over five years.”

His hand rested on the rich, dark grain.

“It’s ready.”

Then he looked at me.

“I like you.”

Without another word, he pushed the walnut blank across the bench.

“I want you to build a rifle with it.”

For several moments I couldn’t speak.

I ran my hand across the smooth walnut.

It was the most beautiful piece of wood I had ever held.

No one had ever entrusted me with something so valuable.

Fred smiled.

“You’ve seen Julius’s Tennessee long rifle?”

I nodded.

“I built it.”

He laughed.

“Julius loves that rifle almost as much as he loves me. He doesn’t let just anybody shoot it.”

I smiled.

“I guess I was lucky.”

“You were.”

Looking back now, I realize Fred never expected anything in return.

He wasn’t giving away a piece of walnut.

He was passing along a craft.

He simply wanted someone else to carry it forward.

At the time, I thought he had given me an extraordinary piece of wood.

I would eventually discover he had given me something far more valuable than that.



A Lasting Legacy

That single piece of black walnut changed the course of my life.

Until that morning, I had never imagined making knives or building traditional black powder rifles. Watching Fred work awakened something in me that had always been there, waiting for direction.

I fell in love with both crafts that day.

Years later, I used that walnut to build a .50-caliber Hawken rifle modeled after Jim Bridger's famous piece displayed at the Montana Historical Society Museum in Helena. Every cut, file stroke, and hour of shaping carried me back to Fred's small workshop.

When it was finished, I gave the rifle to my son, Jake, with the hope that he would one day pass it to one of his sons, Levi or Weston.

I later built an Astorian flintlock, named for John Jacob Astor and the fur trade that helped shape the American West. My hope is that it, too, will someday be placed in the hands of another grandson, continuing the same appreciation for craftsmanship Fred first sparked in me.

Fred never gave me just a piece of walnut.

He gave me a craft that has brought me a lifetime of satisfaction and a tradition I hope will outlast me.

I don't think he ever imagined that a simple act of generosity in 1971 would echo through generations.

But it has.

Whenever I see those rifles in the hands of my son or grandsons, I don't just see walnut and steel.

I see an old craftsman in a weathered barn on the Montana prairie, quietly passing on what he knew to a young man who didn't yet understand its value.

That was Fred's legacy.

And in many ways, it became mine as well.



Fred Wiefrich's place stood quietly beneath the wide Montana sky, its weathered log house and barn holding the memories of another time. Golden October grasses swayed around the sagging corrals, while the prairie stretched toward the hills. There was beauty in what had endured, and a feeling that the land remembered every story.

A Craftsman's Legacy

When Fred and I walked back into the house, Julius and Shep were still recovering from their battle with Julius's Tipple. Neither one appeared eager to move. They looked as though the previous night's festivities had drained every ounce of energy from their bodies.

Fred disappeared into another room and returned carrying eight handmade knives.

He laid them carefully across the table.

I was speechless.

They weren't simply knives—they were works of art. Each one was unique. Every blade, every handle, every curve reflected the hand of the man who had made it. They were beautiful in a way I had never imagined a working knife could be.

Standing there, I realized something had changed inside me.

I didn't just admire Fred's knives.

I wanted to learn how to make them.

Even today, I can't fully explain why that feeling struck me so powerfully. It simply did.

More than fifty years later, I still love making knives. No two have ever been exactly alike. Every time I begin another one, I find myself chasing the same goal—to build the perfect all-around knife. I doubt such a knife actually exists, but the search has become part of the enjoyment.

Fred told me that if I wanted one of his knives, he would gladly make it for me.

I immediately ordered what I thought would become the knife of my dreams.

I didn't know it then, but it would be the last time I would ever see Fred.

About a year and a half later, he passed away before I could return to pick my knife up. I have often wondered what that knife looked like and whether it still exists somewhere today.

After Shep settled his account for the knives Fred had previously made and sold through Shep's antique store, Fred handed him four more.

"Now, Goddamn it," Fred growled, "put a fair price on these so we both make some money. These knives are worth every penny."

Shep simply nodded.

He knew better than to argue.

I finally told Julius I thought it was time for us to leave.

Fred grinned.

"Not so fast, Cochise."

He pointed toward a gun safe beside his bed.

"We still have to get you fixed up with a rifle."

He opened the safe and revealed several brand-new rifles lined up inside.

After looking them over, he removed one and laid it gently on the bed.

Then he reached for a box containing a four-power scope.

“I’ll take one hundred seventy-five dollars for the rifle,” he said, “and twenty-five for the scope.”

The rifle was a Winchester Model 70 chambered in .243 Winchester.

Fred carefully mounted the scope, bore-sighted it, and explained that he had glass-bedded the barrel in the stock with fiberglass resin so the rifle would maintain its accuracy even after the barrel heated from repeated firing.

At the time, I nodded politely.

Truthfully, I had very little idea what he was talking about.

Years later, after learning much more about rifles, I finally understood the care and craftsmanship that had gone into preparing that new Model 70.

I bought fifty factory cartridges.

Then Fred surprised me.

He handed me another one hundred rounds that he had carefully reloaded himself.

Until that day, I had never imagined owning a rifle could mean so much.

Looking back now, I realize I wasn’t simply buying a firearm.

I was carrying home another piece of Fred's craftsmanship.

That Winchester would become part of my life for many years.

Julius, meanwhile, needed ammunition for both his M-14 and his Winchester .300 Magnum.

As usual, Julius announced that I should pay for his ammunition and assured me he would reimburse me as soon as we reached Forsyth and he could visit his bank.

Reluctantly, I handed Fred the money.

Fred just shook his head.

"Listen carefully," he said. "That squeaking you hear isn't this old floor."

He leaned closer.

"It's Julius's wallet screaming."

Everyone laughed except Julius.

"He's got that wallet safety-pinned inside his coveralls. Don't let him beat you out of a penny. He'll do it if you give him half a chance. Believe me—it's all part of the game with Julius."

Before we climbed into the Skunk Wagon, Julius insisted we spend a little more time with Buck.

Buck may have looked like an antelope, but he acted more like an oversized puppy.

His favorite game was to walk up beside someone, lower his head against their leg, and give one quick shove.

Before you knew what had happened, you were sitting flat on the ground while Buck looked entirely pleased with himself.

For such a small antelope, he possessed remarkable strength.

Fred stood laughing as Buck knocked each of us over one at a time.

Watching Fred laugh while his unusual "pet dog" entertained everyone is still one of the memories I treasure most from that visit.

Later that afternoon, I drove Julius and Shep back to Harlowton in the Skunk Wagon.

The combination of gout and Julius's Tipple had caught up with Julius. He could barely walk and spent most of the trip slumped against the seat, saying very little.

Back in Harlowton, Shep carefully arranged Fred's newest knives inside the display case at his antique store.

Before we left, he turned to Julius.

"I need more Indian artifacts," he said. "Buffalo skulls, too. Get them over here as soon as you can."

Julius nodded weakly.

From there, I turned the Skunk Wagon toward Ingomar.

Julius was asleep before we reached the edge of town.

As the miles rolled beneath the tires, I kept thinking about Fred.

Only twenty-four hours earlier, he had been a complete stranger.

Now, I was driving away with a beautiful Winchester Model 70, a treasured piece of black walnut that would someday become a Hawken rifle, and a desire to make knives that has remained with me for the rest of my life.

Looking back, I don't think Fred ever realized what he had given me.

I know that I never forgot.

Some people leave behind buildings. Others leave behind fortunes. Fred left behind skills, friendships, and traditions that continue to live in the hands of people he never had the chance to meet.



The Real Assignment

That evening I sat alone in the Old House, trying to make sense of everything that had happened over the previous two days.

I certainly wasn't about to call my parents and tell them the truth.

How could I explain that I had spent the previous day somewhere south of Judith Gap, out in the middle of nowhere, drinking Julius's Tipple, shooting an M-14 and a handcrafted Tennessee long rifle, sleeping in the cramped Skunk Wagon beside Julius and watching one of the finest knife and black powder rifle makers I would ever meet transform steel and wood into works of art?

It sounded unbelievable even to me.

Then there was the small matter of spending nearly all my money on a Winchester Model 70, a scope, and ammunition.

I didn't even hunt.

The largest wild animal I had ever killed was a jackrabbit.

Somewhere along the way I had also played head-butting games with an antelope named Buck, who thought he was a dog, and I had come home carrying a beautiful piece of black walnut that Fred insisted would someday become a rifle.

If I told Bernice all of that, I knew exactly how she would respond.

She wouldn't be happy.

Not happy at all.

The purpose of my being at Cherry Creek wasn't to make knives, buy rifles, or learn from old craftsmen. I was supposed to help

build a log lambing barn. Once that job was finished, I intended to leave. I wanted to put as much distance as possible between myself and Julius, Ingomar, Sivert, Janet, and all the family turmoil surrounding Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

Assuming, of course, that I survived the experience.

As I lay down that night, my eyes drifted toward the long piece of black walnut leaning against the wall.

The more I looked at it, the less I thought about everything else.

Instead, I found myself imagining knives.

I pictured shaping steel with a hammer, fitting walnut scales to polished blades, and someday carving that beautiful blank into a black powder rifle worthy of the wood Fred had trusted me with.

Those thoughts crowded everything else out of my mind.

Maybe it was the lingering effects of Julius's Tipple.

Maybe it was Buck.

Or maybe Fred had unknowingly planted a seed that had already begun to grow.

The following morning I walked to the Jersey Lilly and called Dean.

He assured me the semis, loaded with all the logs and roofing material, would arrive at Cherry Springs within the next two or three days. He would be driving it himself.

I wanted to believe him.

These were the last days of September, and winter wasn't far away.

Unfortunately, Dean had already given me reason to question his promises.

Before hanging up, I asked about the construction crew he had supposedly hired.

Dean laughed.

"There isn't any crew."

Then he added, "That was something Paul dreamed up."

According to Dean, Julius and I were the construction crew.

The realization settled over me like a lead weight.

Two men.

One elderly sheepherder with gout.

One twenty-year-old college student who had never built a log building in his life.

Somehow, we were expected to construct an entire lambing barn.

After speaking with Dean, I called my parents in Bigfork.

Mom answered.

I told her the logs and roofing material should arrive within the next couple of days.

Instead of sounding relieved, she simply replied,

"Okay."

Then the questions began.

“How many trucks does Sivert own?”

“What do the hired men drive?”

“How old are the trucks?”

“When were they purchased?”

“I need pictures of all the ranch buildings.”

She paused only long enough to add another request.

“And if you can, get photographs of all the raw wool and the processed wool Janet has in the Janknits building.”

I told her I would do my best, but that I spent almost all my time north at Cherry Springs, far from the home ranch.

She ignored that.

When she finally stopped asking questions, I asked how she and Dad were doing.

“Fine,” she answered.

That was all.

She never asked how I was doing.

She never asked about Julius.

She never asked how the windbreak had turned out.

She never asked whether the construction project had even begun on the log barn.

Looking back now, I think that phone call was the moment I finally understood why I had been sent to Cherry Creek.

Mom wasn't asking questions because she was curious about the ranch.

She was gathering information.

At the time, I didn't know exactly what she intended to do with it.

Years later, after everything that followed, I came to believe she was trying to build a legal case against her own brother. She wanted evidence—photographs, equipment, buildings, inventory, anything that might support dividing the Cherry Creek Sheep Company or challenge the way Sivert and Janet were operating it.

What puzzled me then—and still puzzles me today—was why she needed me to gather any of it.

The ranch kept financial records.

If she believed money had been misspent, the profit-and-loss statements and accounting books would have told that story far better than a twenty-year-old son wandering around with a camera.

And if she truly wanted to know what had been purchased, she and Dad could have driven to the ranch and seen the new trucks, equipment, and buildings with their own eyes.

Instead, they sent me.

It did not make any sense…

As I hung up the phone, another realization struck me.

The previous day, an old craftsman living alone on the Montana prairie had shown more interest in me—in who I was and who I might become—than my own mother had during that entire conversation.

That realization stayed with me long after I walked out of the Jersey Lilly.

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This young buck was almost dinner. Julius thought "It was too beautiful of a "deer people" to eat."

Julius's Hidden World

As Julius and I headed back toward Cherry Springs, he suddenly announced there was "something" he wanted to show me.

By then he had recovered enough from his battle with "Julius's Tipple" to insist on driving the Skunk Wagon himself.

We passed the Black Sea Reservoir about a mile east of Ingomar, then crossed West Blacktail Creek.

That crossing carried more history than anyone passing through would ever suspect.

It was there that Merton had shot the huge bobcat from a cottonwood tree. Years later, it also became the place where Jonathan Mysse lost his life after rolling his pickup while driving drunk. It was the second rollover of Jonathan's life. The first had happened while he was still in high school, when another alcohol-fueled wreck left him permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

A few miles beyond the bridge, Julius suddenly turned off the main road.

"Open the gate," he said.

I climbed out, swung the wire gate open, and we followed a faint two-track that looked as though no vehicle had traveled it in years.

The prairie slowly swallowed us.

For nearly three miles we drove north across the open range until the outline of a large, abandoned two-story house appeared on the horizon.

I glanced over at Julius.

There were tears in his eyes.

At first, I assumed he was still suffering from yesterday's Tipple.

I was wrong.

We passed through another gate and stopped near a scattering of twisted metal, weathered lumber, and pieces of what looked like an old airplane instrument panel lying half buried in the grass.

Julius climbed out of the pickup.

Then he began to cry.

Not quietly.

Not just a few tears.

He openly wept.

I had never seen Julius like that.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Instead of answering, he pointed toward the wreckage.

"What do you think all this came from?"

"I don't know."

He nodded slowly.

"These were the good old days."

He stood silently for a moment, looking across the prairie.

"My mom and dad homesteaded here."

“This was home.”

His voice softened.

“My three brothers, my two sisters, and I all grew up here.”

For the next several minutes Julius talked about his family.

After his parents died, only he and his brother Dominick remained on the ranch. John, another brother, “was always a little slow… maybe a little crazy,” according to Julius. Walter eventually moved to Alaska, while his sisters, Estelle and Edna, settled near Hamilton.

Then, almost as quickly as the sadness had appeared, Julius smiled.

“Someday Walter and I are going to the Great Slave Lake in Canada.”

He looked toward the northern horizon.

“We’re going to see what we can see.”

Another great adventure.

Always somewhere beyond the next horizon.

Without warning, Julius looked down at the ground beneath my boots.

“You’re standing on Dominick’s grave.”

I jumped backward so quickly I nearly lost my balance.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. “I didn’t know.”

Julius simply nodded.

He pointed toward the scattered airplane parts.

“Dominick and I built an airplane together.”

His voice broke again.

“We flew it all over Rosebud County.”

He stopped for a long moment before continuing.

“One day he was flying over the ranch…and he crashed.”

More tears.

“I buried him where he died.”

For several minutes neither of us spoke.

Looking back now, I have often wondered how many losses Julius carried alone.

At twenty years old, I saw only an eccentric old sheepherder whose moods changed without warning.

Years later, I came to understand that behind those sudden shifts lay a lifetime of grief, loneliness, and memories that never really left him.

Then, as though someone had quietly thrown a switch inside him, Julius wiped away his tears, looked directly at me, and asked matter-of-factly,

“So…do you want to see where my parents are buried, or would you rather see my copper still?”

Only Julius could move from burying his brother to showing off a moonshine still in the very next sentence.

Trying to be respectful, I told him I would like to see his parents' graves first.

Julius led me a short distance to a small family cemetery.

His parents, John and Valentyne Sebulsky, rested beneath handsome granite headstones.

What caught my attention, however, wasn't the markers.

It was the garden.

Vegetables were growing all around the graves.

Finally, I asked the obvious question.

"Why is there a garden planted over your parents?"

Julius looked at me as though the answer should have been self-evident.

"I didn't want to carry water any farther than I had to."

Then, after thinking about it for a moment, he added,

"Besides…maybe they'll sweeten the ground for the vegetables and the blue potatoes."

I smiled.

With Julius, the simplest questions almost always produced the most unexpected answers.

The more I learned about him, the less I found myself laughing at him.

We returned to the old house.

After unlocking what seemed like half a dozen padlocks, Julius explained that he had boarded up the rest of the house so no one could break in.

The front door finally swung open.

The first thing I noticed wasn't the furniture.

It was the floor.

It was covered wall to wall with sheep pelts.

Most still carried Cherry Creek's Bar Two Dot brand.

I asked if they had all come from Cherry Creek.

Julius laughed.

"Hell, no."

He swept his hand across the room.

"Most of them did…but some came from Benny Olsen's…some from Eric Erickson's…some from Galt's…and wherever one damned sheep or another happened to run into my bullet."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond.

So I didn't.

Julius picked up an old cast-iron skillet.

"We can use this at Cherry Springs."

Then he looked at me and smiled.

"Now…"

“I’m going to have to blindfold you.”

Every instinct I possessed told me this was probably a very bad idea.

Oddly enough, after everything I had experienced with Julius over the previous weeks, it no longer seemed entirely unreasonable.



Looking Northwest towards Ingomar.

Without another word, Julius tied a blindfold over my eyes.

I wasn't thrilled about the idea.

In fact, I wasn't sure I trusted Julius enough to let him lead me anywhere while I couldn't see. During the previous two days I had watched him drink enough moonshine to stun a horse, laugh at things no one else found funny, bury his brother where he crashed an airplane, plant a vegetable garden over his parents' graves, and casually admit to shooting sheep that belonged to neighboring ranchers and my ranch.

Now he wanted me to climb into the Skunk Wagon blindfolded.

"What if I just promise not to tell anyone where it is?" I asked.

"Nope," Julius replied. "If you're going to see my still, you can't know how to get there."

There was no room for negotiation.

He took me gently by the arm and guided me into the Skunk Wagon.

As we bounced across the prairie, every sense except my sight seemed heightened. I tried to keep track of every turn, every hill, every creek crossing, hoping I could somehow remember the route.

It was hopeless.

Within minutes I had completely lost my bearings.

One thought kept returning.

Is he really taking me to his still…or is he about to shoot me, bury me somewhere on this prairie, and drive home with my brand-new Winchester?

It sounds ridiculous now.

At the time, it didn't seem impossible.

Julius had become one of the most unpredictable men I had ever known.

Finally, the Skunk Wagon came to a stop.

"You can take it off now."

I removed the blindfold and immediately looked around, searching for some familiar landmark.

There wasn't one.

No house.

No windmill.

No corrals.

No road.

Nothing but miles of empty prairie stretching toward every horizon.

We were truly in the middle of nowhere.

Julius started walking without a word.

I followed him nearly a quarter mile until we reached the edge of a sandstone bluff overlooking what I believed was the Big Porcupine

Creek drainage somewhere near Art Hagen's place adjoining Sivert's ranch. I couldn't be certain.

Far below us, a faint trail disappeared beneath the rimrocks.

We followed it for perhaps a hundred feet before stopping beneath a sandstone overhang.

Julius knelt and immediately began scraping away dirt and sagebrush with his gloved hands.

"You never know when a rattler might be hiding under these boards."

That wasn't especially comforting.

I helped move a little dirt, but I was perfectly content to let Julius reach into the places where rattlesnakes might be waiting.

After fifteen minutes the opening finally appeared.

Hidden beneath weathered planks, dirt, and years of accumulated sagebrush was a surprisingly large dugout carved beneath the sandstone ledge.

Inside sat Julius's treasure.

A beautifully crafted twenty-gallon copper still.

Even now I can still picture it.

The polished copper glowed beneath the sandstone overhang as though it had been waiting there for generations.

Attached to the top was a brass plaque that read:

Chicago Copper Foundry

1890

USA

Julius looked at it the way another man might look at a treasured family Bible.

“Purdy, isn’t she?”

He reached out and gently ran his hand across the polished copper.

“This old girl makes the finest Montana Lightning and gin you’ll ever find.”

There wasn’t a trace of humor in his voice.

Only pride.

“My mom and dad made the best alcohol around during Prohibition,” he said. “That’s how they kept food on the table in the 1920s.”

Suddenly Julius’s Tipple made a little more sense.

This wasn’t simply moonshine.

It was part of his family’s history.

As I listened to him, another thought occurred to me.

Fred had inherited the knowledge of making knives and rifles.

Julius had inherited the knowledge of making Montana Lightning.

Each man treasured the skills handed down to him.

Each believed those skills were worth preserving.

The difference was that one transformed steel into works of art.

The other transformed chokecherry wine into something powerful enough to peel paint from a fence.

Julius smiled.

“I’ve probably run over a hundred gallons of that chokecherry wine through this still.”

He chuckled.

“That’s why my Tipple is so damned good.”

I wasn’t convinced.

My pounding head suggested otherwise.

When it came time to leave, Julius carefully covered the still once again.

First the heavy boards.

Then the dirt.

Finally the dead sagebrush.

Within minutes there wasn’t the slightest sign that anything had ever been hidden beneath the sandstone.

He stepped back and admired his work.

“My God,” he said softly.

“She’s a thing of beauty.”

There was genuine affection in his voice.

As we walked back toward the Skunk Wagon, I realized Julius had shown me something very few people had ever seen.

For all of his eccentricities…

he trusted me.

That realization surprised me almost as much as the still itself.

Before we reached the main road, Julius tied the blindfold over my eyes one final time.

Only after we had driven well away from the rimrocks did he let me remove it.

I didn't argue.

By then I no longer had the slightest idea where we had been.

As the Skunk Wagon rumbled toward Cherry Springs, I leaned back against the seat and closed my eyes.

My head still ached from Julius's Tipple.

My mind was overflowing with everything I had experienced during the previous few days.

Fred.

Buck.

Dominick's grave.

The little garden growing above Julius's parents.

The hidden copper still beneath the rimrocks.

Only a few weeks earlier I had expected eastern Montana to be little more than a temporary stop before returning to college.

Instead, it had become a place filled with unforgettable people, extraordinary stories, and lessons I never could have anticipated.

Looking back now, I think September changed me far more than I realized at the time.

I arrived at Cherry Springs believing I had come to build a log lambing barn.

Before the month was over, I had begun building something else entirely.

Friendships.

Skills.

And memories that would remain with me for the rest of my life.





Two sheep herders sharing a saddle, guiding their band toward the Southwest pasture. Around them, the sheepdogs did what they did best, keeping the sheep moving across the open range. It was a bond forged between two men, their faithful dogs, and the endless Montana prairie—a life measured not in miles, but in trust, loyalty, and the freedom of the open land.

Chapter 5

October 1971

Lessons on the Prairie

October announced itself with frosty mornings, crisp air, and the unmistakable feeling that winter was no longer far away. Dawn arrived later now, spreading slowly across the prairie while a thin layer of frost clung to the grass. The cottonwoods along the creek had turned brilliant gold, and every breath reminded us that summer had finally surrendered.

That morning I was up early and decided I would make breakfast.

Julius looked at me, shook his head, and laughed.

“I’m sick of eggs—real ones and powdered ones. And your biscuits and pancakes…”

He paused dramatically.

“Hell, they’re even worse than mine.”

Then he reached for his little semi-automatic .22 rifle.

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

I watched him disappear across the prairie and couldn’t help wondering what he was up to this time.

With Julius, almost every day began with another surprise.

True to his word, he returned about an hour later carrying a dozen sage hens.

He proudly held them up.

“Shot every one through the head,” he said. “Never wasted a bullet. Never wasted a bit of meat.”

I remember thinking they couldn’t possibly be young birds. It was already October, and sage grouse hatch in late spring. To me they looked fully grown.

Julius only laughed.

“They’re this year’s birds.”

Even today, I don’t know whether Julius was technically right. By October those birds certainly looked fully grown to me, but Julius had spent a lifetime on the prairie. I wasn’t about to argue with him over sage hens.

Then he handed me one.

“Come on.”

“Time to clean breakfast.”

By then I had dressed enough game to understand the basics, but I was nowhere near Julius’s speed. His hands moved with practiced efficiency while mine still searched for the next step. Before I had finished cleaning two or three birds, Julius had already dressed the rest.

He slipped half of them into a bread sack and placed them in the cooler, where enough ice remained to keep them fresh for another meal.

The rest became breakfast.

Following Julius's instructions—advice I had probably heard two dozen times already—I dredged the pieces in flour and fried them in a cast-iron skillet until they turned a rich golden brown.

Once again, I was surprised.

They were excellent.

Absolutely delicious.

Living with Julius was slowly changing the way I thought about food. Meals didn't begin at a grocery store. They began on the prairie. If a man respected the seasons, paid attention, and knew where to look, the land usually provided.

After breakfast Julius glanced toward my new Winchester Model 70.

"It's time we taught you how to shoot that rifle."

Those words made me smile.

Fred had mounted the scope and bore-sighted the rifle, but neither of us had actually sighted it in.

Julius already had a plan.

"We'll fine-tune it."

His idea of a rifle range was Mud Lake.

According to Julius, the pond held plenty of muskrats, making them perfect targets while we adjusted the scope.

We drove to the edge of the pond, and Julius paced off one hundred yards with the confidence of someone who had done it hundreds of times before.

Using the hood of my pickup as a shooting bench, we rested the rifle across our jackets.

A muskrat surfaced.

I squeezed the trigger.

The bullet splashed harmlessly into the water several feet away.

Julius looked at me in disbelief.

“Who taught you to shoot?”

Apparently, the correct answer wasn’t me.

For the next several hours Julius became my shooting instructor.

“No!”

“Quit slapping the trigger.”

“Squeeze it.”

“Don’t fight the rifle.”

“Let it surprise you.”

“You’re breathing too fast.”

“Watch the wind.”

“Quit choking that stock.”

He corrected almost everything I did.

Then came one of Julius's more memorable pieces of advice.

"Treat that rifle like your girlfriend."

He paused.

"Someday it might save your life."

I wasn't entirely sure how those two ideas fit together, but I understood his point.

Respect the rifle.

Learn it.

Become part of it.

The more I shot Fred's Winchester, the more I appreciated what he had sold me. The rifle wasn't the problem.

The man behind it was.

Every miss belonged entirely to me.

By the end of the morning I had fired fifty rounds of Fred's carefully reloaded ammunition.

The factory cartridges, Julius reminded me repeatedly, were to be saved for "real critters."

Muskrat after muskrat surfaced, looked around, and calmly disappeared beneath the water again.

The only thing I seemed capable of hitting that morning was Mud Lake itself.

According to Julius, I hadn't hit a single muskrat.

In fact, he claimed I hadn't even managed to scare one to death.

His criticism was relentless.

Yet beneath all the teasing, Julius was teaching me something far more valuable than marksmanship.

He was teaching patience.

Discipline.

Confidence.

Every missed shot became another lesson.

Eventually the rifle began feeling less like a strange tool and more like an extension of my hands.

Before leaving, Julius insisted we police every empty cartridge case.

Nothing was left behind.

The brass could be reloaded someday by Fred, making every case worth saving.

Just as important to Julius, however, was leaving no evidence that we had ever been there.

A good outdoorsman respected the land.

He left it as he found it.

Looking back now, I realize Julius wasn't simply teaching me how to shoot a rifle that morning.

He was teaching me how to pay attention.

Watch the wind.

Control your breathing.

Take your time.

Respect your equipment.

Leave a place better than you found it.

On the prairie, those weren't merely lessons about shooting.

They were lessons about living.

At twenty years old, I thought we were only trying to hit muskrats.

More than fifty years later, I understand Julius was teaching me something much bigger than marksmanship. It was simply another lesson on the prairie.



Across Cherry Creek

That afternoon I decided I wanted to see more of Cherry Creek than just the country surrounding Cherry Springs.

Julius didn't need much convincing.

He loved exploring almost as much as he loved "burning gas"—especially when someone else was paying for it.

His plan was simple.

"We're going corner to corner to corner."

In Julius's mind, there wasn't a fence line, coulee, spring, or abandoned homestead on Cherry Creek that wasn't worth seeing.

We packed a little food and our rifles, climbed into my pickup, and I took the wheel while Julius played guide.

Our first stop was the northeastern corner of the ranch where Cherry Creek bordered Albert Brooks's place.

Standing there, looking across miles of rolling prairie, I finally began to appreciate just how enormous Cherry Creek really was.

It wasn't simply a ranch.

It was a world unto itself.

From there we headed south.

As we drove, an unmistakable odor drifted through the open windows.

Rotten eggs.

Strong enough to wrinkle my nose.

Julius smiled.

“That’s Halverson Hot Springs.”

Then, as casually as if he were commenting on the weather, he added,

“It’s haunted.”

“Really?”

I wasn’t much of a believer in ghosts, although there had been a few experiences in my life that made me wonder.

We parked and walked the rest of the way.

The spring looked strangely out of place on the open prairie. Steam drifted above the mineral-rich water, while the smell of sulfur hung heavily in the still autumn air. The cottonwoods nearest the spring had long since died, their bleached trunks standing like skeletons against the bright October sky. The sulfur-rich water had poisoned the soil, leaving behind an eerie little oasis that reminded me of Yellowstone National Park somehow misplaced in eastern Montana.

It was beautiful.

And just unsettling enough to make a man glance over his shoulder.

Without another word, we drifted off in opposite directions for a moment before returning to my pickup.



We climbed back into the pickup and continued toward the southeast corner of Cherry Creek.

As we eased into a cottonwood-filled coulee, Julius suddenly sat upright.

“There!”

Three men were dragging a large mule deer buck toward their pickup.

The season wasn’t open.

They weren’t hunters.

They were poachers.

Julius leaned forward.

“They’ve got no business on Cherry Creek.”

Then he pointed toward them.

“Go tell them to get off our land.”

I looked over at him.

“Our land?”

“Do it.”

Then came the nickname I had heard so many times before.

“One Share.”

Until that moment, “Mr. One Share” had always sounded like one of Julius’s jokes.

Suddenly it wasn't a joke anymore.

He expected me to act like an owner.

I wasn't eager to climb out of the pickup.

In fact, I wanted to stay exactly where I was.

Instead, I opened the door and walked toward the three men.

Trying to sound far more confident than I actually felt, I introduced myself.

"My name is Craig Milam."

"I'm one of the owners of Cherry Creek Sheep Company."

I pointed toward the surrounding pasture.

"You're on Cherry Creek property."

The oldest of the three men immediately stepped forward.

"I'm sorry."

"We thought this was Albert Brooks's place."

He pointed toward the buck.

"Albert gave us permission to hunt over there."

"We'll load him up and leave if that's all right with you."

I nodded.

"That'll be fine."

Then, without thinking, I added,

“My friend and I are going to follow you to the gate and make sure you leave Cherry Creek.”

Two of the men nodded.

The third one didn’t.

He muttered something under his breath.

As they lifted the deer into the pickup, he suddenly turned toward me.

His rifle came up.

The muzzle stopped squarely on my chest.

Everything around me became strangely quiet.

I remember thinking only one thing.

Well…

This is how it ends.

Oddly enough, I wasn’t angry.

I wasn’t even panicked.

I simply accepted that I probably wasn’t going to live long enough to see another sunrise.

I didn’t say a word.

I turned around and began walking back toward my pickup.

Looking back now, I still can't explain why.

Perhaps I remembered too many old western movies.

Cowboys weren't supposed to shoot a man in the back.

That may have been one of the dumbest thoughts I have ever had in my life.

When I reached the pickup, I finally understood why I was still alive.

Without my seeing him, Julius had quietly slipped out the passenger door.

His Winchester .300 Magnum rested across the hood of my pickup.

The scope was centered on the poacher's chest.

Julius never raised his voice.

He never looked excited.

If anything, he seemed remarkably calm.

A faint smile crossed his face.

"Go ahead."

He paused.

"Make my day, Mother Fucker."

The entire coulee froze.

The man pointing the rifle at me suddenly realized someone else had been pointing a much larger rifle at him.

His face turned white.

So did the faces of the other two men.

Without another word, they climbed into their pickup and drove toward the east gate as fast as the rough gumbo road would let them.

Only then did I realize how violently my heart was pounding.

My hands were shaking.

So were my legs.

Looking back now, I honestly believe that if we hadn't stopped at Halverson Hot Springs earlier that afternoon…

I probably would have wet my pants.

We followed the pickup all the way to the gate and watched it disappear onto Albert Brooks's ranch.

Only after it vanished over the next rise did I finally begin breathing normally again.

The drive back to Cherry Springs was quiet.

At least on my side of the pickup.

Julius couldn't stop talking.

"I had your back."

"I'd have shot that dirtbag."

"They didn't know who they were f…ing with."

“You handled yourself just right.”

“Paul and Bernice would be proud of you.”

Then he smiled.

“Damn, I’m proud of you.”

I appreciated what Julius was trying to tell me.

He believed I had stood my ground.

He believed I had done my job as “Mr. One Share.”

But I couldn’t share his enthusiasm.

I wasn’t proud.

I wasn’t exhilarated.

I wasn’t looking for another adventure.

All I could think about was how close I had come to never seeing another day.

My hands continued shaking for the rest of the afternoon.

Even that evening, while we ate supper at Cherry Springs, I could still feel the knot in my stomach.

Julius finally leaned back in his chair, grinned, and summed up the day in one sentence.

“This,” he said, “is the kind of day that reminds you you’re truly alive.”

“I love it.”

I looked across the table at him and simply stared.

I never said what I was thinking.

F… Y…!!!

More than fifty years later, I can still hear Julius saying those words.

Back then, I kept my thoughts to myself. If I had answered him honestly, my response would have been exactly what it would be today.

To hell with that.



The day Julius shot the golden eagle.

An Eastern Montana Buzzard

The next morning dawned gray and unsettled. Low clouds drifted across the prairie, threatening rain—or perhaps the first snow of the season.

After the confrontation with the poachers the day before, I wanted only one thing.

Peace.

The Jersey Lilly suddenly sounded like the safest place in eastern Montana. I could picture myself sitting at the counter with a cold bottle of Pepsi, listening to ordinary conversations instead of wondering who might point a rifle at me next.

I looked over at Julius.

“Want to leave the Skunk Wagon here and ride into Ingomar with me?”

“Sure.”

Before climbing into my pickup, I stopped him.

“I don’t need anything raising my blood pressure today.”

I paused.

“No screwups today. Okay?”

My tolerance for excitement had reached its limit.

Julius shrugged.

“Fine.”

For reasons I still can't explain…

I believed him.

We hadn't driven more than a few miles before we reached the wheat fields bordering the north end of Acorn Flats near Cherry Creek's eastern fence.

Without warning, Julius shouted,

"Stop!"

I slammed on the brakes.

Before the pickup had completely stopped rolling, Julius was already climbing out.

He threw his coat across the hood, rested his Winchester .300 Magnum on top of it, took careful aim, and fired.

The blast shattered the quiet prairie morning.

My ears immediately began ringing.

Again.

For one brief moment I thought the poachers had returned.

Then I hoped maybe he had seen a coyote.

By the time I stepped from the pickup, I realized I had unconsciously chambered a round into my own Winchester.

That realization unsettled me.

After spending nearly three months beside Julius, I was beginning to react to danger the way he did—without even thinking.

Julius ignored me.

Instead, he slowly scanned both directions along the Cohagen Cutoff Road before looking up into the sky.

“You’ve got to watch out for those state game wardens,” he said.

“They fly airplanes.”

Trying to break the tension, I asked,

“What… do they do… take aerial photographs of people shooting each other?”

Without changing expression Julius answered,

“Shooting animal people.”

He thought for a moment.

“No.”

“Only if I had to.”

Then he looked directly at me.

“What I just did could send both of us to prison.”

That got my attention.

I found myself looking toward the sky.

“God,” I muttered.

“Please get me out of here.”

Julius answered with one of his familiar Festus winks.

I had reached my limit.

I turned around and started walking back toward my pickup.

Whatever Julius had shot…

I honestly didn't want to know.

Then I heard him yell.

"Come look at this!"

Reluctantly, I turned around.

He was walking toward me carrying an enormous dark bird.

At first I couldn't tell what it was.

Then the sunlight caught the feathers on the back of its neck.

Golden.

My stomach dropped.

It was a Golden Eagle.

America's national bird.

Dead.

For a moment I couldn't breathe.

I wasn't merely shocked.

I was heartsick.

All I wanted was to be somewhere else.

Back in Bigfork.

Back in college.

Anywhere except standing beside Julius looking at a dead Golden Eagle.

One sentence kept repeating itself inside my head, just like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz.*

"There's no place like home."

"There's no place like home."

"Please God… get me out of here."

Julius carried the eagle to my pickup and laid it on the passenger-side floorboard.

Blood immediately began soaking onto the rubber mat.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Without the slightest concern, Julius answered,

"Change of plans."

He explained that he needed to get back to the Skunk Wagon.

From there he intended to drive to the Crow Reservation and sell the eagle's feathers and claws while they were still fresh.

I stared at him.

"I don't care what you do with that bird."

Then I pointed at the blood running across my floorboard.

“But why is that dead eagle bleeding all over my pickup?”

Julius frowned.

“Don’t you listen?”

He pointed toward the sky.

“So the game wardens can’t see it from their airplanes.”

The explanation made absolutely no sense.

Then Julius grinned.

“Besides…”

He paused just long enough.

“You’re an accessory now.”

“If I go down for shooting this eastern Montana buzzard…”

“…you go down with me.”

I wasn’t amused.

Not even a little.

I climbed behind the wheel and headed toward Cherry Springs much faster than I normally drove.

After several miles Julius finally spoke.

“Slow down.”

I never answered.

All I wanted was for him—and that eagle—to be out of my pickup.

When we reached Cherry Springs, Julius climbed out carrying his prize.

Before I could leave, he stopped me.

“Take my picture.”

“What?”

“With the eagle.”

So I did.

Even today, I still have that photograph. Julius stands grinning, holding the lifeless eagle with its wings spread against him, its feathers dark and heavy, the body limp in his grip. Behind him rises the weathered side of my sheep wagon—sun-bleached wood scarred by wind, dust, and years of prairie weather. Beyond it, the open prairie stretches in every direction, a sea of grass under an unbroken sky.

Every time I look at that photograph, I’m taken back to that lonely stretch of land, the dry wind, the silence, and the complicated man standing there as if he belonged to that country in a way I never could. Julius understood that harsh world. He accepted it on its own terms. I never did.

Every time I look at that picture, I’m reminded that Julius and I weren’t just looking at the same eagle—we were looking at two entirely different worlds. His was the prairie. Mine never would be.

I drove straight to Ingomar without looking back.

The Jersey Lilly had never felt more welcoming.

Bill Seward asked how things were progressing at Cherry Springs.

I simply told him Julius and I were still waiting for the logs and roofing material to arrive.

Bill smiled his familiar, gentle smile, the kind that always seemed to put people at ease. His well-worn glasses were still held above his nose by a little piece of white cotton string that came across his forehead and looped behind his ears, and his crumpled white sailor cap sat firmly on his head, as though it had become a permanent part of him. There was nothing polished or pretentious about Bill. His quiet, soft-spoken manner and unassuming appearance were exactly what made him so easy to like.

Instead of my usual Pepsi, I ordered a root beer.

For some reason I wanted something sweet.

Bill looked surprised.

“I’ve got plenty of Pepsi.”

“No thanks.”

Only then did I notice the dried eagle blood that had run down the leg of my jeans.

By that point…

I didn’t care who saw it.

Bill chuckled.

“You know…”

“Root beer’s Julius’s favorite pop.”

That was the last thing I wanted to hear.

That night I slept in the Old House.

For the first time in weeks I slept so deeply that I hardly moved.

When I woke the next morning, however, the same thought immediately entered my mind.

What trouble is Julius going to get me into today?

More importantly…

Why was I still here?

The answer was simple.

Before leaving Bigfork, I had given my parents my word.

I had promised I would stay until the log lambing barn at Cherry Springs was finished.

By then I had already learned something that has remained with me throughout my life.

A person’s word is part of their character, who they are in life.

If you deliberately break a promise simply because keeping it becomes difficult, your word eventually becomes worthless. A person who cannot be trusted soon loses the respect of others.

To me, that respect mattered. It was one of the few things in life that could outlive a person.

I admired Julius more than almost anyone I had ever known.

His work ethic.

His determination.

His willingness to tackle jobs most men would never attempt.

But that afternoon I had also learned something else.

Admiring a man doesn't require agreeing with everything he does.

Julius and I did not see the world the same way.

We never would.

Later, while we were building the lambing barn, Julius explained exactly why he shot Golden Eagles. In his mind he wasn't destroying a magnificent bird; he was protecting lambs and ewes from a predator that had no business hunting on Cherry Creek. Whether he was right or wrong isn't the point. That was honestly how he saw the world.

I saw it differently.

It was one of the first times I realized that two good men could respect one another deeply… and still live by very different codes.

At the time, however, none of that changed my decision.

I intended to keep my promise. My promise to my family.

No matter what Julius managed to get me into next.



The Day Rummy Lost His Finger

The next morning I drove up to the Jersey Lilly for breakfast.

Before ordering anything, I walked over to the pay phone and called Dean.

“Please tell me the semis are loaded,” I said. “When are you coming?”

Truthfully, by then I wasn’t sure I even cared anymore.

Dean sighed.

“The steel roofing is ready,” he said, “but the corrugated fiberglass light panels still haven’t arrived. It’ll probably be another day or two before I can head your way with all the semis.”

“All the semis?” I thought.

Just how many truckloads were we talking about?

After hanging up, I stared at the phone for a long moment.

I couldn’t bring myself to call my parents.

I decided I would not call them until the logs actually arrived.

Besides, what exactly was I supposed to tell them?

That I had spent the past several days discovering things they probably never imagined existed?

Should I mention that Julius’s house was carpeted wall to wall with Cherry Creek sheep pelts?

Or that Sivert had quietly purchased Julius's homestead—and the entire section surrounding it—so Julius could spend the rest of his life on the land he loved?

Looking back, I've often wondered if Sivert's decision was about more than simple generosity. Was it his way of thanking a man who had been loyal to him and Cherry Creek? **Or did Sivert understand that Paul and Bernice's offer of a home and lifetime employment on the new Milam Ranch could pull Julius away from him—and he quietly acted to prevent it?**

I'll never know. But one thing became increasingly clear to me: everyone wanted Julius on their side, and Sivert understood his worth as well as anyone.

Should I tell them I had stood beside Julius's parents' graves… and his brother Dominick's grave where he had crashed the airplane they had built together?

Maybe I should explain that I had seen the famous Chicago copper still where Julius made his Tipple.

Or perhaps mention that a poacher had pointed a rifle at me… only to have Julius quietly level his .300 Magnum at him.

Then there was the Golden Eagle.

Julius had probably reached the Crow Reservation by now, trying to sell feathers and claws from America's national bird.

No.

Those were conversations better left unspoken.

It was easy for Paul and Bernice to judge from hundreds of miles away. Had they been living at the ranch and experienced what I

did, they might have packed the car and driven straight back to Bigfork.

Then again, knowing them, I'm not so sure.

Instead, I walked back down to the Old House, stretched out on the bed, and slept most of the afternoon.

That evening the prairie rewarded me with another magnificent sunset.

The sky glowed with brilliant shades of orange, crimson, and purple as nighthawks darted through the evening air, their familiar buzzing wings echoing across the valley.

It was another one of those sunsets that reminded me again of a Charles M. Russell painting.

Moments like that almost made everything else worthwhile.

Almost.

I wanted to leave in the worst way possible.

More than once I thought about simply driving away from Cherry Creek and never coming back.

But the pickup I was driving belonged to Sivert… to Cherry Creek.

If I disappeared with it, he would probably report it stolen.

That wasn't a problem I wanted.

So instead, I picked up an old book, read until dark, and went to bed.



The following morning I made my decision.

I was going back to Cherry Springs.

I had given my word to Paul and Bernice that I would stay until the lambing barn was finished.

Whatever happened between now and then, I intended to keep that promise.

Before leaving Ingomar, I filled both fuel tanks on my pickup at the Jersey Lilly pumps.

Then I added a six-pack of bottled Pepsi, several bags of Cheetos, and the gasoline to the Milam family tab at the Lilly.

I pointed the pickup toward Cherry Springs hoping Dean would arrive within the next couple of days.

Part of me hoped I would never see Julius again.

Another part wondered if I had somehow become addicted to the constant adrenaline that seemed to follow him everywhere.

I sincerely hoped that wasn't true.



Back at Cherry Springs, I climbed into my sheep wagon.

For the first time in days, I finally felt completely at peace.

It lasted…

Maybe an hour.

Then I heard a pickup coming over the hill from Beer Bill's place.

Out jumped John Sebulsky.

His eyes were the size of hockey pucks.

They came racing into camp looking for help. Whether they were looking for me or Julius, I never knew. At that moment, it didn't matter.

John was yelling before the pickup even came to a stop.

"Rummy cut off his finger!"

I stared at him for a second, trying to make sense of what I'd just heard.

"His… what?"

Without another word, John grabbed Rummy's injured hand and thrust it toward me. Almost into my face.

Sure enough…

His middle finger was gone.

"The middle finger!" John shouted again, adding an unbelievably crude description that left no doubt which finger he meant.

Trying to ignore his frantic explanation, I turned my attention to Rummy.

"What happened?"

Rummy winced.

"I slammed the pickup's tailgate latch on my hand."

The heavy latch had completely severed his middle finger and badly mangled the two fingers beside it.

Without thinking, I asked the obvious question.

“Where’s the finger?”

“The doctor might be able to sew it back on.”

“We need to keep it cool. In ice.”

The moment I asked, tears welled up in Rummy’s eyes.

Before he could answer, John yelled,

“His damn dog ate it!”

I stared at him.

“Ate it?”

“Are you deaf?” John shouted.

“Get him to Doc Whitney in Forsyth!”

Rummy and I head south on the Porcupine Cutoff Road toward Vananda, hoping to save time.

Just as the old brick bank in Vananda came into view…

I had a flat tire.

Rummy was convinced he was dying.

“I’m bleeding to death!”

“I’m going to die before you get that tire changed!”

It was only the second flat tire I had ever changed in my life.

My instructor happened to be a sheepherder missing his middle finger whose dog had just eaten the missing piece.

I remember thinking,

I don't need Julius.

This whole country is a damn insane asylum.



I drove as fast as I dared into Forsyth and finally found the hospital.

To this day I couldn't tell you which doctor treated Rummy.

I never met him.

One thing I did learn was that hospitals didn't operate on tabs like the Jersey Lilly or Jake Zaharko's Texaco station.

Someone had to pay.

Fortunately, I still had my checkbook.

I wrote a check large enough for the hospital to begin treatment and arranged for the remaining bill to be sent to Cherry Creek Sheep Company in care of Sivert Mysse in Ingomar.

I thought the excitement was finally over.

I couldn't have been more wrong.



After leaving the hospital, Rummy announced that what he really needed was a meal—and a drink.

Actually…

Several drinks.

So we walked into the Howdy Bar on Main Street.

To settle our shaken nerves, Rummy ordered each of us a shot of Jack Daniel's.

Then he ordered the sandwiches without asking what I wanted. Maybe it was the shock. Maybe it was the pain medication beginning to take effect. Whatever the reason, Rummy simply decided for both of us.

Mine was a BLT with French fries, but I barely noticed what I was eating. The image of his missing finger kept replaying in my mind.

By the time we finished, the shock had begun to wear off. Without thinking—something completely out of character for me—I ordered each of us a draft beer. Looking back, I suspect the Jack Daniel's was making the decision for me. I wasn't even twenty-one years old. Under normal circumstances, I never would have done such a thing.



The waitress never asked how old I was.

Apparently, bloodshot eyes, a scruffy beard, dusty ranch clothes, and looking completely worn out were all the identification anyone needed in eastern Montana. I do not know what made me look older than I was. Or maybe, at the Howdy, nobody thought to ask.

Who knows?

As we ate, Rummy reached into his pocket and swallowed a handful of pain pills the hospital had just prescribed.

Not one.

Not two.

A handful.

He washed them down with his Jack Daniel's…

…and then his beer.

Within minutes his speech was slurred, and his eyes had that unmistakable glassy look.

It was obvious we needed to leave.



I excused myself and walked to the restroom.

When I returned…

Rummy was gone.

Completely gone.

I asked the bartender if he'd seen him.

"Oh sure," he said casually.

"He left with Albert Neuman."

"They're headed to the Bison Bar."

Relieved, I asked where the Bison Bar was in Forsyth.

The bartender pointed east.

“In Miles City.”

Then he chuckled.

As I started toward the door, he called after me.

“You aren’t planning to kill that poor bastard, are you?”

I stopped for a moment.

Believe me…

The thought had crossed my mind.

I said nothing… my face said it all.

Instead, I climbed into my pickup and drove back toward Cherry Springs alone.

I hadn’t hit the city limits of Forsyth when it hit me… Why should I go back.

If Rummy wanted to spend the afternoon and night in Miles City drinking whiskey and beer while full of pain pills—and missing his middle finger—that was his decision.

I had finally learned something about eastern Montana.

You couldn’t save everyone from themselves.

Especially if they were sheepherders.



A Brief Return to Civilization

After dropping Rummy at the hospital, I had reached my limit.

I wanted one thing.

A hot shower.

A clean bed.

And one night without Julius, sheep, deer poachers, missing fingers, stubborn sheepherders, or anything else eastern Montana could dream up.

I checked into the Rails Inn in Forsyth.

The moment I unlocked the door, I headed straight for the shower.

I honestly believe it was one of the best showers of my life.

I used every little bottle of shampoo, every bar of soap, and every packet of conditioner the motel had supplied. It felt as though I was washing away the dust, sweat, eagle blood, and sheer insanity that had accumulated over the previous several days.

When I finally stepped out, I felt human again.

I went down to the Rails Inn Café and ordered supper.

For the first time in what seemed like forever, I could finally relax.

That night I slept better than I had since arriving at Cherry Creek.

Nothing disturbed me.

Well…

Almost nothing.

My beard had reached the point where it itched constantly.

Julius had managed to use every one of my razor blades several weeks earlier. For what I have no clue. I made a mental note that before heading back to Cherry Springs, I needed to buy more.

The first thing I did the next morning was call my parents collect from the motel.

The reason had nothing to do with homesickness.

I was almost certain that after paying Rummy's hospital bill, I had overdrawn my checking account.

I gave my parents the sanitized version of what had happened.

I told them Rummy had badly injured his hand, that I had taken him to the hospital, and that I had written a check to get him admitted.

I conveniently left out the part about Rummy disappearing from the Howdy Bar after mixing whiskey, beer, and pain pills before heading off to Miles City with one of his drinking buddies.

Some stories were simply better left untold.

Mom listened quietly.

Then, almost immediately, she asked the question she seemed to ask every time we talked.

"Has Sivert bought anything new since you've been there?"

To the best of my knowledge, he hadn't. The pickup I had been driving since I arrived was all I knew about.

Truthfully, Julius and I had spent so much time roaming the ranch that I had little idea what Sivert had or hadn't purchased.

Dad said very little during the conversation on the other line.

Before hanging up, Mom told me they would deposit enough money into my account to cover any outstanding checks.

That was the end of the conversation.

My next mission was finding Rummy.

According to the bartender in Forsyth, he had left with Albert Neuman for Miles City.

So I drove northeast.

It was around ten o'clock in the morning when I walked into the Bison Bar.

A handful of cowboys were still eating late breakfasts, trying to recover from the night before.

I walked up to the bartender.

"Have you seen Jack Rumdahl?"

He smiled.

"Sure have."

"He was here until about five."

Then he added,

“He and Albert headed for Jordan.”

“They figured they’d have prime rib at the Hell Creek Café.”

Jordan.

Another hundred miles.

So off I went.

By the time I reached Jordan, it was nearly one o’clock.

I stepped through the front door of the Hell Creek Café expecting to find Rummy.

Instead…

The place was almost empty.

Only the bartender was there.

No Rummy.

No Albert.

Nothing.

For a moment, I honestly thought my head might explode.

I had spent half the day chasing a man who apparently had no intention of being found.

Fine.

If Rummy wanted to disappear, that was his business.

I had finally reached the point where I simply didn’t care anymore.

As I headed toward the restroom, the bartender called after me.

“Hey!”

“Do you know how to spell welcome in Jordan?”

I turned around with a puzzled look.

He grinned.

“B…”

“A…”

“R.”

I couldn’t help laughing.

For the first time that day, someone had actually made me smile.

I ordered a cheeseburger, a bag of chips, and an Olympia beer—my Uncle Merton’s favorite.

As I sat there drinking it, an uncomfortable thought crossed my mind.

Was I becoming like Merton?

I hadn’t even turned twenty-one.

The thought bothered me far more than the beer.

I quietly reminded myself,

Keep it together, Craig.

Just keep it together.

When I finished eating, I left enough money on the table to cover my meal and tip and started for the door.

The bartender smiled.

“You know,” he said, “I probably shouldn’t have served you that beer.”

He paused.

“I figured you weren’t twenty-one.”

Then he shrugged.

“But there wasn’t anybody else in here.”

I smiled.

Neither of us said another word.

I drove slowly through Jordan’s two-block business district before turning toward Cohagen and eventually back toward Cherry Springs.

The farther I drove, the quieter I became.

I kept asking myself the same question.

Surely there has to be somewhere in this world where life is at least a little bit normal.

Eastern Montana certainly wasn’t it.

Before returning to Cherry Springs, I decided to stop by Rummy’s sheep wagon near Brown’s Gulch.

As I pulled up to the sheep wagon, John Sebulsky stepped outside before I had even shut off the pickup.

He marched straight toward me.

Before I could say a word, he grabbed my hand.

“Thank you.”

He was so close I could smell the mixture of cigarette smoke, whiskey, and kerosene on his breath.

His words came fast.

“You saved Rummy’s life.”

“We’ll never forget it.”

“You’re a damn hero.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

Standing that close, John managed to spray me with every sentence as much as he spoke.

Just then the sheep wagon door opened.

Out popped Rummy.

He gave me a huge grin, waved his heavily bandaged right hand, then disappeared back inside without saying a single word.

No “thank you.”

No explanation.

Nothing.

Whether he was still under the influence of pain medication, alcohol, or simply being Rummy, I'll never know.

At that point, I really didn't care.

As I headed back toward Cherry Springs, I passed the Beer Bill's shack once again.

Something immediately caught my eye.

Parked outside was Aunt Janet's brown Suburban.

She appeared to be standing on the shaded west side of Beer Bill's place talking with Mexican Pete.

I looked.

Then immediately looked away.

Like Sergeant Hans Schultz on Hogan's Heroes, I found myself repeating the only sensible response.

"I see nothing."

"I know nothing."

No one saw me.

I saw no one.

End of story.

That evening I walked away from the sheep wagon carrying my old .22 rifle.

I spent the rest of the evening shooting at prairie targets until I had only a handful of cartridges left.

The quiet rhythm of loading, aiming, and firing settled my mind in a way nothing else had for days.

I had no idea, however, that on Cherry Creek, even the smallest decisions had consequences.

Out there, nothing ever stayed simple for very long.



October 1971 - South of Beer Bill's Shack I saw more hind ends that day than I ever expected.

Another Favor for Julius

Another day passed.

Still no semis.

No logs.

No roofing steel.

No fiberglass panels.

By now I had almost stopped expecting Dean to arrive.

Instead, I found myself waiting to see what fresh insanity Julius would drag back from the Crow Reservation.

Sure enough, I heard it before I saw it.

The familiar blue Skunk Wagon came bouncing over the hill from Beer Bill's place.

I couldn't help but smile.

"Here we go again."

Julius had returned from his trip to the Crow Reservation by way of the Porcupine Cutoff Road. He climbed out wearing his usual grin, completely at peace with the world, as though nothing unusual had happened over the previous week.

Then he looked at me.

"Want to do a favor for a friend of mine in Forsyth?"

I hesitated.

Experience had taught me that whenever Julius asked for "a favor," life usually became much more complicated.

Finally I answered.

"As long as it doesn't get my butt into trouble."

The words were barely out of my mouth before I regretted saying them.

I should have known better.

This was Julius.

Trouble had a way of finding him.

Or perhaps he simply had a way of finding trouble.

As usual, the Skunk Wagon needed gasoline, so we took my pickup.

Julius explained that an old railroad friend of his in Forsyth needed some food.

Years earlier the man had worked as a section foreman while Julius had been the railroad's welder and metalworker.

Listening to Julius explain his plan, I became convinced we were headed to Sivert's place to "appropriate" food for his friend.

"Appropriate" was Julius's favorite word for borrowing something permanently.

Most people simply called it stealing.

The thought made me uncomfortable.

Cherry Creek Sheep Company belonged, in part, to me.

Even though I owned only five shares, I couldn't imagine helping Julius steal food from a company in which I was an owner.

"Please don't let this become another one of Julius's adventures," I thought.

As I turned toward Sivert's house, Julius nearly came unglued.

"Where the hell are you going?"

I looked at him.

"I thought…"

"No!"

He pointed in another direction.

"We're going to my place."

I turned the pickup around and headed toward Julius's homestead above the rimrocks.

As we pulled back onto the main county road, Sivert happened to be driving toward us in his Suburban.

He waved us to a stop.

My first thought was simple.

"Now what?"

I briefly explained what had happened to Rummy and how I had taken him to the hospital in Forsyth.

Sivert listened without much expression.

“I’ll pay the bill when it comes.”

That was all he said.

He never asked how Rummy was doing.

He never thanked me for paying the hospital so Rummy could receive treatment.

He never offered to reimburse me for the money I had already spent on behalf of the ranch.

Instead, he reached into the back of his Suburban and handed us a bundle of bright fluorescent-orange signs.

NO HUNTING ALLOWED ON CHERRY CREEK SHEEP COMPANY PROPERTY

Along with the signs came a heavy-duty stapler and a full box of staples.

“Hunting season opens in about a week and a half,” Sivert said. “I want these posted at every gate on the north pasture.”

He explained that hunters had been entering Cherry Creek without permission, and he hoped the signs would encourage them to stop and ask first.

As he talked, I found myself studying him.

Only a few days earlier, Julius and I had confronted armed poachers dragging a mule deer across Cherry Creek.

Sivert knew nothing about it.

He knew nothing about Julius's hidden still.

He knew nothing about the Golden Eagle.

He showed little concern that Rummy had lost a finger.

For all the confidence he placed in his shortwave radios, they certainly weren't telling him much.

The first week of October was drawing to a close.

In another two weeks my parents would arrive in Ingomar. I couldn't help wondering what they would think if they knew what had really been happening on Cherry Creek.

The cottonwoods had begun turning brilliant shades of yellow, and it suddenly occurred to me that Sivert hadn't been north since the steers were delivered and the sheep were shorn the previous spring.

He was managing Cherry Creek from a distance.

The ranch, however, had a life of its own.

Before leaving, Sivert glanced onto the side of my pickup bed.

A puzzled look crossed his face.

"Did Jack bleed that much on the way to Forsyth?"

I looked at the dried eagle blood and answered as calmly as I could.

"Yes."

"Yes, he did."

Beside me, Julius suddenly burst into laughter.

Realizing he had almost given something away, he quickly turned the laugh into an exaggerated coughing fit.

Sivert never suspected a thing.

As I watched him drive away, I couldn't help shaking my head.

When I had accepted this assignment, I believed Sivert knew everything that happened on Cherry Creek.

After nearly three months on the ranch, I was beginning to wonder if he knew much of anything.

Where had Dean disappeared to?

Why hadn't the building materials arrived?

Why hadn't Sivert been north since spring?

If he wasn't overseeing the ranch, who was?

Julius seemed to know everything that happened on Cherry Creek.

Sivert, on the other hand, seemed strangely detached from the day-to-day life of the ranch.



Julius and I continued toward his mysterious "food gathering" mission.

Just before reaching the Ingomar turnoff, Julius directed me west toward an old feed storage barn.

From there we passed one of the most unusual buildings on the ranch.

It belonged to my grandfather Mysse.

Long and narrow, it resembled an old railroad boxcar sitting alone on the prairie.

Granddad had built it from a Sears, Roebuck kit that had been shipped by rail to Ingomar during the 1930s.

Standing there against the endless prairie, it reminded me that almost everything on Cherry Creek had a story waiting to be told.



View looking from the Porcupine Rimrocks towards the Northeast. This was Julius's and my favorite place to hunt arrowheads.

The Prairie Keeps Its Secrets

As we continued west along the rimrocks overlooking the Big Porcupine Creek, Julius suddenly yelled,

“Stop!”

I hit the brakes.

“What now?”

He looked toward the sandstone cliffs and smiled.

“You want to see where the Indians made their arrowheads?”

That was a question I didn’t have to think about.

“I’d love to.”

So far, Julius hadn’t asked me to steal anything or help him get into trouble. Standing on the rimrocks overlooking Sivert’s ranch house seemed harmless enough.

We climbed out of the pickup and walked toward the edge of the bluff.

The view stretched for miles.

Below us, the Big Porcupine Creek wound through the cottonwoods while the open prairie rolled away toward the horizon.

Julius pointed to a faint trail etched into the valley floor.

“See that?”

I nodded.

“That’s where the buffalo bone freighters traveled.”

He explained that after the great buffalo herds had been slaughtered, crews gathered the sun-bleached bones into horse-drawn freight wagons until they were piled high. The bones were hauled to Miles City where they were ground into bone meal.

Julius shook his head.

“They must have killed millions of buffalo.”

The wagon trail, worn deep into the prairie more than a century earlier, could still be seen as clearly as if the last wagon had passed only yesterday.

As we walked along the rim, Julius stooped and picked up a four-inch piece of weathered buffalo horn.

Holding it in his hand, he quietly said,

“Everyone knows the last wolf in Montana was killed over around Deep Creek near Jordan.”

Then, after a pause, he added,

“Probably for the best.”

“There wasn’t much left for them to eat after the buffalo were gone.”

He stood silently for a moment, looking across the endless prairie.

Finally he spoke again.

“I should have been born a hundred years earlier.”

He smiled to himself.

“I think I might have fit in better back then.”

There was something different in his voice.

For once, Julius wasn’t joking.

He sounded almost homesick for a time he had never known.

As we continued walking, Julius pointed toward several large ant hills.

“Always look around ant hills,” he said.

I must have looked puzzled.

“The ants bring little pieces of stone up from underground.”

He knelt and sifted through the gravel.

“If you find chips of Miles City siltstone, Yellowstone obsidian, green flint, agate, or yellow river stone, you’re close.”

“Close to what?” I asked.

“Indian camps.”

He explained that Native Americans often sat on the high rimrocks overlooking the valleys below, shaping arrowheads, spear points, and other tools while watching buffalo and other game move across the prairie.

The discarded flakes from making those tools still remained.

The ants simply helped bring them back to the surface.

That afternoon Julius taught me how to read the prairie in a way I never would have imagined.

Before we left, I found three perfect arrowheads and an atlatl spear point.

More than fifty years later, they still occupy a place of honor in my home, alongside the red Minnesota pipestone peace pipe Bill Seward gave me many years earlier.

I hope that someday my daughter-in-law, Taneal, treasures those artifacts as much as I always have.

To me, they are reminders of one remarkable afternoon spent walking the rimrocks with Julius.

Not long afterward Julius spotted half of an old buffalo skull with one black horn still attached.

He grinned.

“Shep will probably give me fifty or seventy-five dollars for this.”

Then he laughed.

“I’ve probably sold him over a hundred buffalo skulls through the years.”

Knowing Julius, I had no reason to doubt him.

Just when I thought the day’s adventure was over, Julius suddenly froze.

“There.”

A pronghorn buck stood feeding several hundred yards away.

Julius spoke quietly.

“Get your .243.”

I slipped the Winchester from in front of the seat.

He had me spread my down jacket across the hood of my pickup to use as a rest.

The buck remained completely unaware of us.

Julius looked through his binoculars.

Then he smiled.

“Let’s make some meat.”

I settled the crosshairs behind the buck’s shoulder at the top of its back and gently squeezed the trigger.

The antelope collapsed where it stood.

For several seconds neither of us said a word.

I had never killed an animal that large before.

Julius, however, was grinning from ear to ear.

“We’ve got to dress him fast.”

Then he reminded me of one small detail.

“It isn’t hunting season.”

Neither one of us had an antelope license.

Reality returned rather quickly.

Standing over the buck with my Buck knife open, I suddenly realized something.

I had absolutely no idea how to field dress an antelope.

Julius took one look at the expression on my face, smiled, and reached for my knife—not his new Buck knife.

“Watch.”

Working patiently, he explained each step as he field dressed the antelope.

Within minutes the animal had been field dressed and bled.

We rinsed the body cavity with water from a jug in the pickup.

When he finished, Julius slapped me on the shoulder.

“You hit him perfectly.”

He smiled proudly.

“Just like I taught you.”

Then he added one of those comments only Julius could make.

“If you can’t kill an animal people—or a human people—with one shot…”

“…you shouldn’t be carrying a gun.”

I remember thinking,

“A human people?”

Once again Julius had taken an ordinary conversation in a direction I never expected.

With the antelope loaded into the pickup, we headed toward Forsyth.

Before we had gone very far, Julius suddenly asked me to stop at his family homestead.

He climbed out carrying one of the fluorescent NO HUNTING signs Sivert had given us.

To my complete surprise, Julius stapled it to the garden fence.

Then he turned toward me.

“Bring your rifle.”

I climbed out, completely confused.

I set my rifle next to the fence. Then Julius had me help him drag the antelope beneath the freshly posted NO HUNTING sign.

Then he struck a pose with my rifle.

“Take my picture.”

So I did.

When I lowered the camera, I smiled.

“I think this one will be as good as the picture I took of you with the Golden Eagle.”

Julius’s smile disappeared.

For the first time all day he looked genuinely concerned.

“Those pictures…”

He hesitated.

“They’re pretty damn incriminating.”

He looked directly at me.

“Promise me something.”

I nodded.

“Don’t have those rolls of 35mm film developed until after I’m dead.”

He paused.

“Even then… be careful.”

“If the authorities ever connect you with me—and with some of the things I’ve done…”

He let the sentence trail off.

He didn’t have to finish it.

I understood exactly what he meant.

I kept that promise.

Those rolls of 35mm slides remained undeveloped until December 2019, nearly fifty years later. Part of me secretly hoped time had destroyed them beyond recovery.

In a way, it had.

Several rolls had deteriorated beyond saving after half a century. Others yielded only faded or damaged images. But a few survived well enough to be developed, and the photographs that emerged

immediately reminded me why Julius had never wanted anyone to see them.

Ironically, of all the images that survived, one was the very photograph Julius had worried about the most.

Looking back now, I think Julius understood something that I didn't.

Photographs preserve memories.

Sometimes…

They also preserve evidence.

With that, we climbed back into the pickup and continued toward Forsyth.

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The Real Battle for Cherry Creek

After arriving in Forsyth, Julius directed me to a modest house where one of his old railroad friends lived.

“Back into the garage,” he said.

The request seemed odd, but by then I had learned not to ask too many questions.

The man opened the garage door, and I backed my pickup inside.

Julius pulled the garage door nearly closed behind us.

Together, the two old railroad men unloaded the antelope and hung it from the rafters.

His friend studied the buck for a long moment before shaking his head.

“That’s the biggest antelope I’ve ever seen.”

Then he looked more closely at the ivory tips.

“Huge ivories,” he said with admiration.

“Huge.”

He repeated it several times.

Once the antelope was hanging safely inside the garage, Julius had me pull the pickup back onto the street.

About twenty minutes later he announced that we needed to stop at the Forsyth Bank.

“I’ll only be a minute.”

He went inside alone.

When he returned, he carried nothing more than a plain envelope.

Back at his friend's house, Julius walked quietly to the front door and handed him the envelope.

"If you need more food," Julius said, "or if you need more money, just get word to me."

"I'll do what I can."

That was all.

No speeches.

No fanfare.

No expectation of being repaid.

After Julius climbed back into the pickup, I noticed he had accidentally left the bank withdrawal slip lying on the seat beside me.

For the first time I realized how much money he had withdrawn.

It wasn't a small amount.

I found myself wondering how one man could be so generous to a friend in need while, at the same time, living so comfortably outside the law.

Julius never seemed to see a contradiction.

To him, helping a friend was simply the right thing to do.

That evening we returned to Cherry Springs.

Dean still hadn't arrived.

The waiting continued.

Only two weeks remained before Paul and Bernice planned to come to Cherry Creek and inspect the progress on the lambing shed.

They also expected me to report on what Sivert and Janet had been buying with ranch money.

The truth was, I didn't know.

I had no clue.

I had plenty of suspicions.

I had photographed buildings, equipment, and improvements around the home ranch, but photographs alone couldn't tell me whether something had been purchased for the ranch or for personal use.

The only thing I knew with certainty was that a tremendous amount of money had been spent improving the headquarters and on Janknit's side business on the Big Porcupine.

At Cherry Springs, however, the concrete foundation for the lambing shed sat waiting.

Without Dean and the logs, there was nothing more we could do.

The following morning I walked outside my sheep wagon and immediately noticed an awful smell.

At first I couldn't figure out where it was coming from.

Then I opened the large cooler Julius had “appropriated” from Sivert.

The odor nearly knocked me over.

The sage hens we had saved had completely spoiled.

They had dissolved into a revolting yellow soup of bones, grease, and whatever else had once been edible.

Everything inside the cooler was ruined.

The smaller cooler inside my sheep wagon wasn’t much better.

There wasn’t a single thing left worth saving.

After throwing everything away, I decided to use the last of our canned food before driving down to Sivert’s to replenish supplies.

I heated several cans of Van Camp’s pork and beans in my faithful green Teflon pan and carried a bowl over to the Skunk Wagon.

Julius was in miserable shape.

His gout had flared up again, and he could barely stand.

Even his medication wasn’t touching the pain.

After we ate together sitting on the Skunk Wagon’s tailgate, I told him I planned to drive down to the home ranch for more supplies.

He nodded.

“I’m not going anywhere today.”

Then he surprised me.

“I’ll wash the dishes.”

I looked at him.

Julius…

…volunteering to wash dishes?

That might have been the most unbelievable thing I’d witnessed since arriving in eastern Montana.

There weren’t many dishes.

“Great,” I said.

“I’ll see you later.”

I headed down to Sivert’s hoping to find enough bleach to disinfect the cooler.

If I was lucky, I might even get a shower and a chance to shave.

Everyone was gone except Janet.

She greeted me pleasantly enough.

When I explained what had happened to the cooler, she laughed.

After taking one smell she wrinkled her nose.

“I’m not sure whether the cooler smells worse than you do.”

She wasn’t entirely wrong.

She handed me a bottle of bleach, then told me to go ahead and shower while I was there.

The trailer's water still smelled strongly of sulfur, but it was hot.

At that point I would have showered in almost anything.

I borrowed Sivert's razor, shaved, and changed into clean clothes.

As I laced up my boots, I noticed they had developed an odor all their own.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much I could do about that.

When I carried my blaze orange backpack filled with dirty clothes into the kitchen, Janet surprised me again.

"I'll wash them."

While the washing machine ran, we sat at the kitchen table.

Janet smoked one menthol cigarette after another.

She seemed unusually quiet.

Finally she looked directly at me.

"Craig…"

"Sivert and I know why you're here."

The room suddenly felt much smaller.

"We know what Bernice and Paul are trying to do."

She leaned forward.

"It doesn't matter if you build one barn or ten."

"It won't change anything."

Then her voice became firmer.

“Sivert and I are the ones running this ranch.”

“Not Bernice.”

“Not Paul.”

“Not Marie.”

“They don’t have the slightest idea what it takes to make this place work.”

She paused long enough for her words to settle in.

“We got rid of Merton.”

“And given enough time…”

“We’ll get rid of Bernice and Marie too.”

Then she delivered the sentence that stunned me.

“No matter what you’ve been told…”

“This is Sivert’s and my ranch.”

“Not Bernice’s.”

“Not Marie’s.”

“Not Paul’s.”

“They’ll never own one square inch of Cherry Creek.”



I simply sat there and listened.

Every instinct told me to push back.

I had inherited my father's temper, and under different circumstances I might have argued every point she had made.

Instead, I reminded myself why I was there.

Losing my temper wouldn't accomplish anything.

So I said nothing.

Looking back, it was probably one of the wisest decisions I made during my entire time at Cherry Creek.

Many years later I realized Janet had been right about one thing.

After the northern pasture and Cherry Springs were eventually sold, the remaining Cherry Creek Ranch belonged only to Sivert and Janet.

At the time, however, I simply sat there speechless.

For some reason I kept thinking about The Wizard of Oz.

I almost expected Janet to point at me and say,

"I'll get you, my pretty… and your little dog, too."

She never said the words.

She didn't have to.

Her expression said enough.

Then, almost as quickly as the conversation had turned serious, Janet smiled.

“Oh… one more thing.”

She took another long drag on her cigarette.

“We’re having our annual fall party.”

She looked directly at me.

“We want you and Julius to roast three or four lambs.”

She explained that friends from Rosebud and Garfield Counties would be coming.

Probably thirty people.

Maybe a few more.

Then came the part that wasn’t really a request.

“If either of you says no…”

“…you can pack your things and go home today.”

For a moment I simply stared at her.

My freshly washed clothes had finished drying.

I quietly folded them into my faded blaze orange backpack while considering my options.

There really weren’t any.

She wasn’t speaking to Craig.

She wasn't even speaking to Mr. One Share.

She was speaking to another hired hand.

Finally I looked at Janet.

"We'd be happy to roast the lambs."

"How many people did you say?"

She smiled.

"A lot."

I loaded canned goods, eggs, and frozen meat into the pickup.

Just then Sivert arrived home with the two older boys.

He walked right past me without saying a word.

Not even hello.

That simple act told me as much as Janet's speech had.

Neither one of them saw me as an owner of Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

To them, I was simply Paul and Bernice's messenger.

I climbed back into my pickup and headed toward Cherry Springs.

The entire drive back I replayed the conversation with Janet.

Had she just threatened to fire me?

Of course she had.

Was she trying to establish who held the power at Cherry Creek?

Absolutely.

Was she using Julius and me to make her fall party a success?

Without question.

But one thought kept returning to me.

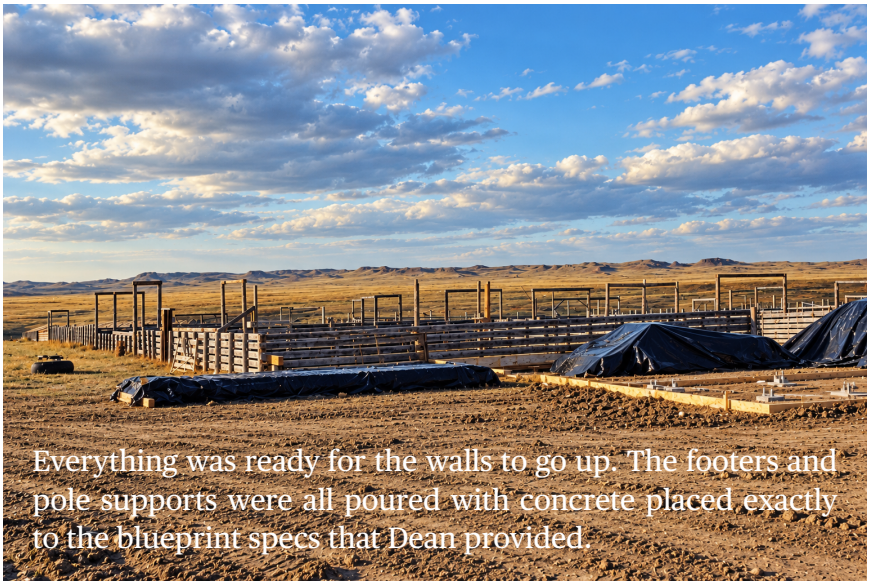
Could Janet actually fire “Mr. One Share?”

After all…

I wasn’t simply a hired hand.

I was also one of the owners of Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

Or at least that was what I had believed.



Everything was ready for the walls to go up. The footers and pole supports were all poured with concrete placed exactly to the blueprint specs that Dean provided.

The Building Finally Begins

The first thing I did after unloading my groceries at the sheep wagon was go looking for Julius.

I found him sitting on the tailgate of the Skunk Wagon.

Spread out beside him were a Brillo pad, a piece of sandpaper, and his Buck knife.

In his hands was my beautiful green Teflon pan.

Or at least what was left of it.

He was busily scraping every bit of the green coating from the inside.

“What in the world are you doing?” I exclaimed.

Julius looked up, smiled proudly, and held up the pan.

“It’s finally usable.”

I stared at him.

“What are you talking about? I’ve cooked in that pan for weeks.”

He shook his head as though I were the crazy one.

“Can’t you see somebody painted the inside of it green?”

He pointed at the remaining patches of Teflon.

“The fools that sold this to you in Billings ought to be shot.”

“You should take it back and get your money refunded.”

For several seconds I couldn't speak.

Here was a man who could build an airplane, weld almost anything made of steel, make moonshine, track game across miles of prairie, and forge knives alongside Fred in his little prairie shop.

Yet he had never heard of Teflon cookware.

I simply stood there in complete disbelief.

At that exact moment, the distant blast of an air horn echoed across the prairie.

I turned toward the sound. Three loaded semis were crawling over the rise, their black diesel smoke and billowing clouds of gumbo dust announcing their arrival long before they reached us.

Dean had finally arrived.

I have never been so happy to hear an air horn in my life.

Not only had the logs and roofing finally arrived, but Dean's timing probably saved Julius from becoming the first man I ever strangled.

Dean climbed down from his truck already barking orders.

True to form, he hadn't brought the construction crew Paul had promised.

Instead, he had only two other drivers operating the other two semis.

That was our crew of four.

The afternoon became a blur of work.

Every log, every bundle of roofing steel, every bolt, every brace, and every piece of hardware had to be unloaded by hand.

Dean insisted everything be stacked exactly where he wanted it.

If something wasn't placed to his liking, one of the three of us heard about it.

He wasn't particularly gentle with the other drivers, but they had obviously worked with Dean before and simply ignored his language.

I did my best to keep up.

After six straight hours of unloading, every one of us was exhausted.

Meanwhile, Julius and my pet jackrabbit, Jack, watched the entire operation from the shade beside the Skunk Wagon.

Julius contributed an endless stream of complaints about his gout while Dean contributed an endless stream of colorful language.

By sunset the work was finally finished.

The other two semi drivers climbed back into their semis and headed home before darkness made the unfamiliar gumbo roads impassable.

That evening Julius cooked supper using the groceries I had brought back from Sivert's.

Dean and I both appreciated the hot meal.

As we ate, Dean pointed his fork toward Julius.

“Never…”

He paused.

“…ever bring one of those damn jugs of your wine around me again.”

Julius grinned.

Then laughed.

The truth was, he loved being the center of attention.

Before long all three of us were asleep.

Julius snored from the Skunk Wagon.

Dean answered from the cab of his semi.

A few minutes later, I probably joined the chorus from my sheep wagon.

There were only ten days left before Paul and Bernice were due to arrive.

For the next week our routine never changed.

Up before sunrise.

Work until sunset.

Collapse into bed.

Repeat.

The lambing shed rose steadily from its foundation.

First the log walls.

Then the top plates.

Finally we reached the stage where the heavy rafters and purlins could be installed.

For the first time, I could actually picture the finished building.

On the eighth morning I was awakened by Julius yelling.

Not talking.

Yelling.

He burst into my sheep wagon.

“Where’s your .22?”

I pointed toward the corner.

He grabbed it.

“Where are your shells?”

I handed him the six cartridges I had left.

Without another word, Julius sprinted outside.

He threw himself across a pile of logs, aimed, and fired.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Silence.

A moment later he stormed back.

“Goddamn it!”

“You keep at least a full box of shells around here!”

“I can’t ever be caught short again!”

I had finally had enough.

I walked outside and discovered the reason for all the excitement.

Four skunks lay dead beneath the stacked rafters.

Several others had escaped.

Looking Julius squarely in the eye, I answered calmly.

“I thought one shot was all a person ever needed.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve been teaching me?”

“Maybe you ought to carry a rifle you can actually shoot.”

Dean wisely stepped between us before Julius could answer.

“I need both of you alive,” he said.

“This is already the building from hell.”

Without another word Julius skinned the four skunks.

The smell didn't seem to bother him in the least. He seemed to wear it proudly.

Then he carried every hide…

…straight into the Skunk Wagon.

Unfortunately, the skunks had sprayed all over the rafters before they died.

Every log was coated with skunk musk.

Dean and I had the unpleasant job of handling every one of them while Julius happily operated the tractor that lifted the rafters into place.

Each time we grabbed another log, the oily spray transferred onto our gloves and clothes.

Dean invented entirely new combinations of profanity.

Julius simply smiled.

By the end of the day every rafter and purlin had been installed.

The building was finally beginning to look complete.

The only problem was…

We smelled like skunks.

I finally told Julius we needed to drive down to Sivert's and take showers.

He refused.

Apparently I had hurt his feelings by criticizing his marksmanship.

Dean and I looked at each other.

Then climbed into my pickup wearing our least offensive clothes.

There was no chance I was letting the Skunk Wagon turn my pickup into Skunk Wagon Number Two.

While Dean showered, I started another load of laundry.

I felt a little guilty about what Janet's washing machine was about to endure.

No amount of detergent was going to hide skunk odor.

A few minutes later, Sivert and Janet came outside to see how construction was progressing.

I couldn't help being surprised.

For the first time since I'd arrived at Cherry Creek, they acted genuinely interested in the lambing barn.

Janet talked at length about everything she and Sivert had to do to manage such a large operation.

Both Dean and I listened politely.

Inside, however, I found myself wondering what ranch she was talking about.

During the past three months, I had driven hundreds of miles over Cherry Creek.

I had watched Julius and the sheepherders care for the sheep day after day.

I had seen the pastures, the water holes, the fences, and the livestock.

Yet I couldn't remember a single time that Sivert or Janet had driven north to inspect the camps, check on the men, or see firsthand how the ranch was operating.

I'm sorry… one time I saw Janet.

They managed Cherry Creek almost entirely from the headquarters.

The ranch itself seemed to function without them.

To this day, I still don't fully understand how Sivert and Janet maintained such complete control over Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

There were other partners who were shareholders.

These were people, family whose livelihoods depended upon the ranch.

Yet somehow they acted as though no one else had any voice in its future.

No one questioned them.

No one challenged them.

At least not successfully.

The farther removed they seemed from the everyday operation of the ranch, the tighter their grip on it became.

To me it remains one of the great mysteries of Cherry Creek.

Dean had already been warned by Paul about the family politics surrounding the ranch, and he wisely stayed out of them.

Both of us answered their questions with as few words as possible.

Then Janet looked directly at me.

“So…”

“You and Julius are still roasting the lambs for our fall party?”

My stomach tightened.

I had completely forgotten to mention it to Julius.

“Yes,” I answered.

“We’ll do it.”

Something told me I really didn’t have another choice.

Whether I was “Mr. One Share” or not, Janet had already made it perfectly clear who she expected me to believe was in charge.

The irony wasn’t lost on me.

On paper I was one of the owners.

In reality, I was treated like another hired hand.

The following morning we began fastening the corrugated steel roofing in place.

Dean explained that the ends of the building would have to be cut open later with a chainsaw for the large barn doors.

Having spent summers with the Forest Service, I volunteered for the chainsaw work.

It was one thing I knew I could do well.

Later that day two Cherry Creek sheepherders wandered over to see how the building was coming along.

Dean was delighted.

At last, he thought, we finally had some extra help.

Unfortunately, they seemed far more interested in watching than working.

One of them was an Irish sheepherder named Jimmy Mulholland.

His sheepdog, Rover, may have been the finest sheepdog on Cherry Creek.

He also may have been the craziest animal I had ever met.

Rover would spend hours digging at the moving shadows of sagebrush blown by the wind.

He chased the shadows of birds across the prairie, often biting prickly pear cactus instead.

On one occasion he became so determined to kill the whitecaps on a wind-whipped stock pond that he nearly drowned trying to bite the waves.

I actually watched Jimmy pull him from the water and give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Rover survived.

Watching him over the following weeks convinced me of something.

Nearly everyone—and almost every animal—I met in Rosebud and Garfield Counties seemed just a little crazy.

Some were simply better at hiding it than others.



Jimmy Mulholland's dog Rover some years later.

Accidents and Assumptions

The lambing shed was finally beginning to look like a real building.

Dean had the walls braced, the rafters in place, and the roof taking shape. The next step was to cut the large openings for the barn doors.

To make sure the cuts stayed perfectly straight, Dean bolted heavy guide boards to the log walls.

I sharpened the chain on the saw, filled the fuel tank, checked the bar oil, and pulled the starter rope.

The chainsaw roared to life.

Dean climbed into the bucket of the tractor so he could watch the angle of my cuts from above.

As I pushed the bar through the first twelve-inch log, his voice carried over the scream of the saw.

“Keep it perpendicular!”

“Don’t let it angle!”

I concentrated on keeping the bar perfectly square as I worked my way downward, log by log.

The first side of the doorway went smoothly.

When I reached the concrete footing, the chain struck the foundation and threw a few sparks.

I shut the saw off long enough to inspect the chain, then started cutting the opposite side.

Halfway down I heard Dean yell,

“Good… good…”

The next instant something warm splattered across my face and shirt.

Blood.

For one horrifying moment I was certain I had somehow cut Dean.

I looked up.

He was still standing safely in the tractor bucket.

Then what had happened?

I shut the saw off, climbed down the ladder as fast as I could, and ran around the corner of the building.

There stood Jimmy Mulholland.

In his hands was one of my dish towels wrapped tightly around Rover’s muzzle.

Somehow Rover had wandered away from Jimmy’s pickup and lunged at the moving chainsaw chain.

The spinning chain had caught him across the mouth.

Jimmy’s face was as white as a sheet.

Mine probably was too.

Neither of us said much.

Jimmy gently lifted Rover into the pickup and, in a cloud of dust, headed for the veterinarian in Forsyth.

The three of us—Dean, Julius, and I—stood there in complete silence.

I couldn't stop blaming myself.

I knew how much Jimmy loved that dog.

The accident replayed over and over in my mind.

I had no desire to pick up the chainsaw again.

I was finished for the day.

I began putting away the generator, fuel cans, and tools when Dean walked over.

He looked at me for a long moment.

Then, in his usual direct fashion, he said,

"Forget that."

"We've got to finish."

He pointed toward the building.

"If those walls aren't tied together today, they could bow or spread apart."

"We're too close to quit now."

He was right.

I picked up the chainsaw once more.

The rest of the cuts went without incident.

While I finished opening the doorways, Dean and Julius installed the temporary heavy metal door supports and bolted everything securely through the logs.

By the end of the afternoon we had accomplished a tremendous amount.

The walls were complete.

The rafters and purlins were in place.

The roof purlins had all been fastened down.

Both door openings had been cut and reinforced.

Several sheets of corrugated steel roofing had already been installed, along with the first translucent skylight panel.

For the first time I could stand back and see the lambing shed taking its final shape.

I looked at Dean.

“I’m done for today.”

“My parents will be here tomorrow afternoon.”

“I need a shower… and I need to clear my head after what happened to Rover.”

Dean nodded.

“Go.”

“Julius and I will keep busy.”

I drove down to the home ranch.

As usual, everyone seemed to be gone except Patty Ryan.

Patty and I had known each other for years, although we had never talked much beyond the usual greetings.

“I’m heading into Ingomar after I clean up,” I told him.

“Need a ride?”

His face immediately brightened.

“I sure do.”

After another hot, sulfur-smelling shower and a change into clean clothes, Patty climbed into the pickup beside me.

For several miles neither of us said much.

Then, almost out of nowhere, Patty began talking about his future.

After Janet’s fall party, he said, Sivert and Janet planned to bring in a brand-new seventy-two-foot mobile home for him.

It would be placed near the stockades where the yearling ewes were kept before breeding.

I looked at him.

“You’re buying a trailer that big?”

Patty laughed.

“Hell no.”

“I couldn’t afford something like that.”

“I’ve lived in sheep wagons all my life.”

“I’ve never saved enough money.”

Then he smiled.

“Sivert and Janet are buying it for me.”

“They don’t want me ending up in a retirement home.”

Instead, Patty explained, he would continue living on Cherry Creek.

His job would be to keep an eye on the yearling sheep and help watch Sivert and Janet’s children whenever they needed him.

The trailer was their way of thanking him for a lifetime of work on the Cherry Creek Ranch.

For several miles I didn’t say a word.

I simply drove.

Everything I had heard before coming to Cherry Creek painted Sivert and Janet as people interested only in themselves.

Yet what Patty had just told me didn’t fit that picture at all.

It forced me to confront something I had never really considered.

Perhaps everyone had been telling me the truth.

Just not the whole truth.

Sivert and Janet could be genuinely generous to someone they loved and trusted.

They could also be dismissive, controlling, and deeply hurtful toward other members of the family.

One reality didn't erase the other.

Both could exist at the same time.

At twenty years old, I was only beginning to understand that people are rarely as simple as we want them to be.

Neither are families.

The longer I stayed on Cherry Creek, the more I realized I wasn't witnessing a struggle between heroes and villains.

I was watching a family at war.

Each side believed its own version of the truth.

Each side could point to examples that supported its position.

Each side carried wounds the other either couldn't—or wouldn't—see.

I still didn't know who was right.

Truthfully, I wasn't even sure there was a single right answer anymore.

What I did know was this:

Cherry Creek wasn't just a sheep ranch.

It was a family trying to survive while slowly tearing itself apart.



The Calm Before the Storm

As Patty and I drove toward Ingomar, something caught my eye lying beside the road.

It was an enormous bull snake.

Someone had already run over it.

Even in death it was an impressive animal, nearly as thick as my forearm and beautifully marked.

I hated seeing such a magnificent snake wasted.

I pulled over, picked it up, and laid it in the bed of my pickup.

I planned on skinning it and preserving the hide.

When we reached the Jersey Lilly, Patty and I stopped at the wash basin on the porch to clean up before supper.

Patty washed first.

As always, I carried his dirty wash water outside and threw it into the dirt street before washing up myself.

It was simply the way things were done.

We had just sat down and were looking over the menu when Sivert and Janet walked in.

The two older boys were playing on the Jersey Lilly porch while Janet carried the youngest in her arms.

I kept reminding myself of something.

They're family.

No matter how strained things had become, Sivert was still my uncle.

Janet was still my aunt.

That thought kept running through my mind.

Almost immediately Janet asked,

“What time are Paul and Bernice getting here tomorrow?”

The question caught me completely by surprise.

How did they know my parents were coming?

Paul or Bernice must have called them.

“They’ll probably be here sometime tomorrow afternoon,” I answered.

Sivert looked at me.

“How long are they staying?”

“I really don’t know.”

We ate our supper with very little conversation.

Finally Sivert asked,

“Do I need to be up at Cherry Springs while Paul’s here?”

I shrugged.

“You’d have to ask Paul.”

“The only thing I know is he wants to see how the lambing barn is coming and to see the finished windbreak.”

For a few moments no one said anything.

Then Janet looked directly at me.

“I heard you tried to kill Jimmy’s dog.”

Her words hit me like a punch in the stomach.

“It was an accident,” I replied quietly.

“I wish Jimmy had kept Rover in the pickup.”

No one answered.

The conversation simply ended.

When supper was over, Sivert, Janet, and Patty walked outside.

Watching them leave, I couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow I had become the villain in a story I never intended to be part of.

The Rover accident already weighed heavily on me.

Janet’s comment made it feel even worse. Maybe that was her intention. I’ll never know.

That night, lying in bed at the Old House, one question kept coming back to me.

Why did Sivert and Janet always drive separate vehicles wherever they went?

No matter where they traveled…

…they never seemed to ride together.



The following morning I walked around the pickup Sivert had loaned me.

Only then did I realize how much it had changed since I'd first driven it away.

It was almost unrecognizable.

The body was covered with dried gumbo mud.

Blood stains streaked the bed and floor mats.

A long dent and several scratches ran down the cab where ladders had rubbed against it.

The hood bore fresh scratches from rifles being rested across it.

The tires were badly worn, including the spare.

Mechanically, it was overdue for an oil change and probably several other things I didn't yet know enough to recognize.

Back then I wasn't much of a mechanic.

I had inherited my father's approach to machinery.

Use it until something breaks.

Then figure out what happened.

Or replace it.

My appreciation for engines and taking care of vehicles would come much later in life.

Just as I finished looking over the pickup, another familiar vehicle pulled in behind me.



Uncle Merton.

He climbed out smiling.

He seemed happier than I had seen him in years.

By then he was spending much of his time in Three Forks with his wife, Audrey Kinchlow.

“Want to have breakfast?” he asked.

“I’d love to,” I replied.

“I only have one request.”

“No smoking while we eat.”

Merton laughed.

“I think I can manage that.”

Breakfast with Merton was always entertaining.

Conversation bounced from one subject to another like a flat rock skipping across a pond.

He asked questions.

Told stories.

Laughed.

Changed subjects before either one of us had finished the last one.

Eventually he mentioned that he planned to check on his trailer before heading back to Three Forks.

Then his mood became noticeably more serious.

“You know,” he said, “life got a whole lot better after I got away from that damn Janet.”

He leaned back in the booth.

“When a man marries a woman…”

“…he inherits a whole shit pot full of her problems.”

Then he looked directly at me.

“Families change.”

“Wives don’t always get along.”

“Pretty soon nobody trusts anybody anymore.”

He slowly shook his head.

“That’s what happened here.”

Then he grew unusually quiet.

For a long moment he simply stared out the window.

Finally he looked back at me as he lit a cigarette.

“Craig…”

“Don’t ever underestimate what one marriage can do to a family.”

“The woman you marry…”

“…or the woman your brother marries…”

“…can change the course of an entire family.”

He paused, making certain I was listening.

“Sometimes for the better.”

“But more often…”

“…not.”

At twenty years old, I thought Merton was simply talking about personality conflicts between in-laws.

Looking back now, I realize Merton was talking about something far deeper.

Merton had lived through the unraveling of the Mysse family. He and Sivert had once shared a relationship that seemed strong enough to withstand anything. But after Sivert married Janet, something changed. Merton believed Janet was the reason he eventually left Cherry Creek.

He had watched a relationship between two brothers that once seemed unbreakable slowly deteriorate. Resentment replaced trust. Divided loyalties took the place of family. What began between a few people eventually spread through the entire family until the conflict became bigger than the people who had started it.

Eventually, almost no one remembered how the conflict had begun. They only remembered who they were supposed to distrust.

At the time, I understood where Merton was coming from. What I didn't yet understand was how closely his experience would eventually mirror my own.

The years ahead would give those quiet words a meaning I could not yet see.

Trying to lighten the mood, I asked him the obvious question.

"How are you and Audrey getting along?"

Merton grinned.

"Oh, she thinks I drink too much."

Then he laughed.

"She'll get over it."

"After all…"

"She owns a bar."

Years later, Audrey didn't get over it.

Their marriage ended because Merton never overcame his alcoholism.

Looking back, I wish he had.

After breakfast Merton paid the bill with what he proudly called a "Ben Franklin"—a one-hundred-dollar bill.

He tipped his hat to nearly everyone in the Jersey Lilly, stopped by the old Bull Pen outhouse, climbed into his pickup, and headed back toward Three Forks.

I watched him disappear down the highway.



With my parents arriving later that afternoon, I wanted the Old House looking as neat as possible.

I swept the floors and put everything back exactly the way Bernice preferred it.

Then I remembered the bull snake lying in the bed of my pickup.

Following Julius's instructions, I found a long sheep hook that was just the right diameter for stretching the hide.

I wired the snake's head to a ceiling rafter, carefully skinned it, cleaned the tail, then pulled the hide inside out over the pole to dry.

I had just finished when I heard another vehicle pulling in.

Actually…

Three vehicles.

Paul and Bernice had arrived.

Behind them came Dr. Les White, our family dentist from Kalispell, driving his white Ford pickup.

Following close behind was Ernie Wells, one of Dad's friends from his coffee group.

Paul had invited both men to hunt on Cherry Creek while they stayed in Ingomar.

My first thought wasn't about hunting.

It was much simpler than that.

There aren't enough beds in the Old House for all these people.

After getting settled, we walked up to the Jersey Lilly for an early supper.

When we finished eating, Les White and Ernie Wells climbed back into their vehicles and headed out to explore the back roads toward Froze-to-Death and down toward Hysham.

Watching them drive away, I couldn't help wondering what the next few days were going to bring.

Something told me life on Cherry Creek was about to become even more interesting.

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Caught in the Middle

That evening, after Les White and Ernie Wells left to explore the back roads, Paul and Bernice turned their attention to me.

The questions began almost immediately.

“How much time has Sivert spent helping build the lambing shed?”

I hesitated.

Then I asked a question of my own.

“Was Sivert supposed to be helping?”

Paul’s face tightened, but he didn’t answer. His eyes shifted away from mine, just long enough for me to notice.

“So where was the construction crew Dean was supposed to bring?”

The silence stretched.

Paul seemed to be searching for a response that would move the conversation somewhere else. Before he could find one, I continued.

“There never was a crew.”

He looked back at me.

“It was just Dean, Julius, and me.”

The words settled between us. Paul’s expression hardened, but he still said nothing. That silence began to feel less like surprise and more like avoidance.

“Remember when you first sent me to Cherry Creek?” I asked. “I was supposed to watch the construction, not construct the building myself.”

Paul shifted in his chair.

I paused, watching him.

“And what about school?”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The room seemed to draw tighter around us. I had the uneasy feeling that each question was pulling at something Paul had already decided not to explain.

His jaw worked once.

I could almost hear the pressure building inside him. He wasn’t answering because he didn’t have an answer—or because the answer would lead somewhere neither of us wanted to go.

Finally, he exploded.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Why can’t you just answer a simple question?”

“No one wants to hear your damn questions!”

“You and that big damn mouth of yours…”

Bernice tried again, speaking more calmly.

“Craig… was my brother involved in building the lambing shed?”

This time I simply answered.

“No.”

“Sivert hasn’t been there once.”

The room went silent.

Then everything came apart.

Paul became furious.

Bernice looked at me with that familiar expression of disappointment—as though somehow I had failed her.

Then Paul asked the question I had already answered several times over the telephone.

“Why in the hell has this project taken so Goddamn long?”

“Why isn’t it finished?”

“What have you people been doing all this time?”

I had reached my limit. I tried to explain that we had rebuilt the corrals, had redone the entire windbreak, and straightened out the miscommunication after I started dealing directly with Dean about the log lambing barn. But Paul kept interrupting me, word after word, barely giving me a chance to finish a sentence.

Trying to remain respectful, I stood up. I just wanted to leave.

“I need to get back to Cherry Springs.”

“We’ve got roofing to finish first thing in the morning.”

Paul’s voice followed me toward the door.

“Answer the question!”

I kept walking.

I refused to answer.

Then came another outburst from Paul.

“Well, then how am I supposed to get to Cherry Springs?”

Without turning around I answered,

“Ride with your friend, Les… or Ernie.”

Bernice quietly added,

“We’re doing all of this for you and Gary.”

“For our family.”

I stopped for just a moment.

Part of me wanted to believe her.

In many ways, I probably still did.

Inside, however, I was burning.

Really?

Who’s actually doing the work?

I never said the words aloud… I should have.

I simply walked outside, climbed into my pickup, and drove away.

For several miles I never even realized I hadn’t turned on the headlights.

My mind was racing.

Somewhere during that lonely drive back to Cherry Springs, something finally became clear.

Paul and Bernice weren't trying to build a lambing barn.

They were fighting a family war.

The lambing barn had become one more move on a chessboard I hadn't even known existed.

And suddenly, I understood my place in it.

I was the pawn.

They had sent me to Cherry Creek with a simple assignment: observe the construction and report back. But somewhere along the way, the assignment had changed. I was no longer just watching. I was building, repairing, solving problems, and getting caught in the middle of disputes that had nothing to do with me.

I had become a piece they could move across the board whenever it suited them.

And the worst part was realizing how disposable I was.

If I got caught in the middle of the fight, they could simply move on to another piece.

But there was something else I was beginning to understand.

Paul and Bernice may have thought they were playing chess, but they didn't seem to understand the game. They were moving pieces without seeing the entire board.

Sivert and Janet were.

And if anyone had the stronger position, it was them.



By sunrise the next morning Dean and I were back on the roof.

The generator rattled away below us while Julius positioned sheets of corrugated steel so we could pull them into place.

Around ten o'clock Les White's white Ford pickup rolled into the corrals and parked next to my sheep wagon.

Paul and Ernie climbed out with him.

The first thing Paul did was pull Julius aside.

The two of them disappeared into my sheep wagon.

Whatever they discussed was apparently meant for no one else to hear.

When they finally came back out, Paul immediately started issuing orders.

"Get all your shit out of the front seat of the ranch pickup."

I looked at him.

"Why? What for?"

Les, Julius, and I were apparently going hunting in the Skunk Wagon.

Paul and Ernie intended to use the Cherry Creek pickup to hunt farther south.

I wasn't thrilled about the idea.

By then I had become surprisingly protective of that pickup.

More importantly, I looked over at Dean.

"The lambing barn is supposed to be the priority."

"If we all leave, Dean's here by himself. Everything comes to a standstill."

"Putting on the galvanized roof sheets is at least a three-man job."

For once, Les agreed with me.

After a little discussion with the others, Paul reluctantly gave in.

The compromise was simple.

Les, Julius, and I would hunt for no more than three hours.

Then we'd come back so Paul and Ernie could have their turn.

The three of us squeezed into the cab of the Skunk Wagon.

Within a minute Les wrinkled his nose.

"As politely as I can ask…"

"When's the last time either of you showered?"

I laughed.

"I showered the night before last."

"My clothes are another story."

Les rolled his window down.

“The body odor in here is absolutely overwhelming.”

It was late October.

The morning air was cold enough to make us wish the windows were closed.

Instead, all three of them stayed open.

About four miles north of Cherry Springs we topped a ridge.

Below us, nearly half a mile away, a band of pronghorn antelope grazed peacefully across the prairie.

Julius studied them through his binoculars.

Finally he pointed.

“Two really good bucks.”

Les looked through his scope for several minutes.

Finally he lowered the rifle.

“They’re too far.”

“I can barely see them.”

Julius smiled.

“Mind if I try?”

Les laughed.

“Go ahead.”

“You won’t see them any better than I can.”

Without the slightest hurry, Julius walked back to the Skunk Wagon and retrieved his Winchester .300 Magnum fitted with its six-power scope.

He returned, carefully folded an old blanket over a clump of sagebrush, settled in behind the rifle, and studied the distant antelope.

Nearly two minutes passed.

Then…

Boom.

A pause.

Another careful breath.

Boom.

Julius calmly stood up, blew across the end of the barrel as though blowing away imaginary smoke, looked over at Les, and gave him that familiar Festus wink.

“Les…”

“You’ve never seen two better rifle shots in your life.”

“And you never will.”

“I’m the one and only Julian N. Sebulsky.”

Les never even smiled.

Still looking through his scope, he said,

“I can’t see a thing.”

“Are you sure you hit anything?”

He even borrowed Julius’s rifle to look through the better scope.

Still nothing.

Julius only grinned.

“Come on.”

“I’ll show you.”

I drove the Skunk Wagon while Julius and Les walked across the prairie toward the antelope.

The entire way Les kept shaking his head.

“No way.”

“They’re too far.”

“Nobody could make those shots.”

Then we reached them.

The two bucks lay less than ten feet apart.

Perfectly matched.

Perfectly clean kills.

Like mirror images.

Les simply stood there staring.

“I don’t believe it.”

He looked back toward the ridge where we had been shooting.

Then back at the antelope.

Then at Julius.

Julius handed me his Buck knife, and I gave Les mine.

“Time to learn how to dress out your trophies.”

It quickly became obvious that Les had very little experience field-dressing big game.

Patiently, Julius walked him through every step, explaining how to save the cape properly for a shoulder mount.

I worked on the second buck while they talked.

Les couldn’t stop looking back toward the distant ridge.

“I still can’t believe those shots.”

“They’re nearly identical.”

“How many animals have you killed in your life, Julius?”

Julius smiled without answering directly.

“Oh…”

“A couple more than a few.”

Only then did I notice something.

A dark ring was forming around Julius’s right eye.

The recoil from his .300 Magnum had driven the scope into his eyebrow.

By evening he was wearing a beautiful black eye.

He would carry it for the next two weeks.

I never mentioned it.

After all…

Even the best rifleman I have ever known occasionally got a little too close to his scope.



Julius stuck an eagle feather in his Stetson. He waited for Dean to say something. Eventually, Dean spotted it. Not a word was spoken. Julius wore that feather for two or three days, waiting for Dean to notice him as the Chief of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. Dean never took the bait.

The Roof and the Rift

Les, Julius, and I were back at Cherry Springs less than an hour after leaving. The drive passed beneath a wide, pale October sky, with dust rising behind us and settling in a thin veil across the road. The truck rattled over the uneven ground, and the smell of dry earth, sage, and sun-warmed leather drifted through the cab.

As we drove toward the corrals, we climbed the hill that gave us a clear view of Cherry Springs. From there, I could see everything spread out below us—the log lambing barn, the corrals, and the sheep wagon sitting in the open prairie. The wind moved through the grass in long, rippling waves, while the log barn stood stark and still against the surrounding hills.

I expected to see the roof nearly finished.

Instead, as we came into Cherry Springs, I saw Dean, Paul, and Ernie standing together, talking. They were gathered near the log barn, their figures outlined against the weathered corrals and dusty ground. The truck rolled to a stop, and the sudden quiet made their conversation seem even more deliberate.

Not a single additional sheet of roofing had been installed.

Three able-bodied men had been there the entire time, yet the building hadn't advanced one bit.

I could feel my disappointment turning into frustration.

For nearly four months, I had watched every hour of daylight matter. Winter wasn't going to wait for family politics.

Neither was I.

I wanted to finish the barn. I wanted to finish my assignment. I wanted to get back to college and reclaim the life Paul and Bernice had taken me away from.

But there was something else bothering me.

I was a big part of this project. I had been there from the beginning. I had worked beside Julius and Dean, solved problems, hauled materials, rebuilt the corrals, redone the windbreak, and worked through the confusion surrounding the log lambing barn.

Yet once again, I found myself standing on the outside of a conversation about a project I was helping build.

Nobody told me what Paul, Dean, and Ernie had been discussing.

Nobody asked me what I thought.

They simply talked among themselves, as though I wasn't standing there.

That hurt more than I wanted to admit.

I kept those thoughts to myself. The last thing I wanted was another argument.

While the others discussed their plans for the afternoon, I carried Les's two magnificent antelope bucks to the tall loading chute at the south end of the corrals and hung them in the shade to cool.

Paul finally decided to use the Cherry Creek pickup instead of Les's. He was concerned that Les's pickup wasn't suited for the rocky gumbo roads with its highway tires.

For once, I thought Paul was probably making the right decision.

The plan was simple.

Paul, Les, and Ernie would spend the rest of the afternoon hunting south of Beer Bill's.

Dean, Julius, and I would stay behind and continue building the lambing shed.

As soon as they drove away, work resumed.

Julius fed the corrugated steel and fiberglass panels up to the roof while Dean and I aligned them, drilled the holes, and fastened them in place.

Neither Dean nor Julius mentioned what had been discussed privately with Paul earlier that morning.

Neither did I.

But I remember wondering why.

I had spent weeks working on this project. I was supposed to be observing the construction, yet I had become one of the people actually constructing it. I thought I had earned the right to know what was happening.

Instead, I was expected to work without being told what had been decided around me.

Only much later did Julius tell me how that conversation had ended.

His words have stayed with me ever since.

"There is a big difference between a bullshitter and a liar."

“Paul is a liar.”

“Bernice, Paul, and I still have some unsettled business… promises… that do not involve you.”

Julius rarely spoke harshly about anyone. When he did, **I knew he meant every word.**

At the time, I had no idea what business or promises he was talking about. I only knew that Julius seemed to know something I didn’t.

Those words troubled me for years.

Not because I wanted to believe Julius…
but because I didn’t want to believe he might be right.

By then, something inside me had already begun to change.

The trust I had placed in my mother and father was beginning to evaporate.

I didn’t fully understand it then, but looking back, Paul’s visit to Cherry Springs marked the beginning of a different relationship between us.

I still loved my father.

Nothing could change that.

He was still my father.

But for the first time in my life, I realized that loving someone and believing everything they told me were not the same thing.

That realization stayed with me for the rest of my life.

The Montana Education Association convention break was over.

Paul had driven Les and Ernie over much of the north pasture in the Cherry Creek pickup. According to Julius, they had “run out of bullets.”

Not a single animal had been harvested.

Julius couldn’t resist smiling.

“They never even ruffled the hair on a critter.”

Les, however, wasn’t disappointed in the least. He already had the two trophy antelope he had always dreamed of displaying in his dental office.

Before leaving, he thanked Julius over and over for making that possible.

Julius simply smiled.

“If anybody asks,” he told Les, “just tell them you shot them.”

“Nobody will know any different.”

“Besides…”

“We’ll probably never see each other again.”

It was such a Julius thing to say.



As everyone prepared to leave Ingomar, Ernie wandered over while I was working on the bull snake hide.

The skin had dried beautifully.

Its gold, brown, and black pattern shimmered in the autumn sunlight as I carefully split it down the center with my knife.

Ernie admired it for several minutes.

Finally he asked,

“What do you want for it?”

I smiled.

“Nothing.”

“Take it.”

“Just let me show you how to tan it.”

He thanked me repeatedly as I rolled the hide up for him to take home.

Watching him leave with something I had made from a snake most people would have driven past made me unexpectedly happy.



It was Sunday, October 24, 1971.

By late afternoon my parents, Les, and Ernie had all headed home.

The ranch suddenly became quiet again.

No more questions.

No more arguments.

No more family politics.

Only the three of us remained.

Dean.

Julius.

And me.

For the next four days, from sunrise until sunset, we worked side by side until the roof of the log lambing shed was finally completed.

With every sheet of steel we fastened into place, I could feel my time at Cherry Springs drawing to a close.

The roof was finally coming together.

Ironically, my family wasn't.

For the first time in months, finishing the job finally seemed within reach.

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Twenty-One

October 26, 1971.

It was my twenty-first birthday.

I told no one.

I was finally old enough to drink legally in the state of Montana.

The last thing I wanted was Julius celebrating by producing another jar of his Tipple or that infamous chokecherry wine.

One experience with Julius's homemade liquor had been more than enough.

To this day, I'm not entirely convinced I didn't lose a few brain cells the first time I drank it.

So I kept my birthday to myself.

Late that evening, sitting alone in my sheep wagon before climbing into bed, I quietly wished myself a happy birthday.

Then I remembered something that made me smile.

My driver's license expired the very next day.

Turning twenty-one meant far more to me than simply becoming old enough to buy a drink.

Somewhere during those four months on Cherry Creek, childhood had quietly slipped away.

I no longer looked to my parents for every answer.

I no longer accepted every explanation simply because it came from them.

For the first time in my life, I understood that the person responsible for my future was me.

That realization was both frightening and strangely liberating.

There were still countless paths my life could take.

Some would prove wise.

Others would undoubtedly prove foolish.

But I wanted those choices to belong to me.

I wrote these words before bed…

“One of the hardest things that I have come to realize at Cherry Creek is that I no longer feel believed, respected or supported by Mom, Dad, Uncle Sivert, or Aunt Janet. I came to Cherry Springs because of family. I will have kept my promise to my family. When Julius and I have finished the log lambing barn, I have done everything Paul and Bernice had asked of me—and more. Yet somehow, none of what I have done at Cherry Creek seems to matter to either of them.

For the first time in my life, I feel something I can not name. It isn’t anger. It isn’t grief. It isn’t heartbreak. It is a strange emptiness, unlike anything I have ever experienced. I do not understand why keeping my word, working as hard as I could, and doing everything I had promised still wasn’t enough. I have never felt so alone in this world being on Cherry Creek.”

Looking back today, I can still feel the hurt behind those words. They carried the weight of the promises that had been made to me

at both Cherry Creek Sheep Company and Milam Basin Creek Ranch.

But those words were not written by a man reflecting on his life fifty years later. They were written by a twenty-one-year-old son who was slowly realizing that his parents were keeping him in the dark while making decisions about his future.

At twenty-one, I believed that giving my word meant something. I believed that if I made a promise, I kept it—no matter how difficult keeping it became. More than fifty years later, I still believe the same thing. My word meant as much to me then as it does now.

The difference is that, at seventy-six, I understood something the twenty-one-year-old version of me could not yet see: keeping my word could not make other people keep theirs.



Dean's plan was straightforward.

On October 28 he intended to leave Cherry Springs, return to Thompson Falls, build the sliding barn doors and custom hardware, then come back within a week or two to finish the lambing shed.

He promised us exactly that.

Once the doors were installed, the project would finally be complete.

Then I could leave Cherry Creek.

I could return to Bigfork.

More importantly, I could begin Winter Quarter at the University of Montana.

I couldn't wait.

I was ready to leave what had become, in my mind, the biggest nut house on the Montana prairie.

All I had to do was finish the job.

I had no idea that the following evening would leave me questioning what I believed was possible.

By October 27 the three of us had finally completed the roof.

Every sheet of steel had been installed.

Every skylight panel was in place.

Every bolt had been tightened.

The wind bracing was finished.

For the first time, the log lambing barn looked complete, except for the sliding doors.

That afternoon Dean carefully measured each doorway so he could build perfectly fitted sliding doors back in Thompson Falls.

As evening settled across Cherry Springs, the three of us sat down to supper.

Dean looked tired but satisfied.

Over thick T-bone steaks he made a comment I have never forgotten.

“I hope I never have to see or speak to Paul Milam ever again.”

He shook his head.

“After that conversation I had with him in your sheep wagon…”

“…I’d believe Julius before I’ll believe Paul.”

Dean’s words hurt.

They also stunned me.

Dean admitted he felt sorry for Julius and me.

The two of us had been trapped in the middle of a family war we neither started nor fully understood.

By then I realized the lambing barn had never really been the story.

It had simply become the stage upon which a much larger family drama had been playing out.

The real struggle was about ownership.

Control.

Loyalty.

Trust.

And relationships that, once broken, would never fully heal.

Looking back now, I realize every branch of my family carried wounds from those years.

Many of them never recovered.

That evening…

The impossible happened.

None of the three of us ever spoke about it again.

Not Dean.

Not Julius.

Not me.

Even now, more than fifty years later, I can still picture every detail as though it happened yesterday.

Some experiences change the way you look at the world.

This was one of them.

But that story deserves a chapter of its own.



The following morning, October 28, dawned clear and beautiful.

Dean loaded his tools into the cab of his semi.

Once again he promised he'd return within two weeks with the completed doors and hardware.

Being twenty-one years old and still trusting people far more than I should have…

I believed him. Of course.

He climbed into the truck.

The diesel engine came to life.

Then the familiar blast of the air horn echoed across Cherry Springs.

As the semi disappeared into a cloud of dust heading west, Julius cupped his hands and shouted,

“Stay out of the hoosegow!”

Dean leaned his arm out the driver’s window, extended a single finger toward Julius, and yelled back,

“I hope you two live through another day in this hell hole!”

Then, after a brief pause, he added,

“And to hell with whatever we saw in the sky last night!”

Julius burst into laughter.

Watching them exchange insults, I realized they had developed something neither of them would probably admit.

A friendship.



The visit from my parents continued to weigh heavily on my mind long after they had returned to Bigfork.

The only real conversation we had shared during their visit had felt less like a discussion, more like an interrogation.

No matter how honestly I answered their questions, my answers never seemed to matter.

There was no room for my opinions.

No room for my own questions.

Only theirs.

My father had called me a liar.

That visit taught me something I had never understood before.

There was no way to win those conversations.

No matter how calmly or respectfully I spoke, I would lose every time.

Paul's temper could ignite without warning.

By then, I no longer felt respected as either his son or as a partner in Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

Trying to avoid provoking Paul felt like walking through an endless minefield.

Eventually I stopped trying to understand how to have meaningful conversations with either of my parents.

The truth is…

I spent years trying.

I never figured it out.

Years later I learned something else that surprised me.

While everyone else was working at Cherry Springs, Bernice spent two of those afternoons meeting privately with Sivert at the Jersey Lilly.

What they discussed was never shared with me.

Neither of them ever mentioned those conversations.

Some secrets remained buried long after the dust of Cherry Creek settled.

Others would remain buried for more than fifty years.

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A mile north of Cherry Creek Headquarters looking North East from the county road.

Chapter 6

November 1971

The Fall Barbecue
Part One – Preparing the Feast

November arrived with the log lambing barn standing nearly complete.

Whether I had just turned twenty-one or not no longer seemed very important.

Dean had returned to Thompson Falls to build the sliding barn doors and custom hardware, leaving Julius and me with another assignment.

Janet's annual Fall Barbecue.

It was one of the large parties Paul and Bernice often complained Sivert and Janet were paying for with Cherry Creek Sheep Company money.

About a month earlier, Janet had made it clear that Julius and I would be helping with the barbecue. It hadn't really been a request. She had told me that if we refused, we could pack our things and leave the ranch that very day.

So I intended to keep my word.

Besides, I was curious.

Until then I had never seen Cherry Creek's ranching neighbors gather in one place.

According to Julius, two one-hundred-pound wether lambs would be just about right. Before the guests arrived, we needed to build heavy steel spits, dig a roasting pit, gather enough firewood to last through the night, and somehow rig a motor that would slowly turn the lambs over a bed of glowing coals.

“The secret,” Julius explained, “is to crisp them to perfection.”

Like so many things Julius attempted, he already had the entire project figured out in his head.

Our first stop was Julius’s place in Ingomar.

Inside his garage, sparks flew as he welded together two heavy spits from reinforcing rod. Like nearly everything Julius owned, the welder itself had an interesting story.

“I built it myself,” he said proudly.

“Out of a big electrical coil I found years ago.”

I smiled.

“Where’d you find the coil?”

Julius stopped for a moment and scratched his head.

“I honestly don’t remember.”

Whether he truly couldn’t remember or simply preferred not to say, I never knew.

While he continued welding, I wandered around the garage.

It looked more like a museum than a workshop.

Every wall was lined with tools, machinery, spare parts, engines, welding rods, old railroad equipment, and enough odds and ends to rebuild almost anything a person could imagine.

Parked in one corner sat a late-1950s Ford delivery wagon.

Beside it rested a beautifully preserved 1946 Indian motorcycle.

Nothing seemed to have ever been thrown away.

Against one wall stood two enormous chest freezers.

Both were packed full of carefully wrapped meat.

Some of the packages looked suspiciously familiar.

Nearby sat several gasoline cans.

One immediately caught my attention.

Painted across its side in black letters was a single name.

CAMERON

Donald John's missing gas can.

So Julius really had taken it.

I wasn't shocked.

But I was disappointed.

Donald had been telling the truth.

Julius noticed where I was looking.

Rather than explaining himself, he simply smiled.

“Come here.”

“I want to show you something.”

Inside his trailer sat his HAM amateur radio, which I briefly saw a while back.

He proudly pointed out the transmitter, receiver, microphones, antennas, and stacks of call books.

For nearly twenty minutes he told me about friends he talked with all over the world.

Australia.

England.

Canada.

New Zealand.

South Africa.

Anywhere someone spoke English, Julius seemed to know another amateur radio operator.

For a man living alone on one of the loneliest ranches in eastern Montana, that radio connected him to a world far beyond the prairie.

Outside the trailer stood an enormous stack of seasoned cottonwood.

“I’ll never burn all of that,” Julius said.

“I converted my little trailer over to an oil stove.”

We loaded every stick into the bed of my pickup until the springs sagged beneath the weight.

It would become fuel for the barbecue fire.

As we headed back toward Cherry Creek, I couldn't stop thinking about Donald's gas can and the freezers full of meat.

Finally, I asked the question that had been bothering me.

"Julius…"

"Why do you have so much Cherry Creek meat?"

He didn't hesitate.

"It isn't for me."

"It's for people who need it."

Then he began naming them.

"Fred."

"Shep."

"My railroad friends in Forsyth and Harlo."

"A widow over by Hysham."

"By Christmas every bit of it will be gone."

"I guarantee I won't eat a bite of it."

He spoke so matter-of-factly that I almost forgot what we were discussing.

There was no doubt in my mind that Julius had taken the meat.

There was also no doubt he intended to give every pound away.

The contradiction puzzled me.

He wasn't stealing to make money.

He wasn't even stealing for himself.

In his own peculiar way, Julius seemed convinced he was simply helping people.

Whether that made what he was doing right or wrong, I honestly didn't know.

The farther I got to know Julius, the harder he became to judge.

He could be one of the most generous men I had ever met.

He could also be one of the most exasperating.

Sometimes…

He managed to be both on the very same day.

By late afternoon my pickup was loaded with cottonwood, the steel spits were finished, and Julius was satisfied we had enough firewood for the long night ahead.

"We've still got a lot to do," he said.

"We need two good wethers."

Then he smiled.

"And maybe…"

“If we’re lucky…”

“…we’ll find something else before the day’s over.”



“The critter is crisped to perfection”
Julius is happy with himself… he did good!

The Fall Barbecue
Part Two – Learning from Julius

Our next stop was the home ranch on the Porcupine.

Patty Ryan pointed out a band of wether lambs grazing near the stockades.

Before we reached them, however, Julius suddenly grabbed my arm and nearly shouted,

“A coyote!”

“A coyote!”

“Do you see it?”

I looked where he was pointing.

Sure enough, a big prairie coyote stood broadside near the edge of the Big Porcupine Creek Road, its winter coat already beginning to thicken into a beautiful ball of gray and tan fur.

“This is your chance to prove yourself,” Julius said excitedly.

“Get the .243!”

I slipped my Winchester Model 70 from the passenger seat and laid my down jacket across the hood of the pickup for a rest.

The coyote stood about eighty-five or ninety yards away.

A steady breeze swept across the prairie, tugging at the loose sleeve of my jacket.

I settled the crosshairs just behind the shoulder and gently squeezed the trigger.

The rifle cracked.

The coyote collapsed where it had been standing.

The gust of wind that followed my shot created an entirely different problem.

Part of my beautiful down jacket had blown in front of the muzzle just as the rifle fired.

The bullet burned two perfectly round holes through the front of my nearly new coat.

Later I repaired them with duct tape to keep the down from working its way out.

At that particular moment, however, I hardly noticed.

Julius was grinning from ear to ear.

“He never felt a thing!”

Then he slapped me on the shoulder.

“Damn, I’m proud of you!”

“You’re a natural!”

Coming from Julius, those words meant more to me than I probably let him know.

He had spent a few months teaching me how to shoot.

Now, for the first time, I felt as though I had earned his approval.

“Leave him where he is,” Julius said.

“We’ll let him cool and if he has ticks they will drop off and leave.”

“He’ll skin easier later.”

With that, we continued toward the stockades.



Patty had already separated a group of wether lambs for us.

Without hesitation Julius selected two heavy animals, then dispatched and bled them with the practiced efficiency of a man who had done the job hundreds of times before.

The remaining wethers crowded together quietly, watching every movement.

Together we carried the lambs into Sivert’s Quonset and hung them on the heavy steel hooks Julius had welded that morning.

The cool November days—and even colder nights—would keep the meat in perfect condition until the barbecue.

Only then did Julius remind me about the coyote.

“Time to skin your critter.”

Back where it had fallen, the hide had cooled just as Julius predicted.

He handed me his Buck knife.

“I keep mine sharper than yours.”

“You do this one.”

I knelt beside the animal while Julius stood over me, watching every cut.

Patiently he talked me through the process.

“Easy…”

“Don’t rush.”

“Let the hide tell you where it wants to come apart.”

For nearly an hour he corrected my hand position, showed me where to pull instead of cut, and explained how to avoid nicking the fur.

By the time I reached the tail, I realized something.

For the first time, I was actually skinning a coyote for its fur instead of simply shooting one and leaving it.

When I finished, Julius carefully examined every inch of the hide.

He looked over the shoulders.

The belly.

The legs.

The face.

Finally he smiled.

“Perfect.”

“The fur buyers won’t deduct a penny. I guarantee you will get top dollar for this hide!”

Coming from Julius, there was no higher compliment.

We stretched the hide onto drying boards and leaned it against the wall inside the Quonset.

Another lesson learned.

Another skill I never imagined I would someday use.

As we walked back toward the pickup, Julius looked over at me with that familiar grin.

“You know…”

“I think there’s hope for you after all.”

I laughed.

“I was beginning to wonder.”

“So was I,” Julius answered.

Then he burst into laughter.

By then I knew exactly what was coming.

Whenever Julius laughed like that…

…another adventure usually wasn’t very far behind.



The Fall Barbecue
Part Three – Building the Barbecue

With the lambs hanging safely inside the Quonset, I assumed our work was finished for the day.

I was wrong.

Julius had another problem to solve.

“We need bricks,” he announced.

“Lots of bricks.”

I asked him where he planned to find them.

He smiled as though the answer should have been obvious.

“I know just the place.”

One thing I had learned about Julius was that he lived by a philosophy all his own.

He saw no reason to take something until he actually needed it.

Once it had a purpose…

…it became useful.

Useful things, in Julius’s mind, should never be wasted.

Whether everyone else agreed with that reasoning was another matter entirely.

He directed me down a maze of little-used prairie roads until we reached the remains of an abandoned homestead.

Time had erased almost everything.

The house had collapsed years before.

The roof was gone.

The windows had long since disappeared.

Only the old brick chimney still stood against the Montana sky.

“There they are,” Julius said with satisfaction.

“Just what we need.”

For the next half hour we carefully dismantled the chimney, loading only the number of bricks Julius figured we’d need for the barbecue pit.

He refused to take a single extra brick.

“Never haul more than you can use,” he said.

“It just means hauling it twice.”

Back at Cherry Springs another problem remained.

We still needed a way to slowly rotate the two one hundred pound roasting lambs over a bed of hot coals.

Julius spotted an old discarded clothes dryer sitting among the junk near the Quonset.

“Perfect.”

Within minutes he had me taking it apart.

Soon the electric motor lay on the ground beside us.

He studied it for a moment.

“It turns too fast.”

Then he disappeared into the Skunk Wagon.

By now I had learned not to ask questions.

Eventually he emerged carrying a collection of gears, pulleys, chain, and odds and ends that only Julius could somehow fit together.

Within another hour he had transformed an ordinary clothes dryer motor into a slow-turning rotisserie drive.

The spits revolved almost effortlessly.

He folded his arms across his chest and admired his handiwork.

“There.”

“That’ll crisp ’em just right.”

Wednesday morning we built the roasting pit.

Using the seasoned cottonwood we had hauled from Julius’s place, we started a large fire that burned nearly all day.

I assumed we were simply getting a head start.

Julius explained otherwise.

“You’ve got to heat the ground first.”

“It dries the soil underneath.”

“Then tomorrow the coals stay hotter and burn more evenly.”

I had never heard such a thing before.

Knowing Julius, I suspected he had learned it through years of trial and error.

By late afternoon there wasn't much left to do.

Julius looked toward the rimrocks overlooking the Big Porcupine.

"Want to hunt arrowheads?"

That was another question I never had to think about.

"I'd love to."

The autumn afternoon was beautiful.

The cottonwoods along the creek had turned brilliant shades of yellow and gold. With each cool prairie breeze, they released another shower of leaves that drifted softly to the ground. Beneath a cloudless Montana sky, the prairie grasses shimmered in the autumn light, and I couldn't help but feel that my own time on Cherry Creek was beginning to slip away with the season.

We wandered slowly across the sandstone ridges overlooking the Porcupine Creek valley below.

Julius made it look easy.

He seemed able to spot arrowheads where I saw only sand and gumbo.

Within minutes he had found four or five beautiful points.

I, on the other hand, found mostly flakes of Miles City siltstone, pieces of Yellowstone obsidian, and several broken spear points.

Then, almost hidden among the chips of stone, I noticed something different.

A tiny piece of pottery.

I carefully picked it up.

It wasn't much to look at.

Just a small fragment shaped by hands that had lived on those rimrocks centuries before.

To me, it was priceless.

Afterwards we went home to Cherry Springs for the night.

Back at my sheep wagon I placed the pottery piece beside the arrowheads I had already collected.

More than fifty years later, I still have that little piece of pottery.

It reminds me that long before sheep ranches, fences, and county roads, other people had stood on those same bluffs looking across the Big Porcupine Valley.

As evening settled over Cherry Springs, we loaded the remaining scrap logs from the lambing barn into my pickup.

They would become the first fuel beneath the roasting pit.

Back at camp, I fed Jack, my pet jackrabbit.

By then Jack had become surprisingly round from spending the summer eating lamb pellets around the corrals.

Julius watched him nibbling contentedly and laughed.

“He’s going to make one coyote one fine meal someday.”

Then, as though another idea had just entered his mind, he looked over at me.

“You know…”

“We ought to put in a trapline this winter.”

“We could make some good money.”

Before I could answer, he had another plan.

“And next summer…”

“…you ought to go with Walter and me to Great Slave Lake.”

I laughed.

“One adventure at a time.”

Dean had promised he’d be back within a week or two with the completed barn doors.

It was already the first week of November.

Surely the log lambing barn would soon be finished.

Surely my time on Cherry Creek was finally drawing to a close.

As darkness settled over the prairie, Julius and I fed another armload of cottonwood into the fire by my sheep wagon.

The flames rose high into the cold November air while Julius continued talking about trapping, Canada, old friends, and adventures that always seemed to lie just beyond the next horizon.

The Fall Barbecue
Part Four – The Gathering

Friday, November 5, 1971, finally arrived.

The annual Cherry Creek Fall Barbecue had become something of a local tradition, bringing together neighbors and friends from Yellowstone, Rosebud, and Garfield Counties. For years I had heard many of their names mentioned in conversations about the ranch, but they were simply names to me. I had never met most of them. This would be my first opportunity to put faces with those names and see everyone gathered together in one place.

Before daylight, Julius and I arrived from Cherry Springs to uncover the bed of glowing coals we had built the day before.

We added a quantity of cottonwood, let it burn into hot coals…

The roasting pit was ready.

Together we carried the two dressed wethers from the Quonset, slid the heavy steel spits through them, and carefully balanced each animal on its rod.

Julius stepped back, studying them from every angle.

“Perfect.”

He nodded with satisfaction.

“They’ll crisp just fine.”

The homemade rotisserie motor quietly came to life, slowly turning the lambs over the glowing coals.

The smell of roasting lamb soon drifted across the Porcupine Creek Valley.

It would linger there for the rest of the day.

By midmorning Janet returned from Forsyth with her brown Suburban loaded to the roof.

Cases of beer.

Boxes of liquor.

Wine.

Soft drinks.

And enough bags of ice to fill a large galvanized stock tank.

Julius and I unloaded everything while Janet hurried inside to coordinate the rest of the preparations.

Several neighboring women had already arrived to help.

A catering crew from Billings kept busy preparing salads, baked beans, desserts, and all the side dishes that would accompany the roasted lamb. They also erected a large tarp over the backyard to provide shade for the guests who arrived early. Around each support pole they wrapped strings of lights, transforming the backyard into a welcoming place where neighbors and friends could visit long after darkness settled over the Cherry Creek headquarters.

Julius and I had only one responsibility.

Keep the fire right.

Keep the lambs turning.

Keep them crisping.

Every now and then Julius would step over to the pit, study the color of the skins, rearrange a few coals with a shovel, and quietly nod to himself.

So far…

Everything was going exactly as he had planned.

By early afternoon the first vehicles began rolling into Sivert and Janet's Cherry Creek headquarters.

One pickup.

One suburban.

Then another and another.

Soon dust clouds stretched across the prairie from every direction on the county road.

Neighbors who had spent much of the year scattered across the ranches of Yellowstone, Rosebud, and Garfield Counties began arriving early that afternoon. For many of them, the Cherry Creek Fall Barbecue was an annual tradition—a chance to renew friendships, exchange stories, and visit with one another before winter and the isolation of ranch life once again settled over the eastern Montana prairie.

Julius and I remained at the roasting pit, tending the fire and slowly turning the lambs while watching the activity around us. Guests were beginning to arrive, and the quiet home ranch

gradually came alive with pickups, laughter, and conversation. Just before the crowd began to gather, Sivert walked over.

“I need to run into Forsyth,” he said. “Janet needs a few more things for the party.”

Julius and I smiled and gave him a thumbs-up as he headed down the Ingomar Road toward Vananda.

The first guests began arriving almost as Sivert disappeared down the road.

“This is the one party you absolutely don’t want to miss,” one couple remarked as they stopped beside our roasting pit before walking toward the house.

Before long the familiar names I had heard for years finally became faces. Swede Slazenger and his wife from Las Vegas arrived, followed by Artie Hagen, Bobby Olsen, the Brooks family, the Gaults, Walt Secrest and his family, and many others. Pickup after pickup rolled into the yard throughout the afternoon. By my best estimate, at least fifty people attended—perhaps as many as sixty-five.

One after another they parked around the main house and the Janknits building, greeted one another with handshakes and hugs, laughed, renewed old friendships, and eventually wandered over to the roasting pit to admire Julius’s handiwork. As the aroma of the crisping lamb drifted across the ranch yard, it seemed everyone wanted to stop, visit for a moment, and ask Julius how he managed to make it smell so good.

I had expected perhaps thirty people.

That was what Janet had originally told me.

Instead, vehicle after vehicle continued arriving until I estimated there were at least fifty guests.

Perhaps sixty-five with children.

Fortunately, Julius had chosen two large wethers.

There would be plenty of meat.

There was, however, one problem neither of us had anticipated.

Dust.

Every pickup and ranch truck that pulled into Cherry Springs Headquarters covered the roasting lambs with another fine layer of prairie gumbo.

At first Julius ignored it.

“Extra minerals,” he joked.

After another dozen vehicles arrived, even he admitted we had a problem.

Without saying a word, he walked over to the galvanized stock tank filled with ice.

I assumed he was getting himself a cold beer.

Instead, he opened one bottle and slowly poured it over the roasting lamb.

Foam hissed across the hot flesh before dripping into the coals.

A cloud of fragrant steam immediately rose into the cool November air.

Then he repeated the process with the second lamb.

The beer washed away the dust while adding a rich aroma none of us expected.

People standing nearby lifted their heads and smiled.

“That smells wonderful.”

“Heavenly.”

“I’ve never smelled anything like it.”

Julius looked over at me and grinned.

“I told you we’d crisp ’em.”

By early evening the lambs had reached a beautiful deep golden brown.

Julius nodded.

“They’re ready.”

Working together, we lifted the spits from the pit and carried the lambs one by one to the carving table.

With practiced hands Julius carved while I transferred the meat onto large serving platters.

Within minutes the line began forming.

Before long, nearly everyone at Cherry Creek was eating, laughing, and talking at once. Children ran through the corrals at Patty Ryan’s while Patty sat outside in a chair, smiling as he watched them play.

Old friends swapped stories. Neighbors compared cattle prices, debated the best sheep breeds, talked about the upcoming hunting seasons, and speculated about the weather the coming winter might bring.

Standing there, watching everyone visit, I realized I was witnessing a side of ranch life I had never experienced before. For one evening, ranching families from across the region—even those who had traveled long distances—came together, and the hardships of ranch life seemed to fade into the background. People simply enjoyed one another's company.

As I watched, I couldn't help but wonder whether the family dynamics might have been different if Paul and Bernice had been there. Were they invited, or had the rift between them and Sivert and Janet already grown too deep?

Not long after supper, Janet came over and asked if I would step inside the house for a few minutes.

"I'd like you to meet some friends."

I followed her inside.

Janet proudly introduced me to several guests I hadn't met before, people who were obviously important to her. She told each of them that Julius and I had spent the past few months repairing the Cherry Springs corrals and building a new windbreak for the coming spring lambing season, and that we had also built the new lambing barn.

We exchanged handshakes and a few polite words.

Within minutes, Janet smiled.

"That'll be all."

“You’d better get back to the barbecue.”

I thanked everyone and quietly stepped back outside.

As I walked toward the roasting pit, I wasn’t offended, but I was thoughtful. Janet had been proud to introduce me and to recognize the work Julius and I had done. Yet once the introductions were over, I was no longer part of the gathering inside.

For the first time, I understood something I had never fully appreciated before. On a ranch, a hired hand could be respected, trusted, and even admired for his work, while still remaining outside the circle of family and close friends. It wasn’t meant to be unkind. It was simply the way things were.

Still…

The evening wasn’t over.

Before long something happened that reminded me, once again, that nothing at Cherry Creek was ever quite as simple as it first appeared.



The Fall Barbecue
Part Five – Smoke Screens

When I stepped back outside, I noticed Sivert driving slowly down the ranch entry road. Then I lost sight of him.

A little while later he drove back into the yard from the direction of Patty Ryan's and parked near the Quonset.

His hands were empty as he came toward Julius and I, standing at the barbecue pit.

I walked over to Julius.

"Do you think we need to help unload whatever Sivert bought?"

Julius looked at me and smiled.

"No."

"Smoke screen."

I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"He didn't go to town for supplies."

"He went to buy himself a brand-new Suburban."

Then Julius pointed toward the Quonset.

"It's parked behind the building."

"The maroon one."

"The blue one had too many dents."

I immediately thought of my camera.

For months I had been photographing improvements, machinery, buildings, and equipment around the Cherry Creek headquarters. That had been one of the reasons Paul and Bernice had sent me to eastern Montana in the first place.

Curious, I quietly walked behind the Quonset.

There it sat.

A brand-new maroon Chevrolet Suburban.

It was so new the factory sticker was still attached to one of the side windows.

The temporary registration hadn't even been installed yet.

I hurried back to my pickup and reached for my camera.

Just as I was about to take the first photograph, Janet appeared behind me.

She didn't raise her voice.

She didn't have to.

Her expression alone stopped me.

"Our help is no longer needed," she said.

"You and Julius can go back to Cherry Springs."

"Now!"

For a moment neither of us spoke.

Then she stepped a little closer.

“You think you know what you saw the day you drove past Beer Bill’s place.”

“It wasn’t what you think.”

“If you don’t understand that…”

“…your time on our ranch is over.”

Those were her exact words.

I wrote them in my journal that very night.

Until that moment I hadn’t believed either Janet or Mexican Pete had seen me that afternoon.

Apparently they had.

I quietly put my camera away.

Without another word Julius and I climbed into my pickup and headed back toward Cherry Springs.

The prairie was almost dark now.

Neither of us said very much.

As the headlights followed the winding county road, one image kept returning no matter how hard I tried to push it from my mind.

That afternoon beside Beer Bill’s place.

Janet.

Mexican Pete.

A deeply private moment I never should have witnessed.

Janet was right about one thing.

It wasn't something I wanted to remember.

But memory doesn't ask permission.

My last thought about the subject was: "Would the image burned into my mind that Fall sunlit prairie day of two amorous individuals embracing each other's pale white butts, passionately kissing… ever go away?" Nope, it never has!

Some images become part of you whether you welcome them or not.

More than fifty years have passed since that autumn day on Cherry Creek.

I can still see it as clearly as I did then.

Janet was my aunt.

That simple fact made the memory all the more difficult to understand.

As we drove the last few miles toward Cherry Springs, I found myself thinking about everything that had happened during the previous four months.

I had come to eastern Montana believing I was helping build a log lambing barn.

On our way to Cherry Springs Julius tells me, "What the 'F...' did you do to piss your Aunt off?… Boy!... Was she mad!… Sivert got

caught with his hand in the cookie jar... didn't he? The whole thing stinks. What did you do to have Janet threaten you like that?"

I told Julius everything about seeing Janet and Mexican Pete together near Beer Bill's and about trying to photograph Sivert's brand-new Suburban.

Julius listened and then said, "That's complete bullshit. Everyone who works on Cherry Creek has been talking about Janet's little tipi-crawling adventures for years. Pete isn't the only one."

Then Julius surprised me. "I've got enough money. Let's buy a part of this chicken-shit operation ourselves. You and me. We could run it."

I just stared at him. Julius had money? Enough to buy part of Cherry Creek? Where had it come from? And was what he had just told me about Janet really true? My mind was spinning.

Instead, I found myself in the middle of a family struggling over trust, ownership, and control.

The farther I looked beneath the surface, the more complicated everything became.

One thing, however, had become perfectly clear.

Nothing at Cherry Creek was ever as simple as it first appeared.



The Missing Steers

Julius and I left the barbecue pit exactly as it was and headed back to Cherry Springs.

I didn't want to think about Janet anymore. I didn't know what to think about any of it. Did Sivert know what was going on? Did it even matter to me anymore?

Then Julius's statement kept coming back to me.

I've got enough money.

If Julius really had enough money to buy part of Cherry Creek, why was he working hard labor for Sivert?

Why was he working for Bernice and Paul?

And what did Julius mean when he said the two of us could buy the operation and run it together?

The thought of Julius and me running a ranch together was almost impossible to imagine. I knew we could work. I knew we could manage livestock. We had spent months working side by side, and there wasn't much either of us was afraid to tackle.

But did I really want that life?

I wasn't sure I wanted to spend the next several years working from daylight to dark, being outside in every kind of weather, and dealing with Julius and all his antics. The work never seemed to end. There was always another fence to fix, another animal to move, another piece of equipment that needed attention, another problem waiting somewhere out on the prairie.

I had been in eastern Montana for months, and I was beginning to wonder who would willingly choose this life—and why?

I knew Sivert and Janet weren't working this hard!

Then I thought about Granddad Mysse.

He had spent years walking behind his bands of sheep, moving them across eastern Montana from Pompey's Pillar toward Jordan and then back to Pompey's Pillar to winter on beet tops. What kind of life was that? Living for months at a time on the back of a saddle horse, exposed to the heat, cold, wind, rain, and snow. Eventually, the sheep wagon must have seemed like a palace compared with sleeping out in the open.

Then the cattlemen began fencing off the open prairie.

Granddad adapted.

During the Great Depression, he began buying land for **pennies an acre**. Year after year, through hard work, trading, and determination, he continued to build his holdings.

He eventually assembled approximately 432 sections, half sections, quarter sections, and smaller parcels of land into one vast, contiguous ranch. It was no simple undertaking. Granddad had to trade land section by section, acre by acre, purchase additional properties, and exchange parcels with other landowners to bring the pieces together and create the ranch.

By 1971, when I saw it, he had created an enormous, largely connected expanse of land that seemed to stretch forever across eastern Montana.

Granddad Mysse had built what eventually became **the second-largest sheep ranch in Montana—the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.**

What an accomplishment.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized something.

I definitely was not my grandfather.

I respected what he had accomplished. I admired it. But I wasn't sure I wanted to spend my life doing it.

The weather alone seemed to change by the hour. One minute it could be hot enough to make you sweat. The next, a cold wind would sweep across the prairie and leave you freezing.

Maybe I could do this life. I just wasn't sure I wanted to.

I was physically exhausted.

More than that, I was mentally burned out.

I had come to Cherry Creek thinking I was helping build a log lambing barn. Instead, I had spent months caught in the middle of family arguments, accusations, secrets, broken promises, and problems I didn't fully understand.

Surely my life was meant to be more than this.

I remembered something Julius had once told me:

"Just remember, you can take an Eastern Montana woman to the West Side mountains of Montana, but a West Side woman will never live in Eastern Montana…"

At the time, I had laughed.

But sitting beside Julius in the pickup, I began to understand what he meant.

I wanted to get married. I wanted children. I had always pictured myself with a family of my own—at least two boys and two girls, just like Granddad had.

But if I chose this life, where would I ever meet the girl who would want to live it with me?

Eastern Montana wasn't exactly overflowing with young women looking for a twenty-one-year-old ranch hand who worked from daylight to dark, lived in a sheep wagon, and spent his days chasing sheep, fixing fences, moving cattle, and fighting the weather.

The thought actually made me smile.

Then I looked out across the vast Eastern Montana prairie. Above me, the night sky stretched endlessly, its darkness scattered with countless stars, each one twinkling against the deep velvet of the heavens.

Maybe Julius was right.

I was twenty-one years old. I had been working almost nonstop for months. I was tired of the prairie, tired of the uncertainty, tired of being caught between my parents and my uncle, and tired of trying to figure out who was telling me the truth.

I wanted a family. I just wasn't sure I wanted to build that family here.

One absolute thought was… I knew in my heart I would never be unfaithful to my wife. Like Janet was with Sivert.

My mind was spinning.

Eventually, the exhaustion won.

I leaned back in the seat and fell asleep while Julius drove toward Cherry Springs.

For the first time in months, I simply had nothing left to think about.

I didn't say another word the rest of the drive.



The November nights had become bitterly cold.

Each evening I built a fire in the little stove inside my sheep wagon before climbing into bed.

Eventually the fire would burn down.

The cold would wake me.

I'd throw on another log or coal, crawl back under my blankets and sleeping bag, and stare out the window at the prairie sky.

Ever since the evening of October 27, sleep had become difficult.

There was simply too much to think about.



On Saturday morning, I had just started breakfast when John Sebulsky pulled in with another ranch hand.

They brought orders from Sivert.

The steers were going to be gathered on Monday.

Everyone was expected to report to the corrals at Cherry Springs.

Julius and I were assigned to inspect the cattle scales, repair anything broken, and make certain they were ready for shipping day.

Since my pickup didn't have a ranch radio, this was the first I'd heard about the roundup.

We spent the rest of the day preparing.

Loose boards around the corrals leading to the cattle scales were nailed back into place.

We repaired fencing near the new lambing barn.

Then we tackled the cattle scales.

No one had cleaned them since the previous season.

Years of dried manure clung to every corner and moving part like hardened concrete.

It was filthy work, but by late afternoon everything operated as it should.



Monday morning the roundup began.

Steers poured toward Cherry Springs from every direction.

One semi after another backed into position beside the loading chute.

Each group of cattle was weighed, sorted, and loaded before another truck took its place.

The operation ran like clockwork.

Despite the dry summer and short grass, the cattle looked remarkably good.

They had summered well on Cherry Creek.

I eventually lost count of how many semis came and went.

Each left carrying roughly sixty head of cattle, weighing between forty-eight and fifty thousand pounds.



Sivert remained at the corrals all day.

He counted every steer.

He checked every weight.

He watched every trailer leave.

Nothing escaped his attention.

Late that afternoon the final tally was completed.

The numbers didn't add up.

Out of approximately fifteen hundred steers turned into the North Pasture that spring…

Two hundred fifty-three were missing.

Even Julius stood silent.

The financial loss had to be enormous.

Sivert immediately called over the two cowboys responsible for watching the cattle all summer.

One of them was the same hired hand Julius believed had become one of Janet's close "friends." I recognized him. I had seen him with Janet at Beer Bill's. Whether he knew I had seen them together, I couldn't say.

Sivert demanded to know where the missing steers were.

Both men insisted they had already ridden every corner of the North Pasture.

"There aren't any more cattle out there," one of them said flatly.

"We've checked."

Sivert wasn't interested in hearing it.

"Ride it again."

"I don't want another word."

The two cowboys stood their ground.

"There aren't any cattle to find."

“And we’re not riding it again.”

The argument escalated quickly.

Within minutes both men told Sivert exactly where he could go.

Sivert fired them on the spot.

He ordered them back to the home ranch to collect their pay and leave Cherry Creek immediately.

Before climbing into his pickup, he turned toward Julius.

“Get word to everyone.”

“I don’t care who they are.”

“Nobody quits looking until every steer is accounted for.”

For the first time since arriving at Cherry Creek, I could clearly see the pressure Sivert was carrying.

Whether I agreed with him or not, losing that many cattle would have tested anyone.



By dark no one had found a single missing steer.

Not one.

There weren’t even carcasses to explain where they had gone.

The mystery only deepened.

The following morning Julius and I divided the search.

He headed west to notify the remaining sheep herders and continue looking.

I took the eastern side of the ranch toward Brown's Gulch.

I hadn't gone far before something felt wrong.

The front end of my pickup began howling.

The steering wheel jerked violently to the right.

I stopped immediately and climbed out.

After checking the front hubs, I found the problem.

One locking hub had been disengaged.

The other was still locked in four-wheel drive.

Someone had switched the transfer case back into two-wheel drive without unlocking both front hubs.

It wasn't a complicated mistake.

But it could destroy a front axle.

I limped the pickup into Forsyth and pulled into Bogg's Chevrolet.

While waiting for the mechanics, I thought back to the last time the pickup had been in four-wheel drive.

It had been during a rainstorm weeks earlier.

I distinctly remembered locking both hubs myself.

I also remembered watching Julius unlock them afterward.

Neither of us had touched them since.

The last people to use my pickup had been Paul, Les White, and Ernie Wells during their antelope hunt.

I couldn't prove anything.

Still…

I had to wonder.

The mechanics repaired the front axle, changed the oil, checked every fluid, and gently lectured me.

"Always check both hubs," one of them said.

"One left engaged will tear things up in a hurry."

The bill went directly to Cherry Creek.

As I drove back toward Cherry Springs, I made myself a promise.

From that day forward, no matter who had driven one of my vehicles before me, I would inspect it myself before turning the key.

It became a habit that has stayed with me ever since.

That evening Julius and I compared notes.

Neither of us had found a single missing steer.

Julius shrugged and looked out across the dark prairie.

“Not a steer.”

“Not even a dead body to prove they were ever here.”

For once…

Neither of us had an explanation.



Definitely not all the steers.

The Missing Cattle Mystery

It took Julius and me nearly three days of searching in my newly repaired pickup before we finally found our first break.

More than one hundred missing steers were grazing peacefully inside the Brooks ranch.

Mr. Brooks couldn't have been kinder. He immediately offered to have one of his family members help drive the cattle back to the Cherry Springs corrals.

Before we left, he looked over at Julius with a grin.

"I'm glad you didn't pull the trigger the other day."

Julius looked genuinely puzzled.

"What are you talking about?"

Mr. Brooks chuckled.

"My brother-in-law and his hunting buddies. I heard all about your little meeting."

He laughed again.

"I can't blame you one bit. Truth be told, I've thought about shooting that son of a gun myself more than once. You probably would have done me and the world a favor."

He paused before adding with another laugh,

"I think you scared him enough to brown his britches."

Julius answered with nothing more than one of his trademark Festus winks.

After returning the recovered cattle, Julius suggested one more place to search.

“Let’s check the north end of Sivert’s Porcupine pasture near Brown’s Gulch.”

We did.

To our amazement, we found another hundred-plus steers.

Neither of us could explain how they had gotten there.

Those cattle would have had to cross two separate sheep-proof fences to reach that pasture.

Julius studied the tracks for a long time before finally reaching his own conclusion.

“Somebody put them here.”

“It wasn’t an accident.”

He was convinced someone had intentionally hidden the cattle to retrieve them later.

He dismissed the idea that Sivert had anything to do with it.

“Sivert never comes this far north,” Julius said. “Not unless somebody or something drags him here.”

His suspicion immediately turned toward the two fired cowboys.

According to Julius, they had likely hidden the cattle themselves, intending to come back later. That would also explain why they

had insisted to Sivert that no more steers remained anywhere on the North Pasture.

Neither of us had any proof.

It was only speculation.

Still, neither of us could think of a better explanation.

When we reported our discovery, Sivert looked visibly relieved.

“I dropped both of them off in Roundup after paying what I owed them,” he said.

“I hope I never see either one again.”

Even after recovering more than two hundred head, thirty-eight steers were still missing.

We searched everywhere.

There wasn’t a single carcass.

Not one sign of what had happened to the remaining cattle.



Sivert instructed Julius and me to move the recovered steers into the one-section pasture near Beer Bill’s, where John Sebulsky and Rummy could watch them until the next shipment.

Attention then turned to the sheep.

Every band was gathered.

The annual culling had begun.

Sivert planned to reduce the flock from roughly eight thousand sheep to about four thousand younger breeding ewes, selling the older animals to generate much-needed cash.

He explained that the money would pay outstanding ranch debts, cover the shipping and feedlot costs for the steers headed to Nebraska, finance the construction of the new lambing barn…

"…and finally pay a dividend to the Cherry Creek partners."

Quietly, I smiled to myself.

Maybe all the work, frustration, and sacrifice had finally helped accomplish what Bernice had sent me there to witness.

The shipping went smoothly.

Our new windbreak beside the lambing barn proved useful for sorting sheep, removing wool from around their eyes, and organizing the loading process.

For the first time since I had arrived at Cherry Creek, everything seemed to work exactly as planned. As Julius had planned.

When it was over, Sivert actually thanked Julius and me.

Neither of us quite knew what to say.



With the cattle and sheep finally shipped, our work slowed considerably.

Until Dean returned with the custom barn doors, Julius and I spent our days building lambing jugs inside the Quonset.

We briefly discussed moving my sheep wagon down to the home ranch to save the daily drive.

Neither of us liked the idea.

After Janet's threats at the fall party, Cherry Springs still felt like the safer place to sleep.



One morning we were working in the Quonset when Sivert suddenly came running from the house.

I've never seen him move that fast before or since.

He pulled Julius aside for a private conversation.

A moment later Julius motioned me over.

"What Sivert is about to tell you," Julius said quietly, "never gets repeated to your parents. Understand?"

I nodded.

Sivert spoke in a low, controlled voice.

The two fired cowboys had returned.

They had stolen a ranch pickup, taken two saddles, emptied one of the sheep wagons of nearly everything inside…

…and then burned the sheep wagon to the ground near Beer Bill's.

To make matters worse, they had scattered the remaining two hundred twelve steers across the North Pasture.

The only small blessing, Sivert said, was that they hadn't burned Beer Bill's house as well.

Julius and I were to drive him immediately to Reed Point.

The sheriff was holding both men there.

As Sivert spoke, I couldn't understand how any of this had happened without Julius or me knowing.

Beer Bill's was barely a mile and a half from Cherry Springs.

Yet we had heard and had seen nothing.



We drove silently to Reed Point.

Sivert barely spoke during the trip.

His face remained bright red with anger.

I honestly wondered if he might suffer a heart attack before we arrived.

When we reached Reed Point, Sivert asked us to drop him off at the local bar, where the sheriff was waiting with Wishbone Miller and Santiago "Pete" Rodriguez.

Today that same place is known as the Waterhole Saloon.

Sivert said he would recover whatever ranch property remained and drive the stolen pickup home himself.

Julius and I offered to follow him back.

He refused.

So we headed toward Ingomar.

Somewhere along the drive Julius and I began joking about what proper punishment should be given to cattle thieves.

After considering several possibilities, we agreed that hanging a man upside down by his big toes, naked, filling his backside with sand, and waiting for the rope to break…

…might have been just a little excessive.



I kept my promise to Sivert.

I never told Paul or Bernice about the incident.

About a year later, however, Paul heard the entire story over coffee at the Jersey Lilly.

It became yet another reason for him to question why Julius and I hadn't informed him immediately.

Even today I still wonder if I made the right decision.

I honestly don't know.

Nearly twenty-five years later, while teaching in Plains, Montana, I was visiting with the superintendent of schools, Ken Miller.

During our conversation he learned that my uncle was Sivert Mysse.

His face immediately brightened.

“I know that name,” he said.

“My brother, Wishbone Miller, had a little misunderstanding with Sivert years ago.”

I calmly told him exactly what had happened.

Ken didn’t dispute a single detail.

Instead he laughed.

“Just one of those Eastern Montana cowboy misunderstandings.”

“They worked it out.”

“Sivert never pressed charges, did he?”

Then he laughed again.

“My brother was quite a pistol.”

I simply changed the subject.

Later that same year, Ken while intoxicated, tried to give me a poached moose calf.

I should have reported him to the game wardens.

Instead I told him to go home, sober up, and not waste a single ounce of the animal.

Whether he listened, I never knew.

But the moment reminded me of something I had learned on Cherry Creek years before.

The past has a remarkable way of catching up with people.

Sometimes it returns wearing a different face.

Sometimes it looks exactly the same.



Julius called it his "piece of Heaven." A tiny Airstream, and a big garage. Apparently, Heaven didn't need much square footage—as long as it had a garage!

The End of the Trap Line

With the lambing jugs finally completed, Julius and I settled into a routine while we waited for Dean to return with the doors and hardware for the lambing barn.

We had built more than one hundred fifty portable lambing jugs. It felt good to see stacks of finished work standing inside the Quonset. The log lambing barn itself was essentially complete.

Only the doors remained.

Only Dean.

While we waited, Julius decided it was “absolutely necessary” that we establish a trap line.

“Pelts are bringing good money this year,” he insisted. “Besides, you need to learn how to trap.”

I wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic as he was, but eventually I gave in.

At Clark’s Hardware in Forsyth I bought every trap I could afford —about thirty of them.

Julius contributed another forty or so from his own collection stored in his garage at Ingomar.

Before setting a single trap, Julius smoked every one of them over a fire to remove our scent. Then he patiently taught me how to bed each trap solidly in the ground, sift dirt over the jaws, and blend everything back into the surrounding prairie until the trap simply disappeared.

By the time we finished, nearly seventy traps stretched across portions of Rosebud and Garfield Counties.



Checking a trap line in late November wasn't exactly pleasant.

The mornings were bitterly cold.

Snow covered much of the ground.

Every step crunched through frozen grass or gumbo that had finally hardened with winter.

Oddly enough, I enjoyed those mornings.

Out on the trap line, Julius and I weren't caught in the middle of the war between Paul and Bernice and Sivert and Janet.

For a few hours it was simply the two of us, walking across the prairie together.

Then reality would creep back into my mind.

The doors.

Dean.

School.

I wanted to finish the lambing barn, pack my belongings, and get back to the University of Montana.

At that point I would have gladly traded Eastern Montana's gumbo, rattlesnakes, ticks, bitter wind, impossible people, and endless drama for a classroom full of textbooks.



November was nearly over.

There were still no doors.

My work boots had finally worn through.

Every time I walked through snow my socks became soaked, and with each mile my mood grew darker.

I called Dean once again from the Jersey Lilly.

It was probably the tenth time—or at least it felt that way.

Dean apologized.

Again.

He assured me the doors and hardware would be finished "next week."

This time they wouldn't be delivered personally.

He planned to ship everything by truck to the Jersey Lilly.

It was the best he could do.

I agreed because there wasn't much else I could do.

But deep down I had begun to wonder if Dean was ever coming back at all.

I finally reached my limit.

Whether the doors arrived or not, I had decided I was leaving Ingomar.

If necessary, Julius could drop me at the bus station in Forsyth.

I simply wanted to go home.



Julius agreed it was time to pull the trap line.

The season was ending, and there was little point in maintaining it any longer.

Neither of us knew that one last trap still had a lesson waiting for me.



I was checking traps along the sandstone rims above Sivert's place.

Lost in my own thoughts, I rounded a rocky outcropping without paying much attention.

There, not six feet away, stood the largest skunk I had ever seen.

It had already been caught in the trap.

Its back was toward me.

Its tail pointed straight into the air.

Its rear end was aimed directly at my face.

I froze.

The trap happened to be almost exactly waist high.

The skunk couldn't have been positioned any more perfectly.

The last clear thing I remember seeing was a yellow mist exploding from beneath that raised tail.



I never heard a sound.

I never smelled anything at first.

I simply couldn't breathe.

It felt as though every breath had been ripped from my lungs.

My eyes erupted in pain.

Within seconds I couldn't see anything at all.

I honestly believed I was dying.

I struggled desperately to inhale, but nothing seemed to work.

Then everything went black.



Somehow Julius found me lying on the ground.

He ran back to my pickup, grabbed a jug of water, and poured it over my face while repeatedly telling me to take short, shallow breaths.

“Easy.”

“Easy.”

“Little breaths.”

Between breaths he muttered,

“You poor bastard.”

He admitted the same thing had happened to him once…

“…or maybe twice.”

Only Julius could be uncertain about something like that.

After what felt like an eternity—but was probably only fifteen or twenty minutes—I managed to stand.

My vision slowly began returning, though everything remained blurry.

Julius guided me to my pickup, and we headed straight for Sivert’s place.



I climbed into the trailer shower and let the hot sulfur-smelling water run over my face and into my burning eyes.

It hurt almost as much as the skunk itself.

Janet once again found herself washing another set of my clothes that smelled like something no washing machine should ever experience.

Gradually my breathing returned to normal.

My eyesight cleared enough that I knew I wasn't going blind.

For that alone I was grateful.

My prescription glasses had probably saved my eyes from receiving the full force of the spray.

As far as I was concerned, my trapping career had officially ended.

One encounter with an angry skunk was more than enough for one lifetime.



By the time we were ready to leave, Julius had recovered his sense of humor.

He couldn't stop laughing.

"Goddamn it, Craig…"

"You stared Death right in the face today…"

"…and won."

Then his expression became strangely serious.

“You can’t run from Death.”

“It’s coming for every one of us.”

“Today was just the Big Guy reminding you to live your life.”

“Live today.”

“Don’t wait.”

“Someday you and I will be together again.”

“You know that, don’t you?”



That night I wrote his words in my journal while sitting inside the Old House.

Both electric heaters were running, yet I still wore my winter coat.

The duct tape covering the holes in my down jacket kept sticking to my sleeping bag every time I moved.

I was exhausted.

Physically.

Mentally.

Emotionally.

As I finally climbed into bed, one last thought drifted through my mind.

If Julius and I someday met again…

Would it be in Heaven…

…or would it be in Hell?



Julius spent the night at Granddad Mysse's Old House to make sure I kept breathing—or so I'd like to think. The truth? His own trailer was freezing, and my two electric heaters were the warmest game in town. Knowing Julius, he figured if I survived the skunk, I could survive a little company… though I think he does snore louder than me.

Chapter 7

December 1971

The Promise Kept

Winter settled over eastern Montana with a vengeance.

December arrived wrapped in snow, subzero temperatures, and a prairie wind that never seemed to stop blowing. Every morning, Julius and I climbed into my pickup before daylight, grateful for nothing more than the heater fighting against the cold. The warmth inside that ranch truck became our refuge while the rest of Cherry Creek lay frozen beneath a blanket of white.

For nearly six months our lives had revolved around one unfinished task.

The log lambing barn.

It had become far more than a construction project. It was a promise I had made to my family, a promise I intended to keep regardless of the cost. Every delay, every argument, every disappointment, and every mile traveled across the prairie seemed to end with the same unanswered question:

When would the doors finally arrive?



One bitter December morning Bill Seward flagged us down outside the Jersey Lilly.

He handed me a scrap of paper torn from one of the café's billing tablets. Written across it was an address in Billings.

"The doors are there," Bill said.

For a moment I simply stared at the note.

After weeks of promises, excuses, and delays, the doors actually existed.

Julius grinned beneath his beard.

"Well, One Share," he said. "Let's go finish what everyone else said couldn't be finished."

Sivert reluctantly loaned us the new stock truck, although I could tell he hated the idea of either one of us driving it. By the time we reached Billings, I had finally mastered the sixteen-speed transmission well enough to stop grinding gears every time traffic slowed.

Before loading the doors, Julius insisted on one stop.

"Butler's Kitchen."

No matter how serious life became, Julius never passed up fried chicken.

Watching him eat was entertainment by itself. Every piece disappeared down to the last sliver of meat before he cheerfully sucked the marrow from each bone as though it were the finest meal in Montana.

When the doors were finally loaded, I was shocked by their weight. Dean had built them well. Along with the heavy steel

tracks and hardware, they would have crushed the suspension of any ordinary pickup.

As I drove north across the Yellowstone Valley, one thought stayed with me.

Finish the building.



Nothing else mattered anymore.

Not the family politics.

Not the spying.

Not the broken promises.

Just finish the building.

By the afternoon of December 15, 1971, Julius and I stood once again inside the log lambing shed at Cherry Springs.

The generator echoed across the frozen prairie.

Bit by bit, we drilled the mounting holes, bolted the steel tracks into place, hung the massive sliding doors, adjusted the rollers, and installed the latches until each door glided smoothly across the opening.

When the final bolt tightened into place, silence settled over the building.

The wind no longer whistled through open doorways.

For the first time since the project began, the log lambing barn was complete.

Julius stood with a piece of cold fried chicken in one hand and looked slowly around the building.

“I’ll be damned,” he finally whispered.

“We actually did it.”

He looked at me with that familiar Festus Haggen grin and winked.

“They tried to set us up to fail, One Share.”

He paused before adding quietly,

“But neither one of us knew how.”

I laughed.

Maybe Julius couldn’t spell the word “failure.”

But neither one of us had ever accepted it.

We locked the doors, loaded the generator, gathered the last of our tools, and climbed into the truck.

As Cherry Springs disappeared in the rearview mirror, I believed I was driving away from the hardest chapter of my life.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.

The building was finished.

The promise had been kept.

The price for keeping it had only begun to reveal itself. 

The Last Lesson from Julius

The last of the tools were loaded into the truck along with the generator we had stored at the Cherry Springs Log Lambing barn. The only thing left in the barn was that damn ladder Julius rescued from the side of the road near Billings.

Before locking the heavy doors for the winter of 1971, Julius and I stood silently for a moment and looked at what we had built. Six months earlier there had been nothing but an empty stretch of prairie. Now a solid log lambing barn stood against the Montana sky, built with our own hands.

I pulled each door shut, fastened a padlock through the latch, and locked it.

It was finished.

Before leaving, I walked over to Jack one last time. I fed him the last of his lamb pellets and scratched him gently between the ears. Then I took one final photograph.

For years afterward I wondered what became of that little jackrabbit. Did he spend many more seasons racing across the prairie? Did he raise a family of his own? Or did he become a meal for some hungry coyote one cold winter night?

I never knew.

But I always hoped Jack had the life every wild creature deserves.

As we drove past Acorn Flats overlooking Devil's Canyon, Julius suddenly broke the silence.

“You ought to give that journal of yours to somebody someday,” he said. “They could write a book… maybe even make a movie about everything we did out here.”

I laughed.

“Who would pay money to watch two men sweat themselves to death building a log barn in the middle of nowhere?”

Julius grinned beneath his beard.

“You never know… Stranger things have happened.”

Neither of us knew then just how right he would eventually be.

Back at Sivert’s place we unloaded every tool and returned each one to its place inside the Quonset as though none of them had ever left. Even Julius’s collection of chewed bones and assorted garbage finally found its way into the burn barrel after I insisted.

As we prepared to leave, Sivert stopped us near the driveway.

He invited us to Patty Ryan’s housewarming party the following evening.

“We’ll be there wearing our finest,” Julius answered with a grin.

Neither of us realized it would be our final night on Cherry Creek.



That evening, after we had locked the doors on the log lambing barn, Julius and I sold the pelts from our trap line to the fur traders

at the Jersey Lilly. We both made decent money, and for the first time in a long while, I felt like we had something to celebrate.

I had some very vivid memories of that evening. We had finished the barn, sold the furs we had worked so hard to trap, and for once there was nothing left to worry about.

Julius celebrated the way Julius always did—with a pork chop smothered in mustard. **Some things never change.**

I remember thinking about calling Paul and Bernice, but I decided against it. **I didn't want to end the day talking about the ranch, the log barn, or whatever criticism might come next. I wanted to let the day end on a good note.**

For one evening, it was just Julius and me, sitting in the safety of the little town of Ingomar, enjoying what we had earned.

I think we both slept well that night.



The next afternoon I called my parents from the Jersey Lilly.

“We finished the log lambing barn,” I proudly announced.

“Good,” Mom answered.

Dad’s first question wasn’t whether we were safe or how the project had gone.

“How are you getting back to Bigfork?”

“I… I don’t know.”

Dad asked to speak with Julius.

For the next half hour Julius remained inside the telephone booth while I continuously exchanged dollar bills for quarters to keep the call alive. Even through the closed door I could hear raised voices. People entering the Jersey Lilly looked toward the booth as Julius's booming voice echoed through the café.

When he finally stepped outside, his face looked different. 'We're leaving Saturday,' he said quietly…

"Paul will meet you in Harlowton."

I was thrilled.

I was finally going home.

But something had happened inside that phone booth.

"What did they say?" I asked.

Julius slowly stroked his beard before answering.

"You need to walk away from this bullshit as fast as you…"

He stopped.

He never finished the sentence.



Patty Ryan's housewarming party should have been a celebration.

Instead, it became our goodbye.

After cake, ice cream, and conversation, Sivert quietly asked Julius and me to step outside.

Standing beside our pickups under the yard light, he looked directly at me.

“Everything Janet and I bought was paid for with our own money —not Cherry Creek money. Bernice has been misinformed.”

He paused.

“Craig… give me the pickup keys.”

I handed them over.

Then came the words neither of us expected.

“You are both fired.”

For several moments I couldn’t think.

I wasn’t angry.

I wasn’t embarrassed.

I simply stood there wondering why family had become enemies.

As I transferred my belongings into the Skunk Wagon, one thought kept echoing through my mind.

The Mysse Curse.

It had claimed more victims.



Later that night, Julius apologized.

He admitted that he had told Paul and Bernice about the Fall Party, the missing steers, and some of the everyday things happening around the ranch.

“I thought what I told Paul and Bernice was confidential,” he said. “I figured your family should know.”

I nodded.

“No,” I told him. **“Paul and Bernice should have respected what you told them. You trusted them with that information.”**

Instead, they used it.

And that was the part that bothered me most.

They had used Julius’s trust just as they had used mine.

By then, I understood something I had first begun to see at the partnership meeting in June. **Everything that had happened since had only confirmed it.**

The real curse on Cherry Creek wasn’t money.

It wasn’t sheep.

It wasn’t land.

It was the complete loss of trust within the family.



Saturday morning arrived cold and gray.

Julius settled every debt between us, including the money he owed me. True to his word, he paid every penny back.

Looking back now, that mattered.

A man's character isn't measured by whether he borrows.

It is measured by whether he keeps his word.

Julius always did.

On the drive toward Harlowton he managed to hit an enormous raccoon, nearly rolled the Skunk Wagon into the ditch, proudly claimed the hide would make us "even," and laughed the entire time.

It was such a Julius thing to do.

At Shep's Antiques he handed me a brown paper sack.

Inside was a brand-new pair of powder-blue Big Mac coveralls.

"I figured they'd fit you," he said.

Then I handed him my old green Teflon cooking pan—the one he had rescued after nearly destroying it months before.

He grabbed it with a smile.

It belonged with him.

Then his expression changed.

He placed one rough hand on my shoulder.

"Life has taught me something," he said quietly.

“You can’t buy loyalty. You can’t earn it with promises. Sometimes the people you love the most are the people who will hurt you the deepest.”

His eyes searched mine.

“Your parents are using you, Craig. They used me, too. They made me promises. I told them the truth, and now I’ll probably never hear from either of them again.”

He squeezed my shoulder.

“I thank God they aren’t my family.”

For a long moment neither of us spoke.

Then Julius slapped me gently across the back, gave me one last Festus Haggen wink, climbed into the Skunk Wagon, and drove away.

Snow swirled behind his pickup until both disappeared over the hill.

I never saw him again.



The Emptiness

As I stood in the snow after Julius disappeared over the hill, I expected to feel sadness. I expected anger. I expected relief that the job was finally over.

Instead, I felt… nothing I had ever experienced before.

It wasn't grief.

It wasn't loneliness.

It wasn't fear.

It was an emptiness so deep that I couldn't find words for it. It was as though something inside me had quietly been hollowed out, leaving a place that neither thought nor emotion could reach. I didn't understand it then, and looking back, I know I have never felt a loss like that again. Whatever it was that left me so empty, I have carried its absence with me for the rest of my life.

I had done everything I promised my family I would do. Julius and I had finished the near impossible. I had worked until my hands bled, kept my word, and remained loyal from beginning to end.

Yet standing there in the snow, I no longer knew where I belonged.

I wasn't mourning Cherry Springs.

I wasn't mourning Julius.

Without realizing it, I was standing at the edge of the life I thought I had. I simply didn't know it yet.

It was an emotion I would never feel again.



On December 15, 1971, I walked over to the stock chute and placed my hand on Granddad Mysse's carved name. I traced the letters slowly, wishing I could have known the man behind them. I wondered about the hands that had built this place, the hardships he had endured, and the pride he must have felt in leaving something behind for those who followed him. Julius and I had spent our summer building the lambing barn at Cherry Springs, but standing there, I realized we had done more than build a structure, repair the corrals, and rebuild the windbreak. We had become part of a story that began long before me. I wished Granddad could have stood beside me, if only for a moment, so I could tell him what we had done and thank him for the legacy I had inherited without ever knowing him. I ran my hand across his name one last time. I could not know what Granddad would have thought of our work. I could only hope that we had honored him—and that somewhere, in the quiet of his Montana prairie, the work of our hands would have made him proud.

As the Skunk Wagon disappeared into the blowing snow, I realized something I had never expected.

During those five and a half months Julius had become far more than my foreman.

He had become my friend.

He never asked me to do a job he wouldn't do himself.

He worked harder than anyone I had ever known.

He laughed in the face of hardship.

He found adventure where everyone else saw misery.

One part of me wanted never to see him again. We had grown closer than either of us probably understood, and that closeness sometimes left me uncomfortable.

Yet another part of me wanted to climb into that battered Skunk Wagon, forget college, forget Bigfork, forget every promise I had ever made, and head north with Julius to the Great Slave Lakes.

For the first time in my life, someone had treated me with consistent respect—not because I was useful, not because I was family, but simply because I worked beside him.

Saying goodbye to Julius hurt far more than leaving Cherry Springs.



The Truth Was Not Welcome

Over an hour later, Paul's Delta 88 finally pulled in front of Shep's Antiques.

One by one, I loaded my skunk-smelling, dirty orange backpack, sleeping bag, rifles, black walnut rifle blank, new coveralls, a grocery sack of things I had collected, and the enormous raccoon into the car.

Paul looked disgusted.

"You smell too ripe for my comfort."

Those were essentially his words of welcome.

The long drive back to Bigfork was almost silent. He chain-smoked cigarette after cigarette while staring at the snowy highway.

For a few miles, I actually hoped the silence might last.

Then Paul turned off the radio.

A moment later, he spoke.

"Your mother and I can't figure out why it took you and Julius so long to build that log building. Were you working on it, or just finding ways to waste time?"

Not, How are you?

Not, Good to see you.

Not, Are you all right?

Not even, Good job.

Just criticism.

I couldn't take it any longer.

I spoke from my heart. I was firm, but I refused to raise my voice.

"Good God, I'm so tired of being criticized for things you never take the time to understand. You sent Julius and me out in the middle of nowhere, and we worked our asses off. We built the new windbreak, finished the corrals, cleaned the weigh scales, hauled materials, repaired equipment, and did everything we were told to do. Then you and Mom got us fired?"

After five and a half months on Cherry Creek, I could see what the other partners apparently could not—or would not. A ranch was supposed to make money, keep the land healthy, and spend less than it made.

"Dad, do you actually know what the goal of a ranch is? That was Julius's and my goal. I think that was why Granddad Mysse was so successful. He understood ranching. I don't think Sivert and Janet, Marie, or you guys have a clue."

"Whether you and Mom know it or not, Cherry Creek is a real ranch—not a gravy train for partners."

"If you think Julius or I did something wrong, tell me exactly what it was. Don't criticize us because things didn't happen the way you imagined. You weren't there. You weren't living in a sheep wagon in the middle of nowhere, working and freezing your ass off. You have no idea what we had to deal with."

"I'm tired of being blamed for things that aren't my fault or Julius's. Why didn't you tell us the truth about the log barn? Why

lie about it? If you wanted something done differently, you should have told us. I'm not going to listen to you criticize us without giving me a reason."

"I want the truth!"

The words hung between us.

I had not shouted or threatened him. I had simply demanded the truth.

For a moment, there was only silence.

I did not understand then how clearly that moment revealed a pattern that would repeat whenever I questioned Paul or asked for honesty—a pattern that would continue until our final conversation.

Then his face changed.

That was all it took.

Paul exploded.

He screamed over anything more I tried to say:

"I should drop your smart ass off on the side of the road right now… I am tired of your smart ass comments… Som' Bitch… don't you ever open that Goddamn big mouth of yours in front of your mother or I ever again… and I never want the name of Julius Sebulsky to come out of that damn mouth of yours ever again! You just don't get it… your mother and I are doing this for you and Gary!"

Paul had spoken.

Nothing I said mattered.

Nothing Julius had sacrificed mattered.

Nothing we had accomplished mattered.

Only Paul's version of the story mattered.

And somehow, within minutes, I had become the problem once again.

I had gone to Cherry Creek because my parents had asked me to help the family. I had worked alongside Julius, taken on responsibilities I had never expected or wanted, and kept my promise to finish the log lambing barn.

Now, sitting beside my father on that snowy highway, I was being treated as though I had failed Paul and Bernice.

I wanted answers. I wanted Paul to tell me what Julius and I had done wrong, what we had failed to complete, and why our work had fallen short of his expectations.

But he offered no explanation.

Instead, he made it clear that I was not to question him again. His authority was never to be challenged.

As the miles passed beneath us, I quietly looked out the window.

The log lambing barn was finished.

My promise to Bernice had been kept.

Paul's refusal to acknowledge either fact did not change them.



My Ranch Pickup in Front of the Jersey Lilly — The Night We Sold Our Furs

That night, we turned the results of our trap line into cash. Each pelt represented hours in the cold, hard work and a small victory over the prairie. Standing in front of the Jersey Lilly, I felt a quiet excitement knowing that my time in the wilderness was nearly over. Soon, I would be going home to running water, real food, a warm bed, and a winter without freezing my ass off. The fur sale marked more than the end of our time together trapping; it marked the closing of a chapter that had tested me in ways I never expected. I was eager to return to ordinary life, yet something inside me had changed. **Sometimes you have to live without life's simplest comforts—and earn a little money the hard way—to discover that an ordinary life is an extraordinary gift.**

Yet sitting beside him, I felt a despair I could barely put into words. Julius and I had given everything we had to the work, but none of it seemed to matter to Paul.

I wished Granddad Mysse were there. I wanted him to hear what I had said, to understand why I believed Julius and I had done the right thing.

More than anything, I wanted him to tell me I was right.

But Granddad was not there.

And I would never hear those words from him.

The barn stood finished on Cherry Creek. Paul could deny the work, dismiss my words, and refuse to acknowledge what we had accomplished. He could not undo what Julius and I had built.

But I was beginning to understand something I would carry with me for years: with Paul, no amount of work would ever be enough if recognizing it meant admitting that I had been right.

The barn was finished.

The promise had been kept.

But the victory felt hollow.

Paul just stared at the road, said nothing, and lit another cigarette.



Chapter 8

The Rest of the Story

The Steers That Sealed Cherry Creek's Fate

That winter, Paul and Bernice learned that Sivert had not only lost **38 steers**, but had also failed to ship the remaining **112 steers** still on Cherry Creek.

Unfortunately, the steers that had already been shipped to Omaha, Nebraska, and placed in feedlots were worth less when they were sold than what Sivert had paid for them at auction earlier that spring.

Sivert was forced to sell the steers at a loss. The feedlot bills consumed a large portion of the profits from the liquidation of the ewes that fall.

Bernice and Marie were furious.

Sivert did, however, make one final distribution payment, as he had promised at the June partnership meeting. That payment left Cherry Creek with little liquid cash and forced the company to take on **more than a million dollars in new bank loans.**

The resulting debt burden was enormous.

It would eventually become one of the factors that led to the sale of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

The Promise to Julius

Even though Bernice and Paul had promised Julius a salary in addition to the salary he received from the Cherry Creek Sheep Company, **Julius never received a penny from the Milams.**

Paul later claimed:

“Julius never got the job done which was asked of him...”

Really?

That certainly wasn’t Julius’s story.

Julius rarely complained, and he kept the details of his agreement with Paul and Bernice mostly to himself. But I knew my parents received **at least three letters addressed to Box 18**, written by Julius and sent to both Paul and Bernice, asking for the money they had promised him.

Bernice told me I was not allowed to read the letters because they were **“private ranch business.”**

But one day, I took one of Julius’s letters from Bernice’s desk and read it.

It wasn't an angry letter.

It wasn't threatening.

It was a polite request for the money he had been promised for the services he provided.

Julius stated the exact amount of the salary he was owed and asked that he be paid for the work he had done for Paul and Bernice.

He had kept his part of the agreement… his promise.

They had not kept theirs.



The Generosity of Bernice

Yes, my driver's license had expired.

But Bernice "let" me finally retake the test and get a new license, using Paul's Delta 88, just before Easter of 1972.

Apparently, even something as simple as getting my driver's license required Bernice's permission—and could happen only when she decided the time was right.



The Questions I Still Had

To my disappointment, neither Paul nor Bernice ever called a formal partnership meeting to audit the financial records of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company. For more than fifty years, I have been left carrying the weight of wondering why. Bernice was a trained accountant; if those books existed, she possessed the exact skillset needed to trace every dollar. Yet, instead of demanding accountability, she sent her twenty-one-year-old son directly into the crossfire at Cherry Creek to untangle a mess that wasn't mine to fix.

At twenty-one, I was thrust into a high-stakes adult conflict, burdened with questions that should have been answered transparently by the financial records. It felt like a profound betrayal of trust—being forced to search blindly for answers on the ground while the adults protected themselves, potentially leaving the truth locked away in the accounting books. That experience didn't just stress me then; it fundamentally altered how I viewed family and fairness, sparking an unresolved frustration and a deep-seated ache for clarity that has stayed with me for over half a century.



Still the Laborer

During Easter vacation in 1972, Paul, Bernice, and I drove to Ingomar and then to Sivert's.

As soon as we arrived, my parents told me, **"You have unfinished business at the log lambing barn."**

Once again, a project they had started became **my responsibility to finish**.

No one had discussed the building with me beforehand. No one asked what remained to be done or whether I thought the work was necessary. They simply told me to oil-seal the entire log lambing barn that day.

My old powder-orange Chevy pickup was loaded with a fifty-five-gallon drum of Outlast Q8 log oil. Paul and Bernice **"informed me" t**hat I was to spray the entire building, inside and out.

While I worked, they drove around the ranch, exploring and making plans for dividing up the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.

The message was difficult to miss. The future of the ranch was important enough for them to discuss, but the work they had started was still something **I was expected to finish.**

After all, it was **"my project,"** and I **"needed to finish it."**

So I did.

I spent most of the day—at least five hours—spraying the log oil by myself. I wished Julius had been there to help me.

The walls, inside and out, were relatively easy. The roof structure was another matter. Without a ladder, I had to reach overhead and spray the support timbers as best I could. Every so often, a strong gust of wind would blow the oil back into my face.

By the time I finished, **I was covered from head to toe in log oil.**

Paul and Bernice had not helped. Neither wanted to get dirty or oily. And knowing them, I suspected they probably thought I was working too slowly anyway.

But the question that stayed with me was a much bigger one: Why was this my responsibility?

Why was I still the laborer expected to finish the work while Paul and Bernice made the decisions about the future of the ranch?

I had no seat at that table.

My thoughts didn't count. Only my work did.

I finished the building.

I'm not even sure whether Paul or Bernice cared whether the log lambing barn was finally finished.

I know I did.

Then I looked for Jack.

My friend and pet was nowhere to be found.

That was a sad realization.



What Was Left Behind

My Cherry Creek pickup looked much the same as the day I left. It now had a ranch radio, someone had cleaned the interior, and the blood and gumbo were gone.

The dents and scratches were still there… and each one seemed to bring back a memory.

And it had a new set of tires.

Julius and I had left the tall aluminum ladder inside the log lambing shed. The building was locked, and I had turned the keys over to Sivert. Somehow, that ladder disappeared, too. I always wondered who would take a ladder that large from inside a locked building, sitting in the middle of nowhere beside the building Julius and I had worked so hard to build.

These may seem like insignificant things to someone else.

Strangely, they mattered to me.

The pickup was the truck I had worked from and lived in. The ladder was one of the tools Julius and I had used to build the log barn. And the barn itself represented months of work condensed into less than a month of hard labor.

But the log lambing barn we built on Cherry Springs **was never used for lambing.**

As far as I know, it was used only to store a few saddles and some bagged feed.

I tried several times over the following years to visit Julius's home on the one section and the log building we had constructed. Most times, I was turned away—either by Uncle Sivert or by one of his hired men.

When Kevin Brewer later purchased the north pasture of Cherry Creek and began operating the property, the log lambing barn remained off limits. **I tried on several occasions to see the building, but Kevin's men made sure I couldn't.**

I have not seen the log lambing barn—or Julius's home—since Easter of 1972.

For more than fifty years, those places have existed in my memory more clearly than they ever could in a photograph.



The Vehicle Promise

Bernice was good to her word. During the last week of May 1972, "we" purchased a new car for $3,000.00. It was not a pickup. Bernice didn't want to be seen in a pickup.

What I didn't understand at the time was that the **"Vehicle Promise"** came with strings I would not fully recognize for many years.

As it turned out, I would spend much of the next twenty years driving Bernice to her appointments.

After the car was purchased, Bernice asked me with the help of an attorney to sign over my five Cherry Creek corporate partnership shares to her so **"she could divide her shares equally between Gary and me someday."**

I believed her.

I legally signed over the five shares in front of her attorney.

I was no longer Mr. One Share.

Time would eventually reveal what Bernice's true intentions had been concerning those shares.

Interestingly, in her effort to keep things **"perfectly the same between the boys,"** Bernice also bought Gary a new vehicle for $3,000.00.

His was an El Camino, almost a pickup, when he attended college with no work requirements related to Cherry Creek.

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The Summer I Was Left Behind

The following spring, sometime in the middle of June, Julius drove all the way to Bigfork. He tried to convince Paul and Bernice to let me travel with him to the Great Slave Lakes in Canada for a **"few" months during the summer of 1972.**

I always suspected Julius had another reason for making the trip to Bigfork. **He was still trying to collect the wages Paul and Bernice had promised him.**

At the time Julius was in Bigfork, I was back in Ingomar. Paul told Julius that I was working for Sivert again.

Julius knew Sivert.

His response to Paul was simple.

"It would never happen."

After that encounter, Paul told me he never wanted me to see, talk to, or associate with Julius again.

I said nothing.

But Paul's reaction told me something was wrong.

This was the second time he had ordered me to stay away from Julius. I couldn't help wondering what Paul was hiding. Once again, I felt as though I was being punished for something Paul had said or done.

On the first day of the second week of June 1972, I left for Ingomar to work for Sivert. Bernice told me that Sivert would pick me up and that I would be doing odd jobs for him and Janet around the ranch.

I stayed at Granddad's old house and waited.

And waited.

Every day I waited in Ingomar, just as Bernice had instructed me. But Sivert and Janet never came.

They didn't come to the old house.

They didn't come to the Jersey Lilly.

They didn't even leave a message.

I finally had enough.

I thought Julius would find me, but he never did. I checked his trailer every day during the weeks I stayed in Ingomar that June.

Finally, on July 3, I left Ingomar and returned to Bigfork to spend the Fourth of July with my friends from the Playhouse.

Yes, we drank on the Fourth.

Maybe more than we should have.

But I was frustrated with my life and with the responsibilities my family seemed to keep placing on me without explanation.

There was no doubt in my mind that the Mysse Curse was in full flower.

What I didn't know then was that the **Milam Curse was just beginning with the collapse of the Cherry Creek Sheep Company.**

Then, on July 27, 1972, Sivert called Bernice.

He sounded concerned about me. He told her I was no longer staying at the old house and that no one had seen me around the Jersey Lilly for quite some time.

Did she know where I was?

What was discussed between Sivert and Bernice, I don't know.

Really, Sivert? Nice try.

I never again had a normal, face-to-face conversation with Sivert. We crossed paths many times, but after our last meeting three years later in the Jersey Lilly he never spoke to me again.

That continued until the year before he died.

We were both attending a function at the Jersey Lilly when we suddenly came face-to-face.

The only reason Sivert spoke to me was because he didn't recognize me.

He thought I was someone else.

He called me **"Carl."**



What Julius Taught Me

Before Cherry Creek, I had loved college.

For the first two years, I had a goal. I was going to become a doctor, and I believed I knew exactly where my life was headed.

Then I went to Cherry Creek.

When I returned, something inside me had changed.

I hated school with a passion.

My roommates seemed childish and immature. My professors often seemed like pompous know-it-alls who had spent their lives in classrooms and knew very little about the life I had just experienced.

Julius had taught me more about life in five and a half months than I thought a classroom could teach me in years.

The problem was, **I had learned enough to realize how little I still knew.**

I no longer wanted to sit in a classroom listening to people explain life when I had just spent months living it.

Bernice still wanted me to finish college. More importantly, she wanted me to become a high school teacher so that someday I could return to the ranch and work there—not become a doctor as I had originally planned.

I had lost the desire to become either.

Looking back, I realize that Cherry Creek had not simply changed my opinion about college.

It had changed my understanding of what I wanted from life.

Five years later, Cherry Creek Sheep Company would be sold to Kevin Brewer. Sivert and Janet had placed the company under such a heavy burden of debt through what I believed was Sivert's

mismanagement and Janet's spending that there was little hope of its survival.

Once Cherry Creek stopped raising sheep and producing wool, **it never again showed the kind of profitability it once had.**

Marie Straw eventually sold her one-third interest and mineral interests to Kevin Brewer. Bernice followed a year later, selling her interest in the land.

Sometimes I still wonder what might have happened if Julius and I had bought even a portion of Cherry Creek ourselves.



The Last Time I Saw Julius

Julius passed away in the spring of 1973 at the age of fifty-five.

Julius had been working at Shep's Antiques when he suffered a massive heart attack. Somehow, before his life slipped away, he made his way toward the Judith Gap area and to Fred Wiefrich's place.

Fred had been gone for nearly a year and a quarter.

Perhaps Julius was simply following an old road to a familiar place. Perhaps he was looking for someone he knew would no longer be there.

He never made it to the Great Slave Lakes.

He made it to Fred's place instead.

That is where they found him—in the Skunk Wagon, alone, on the land where his old friend had once lived.

In the end, Julius never reached the destination he had planned. But somehow, he found his way back to Fred.

Maybe that had been his final dream.

I didn't learn that Julius had died until nearly a year later, when I stopped at Shep's Antiques and talked with Bill Shepherd.

By then, the hardest part was something I still couldn't explain.

Julius and I had never spoken another word to each other.

I had left messages for him with Bill Shepherd and at the Jersey Lilly with Bill Seward, asking him to call me.

He never did.

I have spent many years wondering why.

Maybe Julius believed that staying away was **"the best for both of us."**

Maybe he was angry with me because of what had happened with my parents.

Maybe he simply wanted to leave that part of his life behind.

I will never know.

What I do know is that Bill Shepherd told me Julius never forgave Paul or Bernice for the promises they had made to him about operating their new ranch—and the other promises they never kept.

I wish I could have had one last conversation with Julius.

Not to change anything.

Not to ask him to explain himself.

Just to tell him thank you.



1974 – The Missing Steers

In 1974, while I was teaching school in Jordan, Montana, I learned a story about the thirty-eight missing steers.

This may have been a rumor, but it made total sense to me at the time.

According to that account, Walt Secrest had found the missing steers on a neighboring ranch. The story was that he moved them into a corner pasture on his property, arranged for Ryan's Grocery in Jordan to process the beef, and divided the proceeds.

I heard a very similar story from Walt Secrest's son, Cotton, who was unaware that I was related to the Mysse family. I was his eighth-grade teacher at the Jordan Schools. Cotton also told me that Merton Mysse had been threatened while trying to cross the Secrest property to gain access to his property on Basin Creek. According to Cotton, his father, Walt, was concerned that Merton might recognize the M Lazy M Cherry Creek brand on the steers.

I cannot establish that Cotton's account was true, even though he stated it as fact.

What I can say is what the story meant to me at the time.

I had spent months in 1971 hearing about the missing cattle, watching people accuse one another, and trying to understand what was happening on Cherry Creek.

Now, as a young teacher, I was hearing another version of what might have happened.

It reinforced something I had already learned from Julius:

On Cherry Creek, there were always more stories than answers.



The Direction of My Life

Cherry Creek also changed the direction of my own life.

Before Cherry Creek, I had loved college. For my first two years, I had a goal. I intended to become a doctor, and I believed I knew exactly where my life was headed.

Then I went to Cherry Creek.

When I returned, something inside me had changed.

I hated school.

My roommates seemed childish and immature. My professors sometimes seemed to me like people who had spent their lives in classrooms and knew very little about life as I had just experienced.

Julius had taught me more about life in five and a half months than I thought a classroom could teach me in years.

The problem was that I had learned enough to realize how little I still knew.

Bernice still wanted me to finish college. More importantly, she wanted me to become a high school teacher so that someday I could return to the ranch and work there—not become a doctor as I had originally planned.

I had lost the desire to become either.

Looking back, I don't think Cherry Creek simply changed my opinion about college.

It changed my understanding of what I wanted from life.

In 1974, I took my first teaching job in Jordan, Montana.

Even then, the family connection to Cherry Creek continued. Once again I was expected to find out what was happening at Cherry Creek for Bernice, and because of Sivert the ranch employees were instructed not to let me wander freely around the property.

I had left Cherry Creek.

But I had not escaped it.



The Sale of Cherry Creek

About five years after the events of 1971, Cherry Creek Sheep Company was sold to Kevin Brewer.

The Cherry Creek Sheep Company had accumulated a heavy burden of debt and, from my perspective, I attributed that condition to what I believed was Sivert's mismanagement and Janet's spending. Cherry Creek was eventually sold after carrying a severe debt load.

Once Cherry Creek stopped raising sheep and producing wool, the ranch never again achieved the profitability it had once had.

Marie Straw eventually sold her one-third interest and mineral interests to Kevin Brewer.

Bernice followed a year later, selling her interest in the land to Kevin Brewer.

By then, the ranch that had dominated so much of my family's life was no longer the same enterprise.

Sometimes I still wonder what might have happened if Julius and I had bought Cherry Creek ourselves.

I know that is speculation.

But I also know why the thought remains with me.

Julius had once looked at me and said we could run it.

For a brief moment, I believed him.



What I Carried Forward

When I left Cherry Creek in December 1971, I thought I was leaving behind a difficult few months in Montana.

I didn't understand that I was leaving behind a part of my life that would stay with me for the next fifty years.

The log barn remained.

The memories remained.

The questions remained.

So did the lessons Julius had taught me.

He taught me about hard work, loyalty, responsibility, keeping my word, and finding a way forward when circumstances seemed impossible.

More importantly, he treated me with respect.

Not because I was a shareholder.

Not because I was Paul and Bernice's son.

Not because I was useful to him.

He respected me because I worked beside him.

That mattered.

I was twenty-one when I left Cherry Creek. I knew very little about life, but I knew I would never forget what had happened there.

I kept my journals.

I kept my photographs.

I kept the questions that never received answers.

I kept the powder-blue Big Mac coveralls Julius gave me.

And I kept the memory of a man who had become far more than my foreman.

He had become my friend.

In many ways, he had become the father figure I did not know I needed.

The story of Cherry Creek did not end when I drove away from Shep's Antiques.

It simply changed.

The Mysse Curse had begun with a family that no longer trusted itself.



August 21, 1921

Bertha Jorgine Coltom Mysse

Sivert Gerhart Mysse I

What followed would become another story—the story of promises, ownership, family, and what happened when the same patterns followed us into the next generation.

That story would eventually become the Milam Curse.

But it started here.

At Cherry Creek.





About the Author

Craig R. Milam

In 1971, at the age of twenty-one, Craig R. Milam was a college student with plans to become a physician. A family assignment sent him to eastern Montana, where he spent five and a half months on the Cherry Creek Sheep Company ranch near Ingomar.

What began as an unexpected assignment became one of the most defining experiences of his young life.

During those months, Craig worked alongside **Julius Sebulsky**, an older Montana sheepherder whose education ended in the eighth grade but whose practical knowledge, intelligence, humor, and understanding of people left a lasting impression. Julius became Craig's teacher, mentor, friend, and, in many ways, the father figure he did not know he needed.

Craig kept a detailed journal throughout his time at Cherry Creek. At the time, he never imagined those handwritten observations

would one day become a book. They were simply his way of recording what he saw, what he experienced, and what he was trying to understand.

More than fifty years later, Craig returned to those journals, photographs, and memories and began reconstructing the story of the summer and fall of 1971—the Cherry Creek Sheep Company, the Mysse family, the growing conflict within the ranching partnership, and the extraordinary man who helped him navigate it.

Julius and the Mysse Curse is the result.

Craig writes from the perspective of both the young man who lived those months and the seventy-five-year-old man who finally understands how profoundly they changed his life. The book is not simply a story about a ranch or a family.

It is the story of a young man learning about **work, loyalty, responsibility, keeping his word, family, trust, and the consequences of promises made and promises broken.**

Most of all, it is Craig's way of keeping a promise he made more than fifty years ago—to tell the story of Julius Sebulsky and the remarkable lessons he left behind.

This book is his record of those five and a half months—and of the young man who left Cherry Creek very different from the one who arrived.

Looking back now, I realize that the lessons Julius taught me were not confined to those months on the ranch. They stayed with me throughout my life, shaping the way I understood people, family, loyalty, and what it means to keep one's word.

All my life, I have watched the lives people live. I have seen what people build, what they acquire, and what they leave behind. I have

also seen what they give, what they take, and the promises they keep or break.

Over the years, I have come to understand something.

In the end, our legacy is not what we leave behind.

It is how we lived.

Whether we were honest.
Whether we kept our word.
Whether we treated others with respect.
Whether we made a difference in someone else's life.

A person may leave behind a ranch, a fortune, or a name that carries on for generations. But none of those things tells the whole story.

What matters is the life that was lived.

An honest life.