

As All My  
Fathers Were

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As All My  
Fathers  
Were

a novel

JAMES A. MISKO

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First Edition

*This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents  
either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.*

*Dedicated to editors and authors alive and dead*

When an author finishes a manuscript, a sense of elation and job well done surges through his entire being. Then it is submitted to editors who have no emotional attachment to its birthing. Their job is to offer suggestions and corrections to make it better.

When the author receives their critiques and starts to incorporate their suggestions pressing him to cut and revise, his attitude toward editors begins to change.

In the end, it is all for the better. Four excellent critique artists and editors edited this book: some for punctuation, some for story arc, and some for overall sense of novel construction. Any remaining mistakes are mine. I would like to thank them all, for without them many of my original literary offenses would have made it to the printing press.

*Irena Praitis*: Instructor of Creative Writing, UC State, Fullerton

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*Lisa Cron*: Speaker, author of *Wired for Story*

*Cathy Bromley*: Copy Editor

An author tends to find other authors he enjoys both for style and content and their work guides him. They provide good reading and form a stable base. I owe a lot to the following.

*Living Authors*

James Alexander Thom, John Graves, Howard Frank Mosher, Kent Haruf, Pat Conroy, Nick Jans, Lynn Schooler, Herman Wouk, Richard Russo, Dick Couch and Andrew Neiderman.

*Deceased Authors*

Jessamyn West, A.J. Cronin, Erskine Caldwell, Robert Service, Robert Ruark, R.F. Delderfield, Vardis Fisher, Robert Penn Warren, Wallace Stegner, Rudyard Kipling, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and Jack London.

# Chapter I

THE METALLIC RING OF the phone in the library bounced off the walls of books and sank into the heavy carpet. Shafts of afternoon sun that often lifted the spirits of Nebraska farmers in the spring filtered through the windows. Richard Barrett picked up the receiver. Startled from his peaceful contemplation of the coming crop season, he was not his friendliest.

Down the hall, his brother, Seth Barrett, scooped out the last spoonful of ice cream and threw the empty container in the trash. Spoon in mouth, he walked down the hall toward the library, his bare feet sticking to the bee's wax finish on the oak flooring.

"Who called?" Seth said.

"Craig Jamison," Richard replied. "Wants to read Mom's will this afternoon."

"Where—here?"

Richard nodded. "I will call Ginny."

"Why call her? She's not direct kin."

"I am sure she will be mentioned in it."

"She'd better not be getting any of the ranch."

An exasperated smile crept over Richard's face. My gawd, the brothers were nine and ten years old in the small town of Plattsmouth, Nebraska, when Mae and Andrew Barrett adopted Virginia and still the fence existed that Seth had built between them. Maybe Seth was going to tell him something he didn't know. With Seth, things seethed inside for some time before they surfaced. If something was going to surface now, Richard wanted to be fully aware of it.

Seth picked up the urn of cremains off the mantel and read the brass plate. "Mae Barrett. Born 1920: Died 2014." He looked up. "She lived a good long time, but she didn't give birth to Ginny."

“She is our legally adopted sister and has been for fifty years. She will be mentioned.”

“Just isn’t right, that’s all.” Seth pulled the spoon across his tongue and looked at the clock. “I’m gonna get a haircut.”

“Be back by 5:00.”

“Don’t start without me.”

Seth grabbed his Stetson off the hall tree, pulled his boots on, and opened the door.

With Seth gone the room was quiet as a cave. Richard let his eyes close, and relaxed in the chair that he had positioned to look out of expansive windows set in the stone house on a hill. He could see over most of the 8,000 acres of farm and rangeland down to the cottonwood trees just beginning to blossom along the banks of the Platte River. The cropland was ready for planting. He loved that time of year. Seeing the new growth split the soil with light green leaves and reach for the sun. It gave him a burst of energy and even at 65 years of age it never failed to excite him.

He could not imagine doing anything other than farming. Sitting on top of a giant piece of equipment plowing, harrowing, seeding—watching the land change from fallow to seeded to growing corn and soybeans and knowing that God had indeed treated the farmer well with returns of over 100 fold from each tiny seed stuck in its bosom, fertilized, watered, and harvested. It was truly a miracle.

On the other hand communicating with his brother had never been easy. Seth had lit out for Nevada after two years of college and ended up in Vietnam. The family heard from him once when he got back and two times when he needed money. He came up the driveway in a ’55 Studebaker after twenty years and announced that he was sober, single, and wanted to work on the ranch. He had fathered a son who lived in Florida with his mother, but it wouldn’t create any problem. It wasn’t a hard decision to make. Mae Barrett and Richard and Ginny had sat at the dining table and talked it over. It was unanimous to let Seth become a full time family member again. The brothers split responsibility for the ranch work: Seth handled the animals and Richard the crops. They seldom crossed paths during the day unless there was a problem. There would be no problem here. He and Seth were the only direct relatives of Mae Barrett, the natural recipients of the proceeds of her estate.

SETH OPENED THE DOOR of the barbershop, grabbed the rim of his hat and spun it at the rack halfway down the wall. It caught a hook, twirled twice and stopped.

“Just like ropin’ a calf,” Seth said.

The barber put the scissors and comb in one hand and with his other hand took up a pen and marked a pad near the cash register. “That’s five out of eight.”

“I’ll make it. I only need one more for my free haircut.”

The customer in the barber chair smiled. “How do I get a free haircut?”

“You throw your hat on the rack six out of 12 tries from the threshold.”

“Sounds easy.”

“It is. Until you try it.”

The barber trimmed the eyebrow hairs. “This is the first year he’s close to it.”

“I’ve been practicing for five years but I’ve got it down now. The secret is to use a hat you wear a lot and are familiar with, one with a big crown in it. You need the float and the space to catch a hook. I could teach you for \$10.”

“Hell,” the customer said. “For ten bucks I can buy the haircut.”

“It isn’t the same. Winning one from Swede is worth way more than ten bucks. It gives you bragging rights all the way across Cass County.”

“What if you don’t make it six times?” the customer said.

“Then you pay just like regular, but he doesn’t bet as high when you’ve got a good poker hand. It costs you either way.”

Swede pulled the barber cloth off the customer, dusted him with the talcum brush and put the ten-dollar bill in the cash register. Then he swept the hair into a dustpan and dumped it in the trash. He brushed off the seat and smiled at Seth.

“Just a trim, Swede. I want to look good for the estate trustee.”

“How good do you want to look?”

“I want to show a little age, enough for wisdom to set in. A care for my personal appearance so to speak.”

“Do you want him to know you lost twenty-two dollars at poker Friday?”

“Hell no. That’s too personal.”

Swede pulled the barber cloth tight around his neck. "Someone said Klete Dixon was eyeing your place to add to his spread."

"I've heard that a hundred times."

"Maybe there's something you don't know."

"Like what?"

Swede shrugged. "Benny Johnson was in and said Klete had hired Craig Jamison to draw up an offer on your place."

"Swede...you know Craig is our attorney." Seth gestured with his hands to the ceiling. "Rumors are easy to start and hard to stop. If I had a dollar for every rumor I've heard about Klete Dixon buying our spread, Klete could have the ranch and I'd be living high on the hog in Florida."

"What do you want to do with these long hairs on the side?"

"Cut em."

**VIRGINIA ALEXANDRIA MAE BARRETT HOUSTON**, aka "Ginny," heard the phone ringing as she set the grocery bags on the counter. A mother of three, she knew how to multi-task and put butter, eggs and vegetables in the refrigerator as she picked up the phone.

"Hello. This is Ginny."

"Ginny. Richard. How is the family?"

"Great as far as I know."

"You short of knowledge on somebody?"

"Not that I know of. But Donavon is out looking at the Norstad Ranch and the kids are helping clean up the church for Easter services, so I'm not up to the minute on any of them."

"What have you got on your plate for 5:00 this afternoon? Could you come out to the ranch and hear Craig Jamison read Mae's will and testament?"

"That old pirate. How come Mom trusted him to handle the estate?"

Richard leaned back in his chair. "Well, you will remember he courted her after Dad died, and she had a soft spot for him. I am not aware that she knew any of his shortcomings. He can look awfully good in a suit and tie and fits in with the best of the community. Anyway, he wants us all here. Can you come alone?"

"I can arrange it. I'll pop a roast and some potatoes in the oven and be there."

“Good. See you then.”

Ginny finished putting the groceries away, put a pork roast and half dozen potatoes in the oven, ground a wee bit of dark chocolate over an espresso, kicked her shoes off and sat down in the recliner. She blew on the coffee while looking out over the back yard that looked like an outdoor gymnasium.

This was one of three times a day she loved and lived for. Before Donavon and the kids got home when she could think her thoughts, dream her dreams, and ingest either a stemmed glass of Sterling Chardonnay or an espresso—depending on what commitments she had made for the rest of the day.

She knew Craig Jamison as a local lawyer, card player, amateur politician, and widower long before he plied his courting skills to her mother. His attentions flattered Mae and provided her with a social life outside the family after Andrew Duncan Barrett broke his neck jumping his horse over a fence, leaving her in charge of the Barrett Ranch, two sons and an adopted daughter.

“Oh God, let me please be mentioned in the will,” she prayed.

**AT FIVE O’CLOCK**, Richard opened the door for Jamison. “Hello Craig.”

Craig nodded. “Richard. I see you haven’t changed anything.”

“No need to. We like it the way it is. Would you like coffee or whisky?”

“Coffee, thank you. Don’t want to misread the will.”

Richard pulled open the double doors leading into the library. Ginny and Seth stood up.

“Afternoon Ginny, Seth,” Craig said. “Good to see you here.”

“Hello, Craig,” Seth said. “How was your luck Wednesday night?”

Craig smiled. “I came out ahead when I filled that full house on the last hand of the night. Early on I thought I’d have to borrow some money from you to finish the evening, but it worked out okay.”

Seth sat down. “More’n likely we’d have had to borrow from you.” He lifted his leg and brushed dust off the toe of the cowboy boot. “Rumor at Swede’s this morning that you’re drawing up an agreement for Dixon to buy our ranch.”

Craig sat in a coach-leather love seat that Andrew Barrett had bought at auction when a neighbor had sold out to Klete Dixon over

forty years ago. Klete never wanted personal property, just the land, the water, the fences, the barns and a good clear deed for his money.

Craig pursed his lips and shook his head. "First I've heard of it." He opened his briefcase. "You want to sell?"

"No," Seth said and looked at Richard sitting in his usual chair with his fingers steepled like some Supreme Court Judge. The room quieted.

Uneasy with the quiet, Craig cleared his throat and began. "I'm glad you're all here. The first of this is a lot of legal talk so let me just cut to the chase and read the will proper. Here's what she asked me to write.

"I wanted you all to be back into normal routine of running the family and the ranch before you heard my will. I had a long and enjoyable life and I want the same for each of you. Such a life needs purpose and goals and above all an understanding of history: history of your family, history of the land, and history of this place and people who make their lives here.

"As to the personal cars and money, I will \$25,000 each to Dawson, Buchwald, and Valerie, my beloved grandchildren. There are three family cars in the garage and I would like each grandchild to have one. They must choose and settle ownership of the cars among themselves with no argument. The adults will respect whatever choices they make.

"Five hundred thousand dollars shall be kept as ranch operating cash and handled as in the past by Richard and Seth with the help of Craig Jamison, Attorney, and Bud Blaha, CPA. Any remaining surplus shall be determined and divided 1/3 each to Seth, Richard, and Ginny."

Seth's head snapped around. "A third?"

Craig nodded. "The Barrett Ranch"—Craig lifted his eyes from the document and scanned the three siblings sitting in chairs across from him—"shall be deeded 40% to Seth and 40% to Richard and 20% to Virginia, providing they jointly complete within sixty-one days, the task I set before them."

Craig smiled looking out over the document. He cleared his throat again.

"Starting May 1<sup>st</sup> the year of my death, or May 1<sup>st</sup> the following year, Seth and Richard will undertake a journey by foot and/or horseback,

from the ranch to the junction of the North and South Platte River and canoe back. They are to stay on, or as close to the river as possible going into towns only for provisions or assistance. No motor or motorized vehicle may be used to speed up their journey, and they must complete the trip in sixty-one days. Along the way they are to look at other farms and ranches, soil conditions, rainfall, crops and animal condition. They are especially tasked to satisfy in their minds why my grandfather, Adolph Melzer, chose this property to homestead in 1845. They are to make special effort to act as brothers of good will and get along by learning the true meaning of brotherly love, which has been poorly demonstrated from time to time over the last forty years.

“I should have spent more time on our history and your forbearers while you were growing up and before Seth lit out for parts unknown. I fault myself for not making you more aware of the history and the hardships that have allowed the Melzer Ranch, now known as the Barrett Ranch, to be homesteaded, retained for 130 years, and passed on to you now.

“It always seemed there would be enough time to do that and I let it slide, which was not my intent. Klete Dixon and the Barretts evolved into industrial farmers at the same time, thinking we were being progressive after the drought of 1930s. We bought out Filoh Smith and divided his land between us, thinking we had done both Filoh and the land a favor. We should have sat down in the library and had some history lessons. As I got older, it was more difficult for me to put up an argument against your new-fangled farming and ranching methods. I had not studied them but I was innately opposed. I simply could not muster a formidable argument.

“I have expressed my displeasure about your continuation of industrial farming methods instead of returning to the sustainable system the ranch had thrived on in the early years. The Grange and Monsanto and the heavy use of the Ogallala aquifer have poisoned your thinking and it is your refusal to see my side of the argument that has caused me to set up these harsh stipulations. This ranch and the bequeathing of it is my last and only tool.

“Bear in mind while on the trip that Granddad Melzer could have chosen property on either side of the river anywhere between Plattsmouth and Ogallala. He chose this land on which my will is being read. It is my belief that a knowledge of, and a feeling for, the

land and river and what it has provided to those who are giving it to you now, is essential in receiving it with a full heart and a mind that is receptive to the opportunities it provides.

“During Seth and Richard’s journey, Virginia and the grandchildren are to operate the ranch on a daily basis as they would have done had Seth and Richard been drafted into the military, crippled or killed. It is a tough world but the Melzers and Barretts who preceded you have done the toughest part. You now have the land and all they built IF you succeed in this task I require of you.

“If the ranch is not operated and maintained well, or if the journey is not completed in sixty-one days, it is to be donated to Boys Town Nebraska directly from the estate.

“I expect you to complete it just as you have each done excellent work in your lives, on this ranch, and in this town. However, just to make sure I have appointed my good friend and attorney, Craig Jamison, as timekeeper for your journey. He is to record the date of leaving and return and certify that it is within the sixty-one days allotted. He is further tasked with certifying that the ranch is in substantially the same condition as it was when Richard and Seth left.”

Craig laid the paper on the desk, removed his glasses, and put them in the breast pocket of his coat. “Mae concerned herself with this request for some time. In the end she felt it was necessary for the succeeding generations to understand what their families had gone through to be able to present them with these assets.”

“They seem harsh to me,” Seth said.

Richard stood up. “Would you care for a whiskey now?”

“Thank you, no, Richard. I better scoot on home, I want to catch the baseball game.”

He stood and reached his hat. “Let’s talk after you’ve had a chance to think about this. Maybe some time next week. I’ll leave this copy here and you can go over it. I don’t think the remaining items are of much concern, but you ought to read them. Good evening. I’ll let myself out.”

Richard patted him on the shoulder. “Talk to you next week, Craig.”

**RICHARD PULLED THE STOPPER** out of the Laphroaig Whisky bottle and poured a double shot into a tulip shaped crystal glass. He swirled it around and brought it up to his nose. His hand trembled.

Seth looked out the window. "That could take all summer."

Ginny was shaking her head. "Every day, every day, every day. I can't do that. Two or three times a week is one thing, every day is entirely another."

"You'd have to move out here."

"I can't do that. The kids are in school until June. And Donavon..."

"Ginny—it's only for two months. It can't be more than 300 miles."

"And just how fast do you think you can travel by foot, horseback and canoe?"

Richard pointed at Seth who raised his head. "A decent horse can make ten miles a day; probably thirty on a trail."

"When's the last time you went thirty miles a day on a horse?" Richard said.

"And walking?" Ginny threw in.

"Well—if there aren't too many fences to cross we could make twelve, fifteen miles a day either afoot or canoe. I'm thinking we can do twelve any method, so that's about thirty days in all," Seth said.

Richard scoffed. "I don't think you know a damn thing about it. You've been riding back and forth between fence lines, not up riverbanks crossing rivers and climbing over downed trees. We need to plan for the full sixty-one days."

"How long did it take Grandpa Melzer?" Ginny said.

Seth and Richard exchanged glances. "Don't know," Seth said. "Well—it doesn't make any difference. If we sign on to this thing we're gonna do it whether it takes us twenty days or twenty months. We've got no choice. What the hell would I do without the ranch?"

"Needs to be done in two months or less," Richard reminded him.

Seth nodded, his face reddening. "Hell—I know that, Richard."

"This is gonna shake my whole family up," Ginny said. "And just as we were getting ready for a nice summer too."

Richard tipped the glass to his lips and swallowed. "I'll need a mule to carry my Scotch."

"No sir—you'll carry it yourself. No more putting it in my pack."

Richard smiled. "You didn't even know you had it."

"What are you guys talking about?" Ginny asked.

“On our last elk hunt,” Richard said, “some twenty-five years ago, I slipped a jar of peanut butter and a fifth of whisky in Seth’s pack when he wasn’t looking. He packed it up the mountain.”

“I didn’t know it until I got to the top. It damned near killed me,” Seth said.

“But at night, you sure enjoyed your share of the Scotch.”

“Well—I did. That’s for sure.”

“And the peanut butter too.”

“And the peanut butter.”

“Next time we’ll take horses.”

Seth frowned. “There ain’t goin’ to be a next time.”

Ginny stood up. “Can you guys get off this and get some straight thinking done. I don’t know what to do. My whole family is going to be in disarray over this. We’ve all counted on being set for life when we inherited the ranch and now it could go down the drain. I might have to go back to work.”

Richard tossed back the Scotch, set the glass down on the table, leaned back and shoved his hands in his front pockets. “I think we need to take a day or two and work this out in our heads. It seems tough right now, but we haven’t begun to detail it. What say we each think about it for a few days and get together first of the week?”

“Richard—you don’t understand,” Ginny said. “This is going to be a complete disruption to my life. Everything is going to go to pot while I’m out here kicking the cows and tending to the crops.”

“Not to mention the hired hands,” Seth threw in.

“That too,” she said.

**IF THERE WAS ONE** thing Ginny could count on it was her daily schedule. She had organized it, and gotten it down to little squares on her Things to Do Today pad. There was room for twenty items. She seldom got past the fourth or fifth item, but the lesser important ones always hung around until they matured, moved up, got handled, and scratched off. She usually laid plans for thirty days in advance and would smile with self-satisfaction when she could complete and cross off each item.

To move to the ranch and run it was going to be a huge disruption. Maybe Donavon could work with it. He was up, breakfasted and gone early most every day. She would have a hundred things to do to get ready. And what about her commitments to the book club, the

Friends of the Library, and the Fourth of July Extravaganza committee which she was chairman of this year?

The kids. What about them? Move out to the ranch? They enjoyed the times they spent there now, but if you made it an every day deal, would they like it? She had to figure a way to make it a living experiment: a challenge like camp or sports. It was a long ways back to her teen years, but she could try to reconstruct those times and avoid the arguments she had had with Mae and Andrew when she was a child living there. But think about it: pushing the warm, smelly cows into different pastures, watching the crops inch their way toward the sky, greening every day, and looking at the sky to check for rain for a good reason instead of the ‘what to wear’ reason. Oh God—it was at once troubling and thrilling.

And the brothers? Could they get along without killing one another, traveling up and down that sick river for two months? In her mind she pictured the time she heard the yelling in the barn, slid open the door and saw Seth on the concrete floor with Richard standing over him, fists clenched. She closed her eyes. Had they always fought like that?

She got out her Things To Do Today list and laid a pen beside it. “Tomorrow,” she said. “That will be a good time to start working on this.”

**SETH BUILT A FIRE** in the library fireplace and sat in the brown leather chair he used for thinking and stared into the flames. He could hear Richard coming down the hall.

“It’s your turn to build supper,” Richard said.

Seth, startled, popped his head around. “Is it Wednesday already?” Richard nodded.

“We ought to get a cook out here. I’m not liking most of the food that crosses my plate lately. Some chief cook and bottle washer might make something that we’d enjoy eating instead of just tolerating it.”

“We could do that,” Richard said. “Did you want to share our house with a young girl, an old woman, or a male chief cook and bottle washer?”

“Don’t think it makes any difference if they know how to cook and keep house.”

“You think Ginny will want her or him if she moves out here?”

“Dunno,” Seth said. He rolled his tongue around his lower teeth. “Are we really goin’ on this trip—afoot or horseback, or are we gonna go to court and get it resolved?”

What’s got you spooked about this little jaunt up the Platte and back?”

“I’m not spooked.” He laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. “I’m just trying to figure out why Mom would have put that in her will and never mentioned anything to us about it all her born days. She must have been thinking about it for some time before she had Craig write it down, don’t you think?”

Richard nodded. “You know how she hated us implementing the new farming techniques? How she liked secrets—would keep things from us until they were ready to happen?”

“Yes, I do. But this is more than a surprise. It’s our livelihood. Since Dad died we’ve been doing all the work and now we’re to turn it over and go traipsing up the river.”

“—And down,” Richard put in.

“—And down, just to see why Grandpa Melzer picked this place.”

“That’s it.” Richard poured a small Scotch and swirled it. “And understand the grip the new farming methods have imposed on the land. I can see her smiling as she told Craig to write that. Don’t forget the rest of it: we’re to get along.”

Seth bit his lower lip. “Well—I hope she’s enjoying it. All I can see is us getting arrested for trespassing, harassing cattle and game, and polluting river water.” He adjusted his headrest. “And as for getting along, if we keep a little apart, like we are here and you don’t tell me how to do my work, I think we can make it without killing one another.” He threw a small pillow at Richard. “Don’t you?”

Richard caught the pillow and squeezed it between his hands. “What’s for supper, Seth?”

“Leave it alone, Richard.” His fingers slid across his face and up beside his nose. “Macaroni and cheese.”

Richard snorted. “And a salad?”

Seth nodded. “And a salad.”

“Good balanced meal. We need to be thinking about what we’ll cook on the river trip.”

“Yeah. That’ll be fun, won’t it?”

Richard turned to look out the window at the setting sun. “You seem a bit upset.”

“Well—Judas Priest, we’re looking at the possibility of losing the ranch. What do we do then, wash dishes at Mom’s Café?”

“There is the will money,” Richard said.

“Yeah—and just how long do you think that will last me?”

Richard shook his head. “It could put us in a hell of a bind.”

“And what about old age? No house, no land, no income—we could end up on welfare. Why the hell would Mom do this to us? She wasn’t mean to us growing up.”

“It gives us a clear purpose and that is always stimulating.”

“If it’s stimulation you’re looking for, let me spell out some alternatives.”

Richard chuckled. “No—I’ll go with this one.” He pitched the pillow at Seth and hit him in the back of the head as he lifted himself out of the chair.

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### *The Platte River*

*Fourmile Creek dribbled over a sodden sand and mud mouth where it dumped its water and chemicals and history into the Platte River a few miles northwest of Plattsmouth, Nebraska. Like an overfed snake, it slid sluggish and grey between its banks, seeking an escape from the plowed land it drained. It was a silent creek, hushed amid the rustling of leaves that whispered on the willows along its banks.*

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## Getting ready, Seth

SETH PULLED THE ANCIENT glass door open to the Riverside Grocery and walked down the aisle marked Prepared Foods.

“Where’s your freeze-dried food, Doug?”

“It was on that third aisle, but it’s all gone.”

“When you getting some more?”

“Probably be a couple of weeks before they get back. They were just here.”

“You didn’t order much?”

“I did my usual order but Klete Dixon came in and bought it all. Said he was sending some of his men out to line shacks to do fence mending.”

Seth plopped his hat back on his head. “Well, don’t that beat all.” He sifted through the jerky hanging on a metal strip. “You don’t have any canoes, do you?”

“No. Probably get one at the Marina. What are you fixin’ to do?”

“Just lookin’, that’s all. Have you got any Tang?”

“You goin’ on a camping trip or something? Too early for hunting.”

“Quit being so inquisitive and answer my question. Judas Priest—you’d think you were reporting for the Plattsmouth Journal. Have you got any Tang?”

“What size?”

“Oh for crying out loud. I’ll come back when you can help me”.

“Bring some money to the poker game next week. I’m tired of loaning you money to beat me with. Matter of fact, you owe me ten bucks.”

Seth took out his billfold, pulled out a ten-dollar bill and laid it on the counter. “Call your freeze dried people and see if they can come back here, or I’ll have to drive to Omaha and get a good price on it.”

## Getting ready, Richard

“CAN YOU DELIVER IT up around Ogallala?”

Jack Brown shook his head. “I can but you aren’t going to like the price, Richard.”

“How much?”

“With gas running three dollars a gallon and a day’s time and a rig—probably double the price of the canoe.”

“You know anybody up there that sells canoes?”

“None I know of.” Jack put his right foot up on a bench and retied his shoelaces. “What in the world do you want a canoe up there for?”

“Seth and I need to come down the river.”

“There won’t be enough water to float that thing this summer with all the irrigation water being pumped out.”

“Doesn’t matter. I need to do it and a canoe seems the best thing to do it in. Don’t you agree?”

“I do. But you’d better buy a pair of waders cause you’re gonna be walking a lot of it.” Jack crossed his arms. “Besides, walking is trespassing on that river so stay on the surface.”

“You got any good news, Jack?”

“I do. Got in a case of .30-30 Winchester in the 170 grain soft point you were asking about a couple months ago.”

“I’ll take ten boxes. Add it to my bill.”

“And the canoe?”

“I’ll think about that.”

“Ok. But it’s the only one I’ve got and I’m not likely to be buying canoes to hang around here once that one’s gone.” Jack stacked the boxes of ammunition on the counter, evened the pile. “Tell you what. For \$800 you can have the canoe delivered in Ogallala if you take it today.”

“Throw in two paddles and a cooler and it’s a deal.”

“Can’t you let a man have a little profit? Do you always have to have everything at my cost?”

“Don’t start crying now, Jack. You know how I hate to see a grown man cry.”

Jack punched in the figures on the cash register. “You and Seth should buy this place and I’ll bargain with you.”

“You’ll win more than that back at the poker game and Barrett Ranch will be in debt again all winter.”

“That’ll be the day. OK. Bullets. Canoe, paddles and cooler delivered to Ogallala or North Platte or somewhere’s close by...let’s see... that comes to \$1,000 plus tax.”

“Send the bill to Blaha. I’ll tell you where to drop off the canoe soon as I figure out myself. Enjoyed talking with you, Jack.” Richard put a forearm against the door and swung it open without touching the handle.

“Come back tomorrow,” Jack hollered. “I’m gonna mark everything up tonight.”

## Do we need a rifle?

RICHARD GOT THE KEY and unlocked the gun cabinet and placed the ten boxes of shells in the ammunition drawer. He looked at the day's mail on the hall table then walked into the kitchen. Thursday. His turn to cook supper.

Seth came down from the upstairs bedroom, his cowboy boots sounding like a chorus of hammers on the wooden steps, worn with 130 years of farmers' boots descending toward the pot bellied stove, and pushed the swinging door open into the kitchen.

"How about a snort before you set up supper?"

Richard pulled his head out of the refrigerator. "Good. Can't find what I'm looking for, anyway.

"You want to hear a good one? Klete Dixon bought all the freeze-dried foods in town. Now why would he do that?"

"Interesting," Richard said. He poured a Scotch and waved the bottle at Seth. "Think you can handle this stuff now?"

"No way. Alcohol and me have got to be just speaking acquaintances."

Richard stopped mid-pour. "Could be a coincidence."

"Could be. But I don't believe that—do you?"

"No." Richard sipped his drink. "We can get what we want in Omaha." He pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. "I got a canoe off Jack Brown today. He'll deliver it to Ogallala. Also got ten boxes of .30-30 ammo."

"Are you thinking of taking a rifle with us?"

"Hell yes. Why not take the .30-30?"

"What are you gonna shoot with it?"

"I don't know yet. You always carry one on your saddle. Why do you do that?"

"Coyotes. Snakes. Buffalo running wild. Maybe a stampede."

"How long has it been since any of those happened to you?"

"Doesn't matter. I'll be ready if it does."

"Likewise."

"Humph." Seth pulled out a chair and straddled it. "What's for dinner?"

"Rabbit on a spit and fire baked potatoes."

"Sounds like trail food."

## Conditions

RICHARD LOOKED UP FROM his plate. "I'm glad you got back before Mom died. I wasn't sure we could put a finger on your whereabouts."

"I was always close," Seth said. "Sometimes I felt too close. Especially when I was in rehab."

"I could have helped some. I know Mom cut you off from the money spigot, but I had a few dollars."

"There were times I needed more than a few dollars. I could have used \$100,000, but it wouldn't have lasted long. Went through my hands like water." He shook his head. "Don't know what took hold of me like that."

"Addictions are hard to break. Where did the woman go?"

"Florida. She and the boy are down there."

"Do you hear from them?"

Seth shook his head. "Not much. I'm sending them some money each month. If we don't get the ranch I don't know what I'll do then."

Richard pushed back from the table, crossed his legs and clasped his hands behind his head. "Do you really think we can go up and back in sixty-one days?"

"Well, it ain't like when Adolph Melzer did it. He didn't have to contend with fences and other owners and farmers sucking so much irrigation water out of the river that you can't float a canoe."

"Jack Brown suggested we buy waders. He said we'd be walking half of it coming back down."

"Could be. At least it should be warm."

"And muddy."

"And muddy."

Richard shook his head. "I don't know. Ten years ago it wouldn't have bothered me much. But nearing sixty-five? Didn't sleep well last night and I don't know what it will be like sleeping on the ground for a month."

"We can go into town to a motel or something of a night, can't we?"

"The will said going into towns only for provisions or assistance. Makes it sound like we need to have a good reason for going into towns."

“Klete will probably have his boys there trying to lure us into town to break the terms of the will,” Seth said.

“I doubt Klete is that much interested in how we perform the terms of the will.”

Seth shook his head. “I’ll bet he is. He’s been wanting his hands on this place since before I lit out of here. He’d like nothing better than to buy it because we failed to meet the terms of the will.”

“Craig wouldn’t let him do that. There must be some legal stipulations that would protect us in that regard.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.” Seth stood up and stacked the dishes and started for the kitchen. At the end of the table he stopped, put the dishes down and put both hands on the table. “Whew. A little dizzy.”

“You’re not used to good food.”

“That and I’m older.”

“That’s the truth. I’ll help.”

“I can do my own damn dishes,” Seth said. He picked up the plates and carried them into the kitchen and set them down by the dishwasher. “That’s the second time this week that’s happened.”

## Ginny has problems too

“**MOM—WHY CAN’T I** wear this?”

“Bucky. It’s Friday. School picture day. You want to look your best for the school pictures and that outfit doesn’t cut it. Now go change before your breakfast gets cold. Go on—shoo.”

Ginny took the toast out with her thumb and forefinger. “Yikes—that’s hot.” She buttered it and put it on a saucer on the table. “Dawson? Valerie? Breakfast’s on.”

Donavon took his coffee and the Omaha World Herald and moved over to the breakfast nook, a neat upholstered U-shaped bench and table built to accommodate the entire family for casual meals. He crossed his legs, spread out the paper, picked up the coffee and blew across it. “I see where Senator Clement is thinking of teaming up with Congressman Dworak to ask the Governor to pull out of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program. That stinks.”

“Donavon, don’t let that stuff get to you. It’s coming up election time for Dworak and most of it is just talk.”

“It may be talk to you, but our bread is buttered by that project. That Hague ranch I just listed is counting on some of that money to improve the water system and habitat. The price differences can be a lot if a buyer can see that the restoration is going forward.”

“It’ll work out fine. It always does,” Ginny said.

“Maybe, but if the Governor pulls Nebraska out of that program we stand to lose a bunch of federal funding for the Platte River. I think the federal share is over \$300 million.”

Dawson and Valerie plunged into the kitchen. Dawson poured a glass of milk and sat down. “Bucky’s trying to wear my white shirt. Fits him like a tent.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Ginny said. She walked to the bottom of the stairs. “Bucky—wear that light blue shirt and the blue blazer. It won’t make any difference with the pants cause the camera will only be shooting the top of you.”

Valerie raised her head. “Mom—we’re having our class picnic today. I can’t go out to the ranch after school.”

“Fine, honey. Are you taking clothes for the picnic?”

“You said I could wear my regular clothes.”

“Not on a picnic. Why did they schedule the picnic the same day as class photos? Who’s running that school—the inmates?”

“I’ll take my jeans and boots in a bag and change at school.”

Bucky slid down the banister and bounced into the room. “Ta da.” He held his arms out like a showman seeking applause.

Ginny raised her chin and pointed at his breakfast sitting on the table. “Pour your milk and get to it, young man. School bus will be here before you get the raisins wet.”

“I don’t even like Raisin Bran. Don’t we have—“

“No, we don’t. I’ll get some shredded wheat today—“

“—and Cheerios?”

“—and Cheerios and Lucky Charms and Grape Nuts. Does that satisfy everyone? Did I leave anyone out?”

Donavon lifted his head from the newspaper. “I’ll be damned. Klete Dixon bought the Springer place and I didn’t even hear about it. I’d have thought Ed Springer would have called me for an

appraisal or to list it. I could have gotten him a better price than Dixon would've ever paid."

"Honey—you can't do every deal in town. Ed Springer is a smart man and he probably knows how to make the right kind of deal for himself."

"Maybe. But he was planning on going organic next year. Selling to Klete makes that go away. I don't like the sounds of it. If Klete turns that into an industrial farming operation, which he will, that means more runoff into the river. Besides, the Springer ranch abuts Barrett Ranch. Klete Dixon is our new neighbor and he could swallow up the Barrett Ranch next if things don't go right." He raised his arms toward the ceiling and rolled his eyes.

Ginny paused, as if flash frozen for an instant. "That won't make us happy."

"Not one little bit."

"Do you think Boy's Town would sell the ranch—not keep it and operate it?"

Donavon shrugged. "Who knows what they would do. You guys just better get the work done right and on time so there isn't a chance of that."

The school bus pulled up at the mailbox. The screen door slammed and the kids shouted goodbyes. Ginny poured a cup of coffee and sat down with Donavon. She turned her head around looking at the far wall and then the window. "I'm always amazed at how quiet it is just after they leave."

"It'll be like that in a few years. They'll be gone to college and we'll be here wondering if we've gone deaf." He folded the paper and set it beside her. "That reminds me—guess who I saw in town yesterday?"

"Twenty questions or hard guess?"

"Hard guess."

"I give up. Who?"

"Filoh Smith."

"He's still alive?"

"He seemed to be. He was walking and talking."

"My gosh. He must be 100 years old."

"Swede was giving him a haircut. He said Filoh was ninety and Filoh didn't deny it."

"What's he doing back in town?"

“Don’t know. But I do know that I’ve got to get to work. Goodbye, honey.” He picked up his briefcase and car keys and headed for the door.

“Brush your teeth, Donavon. You don’t want to have bad breath all day.”

He pulled a toothbrush out of his inside coat pocket and a smile spread across his face. “I’ll brush on the way to work.”

Ginny grimaced. “Without toothpaste—without water?”

“At the office,” he said and the door closed behind him.

For several minutes Ginny sat on the upholstered bench seat that formed the inside of the bay window, both hands wrapped around her coffee cup, elbows on the table. She cherished this time of day. Peaceful. Quiet. Everyone fed, dressed correctly in clean clothes, healthy and smiling...and gone, another successful start of a day.

She looked through the window across the yard strewn with play equipment to the tops of the cottonwood trees at the end of their lot. A breeze just strong enough to carry the pungent smell of the wet earth drifted through the open window. A wild turkey cackled and she spotted him strolling across the far end, pecking at something near the fence line. She had heard them, but hadn’t seen them until the leaves came back on the trees. She used to see pheasants, but the turkeys drove them out. Some say turkeys ate the young pheasants or ate the eggs or both. And then industrial farmers like Klete Dixon and Benjamin Fowler, and her brothers, bought equipment that would plow right to the fence line which eradicated the brush cover the pheasants used for protection and nesting.

When she was young, she could count on seeing a half dozen pheasants as she did her chores and on her way to school. Now it was turkeys. Her science teacher attributed it to global warming but Richard said, no, it was the loss of habitat and the carnivorous turkeys that spelled their doom. Who to believe? Didn’t make any difference. The pheasants were gone and the turkeys were here. That was life as she saw it. Something always took over the land. If you didn’t plant it to pasture or corn or wheat or soybeans, it grew weeds and native grasses. The pheasants were brought over from China in the late 1800s and once they got away from the eastern seacoast immediately prospered in Nebraska. Their call was as familiar to her as the bark of their dog.

She sat upright almost spilling her coffee. "Filoh Smith," she said. She thought he had died years ago. She liked him, although as a child she thought his odor offensive. That was before she was old enough to understand that he made his clothes from the wool of his own sheep. He sheared it, cleaned it, carded it, spun it, and wove it into shirts, pants, jackets, socks, and a stocking hat that went over his thinning hair in late September and didn't come off, as far as she knew, until May 15<sup>th</sup>. At which time, she and all the other kids in the neighborhood understood he took his annual bath near where Fourmile Creek emptied into the Platte.

They received this fantastical information from Eric Compton, a classmate, who claimed to have seen Filoh naked and in up to his bare bottom, scrubbing his white body with sand and silt while they were hunting animal footprints in the mud for a science project. He had left Cass County in disgust after Mae Barrett and Klete Dixon acquired more land and turned every farmhouse into an empty mausoleum and every acre into a well tuned productive investment tool. Now Filoh was back. Interesting.

She picked up the phone and dialed the ranch.

"Hi, Richard. Guess what? Filoh Smith is back in town."

"I'd like to talk with him. Where is he?"

"Donavon mentioned that he was getting a hair cut at Swede's. Town's not that big. Someone will know where he's staying."

"Thanks, Ginny. I'll do some checking around. If you hear anything, please let me know. "

"I will. How's the trip preparation going?"

"It's coming together. Seth is getting cold feet, I think."

"The actualities of it?"

"That's my take on it. He's hell for leather until the rubber meets the road."

"He'll do all right. He came back. He's been sober and hard working every day for the last few years, hasn't he?"

"Yup. So far so good."

"One day at a time, Richard. One day at a time."

"Amen to that. I did offer him a little bourbon last night. Kind of a celebration."

"For crying out loud, Richard. The man spent years being a drunk and you offer him some bourbon after he's sober. What's with you?"

“I wanted to see if he craved it. I think the rehab worked for him. He didn’t take it and that makes me feel better about leaving it out in my office.”

“I can’t believe you guys. Well—I gotta get. Anything I can do to help you get ready, let me know. In the meantime, I’m trying to figure out how to juggle everything while you’re both gone.”

“I know, Ginny. Big task for all of us.”

The conversation fell silent for a second and Richard listened to the line noises. “Richard—what’s your take on why Mom did this?”

“Backup, I think. She wanted us to know that you have to work for things in life. They don’t just get handed to you. Suppose she thought it would give us more respect for the land and livestock.” He coughed. “Another thing—she moved hard toward sustainable farming the last ten years and we fought that transition. I believe she wants us to seriously see this whole thing like she did... a combination of land, water, air and people who are sustained by it year after year.”

“Almost like getting religion late in life wasn’t it?”

Richard set his water down and nodded to himself. “Exactly.”

“Hmmm. Well—it’s not such a big deal. You go up and come back and it’s over.”

“I hope it goes like that. I’m not so sure it will. I think there are a hundred things we’re not seeing or even thinking about.”

“You can handle it. You always have.”

Richard coughed. “I believe I can, but I’m worried about Seth. He got dizzy getting up from the table last night. Almost dropped the dishes.”

“For cryin’ out loud. What’s wrong with him?”

“I have no idea, but it will bear watching.”

“I’d say so. Let me know if you find out anything. That doesn’t bode well for a long trip like this.”

“You got that right. Goodbye Ginny.”