DUSTSHIP

GLORY

MINGLING VOICES

Series editor: Manijeh Mannani

> *Give us wholeness, for we are broken.*
> *But who are we asking, and why do we ask?*
> — Phyllis Webb

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ANDREAS SCHROEDER

dustship glory

— based on a true story —

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This book is dedicated to my father,
Ernst Schroeder, who worked as hard and sailed as far

Damianus "Tom" Sukanen (born Tomi Jaanus Alankola)

PREFACE

When I first encountered the *Sontianen* I was driving down Highway #2, south of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, just before sundown, and I caught sight of her, in full silhouette, as I came up over a rise. She was standing upright in a fallow wheat field, flanked by a clutter of nondescript sheds and machinery (the beginnings, I eventually discovered, of an open-field museum that had never quite gotten off the ground), and she was so utterly and splendidly incongruous and absurd, this deep-sea freighter in the middle of the bald prairie, that every story-telling gene in my body immediately stood to attention. A check of the records at the Regina Public Library's Prairie History Room the next morning seemed to confirm my luck. There were fistfuls of newspaper stories on file dating all the way back to 1932 about this strange ship — and about Tom Sukanen, the obstreperous Finnish-Canadian homesteader who had built her and whose outlandish

inventions and ideas had kept his neighbours in a constant state of astonishment and uproar well through the Dirty Thirties. When I shortly thereafter managed to track down a Mr. "Moon" Mullin, nominal caretaker of the *Sontianen*, I seemed to have found another goldmine of Sukanen lore. And finally there was Ms. Brenda Niskala, a Saskatchewan poet of Finnish-Canadian descent, who proved able to provide me with introductions to various former homesteaders who had actually known Tom Sukanen in his lair. For a few weeks of reckless optimism, I actually thought I might have run into a story virtually full blown, every writer's fondest fantasy, having only to set pen to paper and take dictation.

Such appearances probably always deceive, and this one proved no exception. Cross-checked and cross-examined, the huge file of Sukanen mythology dwindled rapidly. The many newspaper stories turned out to be largely elaborations of a few superficial seed-pieces, which themselves brimmed with inaccuracies. Old-timers' recollections often proved secondhand and hazy. There had clearly been an attempt, by certain people, to soften and warm Sukanen's caustic personality until he'd become alarmingly reasonable and even altruistic — a virtual St. Christopher. And a welter of tall tales, clinging to the statistical record of Tom Sukanen's deeds and misdeeds, had swamped entirely whatever might have been known about the inner man.

All this, fortunately, did no actual damage to the story I was interested in — the man behind this mysterious venture, his times, his rough-hewn genius, his visions as preposterous as his ship standing like a raised finger amid the wheat and the dust, in its own way as unapologetic and absurd a monument to the indomitability of the human spirit as any skyscraper, pyramid, or Taj Mahal. But it did oblige me to

invent what had become erased — the fine-line details, the telling remarks or gestures, the motives, mainsprings, bridges, and dead-ends, all that sub-text and infrastructure which every writer needs as much as story, plot, and dramatic event. These I reconstructed from interviews, hypothesized by gut instinct (though I did stop short of presuming to know Sukanen's inner thoughts), basing my hunches on a growing sense and appreciation of this man whom I had intuitively recognized, and who kept making more and more sense to me as I kept digging and sifting and interviewing. (I might add, however, that I never then or since felt the need to *explain* away anything about Sukanen's obsession — skyscrapers, pyramids, or Taj Mahals have never gained anything by such explanations and are only trivialized by the attempt. What I have tried to do is merely to clarify the forces at work in the man and the decade, leaving the reader in a better position to make whatever judgements he may deem necessary . . .)

So, when the needs of this saga had finally been met, several years of research and writing later, I found I had written a novel — not (in a narrow, technical sense) a biography. I had used poetic licence wherever necessary. I am, therefore, convinced that this portrait bears a closer resemblance to the real Tom Sukanen than most of his contemporaries, friend or foe, have been prepared to countenance.

The same is not true, and intentionally so, of the book's "witnesses." These are composites, mixed and matched in part to protect their privacy and also to sharpen the issues. Everything these witnesses say was indeed said to me by someone at some point during my interviews, but not necessarily in the language, manner, or context presented here.

— *Andreas Schroeder* [Mission, B.C., 1985]

1

THE BOB KLEPPNER PICNIC

[Summer, 1934]

When the clutch of hecklers, drunks, and other idle farmers finally stopped on a knoll somewhere southwest of the one-elevator town of Manybones, Saskatchewan, they were hot, sour, and lost. The bartender's directions had been sloppy or misunderstood, and they seemed no closer to finding Tom Sukanen's hidden coulee now than when they'd piled out of the Beverage Room of the Manybones Hotel earlier that afternoon to deliver, personally, a little token of the "community's support and appreciation." For three hours they had criss-crossed ruined grainfields and blown-out summerfallow in Kleppner's unwieldy Bennett-buggy, and by the time someone had come up with the bright idea of *listening* for old Sukanen's hammering, the horses were lathered and sore. Now they all stood in the muttering wind, backs turned against the grit driving off

an adjacent field, waiting. Gusts whorled the dead grass underfoot like an animal's fur being brushed the wrong way. In the distance, farther southwest, a steady tapping sounded incongruously like a cooling stovepipe or a dripping phantom watercock.

"That's gotta be him," Kleppner said.

"You think that's him?"

"Let's go," Kleppner pointed. "Right along that ridge."

No one had any better ideas, and Bob Kleppner, as usual, seemed the most eager to kick up dust. The gangly fieldhand had never managed to stake his own farm and had never worked more than sporadically for others, even during the bumper harvests of '27 and '28. Since the worsening of the 1930 drought he had spent most of his time riding the rails and serving time. The Kleppners of south Pennant Junction were known to the business community as strictly "cash-'n-carry folk."

As they bounced along old tractor tracks skirting a dried-up alkali pond, the beat grew steadily sharper and more insistent. None of them had ever heard anything quite like it. It had a strangely alien rhythm, beckoning yet threatening at the same time, and it went on and on without the periodic interruptions one might have expected. "Goober sounds like he's playin' *music*," puzzled Willard Simpson, who had once played trumpet in the town band. After a few miles they no longer had to stop the horses to hear it, and ten minutes later the horses began to prick up their ears and switch their tails nervously. Then, without warning, they rolled over a low hummock and there it was.

"Holy fuck," Willard allowed.

"Now don't that jest jar yer preserves!"

"What I wanna know is, how's he gonna get that

damnfool thing outta there," marvelled one of the Stanton boys from Snakehole Lake. They stood on the edge of the coulee's rim like dogs sniffing down a gopher hole.

Below them, in a small field almost half the coulee's size, a large ship lay in several sections amid log and timber supports like a great beached whale, struck broadside by the full blaze of the late-afternoon sun. Her tarred bulwarks glowed a liquid amber, and her smokestack shimmered like molten brass. Off her starboard bow stood a log barn, and beside the barn, at a flaming forge, a wild-looking man with hair flying and a short-handled sledgehammer in each hand was beating a complicated tattoo on a thick sheet of steel, pounding it slowly into a roll. His bare chest and shoulders gleamed with sweat, and his face was expressionless with soot. "So that's how he gets that beat," Willard exclaimed, grinning. "*Two* hammers."

"In the middla the bald goddamn prairie. Th' old Finn musta drunk outta his own biffy."

"Hey, Noah!"

If Sukanen had registered their coming at all, he gave no sign. "Hey, Noah!!"

"Bugger's deaf as a doornail," Kleppner snorted. "Come on, let's get down there and turn up his ear-horn."

They scrambled down the steep bank and into the yard, where Frankie Crompton, always the runt and pariah of every group he'd ever tried to join, lost his balance and tumbled almost to the old homesteader's feet, ending up on his rear, sprawled ingloriously against a cooling vat. The pounding stopped abruptly. Crompton scuttled back out of range, amid hoots of laughter.

"Hey, Noah! We brung ya the second monkey!"

"Every good ape deserves another!"

"Hey, come on now, fellahs, give'm a break. You can see plain as day this Commie's ape enough fer two!"

Tom Sukanen had not moved. His face remained impassive, but his eyes darted from throat to throat. He said nothing.

"Wanna sail this rig back to paradise, do ya, Noah? Folks around here's not good enough for ya, eh?"

"Think you got a corner on the rain or somethin'? You figure when she comes you gonna get 'er all?"

"Say, Kleppner, how d'ya spell 'ahoy'?" Willard called, scribbling busily on the ship's side with carpenter's chalk. "Ship Ahoye."

"Ship of fools," Kleppner said, watching Sukanen carefully. "Make that 'ship of fool.'"

Sukanen's fists had tightened on his hammers, and his jaw was stiffening visibly. It was difficult to keep an eye on everyone. Several men were nosing around the ladder leading up to the hull's lower deck, and another looked ready for mischief by a pile of anchor chain. Crompton stuck his head into an unfinished boiler and brought down a shower of small pipes which had been loose-fitted into it.

"Hey, Klepp! How d'you suppose he's ever gonna launch this thing?"

"Plain as the nose on your face, Willie-boy. It's been rainin' in his head for so long, he'll just shove it up his ass and push off."

Their howls of laughter drowned out Tom's dark mutter underneath his breath.

"What d'ya say? Speak up, Noah, God can't hear ya!"

"Maybe he'll just fire up that little three-wheeler over there and tow the dad-blame thing to paradise!"

"Yeee-hoo!" A man-sized homemade tricycle stood in a

patch of Russian thistle by the barn. Several men ran for it, but Kleppner got there first. He clambered up into the seat and settled his boots against what appeared to be a propulsion bar.

"Now how d'you figure this doggone contraption works?"

Willard Simpson had been considering that. "Kick 'n pull on those handles, boyo. In and out. In and out. Just like Saturday night!"

Kleppner grinned. "Well then, the least we can do to be neighbourly is give it a little kick in the nuts!"

He gave a concerted heave, and the tricycle leaped from its thistle patch like a startled rabbit. He flung his legs wide for balance and heaved again. The front wheel reared, wobbling dangerously. He had just clenched his muscles for a third triumphant heave when something hard and red-hot hit him full on the neck, sprawling him into the dust. The tricycle spilled over on top of him.

"Egyptians!"

Suddenly the air was alive with whizzing, hissing projectiles, fist-sized smoking comets, of which many were finding their marks with painful accuracy. "Now this is finish! Yaa! *Riittava!*" The shipbuilder had spun about and was hurling glowing chunks of coal as fast as he could scoop them, bare-handed, out of the forge. "Damn-it bastards! *Saatanan varkaita!*" His arm pumped like a steam piston, and the coals flamed and spat in all directions. The men bunched and then scattered, but the only way out was straight back up the bluff; the forge was too strategically placed. Yelps and curses filled the air. Sukanen aimed particularly for open shirt collars, wide boot rims, and the folds of loose neckerchiefs. The caramel smell of burnt flesh drifted through the coulee. "Stink-it, seagulls! *Perkelen bummit!* You just be

fly-it home, yah! Run-it gone like rats! Go drown-it you in hell, *pakana!* No room for you in this!"

"Kick the coals into the shavings! Kick the coals into the shavings, Willie!" yelled Kleppner, still extricating himself from the tricycle, but Willard had already scrambled back up the bluff, nursing a burn on his arm. "Jesus, what a chickenshit crew!" He dodged another sizzler that barely missed and then headed at a dead run for the ship's bow, which was out of the line of fire. A jagged clump caught him full on the chest and another bounced off his shoulder, but neither managed to ignite his clothes. As he slid in under the upswept stem he was already clawing at his shirt pocket.

"Look out, Klepp! He's comin' after ya! Heads up!" The shout came from the ridge, but from his position, Kleppner couldn't see anyone. One sweep of his arm had pushed enough shavings into a pile, but his matches wouldn't stay lit in the wind. "Hey, Klepp, where are ya!" The fourth match flared in the hollow of his hand and held. The shavings caught. A flurry of wind startled the flames into bloom. "Heads up, Klepp! He's gotta sledge!" Kleppner grinned. The flames tongued at the bow.

Sukanen's body, when it fell, dropped from its perch so directly above Kleppner that there was no warning shadow at all. The grinning arsonist barely had time to inhale the breath that Sukanen's boots knocked back out of him when they hit his chest. He fell back hard and rolled into the blaze. Sukanen grabbed him by belt and collar and rolled him out, then rolled him back in again, smothering flames. Sparks and smoke snapped and billowed. Sukanen pushed and pulled the half-conscious man through the shavings like a rake, furiously clearing a firebreak around the bow. Again and again he flung himself full length onto the fire,

using Kleppner for the same purpose, turning him over and over across the shavings. The flames' reach among the now isolated shavings soon slowed and guttered, but their hold on the lower bowstem proved more tenacious. Melted tar had begun to drip down along the bow, feeding them from above. The smoke thickened and roiled, turning an oily black. Sukanen flung Kleppner away, turned, and ran for the cooling vats. There was one on each side of the forge, two open thirty-gallon drums filled with black, greasy water. He hauled the nearest off its supports as if it were made of cardboard, staggered back, and hurled it against the bow with a terrific crash. For a moment the flames disappeared in a burst of dark brown steam. Sukanen didn't stop to check the result. He leaped for the second vat, more tightly wedged between the forge's stone base and a considerable heap of scrap iron which had piled up on either side of the anvil over the past six years. The vat rose, then jammed, spilling water. Sukanen bellowed, clenched his teeth, and tore the drum from the scrap pile in a welter of angle iron, steel rods, and plate, trailing a bent wheel rim and two mangled valve covers as he lurched back towards the ship. The flames had wavered back up the bow, but with diminished strength. Sukanen upended the cooling vat, valve covers and all, then plunged through the steam to slap down the remaining flames and sparks. When a thin column of fire threatened to revive along the bow's port side, he grabbed Kleppner's still inert body and scrubbed at the flames with the fieldhand's coveralled back, scraping down still-glowing embers and char. Finally he dropped him to one side and put out the last of the fire with his feet, stamping and scuffing until only blackened cinders remained. The pall of smoke across the coulee eddied and thinned.

For an uneasy moment, only the coulee's grasshoppers sprang and whirred. The shouts from the ridge had stopped. Sukanen sat with his back to his ship, breathing heavily, but keeping a sharp eye on stray wisps of smoke that still rose now and then from the ashes. The palms of his hands were burnt to the raw flesh, and his coveralls were stiff with blood and soot. Kleppner had rolled over onto his side and was trying to sit up, groaning with each attempt. His face and arms were scorched and black, and the hair on his head had been singed almost completely off. Neither man seemed inclined to say much of anything.

"So," Sukanen grunted, finally, more to himself than to the harvest-hand. "This be-it finish now." He had been staring in the direction of the ridge and now turned to Kleppner, who was still gasping and coughing heavily. "You friends, they have-it leave you gone."

Kleppner couldn't or wouldn't turn his head. "They're . . . they're up . . . there all right. Somewhere. Goddamn . . . damn . . . bunch . . . of dishrags."

Sukanen looked for a long time as if he were searching for something on the ground around his feet. Finally his voice was flat, expressionless. "I don't be kill-it you this times, Kleppitner. Not this times. If you be tell-it me why you come."

Kleppner snorted disdainfully, and kicked a glimmering ember towards the ship. It landed on a length of hemp rope, but flickered and died.

Sukanen considered him almost languidly for a moment. He hadn't moved when the ember fell onto the rope. Now he shifted his weight to his other foot, came down on his knees in front of Kleppner, and deliberately, almost hypnotically, slid his hands past the fieldhand's collar and around

his throat. His jawline tightened, and for a brief moment his eyes betrayed his still unassuaged rage. Kleppner jerked upright and kicked, aiming for the shipbuilder's groin. Sukanen's fists merely tightened. Kleppner gurgled and flailed. His breath rasped more and more harshly. He began to gasp. The veins and muscles on his neck stood out like twisting cord. His arms twitched and jerked.

"*Laiva rotta,*" muttered Sukanen, squeezing harder. "What you be want-it from me, you bilge-rats?"

Kleppner's mouth opened and closed like a drowning fish.

"What you be want-it!" Sukanen shouted. "What you be do-it here!" He released Kleppner's throat as abruptly as he had grasped it, and seized both his ears instead. "What for you all be come, and break and this!"

Kleppner gagged, coughed, guzzled air. His chest heaved like a forge bellows. He pushed himself up on one arm and tried to roll to his feet, but the arm folded and he collapsed back against the ship. For several moments he lay still, frothing. His face was starched with hate.

"Goddamn . . . piss-assed . . . rawhead!"

Sukanen waited, attentive.

"Just who the . . . hell . . ." Kleppner's rasp thinned, receded slowly. He tried once more to get up, fell, then managed to push himself slowly into a crouch, steadying himself against the bow. "Just who d'ya . . . think . . ." An attack of coughing forced him once more to his knees and he doubled over, choking. Sukanen continued to wait. Finally Kleppner's gasping slowed, and he regained enough breath to twist himself into a sitting position, facing the shipbuilder. He spat more cinders and dirt onto his coveralls.

"Just who the hell . . . d'ya think . . . y'are?"

Sukanen unstiffened, perplexed.

"It's *you* that's . . . buildin' . . . that's buildin' the goddamn thing! Eh? It's *you* that's . . . buildin' it . . ."

Sukanen regarded Kleppner doubtfully, as if the incongruously plucked and singed harvest-hand had just handed him a hammer and called it a saw.

"What makes ya . . . think . . . you're so piss-assed special!"

A glimmering ember at Sukanen's feet popped and died.

"Hey, Klepp! What's goin' on! Need any help down there?"

Both men glanced towards the ridge, but the ship blocked their view. Kleppner shrugged and painfully hitched up his coveralls.

"So, if you don't want no trouble, don't . . . bloody well go askin' for it. Don't . . . hang it out if ya can't handle it — y'know what I mean?"

He fingered the cinders crusting his face and then pushed himself carefully to his feet, wincing as shirt and coveralls stretched across burned skin. His cap was lying in the ashes, almost charcoaled. He retrieved and settled its remains gingerly on his head. At the ship's stern he stopped to pick up Willie's neckerchief. "An' there's a . . . nother thing too. There's farmers around here gettin' . . . gettin' pretty cooked up about all those . . . thistles . . . you're lettin' run wild in your summerfallow. There's some . . . there's some that's about . . . had it, downwind. Ya know what I . . . mean? You better do somethin' about it. Pretty damn . . . quick." He spit out a tongueful of ash. "Or there's some people around here . . . figure they'll know the reason why."

He disappeared behind the starboard side of the ship and didn't reappear until his head jerked into view above the smokestack, halfway up the coulee's side. Sukanen watched

impassively as he struggled up the rest of the bluff, towards the group of men now visible on the rim above him. As they helped him over the edge he stopped and looked down once more towards Sukanen.

"Cause we know a raised finger when we see one, Commie prick!!"

It was after word of the "picnic" (as the incident came to be called) spread that Sukanen finally turned his back on them all — all the gawkers, hecklers, mischief-makers, even the well-wishers. He did this quite literally, shifting his forge and workbenches and all his scaffolding in such a way that no one was any longer able to see his face. If they became too persistent or offensive, he simply climbed into his ship and closed the hatch. For several years it became a regular game for the idlers of the district to try to snap a photograph of him with his full face showing, but no one, it appears, ever succeeded.

But of course they kept coming, relentlessly, whether he liked it or not. They came in pairs, in small groups, even occasionally by the bus- or wagon-load, young men with their girls, whole families out for a Sunday drive when the wind let up a little and the dust died down. Some came out of plain curiosity, others to jeer or taunt. Most of them just milled about at his gate, safely out of range, gaping at the big ship and shaking their heads. But occasionally there were the small, drunken packs of men, startling for the depth of their instinctive hatred, whose harsh and raucous voices always sounded like the baying of oncoming bloodhounds.

2

CORPORAL G.T. MORTIMER

[RCMP, retired]

Oh sure, certainly, I knew all about that so-called "picnic." There were plenty of farmers at loose ends in those days, broke or about to go broke, and all the farm-hands (harvest-hands, I think they called them in that part of the country, or even field-pitchers, if my memory serves me right)— yes, and all the harvest-hands out of work as well. Naturally tempers got a bit frayed under such circumstances. We had to look in on that hotel on a number of occasions during those years, to calm down a few of the more enthusiastic arguments. But there were no complaints laid in connection with that "picnic" business, so we just decided to let sleeping dogs lie.

No, I had no reason to look up the old fellow until, oh, fairly late in the game — it would have been the winter of '38, probably October, maybe early November of 1938,

if my memory serves me right. I'd received a call from the councillor of Manybones, can't recall his name offhand — big, broad-shouldered fellow, chaired the local school board, I remember that, and he was the Justice of the Peace for the district. Yes, he'd called the station to pass on various complaints there'd been about this Thomas Sukanen.

Said he seemed to be in rough shape and starting to act peculiar. Oh, all sorts of things: allegations about stampeding his neighbours' cattle, painting his fenceposts with blood, threatening children with a butcher-knife. That sort of thing. Said he thought I ought to have a look into it. Well, I was on my way up into that area anyway, had to look into a safe-blowing job at Sceptre, so I said I'd see what I could do.

It took me quite a while to find him — that was an odd winter, winter of '38. It was cold enough to weld your eyeballs shut, but the dirt was still blowing — there hadn't even been enough rain to cake the surface dust. Any snow we got just added a little colour, that's all. And the wind kept bluffing and shifting — I had a heck of a time trying to keep my bearings. He lived in a deep little coulee about ten miles southwest of Manybones — just a tiny branch off Broken Valley, really — the sort of place you just wouldn't see until it's right in front of your nose. And I was scouting for it from down in the valley — might have been better if I'd been up on the ridge, I suppose. I was looking for that round tower they said he lived in — the JP told me he lived in a three-storey tower with a submarine periscope stuck through the roof. I take it you've heard all about that tower — yes well, it takes all kinds, I suppose. "Many a hue to make Bristol stew" as my mother used to say. Present company included, I will confess. All I ever wanted to

do was run a pigfarm in southern Ontario — and anybody I ever admitted that to thought I was loco too.

Anyway, when I finally found his place, everything was already torn down. Tower, barn, whatever else he might have had in there. All that was left was the foundations. But I could see a set of deep gouge-marks leading up onto the prairie in a northeasterly direction, which I followed, and that led me right to the ship. She was lying about half a mile away from the coulee, if my memory serves me right, maybe three-quarters of a mile, but no more than that.

Now the JP had told me a bit about this ship, but he obviously hadn't seen her himself. Couldn't have, from his description. After I got back to Abbey that night and filed my report, I wrote to my wife, she was living in Saskatoon at the time you see, said she found country life too boring, well I wrote and told her, I said: you've got to come out and have a look at this thing — now this'll knock your socks off. A steamship as big as the *Annabelle Lee* — that was an old freighter I worked on back in the merchant marine — just sitting there in the middle of a prairie grainfield, must have been a thousand miles to the nearest tidewater. Damndest thing I ever saw or ever expect to see again. She had grain sacks stuffed into her portholes and her deck looked like she'd been raked clean by a three-week gale — there was no superstructure on her at that point, you see. There was smoke coming out of her stack, and with that wind whipping it straight back and her bow buried in a sand drift, I'm damned if she didn't look like she was punching through heavy swells at fifteen knots. Oh I'd have called it downright eerie if headquarters allowed that kind of language, but they didn't, so I just had to call it "irregular." No, headquarters never liked our reports to get too colourful, you see.

So I banged on her hull for a while with a piece of pipe — had to keep that up for about five minutes before he eventually stuck his head out through a hatch in the stem and asked what I wanted. I said I wanted to talk to him and he dropped a rope ladder over the side to let me up — actually it was just a single rope with doubled knots in it, if memory serves me right. He seemed a bit nervous and not too sociable, but then, of course, he was a Finlander, you see; they'd had the secret police back home. You had to take that sort of thing into account. Well, he told me he'd been building this ship for quite a few years, ever since the beginning of the Thirties, and when he got her launched he was going to sail her to some ocean I couldn't remember ever having heard of . . .

3

THE CONSIGNMENT

When the two flatcar-loads of iron, cable, steel, and oak planking arrived at Manybones in October 1931, the waybill had to be signed by a perplexed Pool Elevator operator because the station-agent was over at the Cherry Café, playing cards. From October to August, freights rarely stopped in this two-street, one-elevator town; once the year's harvest had been shipped and the bins swept out, the only function of the single track which appeared from nowhere on the northeastern horizon, stitched rapidly across town, and disappeared as inscrutably into the southwest, was to carry the weekly train on its roundabout route between Verlo and Pennant. That train had delivered little but the mail since the fall of 1930, ever since the Stock Market crash and the first crop failures had drained away everyone's unspent cash and reduced the houseware advertising posters at Gillis's Hardware to wrapping paper.

The elevator operator shook his head. Two flatcar-loads of high-priced steel and planking all the way from southern Ontario. It didn't make any sense. There wasn't anyone for a hundred miles in any direction doing well enough to need new building materials of that sort.

He stepped back into his office out of the wind and took a second look at the waybill. DAMIANUS SUKANEN. That didn't make any sense either. Nobody called "Damianus" in this area. There was Aleksis Sukanen on a quarter-section half a dozen miles southeast of town, and his screwball brother, Tom, who lived in a coulee branching off Broken Valley a little farther to the west. Both Finnish homesteaders up from Minnesota; both hardheaded as rock. You showed 'em a chicken and they argued it was an egg. But Aleksis's farm was barely big enough to feed his wife and four kids, and Tom, well that stone-pile he called a homestead couldn't have fed a wife and kids even if he'd had himself a set. Which he didn't. Lived alone in that coulee like a hermit.

He stared through the dirt-streaked office window at the dustclouds drifting in from the west again and then kicked shut the door to keep out the worst of it, though it never seemed to make much difference. Damned stuff got in everywhere, no matter how much you plugged all the windows and doors. Every morning he blew a thin layer of it off the desk and chair and even the stack of shipping receipts he kept stuffed in a tin box by the weighscales. It was enough to make you want to hang up your coveralls and head for the Coast. Which people were already starting to do, those who hadn't been around for the good crops of '27 and '28. Around here, you had to be able to tap into memories like that to believe there was any point. And even so,

the area should never have been settled in the first place. Too sandy. Much too dry. Oh, it all looked pretty good when the rain fell and the wind didn't blow your summer-fallow clean into Manitoba, but underneath that thin layer of sweetgrass and crocuses, of wolfwillow and wild roses, it was really nothing more than a great goddamn desert just waiting for the chance to resurface. Which, from the looks of things right now, was exactly what it was fixing to do. Oh sure, the farmers said that was exaggerating, that a little dust only gave the women something to live for, but farmers were farmers; you'd be crazy to expect them to see the world as it was. A farmer complained over a good crop like a horsedealer dumping on a Blackstone mare, but when the weather failed and the land gave out, he promoted it like an evangelist hawking salvation.

He scanned the office walls for a nail on which to stick the mysterious waybill until this Damianus Sukanen showed up to acknowledge his extravagant descent into debt. Steel pipes. Waterglass. Machine bolts. Compression fittings. Everything you didn't need to build a house or barn or even a grain wagon with fancy pneumatic tires, to haul in your ten-bushel-an-acre crop. As an elevator operator, he knew what was coming in off those fields. And what the hell would anyone need to use brass for in the middle of the dryland prairie? You'd think there was a shortage of skid-plates down at the CPR yards in Pennant. Of course these cross-grained Finlanders were known to be like that. Had their own ideas about everything, and once they had them, it was game over. You showed them a chicken and they'd argue it was a goddamn egg.

4

THE INVENTION OF DAMIANUS SUKANEN

No one knows what prompted the midwife who delivered Tomi Jaanus Alankola, eighth of ten children born to a tar-pit owner and his wife in the tiny village of Koronkylä, Finland, to decree that little Tomi would be a "paragon of logic." She came to that conclusion on September 23, 1881, after carrying the newborn for brief moments into every room in the house and observing his responses. "Once around the house tells all," she assured the skeptical mother breezily. "This one will sorely tax your patience."

She was not wrong, though the fact that Hilda Alankola was a veritable czarina whose patience was taxed by virtually everyone no doubt gave her prediction a better than average chance of coming true. Hilda prized neatness and order. Tomi saw little point to it, unless the disorder he created interfered with efficiency. For Tomi, it rarely did. He had a near-perfect photographic memory, and for him a

fistful of marbles or his socks were as instantly retrievable from under a clutter of toys or clothing as from a neatly stored box. Hilda worshipped consistency and ritual, abhorred short-cuts and substitutions. To Tomi, wood was wood. At age three, when ordered to fill the stove box, he considered the snow-covered walkway to the woodshed, noticed a lot of unused wood more conveniently at hand, and filled the box with twelve priceless carved figurines from the wooden crèche under the Christmas tree, various wooden toys he no longer cared for, wooden spoons and ladles from his mother's kitchen, and his brother Aleksis's crib, which the baby was fortunately not sleeping in at the time. Little Aleksis wasn't so lucky on a later occasion when the six-year-old Tomi dumped him unceremoniously into a snowdrift to better get at a seized wheel on the buggy into which the toddler had been bundled. Half an hour later the wheel had been freed, cleaned, and oiled, and little Aleksis was almost dead in the sub-zero cold. "*Minä sanon sinulle*, that boy's all male!" Hilda fumed when her husband tried to defend him. "He's not all there; he's got tunnel-vision; he hops around on one foot. There's just no hope for him."

Accepted for his first game of hide-and-seek with his older brothers, Tomi followed their instructions to the letter. They searched for him for over half an hour, then finally continued the game without him. When he struggled out from under the chicken shed at suppertime, hair thick with vermin and reeking of skunk, he was resolute and unrepentant. "They never found me," he protested through a bath of lye suds and tomato paste. "They never found me, and I won!"

For Hilda Alankola, the boys of the family were a lost cause. They were boorish, cantankerous, lazy, and above

all slovenly. Once she had made up her mind about this she moved them all up into the unfinished attic, where they could roost like monkeys among the beams and rafters, out of her sight. At dinner they were directed to the far end of the table, while the girls sat primly and smugly at the other. Their watchful mother sat between them like a wall. (Their father, Aho, who had been plagued all his life with digestive problems, ate his eggs and milk porridge in the kitchen.) Bath-night for the boys was on Wednesdays, and for the girls (who attended Sunday School) it was Saturdays, during which time the boys were strictly confined to their attic. "I won't have it," Hilda could be heard declaring, as she patrolled the intervening hall. "I will not have it. Absolutely not."

At the age of twelve, young Tomi packed a knapsack and ran off to sea. It seemed to him the only way to show his mother that he could measure up to her uncompromising standards of industry and enterprise. But when his freighter returned to the port of Vaasa, after more than a year's tramping in the Mediterranean, the young stowaway merely received a spectacular thrashing and a long term as pit-man's apprentice, tarring ships in the Alankola re-fit yard on the Lapuanjoki River. Tomi disliked the work, and his resentment was deepened by his younger brother, Aleksis, who often detoured past the pit on his way to school, to smirk at Tomi Jaanus and run.

In the years after his seafaring gamble, Tomi became increasingly secretive and capricious. He said little, but brooded much. He began to confuse everyone by being unpredictably co-operative and rebellious by turns. Once, after driving himself with single-minded ferocity for weeks to complete the caulking of a log barge on time, he deliberately

sank the vessel by unscrewing her seacocks. A few months later he startled his pit-boss and surprised Hilda by inventing a rudimentary paintsprayer using a cast-off irrigation nozzle assembly, some steam valves, and an ordinary air pump, then smashing it to pieces after Hilda noted loudly that "it's astonishing, really, the way simple laziness can cause some people to use their heads." Confrontations between mother and son became heated, then violent. After a fire in the oakum shed was traced back to Tomi, Hilda gave him such a clout to both sides of the head that she burst both his eardrums, deafening him for two months. That fall the boy retaliated by learning to speak Russian — the language of Finland's hated oppressors — which he shouted at his mother during subsequent rows. Yet he never raised a hand against her, though he was rapidly growing into a stocky, bigfisted young man —"chest like a bull and an assured future on the Volga," as Hilda said often to her husband, arguing about him late at night. "And whatever abilities he has, he uses exclusively to torment me."

When the Russians passed Decree F-26 in 1901, obliging all Finnish able-bodied youths to serve a three-year term in the Russian army, Tomi and Aleksis decided to emigrate. Though they were both of conscription age and therefore technically forbidden to leave the country, Tomi spent weeks hounding and wooing emigration officials, clerks, and petty functionaries in the Department of Foreign Matters and in the Travel ministry. Sometimes he disappeared for days, coming home well after midnight and leaving the house again just before the chimes of the big pendulum clock in the dining room routed the rest of the family from bed. Finally he appeared at the breakfast table one morning to mumble that their visas had been granted. The *Rosa Lee*, an

American emigration freighter twice condemned but still afloat, was slated to hoist anchor out of the port of Vaasa in four days' time.

Reaction in the Alankola family was mixed. The girls, who continued to spend most of their lives on the first floor of the house, extended embarrassed handshakes at breakfast two days later. Aho spent those days at the office and in the machine shed staring sadly at the floor. Hilda preferred to see the opportunity in the occasion. "It's rare in life that one is given the chance for a new start," she pointed out. "You're both luckier than you have any right to be. So for God's sake pull yourselves up by your bootstraps and try not to shame the Alankola name. I don't want either of you back on my doorstep with only your hat in your hand."

Aleksis knelt on the dining-room floor for his mother's blessing, but Tomi just shouldered his pack and stalked out the door. When Aleksis arrived at the garden gate, Tomi was coming out of the machine shed, stuffing a large envelope into his vest pocket. His brow was creased but his mouth was set. Aleksis closed the gate. "That was an awful snub you gave Mother back there in the house. What the hell's wrong with you, for God's sake! You may never see her again, and then what? Are those our visas, in that envelope?"

"What I can't understand is why he ever married her." Tomi pulled the envelope back out and tore open the flap. "It must have been different once. It must have been different at the beginning. It's pathetic, the way he just sits there without moving all the time."

Aleksis glanced back at the big house with its closed and curtained windows. "Well, you have to admit she saved the family business. He almost ran it into the ground."

"Sure, that's her story. That's always been her story. And how the hell would you know. You weren't even born."

Aleksis accepted the packet of papers and began to sort them out. "Well, neither were you. And anyway. Oh, I don't know. Maybe . . . just maybe he likes it."

"God help you, Aleksis; you're such an ass."

"So you . . . hold on . . . hey . . . hey, hold on a minute! Tomi!"

But Tomi was already crossing the street. "Tomi! Stop! The papers! Slow down a minute! These aren't our papers!"

Tomi waved a hand past his ear as if swatting at flies. He didn't slow down. Aleksis caught up with him on the other side. "These aren't our visas, Tomi. Look at this. They're both in the name of somebody named Sukanen. What's this supposed to mean?"

"Sukanen. Pulkinen. Pouss or Kouss." Tomi shrugged. "Who gives a damn, as long as we get on that ship. The photographs match, and that's all that counts. Give me the one that says Damianus."

"Damianus?" Aleksis stared at the documents in continued disbelief. There was a note of shock and wonder in his voice. "You've changed our name. That's how you got these visas, wasn't it? You've gone and thrown away our six-hundred-year-old name — as if it was nothing but a dirty handkerchief."

"That's all it is," Tomi said. "Just a name. A sound in your mouth. And where we're going, nobody cares a damn what you're called." He pulled his visa out of Aleksis's grip and stuffed it brusquely into his pocket. "Or would you rather work as cannon fodder for the Russians?"

"But surely to God . . ." Aleksis seemed half dazed but allowed himself to be jostled onward to the steam-coach

station, where Tomi bought two tickets for Vaasa's Great Square and then sprinted down the street for a closer look at one of the whistling, hissing compressed-air cars that had just begun to make their appearance in the towns of Europe. "If the Devil's in that contraption, then he's sure being a lot more practical than God," he grinned when he returned. But Aleksis refused to be drawn in.

They didn't exchange a word during the entire two-hour journey. Aleksis kept looking at the documents in his hand and then staring fixedly out the window, as they lurched slowly along the southern bank of the Lapuanjoki River. Several times he seemed on the verge of some resolute stand, but each time he seemed to think better of it. Finally he sighed, shoved the papers angrily into his jacket, and waved to the coach's sweetmeat vendor, who was selling Russian walnut honeycake from a slatted box. Tomi relaxed against his wooden seatback and began to examine the pipes and steam fittings along the coach's ceiling more closely. They were made of a thin and badly cast pig iron, probably east Ukrainian dombass, which Finland had been pressured into buying in increasing quantities during the past decade. He had seen enough of it at the re-fit yard back home. In the trash bins, mostly. Where he was going, to the New World, they produced oceans of high-grade steel from ore so pure it was red as blood. He'd examined pictures of it at the American embassy in Helsinki. He'd tell Aleksis when they got on the ship; maybe not until they landed in New York. The coal and iron mines of southeastern Ohio.

At the Vaasa Terminal they hitched up their packs and walked the remaining half-mile down to the harbour, where the piers were seething with emigrants struggling to get into the ships. Long cordons of state militia were trying to

restrain the crowds of well-wishers at the gates. It looked like Bedlam, like uproar without direction; from where they stood it could have been a celebration or a mutiny. Tomi stared at all the confusion, and then at the old, crumbling city around him, and for a moment his face looked remarkably like his mother's. "Yes it's *dead*, this place. You know what I'm saying? Dead. This whole continent. Used up. Like boiled-down, chewed-through bone."

Aleksis was astonished by the size of the crowds. "My God, will you look at them all. Looks like half the country's milling around down there."

"Like bugs in cowshit." Tom began buttoning his jacket as if preparing to head into rain. "Like this place has looked to me almost every night since I was born." Aleksis looked offended, puzzled. "Well, I used to have a dream, or a vision, or whatever you'd call it, just before falling asleep most nights — you know, the sort of half-sleep you float around in just before you black out. I'd be drifting high up over the world, way up there, I mean really high up, and I'd be looking down, watching all those miserable little people scrabbling around, everybody pushing and falling and scrabbling. And they looked just like maggots on a round ball of shit." He adjusted his pack and pulled his jacket down over his waist. "Just like all those people down there."

Aleksis snorted. "Well, now you're no damn different from any of them, are you? In less than five minutes you'll be pushing and scrabbling just like them."

Tomi laughed and pulled off his tie, stuffing it heedlessly into his pocket. "Well, thank God there's still a place like Amerika to escape to." For the first time in Aleksis's memory, Tomi clapped him good-humouredly on the shoulder.

"Let's get a move on, frater. We're going to a land so new, there's air that's never even been breathed yet!"

"And so are they," Aleksis pointed out, indicating the ever-growing throngs around the ships. But Tomi was already off and running, galloping towards the sea.

5

TAKING DELIVERY

Tom Sukanen wasn't known as a man much inclined to waste time explaining himself, especially if the explanation required the use of English, which he had never bothered to perfect. He made no exception the day he appeared at the Pool Elevator to claim his consignment from Ontario. "Train agent, he tell-it me come-it to you," he grunted, producing a smudged copy of the waybill hanging on the office wall. "I have-it my horse by the yard."

The Elevator operator glanced at the scruffy brace of piebalds hitched to the wagon just outside the door, and then back at Sukanen, mentally shrugging. Well, there was sure no accounting for taste. People around these parts didn't go much for fancy fashions, but even by local standards Sukanen looked a sight. Untanned rawhide pants, so stiff they looked like they'd been cut from 26-gauge tin, and a tightly woven stooking-twine jacket that bristled on him

like a porcupine in heat. Man must have skin of iron. Bob Gillis up at the Hardware said he sewed everything himself on some contraption he'd rigged using old clock parts, a bicycle wheel, and a vet's needle. Sure looked it too. But he had to admit they were handy buggers, these Finlanders, when it came to monkey-wrenching.

He became aware of Sukanen's impatiently drumming fingers on the counter.

"Yeah, that's the order outside on the flatcars. I had to have them left on our spur. And what you got here — your Party membership?" He led off with a short burst of laughter, but when Sukanen didn't join in, he stopped. Damned Commies had no sense of humour either. "Well, it's a bit irregular, name not matching and all, but since you got a copy of this waybill . . ." He tore a page from the back of the document, puzzled over it for some moments, and then handed it to the homesteader with a pen. "Gotta sign it first, it says. Sayin' it's in good order. Right over there . . . and there . . ." And as Sukanen scrawled his name carefully along the blanks: "Hey listen, if you don't mind me askin' . . . what're you gonna use all that stuff for anyways? You buildin' a mansion or somethin'?"

Sukanen finished his signature with a large period. "*Mitä sinä sanoit?*" He looked up from the paper and saw the operator's bewilderment. "What you be say-it just now?"

"Well, I was just wonderin', you know. Pretty unusual, buyin' that much brass and steel in the middle of bad drought like this. Most people havin' a tough time just gettin' their seed grain and feed . . ."

Sukanen paused and studied the operator for a long moment, then turned and headed for the door, waving at him to follow. Outside, the wind was churning up dirt and chaff as usual, but on this afternoon it had quickened into hot gusts

from the southwest, spawning brief, miniature dust-devils that whirled about the yard like tiny sand-galaxies passing into and out of thin air. Dustclouds across the entire western horizon had smudged out the sun and turned day into painted evening, a rust-coloured gloom that flickered uneasily as the wind flurried and fell. The horses stood hunched and impassive in their traces, heads down and eyes closed. During the past several years the blowing grit had sanded much of the elevator wall behind them down to the bare wood.

Sukanen pointed to the uproar in the sky. "You see-it those cloud? Those big one, look like animal? Like bull?" His voice was low, conspiratorial. The operator leaned forward, closer. "Those be-it rain cloud. Big tunderhead. Pretty soon it rain, rain like crazy. Rain forty day and forty night." The operator's face registered suspicion. "Then it be come-it here flood, big flood. Deep water, maybe fifty feet. Whole prairie, she drown." The operator's face seemed inclined to open revolt. "So I build-it me ark. Big Noah ark. Two pig, two cow, two chicken, two horse. You don't be tell-it for nobody, I give-it you ride."

He roared with triumphant laughter at the operator's curse, then pulled his team alongside the first of the two flatcars and began untying the security straps. There was an overhead hoist for unloading railcars on the other side of the yard but he ignored it, muscling the four-hundred-pound sheets of steel onto his wagon as if they were made of tin. When the wagon was full and its contents tied down, he nodded to the operator, who had been watching without lending a hand. "This finish today. I take-it him other half maybe tomorrow." And as the operator shrugged and turned back towards his office door: "Now don't you be tell-it for nobody! And keep-it remember you raingear!"

6

ELSIE BERTON

[Schoolteacher, retired]

Such an awkward, uncommunicative man! In all the years I lived in that little town, I never so much as saw him crack a smile. No, he was the dark side of the moon, that one. The exact opposite of his brother, who liked a good time and a fast dance. Aleksis was the family man, liked to go visiting, spend a noisy evening down at the Finn Hall. While Tom — well, I'll tell you; Julia Knapps, a colleague of mine at the Manybones School in those days, she used to say about Tom: "He always looks like he's just been kicked out of Paradise." You know what I mean? As if he was still dreaming about it a little, all the time. Big hurt-looking eyes when he stared at the ground. And of course he stared at the ground a great deal, the way such people do. He seemed incapable of enjoying himself. That's why I always had the feeling he was carrying around some heavy inner burden. My husband

Maynard used to say I was much too melodramatic about people, but I know I was right about this one. He was a fish out of water, though I never did decide exactly why.

It was a shame, because he seemed in some ways very bright. He invented all sorts of ingenious equipment he really should have had the sense to take out patents for. He built an ugly little sled with a motor that was clearly the forerunner of the Skidoo, and he spent years developing a thresher that could separate and dry wet grain in one operation. He was constantly rushing into town with one hare-brained idea after another, and I've heard say that if they'd listened to his rants against dust-mulching and parallel ploughing, a lot of the land in the Palliser Triangle might have been saved. But he was a boor, you see; that was the long and the short of it. He simply had no tact and no patience. People who live alone often don't. And he was terribly cruel to his horses which got a lot of people upset. My husband Maynard called that a red herring; he said all kinds of people beat their horses in those days just like they neglect their cars today, but I think he was wrong. I think you can tell a lot about a person from the way he treats his animals. Tom once flogged his team so hard when he got stuck in a mudhole on Main Street that the Justice of the Peace threatened to have him arrested.

He had no friends that I know of. No friends and no family. He just couldn't seem to get along with anyone. Especially women. They say he abandoned a wife and children in Minnesota, before he came up to Canada to homestead. I can certainly believe it. I think the only man who ever had a good word to say about Tom was Vihtori Markulla, another Finnish farmer in the area; he worked his father's homestead a little east of Tom's coulee. But that wasn't much

of a recommendation, believe me! Vihtori was one of those big and slow men, lazy as cold molasses; the kind you always feel tempted to hold a lit match under. Even after he got married he couldn't be bothered moving out of his mother's house. Can you imagine that? The old lady hounded the new wife so terribly, she finally ran off with some neighbours who'd thrown in the towel and were heading west. Adela, I think her name was. Yes, Adela. So naturally the two men had something to talk about — the blind leading the blind! But otherwise there wasn't a person who'd have anything to do with him. Except of course old Mrs. Markulla herself, who loved a good fight and always got her money's worth with Tom.

Actually, saying Tom couldn't get along with women wasn't saying the half of it. Not nearly the half. The truth is, Tom Sukanen hated women. Just plain hated them. My husband Maynard would have called that suffragette claptrap but it isn't. I don't know where it came from, maybe from the wife in Minnesota, maybe from troubles at home, but that man had a real problem about women. Julia used to joke that he had probably never quite forgiven us for that little incident with the apple. Whatever it was, he was certainly preoccupied with it. Whenever *anything* went wrong, if fires broke out or equipment broke down, he'd look among the women for the culprit. If an animal disappeared, he was sure some woman had stolen it. If someone got sick, naturally some woman had caused the infection. You see what I'm talking about? Once, I remember — oh Lord, it was just precious! — he had built one of his more bizarre inventions, a huge man-size tricycle that didn't have any pedals — you worked a kind of lever thing back and forth, between your legs — something like one of those

railroad speeders, but tipped up on its side. Anyway, the silly thing wasn't working for some reason, there was something wrong with the mechanism, and he went around in all seriousness complaining to everyone that some woman had urinated — yes, peed! — into it! That's why it wasn't working. That's right. Some woman had peed into it. It really makes you wonder what he must have been like as a boy at school.

Oh yes, he was quite a specimen, that one. Quite a specimen. I can remember the uproar he caused the day he came into town and announced that we had the days of the week all wrong. The days of the week, if you can imagine it. Wednesday was actually Friday, he said, and Thursday was Saturday. He'd apparently worked that out from some astronomy book he'd found somewhere, and he was quite adamant about it. He insisted we change the town's calendar immediately. He tried to sell that idea to Manybones for years. And he had an odd obsession with eggs — he kept trying every imaginable way to hatch chicken eggs without using chickens. Oh, he wrapped them in blankets, stored them in warm water — even stuffed them into his manure pile for weeks on end. None of this worked, of course, and every time they rotted he accused his neighbour's wife, Tanya Cuthbert, of creeping into his yard at night and putting a hex on them! That's right, creeping into his yard. That always sounded a lot more like wishful thinking to me — oh, bite your tongue, Elsie; I really shouldn't be saying things like that, now should I? Maynard always did insist I had a scolding tongue. But the silliest thing of all was that this Tanya Cuthbert was actually blind. Yes, totally blind. She'd lost her sight to some eye infection years before. As a matter of fact, remembering all this now, I wonder that we

didn't laugh about it more at the time. Everyone kept getting so offended about it all. Oh, very offended. Sam Cuthbert worked up a lifelong vendetta with Tom about it. Those two were at each other's throats for one reason or another for as long as I can remember. And I suppose you'd have to say Sam Cuthbert won, as he usually did. He got Tom's land in the end, and he got it for a song. His son farms it now, and he uses it mainly to run sheep. They always wanted a coulee like Tom's to run sheep.

I suppose when you come right down to it, people simply didn't know what to do with Tom — he just didn't seem to be marching to the same drummer. Oh dear, now I'm starting to do it too — I always harped on my students not to use clichés, you know. What I meant to say was, you just couldn't seem to rely on your normal instincts or knowledge of human nature to tell you what he was going to do next. It wasn't that he was evil — oh, heavens no, I'm certainly not saying that. He once broke an arm rescuing a pet snake for a neighbour's youngster when their house caught fire, and it confused everybody entirely — they didn't know where to fit that in. And those ideas of his . . . No, he was a good deal more . . . well, my husband Maynard had a salty way of putting it — he said Tom was simply a daydreamer with hemorrhoids. But then I'm sure he was more complicated than that. Yes I'm afraid Maynard had a way of expressing himself that I never could get him to clean up — and we never did see eye to eye about people's characters. But anyway, yes, I'm quite sure there was a lot we missed in Tom. Though I will say that if he thought of himself as a prophet in the wilderness he certainly picked a most inconvenient time.

The first few years of the Depression weren't quite as bad

as many people claimed — most people had a few reserves, and the weather only got really bad gradually — but the last half in the Triangle was simply the end of the world. Nobody had the patience to listen to some crackpot from Broken Valley trying to convince him that radio was a government plot to hypnotize or sterilize Canadian citizens — I can't remember which it was, offhand. Or that history was a system of wheels within wheels, exactly like the innards of his wet-grain thresher, and that the drought wouldn't end until each one of the biblical plagues had afflicted us all. Heaven only knows where he picked up notions like that, but you can understand people getting a little short-tempered about them. Especially coming from a man who for the better part of the Thirties couldn't be bothered to keep the thistles on his summerfallow from seeding every farm downwind for twenty miles. That was an unforgivable sin in those days, and those days were a particularly unforgiving time . . .

7

SEA-TRIALS

It was early evening when Sukanen turned into the wagon tracks that led down to his coulee off the east end of the Broken Valley Road. The tiny yard past the fence was littered with fieldstones and trash; it was going to take careful manoeuvring to squeeze the top-heavy wagon past it all, to get to the small clearing behind the barn. The closest obstacle was a derelict wet-dry steam thresher, a gangly, hump-backed confusion of struts and plungers which had proven too heavy to drag through the deep folds of the west Saskatchewan grainbelt. A fully operable 1918 Chevrolet sat on blocks in the now dry creekbed between house and barn; on the day he'd received it from its previous owner, he'd forgotten to take it out of gear before cranking it over, and the little car had rammed him straight back into the barn door. He had eventually forged a crank which allowed him to start the car from the driver's seat, but he had never

actually driven the car anywhere after his legs had healed. He used his horses, or a mammoth tricycle which stood in a patch of thistles by the house.

The house, oddly placed, was the biggest obstacle of all. It stood near the mouth of the cramped coulee like a sentinel, a round, silo-shaped tower only a few yards in diameter but over thirty feet tall, its domed wooden roof virtually level with the surrounding prairie. A homemade periscope had been fitted through the dome, enabling Tom to keep a constant eye on all approaches to his stronghold. To get past this tower required dragging the wagon half up the side of the coulee at a breathstopping angle, the wagon kept from tipping only by its wheels slotted deeply into the ruts. Tom's plan to dig a more level driveway past the house was by now decades old, and he had gotten used to the inconvenience.

By the time he had muscled his wagon onto level ground behind the barn it was well past feeding-time, but Tom paid no attention to his bellowing stock or to his own supper. For the next half hour he paced the little clearing restlessly, waiting until the moon, which had been ghosting through the dust like a pale eyelid all afternoon, finally reached a spot above the tower he found appropriate. Then he unravelled a bundle of sticks and binder twine and began to measure out distances with great care, first sighting from one direction, then another. Occasionally he stopped, tapped a stick into the dry grass, stood back to line it up with a previous stick and the moon, then carried on with his musings and measurings. Whenever he had tapped in half a dozen sticks he connected them all with the stooking twine, then retraced his steps to double-check the results. When he had finally finished all this to his satisfaction,

several hours later, the sticks outlined two long, narrow, vaguely ovoid forms, each five times as long as it was wide, and one just slightly larger than the other. The two shapes were so large that they spanned the entire clearing — leaving barely enough room for a pathway between them and around their narrow ends.

Over the western flange of the coulee the wobbling sun had melted into wide pools of brilliant orange and red, and the wind had dropped to a low, steady moan. The horses stamped impatiently and tossed their heads at the grasshoppers, but Tom continued to ignore them. He had climbed to the coulee's lip and was crouched on its leading edge, scanning the vast sweep of the unrolled prairie now awash with evening dyes, its saskatoons and silver willows flickering like the fluorescent crests of long phantom waves curling steadily in from the southwest. Brown bats swooped like sandpipers in the fast-darkening sky. Sukanen shifted his position to locate the Polar Star, automatically keeping it to his left. At this time of night, only six of the Big Dipper's stars were ever visible. A gust of wind rattled the bracken. Flurries peppered his face with gritty spray. Out in the distance, as far as he could see into the gloom, black tides eddied and surged, swirling slowly from horizon to horizon, restless, relentless; a shallow, dangerous inland sea. Old resentments and grudges slipped anchor and drifted silently into the current, pushing no bow-waves and leaving no wake. Curlews clamoured like drowning men in the distance. Fieldstone reefs lurked everywhere just under the surface. The rigging creaked.

As the moon's colour deepened and its outline firmed, Sukanen groped for the mariner's compass he kept hanging on a thong about his neck and began to take readings. Fifty

degrees twenty minutes north, a hundred and seven degrees thirty-one minutes west. He knew his position by heart, but he murmured it to himself anyway. Fifty degrees twenty minutes north, a hundred and seven degrees thirty-one minutes west. Steer east by northeast. Steady as she goes. Steady as she goes.

Steady as she goes.

The prairie crested and surged heavily.

Now dead to windward. Hard aport.

The prairie sank into a trough and rolled.

Steer north by northwest half-north. Look lively now!

The prairie heaved down with the wind; levelled off.

Steer south by southwest half-west. Aye aye, sir.

The prairie ran off and yawed. Lifted.

Hard alee. Due south. Let's try her with a quartering sea.

The prairie broached to windward, righted herself, and stopped.

Four points off the port bow. Full ahead. Look alive.

The prairie had stopped dead and refused to budge.

Wake up below! Steer south by southeast. Full steam astern!

The man walking across the combers was Samuel Cuthbert, Sukanen's English neighbour on his eastern side. For several years now Cuthbert's plan had been to buy Sukanen's quarter with its corral-like coulee, to allow him to expand into sheepraising and pork. In the failing light, Sam Cuthbert could only look like a bailiff, coming to seize the farm.

"Stopped by the barn, didn't see you there. Happened to look up, saw you here."

"What you be want-it here this night, Sam Cuthbert?"

Cuthbert was wheezing slightly, from the steep climb. "I figure you and me . . . we got little something . . . to talk about, Sukanen. Been hearing . . ."— he stopped a careful

distance from the burly Finlander and cleared his throat "... been hearing ... kind of nasty ... things you been sayin' 'bout my wife."

Steer south by southwest. Full steam ahead. Blow valves aport.

The prairie lay hot and empty under the gritty moon.

"The way I see it, Sukanen, I got me an apology comin' ... or a consideration ..."

Sukanen sighed and pushed his compass back into his shirt.

"I don't am be say-it you wife she can help," he shrugged, turning to walk down to the barn to feed his stock. "I only am say she is be-it witch."

8

MORE LIGHT

It was the Widow Markulla, Vihtori's mother, who first saw the mysterious structures taking shape in the clearing behind Tom Sukanen's barn and sent the gossip humming down the Finnish Grapevine. The old woman, who now ran her son's life as implacably as she had managed her husband's on their homestead two miles east of Boggy Creek, had walked the several miles south to Tom's coulee that morning to deliver fresh eggs. She had found Tom oblivious with hammer and saw, and the little field a chaos of lumber, tools, shavings, and black iron. He had not stopped working, had avoided all her questions, and had even refused to take the eggs, which she returned to her pantry with all the ruffled indignation of a spurned mother hen. "*Luulla*, Vihtori! Just imagine! Not a word. Not one word! And he asked for the eggs last Saturday!" She fussed and clattered among the dishes soaking in the sink, impatiently elbowing

aside Vihtori's wife, Adela, who scuttled once more to the safety of a chair behind the kitchen table. "And what is he building there, behind his manure pile, in the middle of spring when he should be ploughing his fields and planting in seed? What kind of crazy idea is he running after this time, let me ask you? Not enough he almost killed me with that contraption he called a camera, exploded right in my face like dynamite, do you remember, Vihtori? And that calendar he dreamed up, that makes Sunday into Wednesday? It's the Devil's work, in my opinion; all the Devil's work laid into human hands. *Be ye alert to the ways of the Serpent, who was cast to the Earth to do Mischief among ye His children* . . . Do you hear me, Vihtori; are you listening to me? Vihtori! I'm talking to you!"

"There's a drought out there *äiti*. There hasn't been a drop of rain in over two months. Or haven't you noticed?" Vihtori's dedication to farming rarely surfaced before noon, a fact that tugged at his industrious mother's throat like a choke-collar. "That explosion was a magnesium flash, for more light, for the picture. I told you about it before."

"More light — that's just what that heathen needs, is more light! An emperor's ransom in brass and iron; I can't understand where he ever got so much money; his wheat is always half full of wild oats. And now, when everyone is barely holding on to their farms, keeping their granaries from falling down with rope and chickenwire, he comes along and spends like a pasha on . . . what? What is he building there behind his manure pile, Vihtori?"

Vihtori sighed and fanned himself slowly with his father's old straw hat. "I don't know what he's building, *äiti*. He hasn't said anything about it. You were there, not me. What does it look like?"

"What does it look like, what does it look like! How am I supposed to make heads or tails out of all his hallucinations? It looks like nothing I've ever seen on a farm. Big. Long. And pointed at one end. How can I tell you. Like a hayrack. Like gigantic hayracks. Not one, but two of them. And him too lazy to plant pasture for the miserable few heifers he's got."

"A hayrack?" Vihtori got up from the table to look out the kitchen window, but the sky was still a hot, brassy blue. He threw an involuntary glance towards Tom's homestead to the west, though there was nothing out there to see; in the noonday glare the prairie stretched like an abandoned wasteland clear back to the western horizon, its farm buildings mostly hidden behind occasional windbreaks or hummocks. "What would he need with hayracks, *äiti*? They must have been something else."

"What would he need, what would he need! One thing I tell you for sure, Vihtori; what that man *needs* has never had a thing to do with what he does! Abandons wife and children in Minnesota, lives in that hole of his like an animal, and thinks he can lecture us any time he wants to like the prophet Isaiah!" She slammed down the lid on a jar of vinegar and chokecherry juice, her own invention of a thirst-quencher that didn't encourage excessive drinking. "Needs? Don't tell me about needs! That man wouldn't know what he needs if it sailed through the air and hit him between the eyes!"

At Tom's coulee that afternoon, Vihtori tied his horse to a back wheel of the mammoth tricycle and squeezed past the empty wagon to the field behind. He found Tom straining to force a wooden rib into its slot in a curved frame arching high over the smaller of the two constructions. Drilling

tools lay at his feet, and one of his horses stood harnessed to a block and tackle hanging from a tall tripod nearby. The wind had stiffened sharply, and woodchips and sawdust were blowing in all directions.

"*Päivää*, Tomi." Vihtori scrutinized the framework and the scattered building materials casually. "Need a hand with any of that?"

Tom clenched his teeth until his jawbone quivered, shirtsleeves straining over bulging muscles, and the rib shuddered slowly, inexorably along its wooden guides until it reached its slot and was wedged in tight. "*Päivää*, Vihtori." He smeared at the ridges of dust on his face, rubbing mud and sawdust into his hair. "*Ei kiitos*. I can handle it. Thanks anyway."

They spoke in Finnish, automatically, though Vihtori was a second-generation Canadian who had lived on the Saskatchewan prairie for over fifty years. For him, the English language was still almost as foreign as it was for Tom.

Vihtori nodded absently, idly considering the perplexing shapes of the two constructions before him. They didn't really look like hayracks, of course, at least not any more, though he could see from their stooking-twine outlines what his mother had been talking about. The smaller of the two now consisted of an ovoid base over which a high centre beam rose like the ridgepole of a hip-roofed barn, though its shape was oddly curved and inexplicably tapered at both ends. The second seemed less unorthodox but no less puzzling; the same ovoid base but larger, and with no ridgepole at all — just several framing timbers where the walls would ordinarily have been — and these timbers flared out and up from the base as if they were framing the sides of some gigantic, flat-bottomed rowboat. Yet the timbers

were massive; quite unnecessarily heavy even for an ordinary barn. There were small piles of them all over the clearing, and a larger one right by his feet.

"These look solid, Tomi. Get them from back east?"

"*Jo.* Oak. From Port Arthur."

"They look like they could take a fair beating."

Tom pulled a fat carpenter's pencil from his shirt pocket and began to sketch in the location of the next rib on the arched ridgepole. "They will, I guess."

Vihtori nodded again. He had returned to the three ribs already in place and was sighting along their sides, squinting against the sun. "A lot of work, cutting in all those curves. You could use a bandsaw, like Peltola's."

"Peltola's bandsaw uses electricity. And I've got time enough." Tom shoved the pencil behind his ear and began to trace the pencil lines deep into the wood with his thumbnail. Splinters tore at the already bloodied flesh below the nail, but he paid no attention. "It would help if I had a bandsaw, but I don't."

"They're damned expensive," Vihtori agreed. "And the blades break all the time." Several feet away a small woodchip fire burned beneath a ten-gallon oil barrel, which was connected by a pipe to a long wooden box from which wisps of steam were escaping in little puffs. Two casks of black-iron bolts and a ten-pound box of matching nuts and bolts had been broken open and set out beside the fire. Vihtori reached into the nearest cask and took a machine bolt between thumb and forefinger, rolling it thoughtfully back and forth like a prospector examining a drill sample.

"*Hyvä Jumala*, Tomi — you look like you're building for Eternity. Six-by-six timbers, No.4 bolts, all kinds of iron — all this'll outlast you by a hundred years."

Tom had stepped back to give himself elbow room and was now chopping away wood down to the pencil lines with vigorous swings of an old machete. He stopped to wedge a framing timber more firmly into a homemade clamp made of two wooden cleats and a piece of threaded pipe. "It doesn't have to last a hundred years. It only has to last for . . . twenty. Maybe thirty . . ."

Vihtori's forehead furrowed as if he were trying to see thirty years into the future, but the machine bolt proved closer, more immediate. It was an Eaton's Farm Supply issue, standard-thread twelve-inch No.4 SAE, three-quarters of an inch in diameter; the eight-inch version was in common use everywhere for grain wagons and grain trucks. Anybody farming on the prairies knew that; even farmers who didn't care all that much about farming knew it. You used these bolts for tractor hitch pins, you substituted them for missing spacers on a three-gang plough. They would even get you through a couple of days' work as a gearshift, if you couldn't get in to Skully's right away to have a new one made up. There were bolts like this on every farm from the Rockies down to the Souris River. In a sense, you probably couldn't go far wrong, using No.4 bolts. They'd been around for an awfully long time.

Vihtori dropped the bolt back into the cask and rubbed the packing grease from his hands onto the legs of his coveralls. He leaned up against the rib Tom had just slotted into place and gave it a solid thwack with the palm of his hand. The timber barely shuddered.

"So what do you think? Have you decided when to put in your seed this year?"

Tom put down the machete and wiped at the sweat dripping over his eyebrows.

"Five seconds after a few drops of rain, so I don't lose the whole works to Cuthbert. He'd probably try to have me arrested for sowing wheat into his weeds."

Vihtori grinned. "Well, he's a hothead, that's true. I've never had much time for him. But you really shouldn't have said that about his wife anyway."

"Well, she's a witch," Tom said glumly, flicking the larger woodchips out of his hair. "All women are, at heart. I'm not saying they can help it — it's in them all from birth. But you've got to be on your guard all the time . . ."

Vihtori thought that one over for several moments. "You know, Adela started doing something very strange last fall. She's been saving all the chicken bones from dinner. She washes them and dries them, and then she strings them up into little dolls. Lately she's been hanging them in our windbreak, right behind the house. I guess there must be hundreds of them by now, hanging up in those trees. She says it's to keep count of how many meals she's had to cook for people all her life."

"Oh yes, they're tricky" Tom agreed. "They want to control everything, and when they can't, they turn to deceit and trickery. You've got to be on your guard every minute."

"Still, I don't think I'd actually call her a witch." Vihtori hadn't considered the matter of the chicken bones for some time. "I think Adela's mostly high-strung. She gets all wound up over nothing. She cries a lot, but she won't say why." He plucked a finger-long sliver of wood from a timber by his foot and pushed it between his teeth. "Sometimes I wonder whether women belong on the prairie at all, you know. Maybe this isn't the right place for them."

"Women anywhere are as naturally false as barnyard cats," Tom decreed. "That's why they never have women

at sea. They're fickle as the weather. They queer the compass. You'd never get where you're trying to go. It's in them right from birth."

"I've never been to sea," Vihtori shrugged. "I was born right here on the prairie, in a sod hut. You couldn't tell which way was north except by the sun."

The two men stood with their backs to the wind, collars and shirtsleeves fluttering erratically, studying the brightly polished sky. There wasn't a cloud from one horizon to the other. In the distance, knoll-tops and windbreaks seemed to waver and surge, shimmering in hot, ethereal puddles. Clumps of dry wolfwillow crackled in the gusts and smelled of old urine. The dead furze along the coulee's edge hissed and sighed.

"Reminds me of summer at the old schoolhouse," Vihtori grinned. "Nobody ever bothered to run all the way to the outhouse."

Tom grunted and knocked a grasshopper from his ear. After a while Tom turned and threw down the machete. "You want some tea? I have some water from the river."

He led the way out of the field to a great pile of fieldstones by the chicken shed, where sheets of steel stood stacked against a huddle of coal sacks. An ancient bellows had been fixed to the side of a storage drum filled with rocks, and a short length of railway track served as the anvil. Beside the drum lay several coils of already completed flat-bodied chain ingeniously forged of sheet-metal blanks crimped and fused under high heat. "I've only just begun," he explained, as Vihtori gave an experimental tug on the chain and bent down to examine a pile of cut and finished blanks. "It's the cheapest way to make a lot of chain in a forge."

He picked up a short-handled sixteen-pound sledgehammer lying on the edge of the anvil and gave it a fast, powerful swing. The steel rang out with startling clarity, an intense, hard-edged note that filled the coulee in an instant, reverberating and swelling, higher and higher until it seemed that every object within the coulee was adding its own resonance too, uniting to send that note across the prairie like a strident, defiant message.

"*Herran Jesus!* I'll bet they can hear that clear out to the Town Hall," Vihtori grinned, and for the first time Tom seemed to allow himself a glimmer of satisfaction. "They ought to hire you as a bell ringer at Reverend Jarvenpaa's church."

"That miserable shyster should be hung as the bell in his own bell-tower," Tom nodded. "I'd be happy to ring him every Wednesday for an hour."

"And with my blessing, for what it's worth." Vihtori threw his handful of blanks back on the pile. "That man should rent his mouth out as a fly-swatter. Even mother says he could talk his fool head off and never miss it."

They both chuckled briefly. "I still say he wears dresses under that cassock," Tom insisted. "Somebody really ought to check into that sometime."

Vihtori smirked, but let it pass. "What do you say we get to that tea, before the last of the water evaporates."

The house was dark, as usual, and smelled sharply of woodsmoke. Though it was a full ten feet in diameter, its round shape made it seem much smaller, and Vihtori had always found it oppressively confining. Only two small ground-level windows, both hung with floursacking, allowed a faint light to seep in. An irregularly spaced ladder, nailed to the wall, disappeared into the darkness above,

reappearing beside a third window, high up under the tower's dome, which illuminated a small platform underneath the eyepiece of a twin-mirrored homemade turret periscope. From below, the long narrow instrument seemed to point through the dark like a permanently accusing finger.

"Take a seat, if you can find one."

Vihtori stood for some moments without moving, his eyes becoming accustomed to the gloom. There was little furniture to speak of; a carelessly slapped-together table beside a stove with no stovepipe, several upturned packing crates, and a grimy, water-filled oil barrel. The bed against the wall had no mattress, and was made of rough pine planks nailed into the shape of a shallow V, like a wide-winged feed trough. On the wall above the bed hung a large joint of drying horsemeat, and a beautifully crafted violin which Tom had copied from the Eaton's Catalogue the previous winter. Rumour had it that he played it mostly during hail- and thunder-storms, when the extra electricity in the air (as he'd told old Mrs. Markulla) meant that it virtually played itself. He'd strung it with unravelled chickenwire, which made it sound (as old Mrs. Markulla had countered) like a bobcat being paddled in a butter churn.

All this Vihtori had seen before, including the battered mariner's compass Tom either wore on a thong around his neck or, as now, kept tacked to the wall with a fencing staple. But what was new was a large pile of papers lying on the table, papers that turned out, on closer inspection, to be laboriously detailed sketches and exploded views of a bulky deep-sea freighter, broad-beamed and deep-keeled, with a stocky bow and a tall smokestack. The drawings were all in Sukanen's hand, roughly scrawled on the backs of election posters he must have torn from CPR telegraph poles,

and some included long lists of materials and dimensions, much crossed out and recalculated. Among the posters were also maps; murky, cheap-looking large-scale charts from the Cummings Map Company of Toronto, showing various seemingly unrelated parts of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. They too had much scribbling and many markings on them.

Vihtori shuffled through them all before coming back to a detailed sketch of the unusual-looking ship.

"What the hell do you have here, Tomi? Don't tell me you voted Conservative in the last election!"

"I never vote," Tom said seriously, sloshing around two cups in the barrel of filthy water. "Now what do you want in your tea? Do you want sugar, or do you want molasses? Molasses, I've got."

9

AILI

The first time Tom Sukanen saw his future wife she was knee-deep in water and mud, jacking up her log cabin. She explained that she needed more room and was building a cellar under it. She refused his offer of help, then thought better of it and allowed him to mix the cement. Four days later the cabin was sitting on a full basement and Tom was crouched on the cabin's roof, replacing rotted or broken shingles. During pauses while he cut new shims to cover the holes, he could hear the strong, steady blows of her hammer down inside, building the basement stairs.

Her name was Aili Roanen; she was thirty-three, single, and like most residents of Roseau County, Minnesota, in 1906, still spoke fluent Finnish. She was not pretty, had little time for flirting, and was considered by the community a decidedly odd duck. She seemed exactly what Tom was looking for.

They were married several weeks later at the Roseau courthouse, on a Wednesday because that was the day Tom's weekly rent came due, and after the papers had been signed Aili left him at his boardinghouse to pack his things while she went back to the cabin to continue recaulking its logs. She had only recently inherited the place from her deceased father, a local carpenter who seemed to have spent all his time keeping other people's houses in better repair than his own. Until the day she had stormed out of the cabin at age fourteen to spend the rest of her adolescence with an aunt in Nebraska, father and daughter had never ceased to lock horns on the subject.

When Tom arrived from the boardinghouse with his two suitcases Aili was down in the basement, plastering concrete. "Just put your bags behind the chesterfield, Damianus. I can't come up right now. Did you remember to clean the mud off your boots?" Tom hadn't. It led to their first marriage spat, three hours later, when Aili surfaced from below. Meanwhile, there was no evidence that Aili had made any preparations whatever for his arrival. Her father's boxes of tools and hardware still cluttered the bedroom and the hall. There was no room in the cabin's only closet for his clothes, and Aili's bed was a single bunk pushed back against the bedroom's inside wall. "You can sleep on the chesterfield in the parlour," Aili decided, and because it was unclear whether this ruling implied punishment for the mud on the floor or a permanent arrangement, Tom didn't argue.

The following morning Aili showed him where the saws and axes were kept, and Tom began clearing acreage behind the cabin for a crop of corn. In the mornings he felled trees and bucked them up for firewood; in the afternoons he cut down brush and prepared the stumps for burning. It was

hard work but it helped dull his unease over his new position in life and he made good progress. With the money he had earned in the Ohio coalmines he bought a horse and a plough, and by the following spring he had fenced and seeded twenty-six acres of Jubilee Maize, all of it sprouting a promising green in the early June sun. A new steambath and a horse-stall stood in the yard against the fence.

Aili was pleased. "*Voi hyvä!* We can add another thirty acres by next year and get a second horse. You should have built a stable instead of just a horse-stall, Damianus, and saved yourself the rebuilding."

Tom wasn't quite as enthusiastic. For one thing, he was still sleeping on the parlour chesterfield. For another, after a brief discussion on the subject of children and an agreement to have four, he had been left unprepared for Aili's unorthodox method of becoming pregnant. He'd been allowed into her bedroom for a single night to perform his duty, then ousted until the results of his efforts were known. When Aili promptly became pregnant, she'd made it clear that his services in this respect would not be needed or wanted until the time was right for a second child, presumably a year or so down the road. And there remained the matter of his unpacked bags. When she had first inherited the cabin Aili had rearranged it to fit her own needs so precisely that when Tom arrived he found there was simply no space that could be cleared without disrupting the perfectly sensible and necessary use to which it had already been put. The result was that six months later Tom was still living out of his suitcases in his own home, and while he had to agree that there was really no practical problem with this arrangement, it rankled increasingly at the back of his mind. He began to spend longer and longer evenings

at the workbench he had built for himself in the new basement, unpuzzling an old astronomy text a former resident had left in his closet at the boardinghouse.

On July 22, 1907, his first son was born and the resultant excitement swept a good deal of these tensions from the cabin. "I'm calling him Einar," Aili informed the midwife weakly as the old woman bundled the newborn into the crib Aili had built for him during the week before the birth. "Damianus, I don't want you touching the child; men don't know anything about how to handle babies." The Roseau Ladies Aid Society came to call, bringing two large baskets of baby clothes since it was quite correctly suspected that neither parent had the slightest inclination to knit or sew. Though she said little about it, Aili was flustered and pleased at this unexpected nod from a community that had previously mostly pitied her. In her expansive mood she even managed to find some extra closet space for Tom, and the two suitcases finally disappeared into the basement. For the next several months, while Aili was totally absorbed in caring for little Einar and Tom had his hands full harvesting corn, life seemed relatively peaceful in the Sukanen household.

But when the crop was in and the first shock of motherhood had worn off, problems resurfaced. In Tom's view, Aili was monopolizing Einar. She seemed afraid to leave father and son alone together. Aili, on the other hand, accused Tom of skulking about the baby like an intruder. "You act as though you want to tear the child right out of my hands! What's wrong with you, for God's sake? What man do you know who comes home hours before supper to interfere with a baby's feeding and scare him half to death with his black hands!"

Tom fought back by instinct. Aili valued punctuality and tidiness. Tom began coming home at wildly unpredictable hours and putting his feet up on the parlour chesterfield. Aili disliked men in the bedroom, men in the steambath, and men in the kitchen. Tom took to spending long hours in the kitchen, preparing inedible messes that Aili promptly flung out the window for the chickens. After such sessions the kitchen was always an utter shambles. They talked less and less, argued more and more, and Tom withdrew once again into his basement with his astronomy text, his appearances upstairs becoming increasingly like furtive raids or forays into a foreign country.

A truce of sorts was arranged when the time came for their second child, and another for their third, but each time the olive branch wilted more quickly than the time before. To make matters worse, details of their relationship had become a staple of Roseau gossip, and Tom was becoming a laughingstock among the village's men. Only his enormous strength and his brooding look, which made him seem always on the edge of a great rage, kept them from mocking him openly in the street. They had been given a glimpse of both the day Tom had flung several thirty-five-gallon barrels of molasses at two men he had overheard ridiculing him at the Cargill Feed Store in the village; each barrel had missed the men by mere inches. They shook their heads and tapped their temples when Tom decided, on the basis of his much-thumbed astronomy text, that the earth probably had a second moon — identical in size to the known one, and always on its outer side — which accounted for the tide-like fluctuations in world commerce, including specifically the price of corn. They snickered when he converted his outhouse into a makeshift observatory, and howled when

they saw him, each spring, defiantly pushing a lace-hooded perambulator up and down the rows of the two cornfields he had readied for seeding, even after they discovered that the buggy was actually a mechanical seeder, Tom having determined that the space between his rows of corn was exactly the same as the space between the buggy's wheels. Aili made no obvious effort to defend her husband in the village.

One evening after a particularly long brood in his basement, Tom seemed to have come to a decision. He climbed the basement stairs, threw a brief glance at his children who stared back at him nervously, and opened Aili's bedroom door with a resolute shove. Aili was sitting on her bed, nursing the six-month-old Velma.

She looked up, startled, then instinctively pulled her unbuttoned shirt back over her breasts. Tom stared at her hands clutching the shirt and his face darkened.

"Why do you cover your body when I come into the room? I am your husband."

Aili recovered her composure, and her voice was sharp. "What do you want in this room? I'm nursing the baby."

"I can see it. I have not seen it very often."

Aili's glance at Tom flickered for an instant, but her voice remained firm. "It's not a man's business to watch babies being nursed."

"You always know so very definitely what it is a man's business to do or not to do."

By now Aili had managed to close several buttons on her shirt and was getting off the bed, looking cross. "Damianus, get out of this room and see to your responsibilities. I've got to put little Velma to bed and give Einar and Emmi their bath."

Tom pushed her rudely back onto the bed.

"Those children of ours call me 'him in the basement.' I am treated in my own house like a disease."

Tom's push produced in Aili an instant transformation. She shot from the bed, baby shielded in a low protective crouch, the very image of a cornered, spitting cat.

"How *dare* you shove me around! You *bastard!*"

"Everyone in the village seems to know what goes on in this house. How do they know so much?"

"Get out! I said *get out,* you brute! You push me once more and I'll . . . by God I'll . . ." She looked for something to throw but all she could reach was a leather boot. Tom's face had reddened dangerously and he was suddenly breathing hard. He dodged the boot easily, then without warning lunged forward, tearing the baby out of her arms and holding it high above his head, out of her reach. "You snake! Egyptian! What poison do you drip into these children through your mother's milk?"

Aili went berserk. She uncoiled from the wall like a wild animal, eyes flaring, fingers clawing at his throat. Unable to break through, she picked up the boot and slammed it with such force against his head that for an instant he almost lost his balance. She scratched and bit and tore so ferociously he was finally forced to jettison the screaming child into its crib and defend himself in all seriousness, for Aili was now clearly after blood. She slugged and kicked like a seasoned brawler; she rammed her knee against his groin again and again, and when he successfully deflected each attempt, let out a great exasperated cry and hurled herself at his chest, tearing his flannel workshirt from top to bottom. Buttons spilled and scattered across the floor. Tom ducked and blocked her blows as best he could, grappling

determinedly for a grip on her arms. He'd managed several times to clamp down on one or the other but was having trouble getting hold of them both at the same time. By this time Aili's pinned and braided hair had come loose and was slapping wildly about her face, and at some point in the struggle her shirt had become undone again, freeing her milk-swollen breasts which rose and plunged with each enraged assault. She had been so intent on her frantic wrath that by the time she noticed that Tom had stopped fighting, it surprised her enough to enable him to grab her other arm and hold it fast. He gazed at her blazing eyes, flushed face, and loosened hair with a distraction that puzzled her for a moment, and then her eyes seemed to grow a little larger and a look of genuine fear flickered across her face. "Don't you . . . don't you dare," she whispered hoarsely, backing off as far as her imprisoned arms would allow. "You so much as . . . so much as *touch* me, Damianus, and I'll hate you for the rest of my life, with every cell in my body . . . I swear to you . . ."

Tom appeared not to hear. His whole manner had changed. He seemed suddenly quite sure of himself, no longer awkward or defensive. He pushed Aili back, and when she tried twisting away from the bed, steered her once more towards it with an iron grip. Aili seemed paralysed; for a brief moment she stared at Tom as if hypnotized. But the touch of her calves against the bedstead snapped her out of it, and her mouth and teeth clenched.

"Not on your . . . miserable . . . life!" She slammed up against him in a last, desperate lunge, tearing her arms free and sinking her teeth as hard as she could into his shoulder, but he had already seized her breasts and was squeezing them so roughly, she could only gasp and let go. She was

still standing, still flailing, but her shoulders were arched so far back she was forced to hold onto him with one hand while beating at him with the other, and suddenly her feet slid out from under her, they crashed down onto the bed, and as his full weight collapsed on top of her, her spine cracked across the bed's wooden side like a dry twig. Aili screamed.

10

WEST BY NORTH ONE-QUARTER NORTH

There was no law in Minnesota in 1910 that prohibited a man from beating or wounding his wife in whatever ways he deemed fit, but the Roseau judge who conducted an inquest at Aili's request was a friend of the family, who agreed that the Law had never been meant to condone a man's breaking his wife's back. He found Tom's testimony describing his urgent requests for help from his neighbours "hypocritically exaggerated," and his account of the hurried buckboard ride to the county hospital with the partially paralysed Aili "self-serving." Though the paralysis proved temporary and Aili regained full use of her limbs within several months, he found Tom guilty of aggravated assault and handed down a stiff prison sentence. When Tom returned to Roseau the following spring, after serving six months in the metal-work shop of the state penitentiary at Duluth, he found locks on both back and front door

and his suitcases standing packed and ready on the porch. Beyond that, Aili refused to have anything further to do with him. The community of Roseau seemed to have taken her side in the affair, and his children clutched fearfully at their mother's legs each time he appeared at the cabin door to negotiate. After several such attempts, and an eviction from their stable into which he'd tried to settle, Tom moved back down to his old boardinghouse and spent his days in a deep gloom, brooding over his fate.

Eventually it became clear to him that nothing could be gained by hanging on. Roseau was Aili's home town, and in a situation of this sort, she held all the cards. To return to Vaasa was unthinkable, and he'd had quite enough of the grime and the dust in the coal mines of Ohio. He also had precious little affection for his brother, Aleksis, but in one of their rare letters Aleksis had mentioned that a good deal of Crown land was still going begging in the Manybones area of southern Saskatchewan, where he himself had taken a homestead only a year before. Tom had looked up the Canadian prairies in an atlas and had taken a bearing on the nearest large centre, which appeared to be a town by the name of Swift Current, due west of a place called Moose Jaw. The route was west by north one-quarter north, fifty degrees twenty minutes north, a hundred and seven degrees thirty-one minutes west, with a ten-minute margin for error. He set off the next day with three dollars in his pocket (his six months' penitentiary pay), a suitcase containing clothes and his astronomy text, and an old brass compass which he wore on a leather thong around his neck. He ignored all roads, railways, and water routes, keeping as strictly as possible to his compass projections, swimming rivers and shouldering through the

chest-high North Dakota wheatfields as if he were following a bright red line drawn straight from the front door of his old boardinghouse to the little village of Manybones, Saskatchewan, six hundred miles to the northwest. He walked without stopping from sun-up to sun-down, eating berries, wheat, or whatever came to hand, patching his shoes with bits of discarded harness and protecting himself from sunstroke with a handkerchief knotted over his head. At the U.S.-Canada border crossing at Emerson, Manitoba, he registered once again as Damianus Sukanen, and when he reached the town of Manybones twenty-nine days later, he still had three dollars, his suitcase, and his compass. The town clerk remembered him as "polite, a bit sooty, and his shoes looked rather the worse for wear. Oh yes, and he was wearing an old alarm clock around his neck, a thing I found rather quaint, since he could hardly have had a social calendar . . ."

Tom had arrived in Manybones at the worst possible time. Only three weeks previously a gigantic prairie fire had swept through the greater part of southwestern Saskatchewan on a windstorm, reducing everything not ringed by firebreaks to smouldering cinders. From the day he had waded through Wiwa Creek west of Old Wives Lake, Tom had been trudging through ankle-deep ash, the prairie a blackened ruin as far as the eye could see, and the air gripped by an eerie, unnatural silence. There were no birds, no game, no movements of any kind but the gentle drift of ash across a limitless plain, and the lingering smell of scorched flesh from the half-burned carcasses of animals that had not escaped. Charred poplar and aspen trunks tottered here and there at precarious angles. At night the absent crickets seemed to leave a faint ringing in the ears,

like a vacuum. It all seemed somehow unsurprising, entirely consistent, even perversely appropriate in a way.

The clerk at the town hall sold Tom a clumsily traced map showing the Crown land still available in the region, and Tom headed back into the ashes to make his choice. All the land south of the Great Sand Hills had already been claimed, as well as most of the flatland northeast of Gull Lake. Walking west by northwest, however, he stumbled across an empty, shallow valley, less than five miles across, once named "Bowl of the Broken Voices" by the Nez Percé Indians but now listed on the map simply as "Broken Valley." No one had an explanation for the name, and the valley itself, rock-strewn and dry, had been of little interest to earlier homesteaders. Just off its western tip, however, Tom found a small coulee, almost undetectable from most directions, with a tiny creek trickling across its bottom and a narrow entrance accessible only from Broken Valley itself. The prairie above, which surrounded it on three sides, was thin-soiled and stony, but unclaimed and only ten miles west of town along the Broken Valley Road. Tom paced the land for most of a day, scuffing at the scorched earth and scraping holes to determine the level of its moisture. It was too sandy, it would need generous rainfall, and it had too many rocks, but the protected coulee, in the end, proved irresistible. Tom ran a finger through the soot on his face, planted it squarely over the X marking the unclaimed quarter on his map, rubbed hard, and headed for town and the Land Office.

11

THE CUNARD LINE

By the spring of 1932 there was no further doubt about it: Tom Sukanen was building a ship. Virtually in the heart of the prairie dustbowl, 15 miles from the nearest river and 1,027 miles from the closest salt water, he was constructing an ocean-going freighter in three separate sections, comprised of deep-sea keel, hull, and a full-length superstructure. The ship was designed to be powered by steam over considerable distances; its enormous, unusually shaped keel, almost a ship in its own right, was large enough to serve as an additional long-range coal or firewood bunker. By the time enough of this ship had risen in Tom's back field to take on a demonstrably nautical appearance, enough people had managed to get a glimpse of Tom's sketches to confirm the similarity.

To no one's surprise, Tom had very little to say on the subject. He fended off all questions, including the repeated grillings of his brother, Aleksis, who was only able to report

after several visits that Tom's papers included charts of the Nelson River delta and the Iceland coast. From such clues Aleksis patched together the surmise that Tom planned to sail his ship down the Saskatchewan and Nelson rivers to Hudson Bay, from where he could set course for Finland through the ice-free summer waters of Hudson Strait. Tom refused to confirm or deny all such speculation.

Aleksis's wife, Alvina, was scandalized. "He'll make us a perfect laughingstock, *minun rakas*. The name Sukanen will mean 'soft-in-the-head' from Lemsford to Shackleton." Alvina was a first-generation immigrant from the Finnish uplands, and though she insisted the family speak Finnish at home, she was always anxious to maintain as seamless a reputation as possible with the town's "English."

Aleksis grimaced behind his Finnish newspaper. "The name Sukanen . . ." He shook his head and then laughed. "Maybe he'll put wheels on it and sail it down to Finn Hall on Saturday nights. Heh? Now there's a Sukanen tradition worth preserving. Can't you just see that thing moored to the hitching rail with all the buggies and cutters in the parking-yard?" He snorted, tossing the paper into the woodbox beside the stove. "Then maybe he'd finally have all the attention he wants."

"Aleksis, be serious!" Alvina turned from the window and jammed her hands onto her hips. "You said yourself he's building that ship to sail back to Vaasa County, and he's already fifty years old. Besides, how is he going to sail a ship down the South Saskatchewan when it's only six feet deep? You answer me that, Aleksis Toivo Sukanen. How's your crazy brother going to sail a deep-keeled steamship down a river that any horse can walk across practically any time of year?"

Aleksis finished stuffing his pipe and pushed the tobacco pouch back into his shirt. He glanced out the window towards the southwest, towards his ploughed and seeded fields behind the sod-roof barn and the twelve-blade propeller pump that still spun uselessly in its wind-tower by the stock trough. "Well, we don't know for sure just what he's got in mind with those plans. Maybe he's just trying to get everybody riled up a bit. Maybe he's just trying to give you women something new to gossip about." He moved out of the way as Alvina descended on the stove with an armload of pots and pans. "He always did love poking a stick into an anthill."

Alvina's face was closed. "We can't even afford to get a pair of spectacles for Lempi. Everybody's harvesting thistles and dust. And he makes fun of us all with a ship. A *ship*, for God's sake! In the middle of this . . . this godforsaken desert!"

Aleksis puffed hard and the smoke hung for some moments like a screen between them.

When it cleared she had wiped her eyes with her apron and was cutting potatoes into a pot. "Alvina, look, I know . . . I know we expected to be, well, a little farther along by now; I know we had . . . bigger plans . . ."

Alvina pressed a lid firmly onto a pot. "It's outrageous, that's what it is. Just plain and simply outrageous. He's mocking God, and all decent folk along with Him. He needs a wife and a family, and a purpose for his life. Living alone makes men queer."

Aleksis poked about in his pipe as if trying to rearrange fate. "All we really need is a slightly wetter spring next year . . . it's good land, I know it is . . . after all, we *did* get almost fourteen bushels an acre last year and it was bone-dry from June to September . . ."

"A wife and a family, Aleksis. He has one, and he should be looking after it. It's shameful the way he shirks his duty. I still think he should have answered that letter; it was monstrous of him not to. If you want the truth, I sometimes think we should have answered it for him."

Aleksis stopped poking and threw the sliver of kindling back into the woodbox. "That was almost ten year ago, Alvina. My god, but you've got an unforgiving memory."

"It was his *son,* Aleksis. You know it as well as I. It just couldn't have been coincidence. The town he was born in, the age, his description of Tom. And that woman Tom married was a Roanen, I'm sure I remember that. I tell you, no amount of time absolves a father of responsibility for his own flesh and blood!"

Aleksis contemplated his wife thoughtfully for a moment, the wisp of hair hanging down over her face, the resentful line of her hip under her bleached housedress. For no particular reason he felt briefly on the verge of understanding something complicated about all this, but as usual he leaned away and let it pass. It was hard enough just keeping a farm on its feet these days.

"Coincidence or not, you can't just interfere with people's lives like that, Alvina. Especially not Tom's."

"And why not? It wasn't human, ignoring his own child's cry for help. It's plain and simply monstrous."

Aleksis sighed and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Stop exaggerating, Alvina. He bothers me as much as anyone, but he's just as human as the rest of us. Warts, blotches, and all."

"Oh cowshit!" Alvina looked almost as startled as Aleksis, but it was that or the dish in her hand flung to the floor, and they had few enough dishes already. "Oh sure, he's as

human as the rest of us any old time it happens to suit him! When he wants a wife or a farm or some children. But when he's tired of them, when he doesn't want them anymore, why then it's just presto! You wave them away with a flick of the hand and they cease to exist, is that what you're saying? He just doesn't *feel* like having a family anymore; it's just not *convenient* to keep his thistles from seeding onto other people's farms; he isn't *thrilled* at having to work his fingers to the bone just to keep food on the table and rags on his body like the rest of us! But he's a man, he's just old Tom, he can drop it all in somebody else's lap and walk away because after all he's only *human*, warts, blotches, and all, and he doesn't have to worry about picking up the pieces! Is that right? Do I have that right? Is that what you're telling me, Aleksis Toivo Sukanen? That if I'm human, I can build myself a ship and sail away?!"

The coulee seemed deserted when Aleksis rode down into it on his way to town the next morning, after chores. Tom's horses stood idle in the barn and there was no activity in the little field, though Aleksis could see that a good deal of progress had been made since his last visit. The structure nearest the manure pile was now very obviously the overturned skeleton of a freighter's deep-sea keel, its thick wooden ribs bellying out gracefully over a massive lower gunwale, closing neatly along a keel-beam arching fifteen feet above the ground. On the other side of the barn, beside the forge, he saw several lengths of hand-beaten anchor chain draped over a makeshift anvil, and a partly rolled sheet of thick steel he took to be the beginnings of the ship's steam boiler, or its furnace. The door to Tom's tower was unlocked but it opened only a few inches before striking

against something hard. Aleksis banged it several times against this obstruction but it refused to budge. Suddenly Tom's voice boomed out from inside the house.

"Who is be-it there?"

"Aleksis. There's something wrong with your door."

"What's-it?"

"Aleksis. Your door won't open."

"Ah." Tom switched to Finnish. "Nothing wrong. Come in the window."

There was a window open on the east side of the tower, with an old wheel propped under it. Aleksis struggled through and stopped, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Through the gloom he could hear the low sough of the wind under the lip of the tower's dome, and a steady scratching sound, like a dog pawing at the door.

"*Odotaa hetki.* I'll be there in a minute."

Tom's voice floated down from somewhere high above his head. As Aleksis began to make out details, he saw he was standing only inches from a tall thick pole, constituting the main support for a small movable platform about two feet below the ceiling. Tom was lying on his back on the platform, scratching away with a wedge of chalk, and as Aleksis squinted with greater effort, he began to distinguish faint circles and ellipses, then the discs of planets and the plates of suns, swooping trajectories of heavenly bodies, and finally the spray of innumerable stars that speckled the wavering blackness like swirls of phosphorescent dust. The drawings took up the entire inside of the dome, including even rafters and bracing, and as his irises widened the stars and planets seemed to advance and increase, as if he were being drawn slowly, irresistibly upward into unknown heavens.

Tom manoeuvred the platform towards the ladder, climbed off, and descended in a shower of chalk-dust and grit. He paused at the bottom to beat more chalk-dust from his hair and shirt, "Jupiter. Jupiter," he mused, mostly to himself. "I always forget how many moons are in Jupiter. Whether ten or twelve." He gave Aleksis a short, penetrating look. "Maybe ten."

"I couldn't tell you if my life depended on it," Aleksis said dryly. "I think it was twelve," Tom decided. "I think it's twelve."

He unstacked several crates for seats while Aleksis stared once more at the sprawling solar system above their heads, which now rolled and hovered in the darkness like a great brooding eye, gazing down on them with hypnotic intensity.

"*No niin,*" Tom said, stuffing the chalk into his shirt. "What is it you've come to see me for, Aleksis?"

Aleksis was momentarily embarrassed. "I was just on my way to town. See if Gillis got the cutters for my thresher."

Tom nodded noncommittally and blew more dust off his palms and wrists.

"Figured I'd use my own thresher this year," Aleksis shrugged. "Probably won't be enough out there to hire an outfit anyway."

Tom grunted. "If this wind blows another month, you won't need a thresher of any kind. Or a disker. Or a harrow."

"It's good land," Aleksis insisted. "A little rain and it'll bounce back just like in '18."

"It's dry down to four feet. I wonder if it was even worth putting in seed this year."

Aleksis looked uncomfortable. "I planted every acre I got broke. All we needed was a slightly wetter spring."

"We didn't get one though."

"*Herran Jesus,* you don't have to tell *me!* Where the hell d'you think I've been — living under a rock? Building phantom *Dutchmen* in a dustbowl?"

"Aha," Tom said triumphantly. "You came to talk about the ship."

"To hell with you and your goddamned ship," Aleksis growled. "It's causing nothing but argument and trouble, and God knows we've got enough of that these days already. Why don't you come to your damned senses, Tomi? You're acting like a painted clown at a funeral."

Tom glanced out the window as if scanning the yard for intruders. "Is that what they sent you to tell me?"

"I speak for myself," Aleksis snapped. "I always have and I always will."

Tom said nothing, and Aleksis's jawline tightened perceptibly.

"Look here. You know as well as I do there's a spillway across the river at Saskatoon, and even during spring flood that river's no more than ten feet deep — if you're lucky. So how in hell do you figure on getting that . . . that *dream*ship of yours past all the sandbars and rapids between here and Hudson Bay. You going to put wings on it maybe?"

Tom was staring out the window again, looking thoughtful. "Maybe," he agreed.

"And I suppose that explains how you're going to get it out of here, up that fifty-foot bench, and through every gully between here and river? Not to mention the goddamn tracks at Cabri."

Tom looked almost cocky. "I guess it does."

"The rapids at Whitrush don't bother you at all? You think the North Saskatchewan's a joke?"

Tom shrugged.

Aleksis lost his patience. "Goddamn it, Tomi, you're either an idiot or a first-class ass! You've done some pretty dumb things in your time, but this one beats them all and then some. What the *hell* do you expect to accomplish with all this cowshit!"

Tom studied his brother calmly, with a faint tinge of disdain. "You know, Aleksis, more and more often you sound to me just like a chicken."

"What the hell kind of an answer is that?"

"A flock of cackling chickens, Aleksis. You all sound like cackling chickens. You squawk and shit and spend your whole lives picking away at little stones."

"And I suppose you think you've accomplished the earth as the laughingstock of the township, threshing half a quarter of stonepile and living in this miserable hole in the ground."

"Like maggots, Aleksis. Like maggots in a shit-pile. It's as if you never left Vaasa County at all."

"Oh I left it all right," Aleksis snorted. "You bet I left it. And I ended up right here. You make me wonder whether you can say the same."

The two brothers stared at each other hard for several minutes.

"You know, I don't think you've fitted in very well here in Manybones," Aleksis said finally. "When you were just getting settled you used to come down to Finn Hall and join us like a normal human being. But you haven't been down to the Hall in years. You live all alone in this gully, and every day your head seems to fill up with more and more crazy ideas. What you need is your family, Tomi. You should bring up your wife and children. Man wasn't intended to live alone in this world. And if your wife is dead, at least bring back the kids."

Tom's face stiffened. "I have no family," he said testily, and his voice sounded suddenly tired. "I've told you that before. No wife and no children. And the last thing I need is to saddle myself with a houseful of them now."

"Don't take me for a fool, Tomi. You sent me a photo of them once. From Minnesota."

"*I have no family,*" Tom growled. "Do I have to write it on the inside of your head?"

Aleksis ignored this. "After I showed you that letter in the *Lakehead Chronicle,* you disappeared for almost half a year. The way I see it, you went south to look for the boy. But you didn't come back with him. What happened to Einar, Tomi?"

"I went to the moon," Tom sighed, standing up to shove his packing crate back against the wall. "And it's made of green cheese."

"Sentner complained about working extra," Aleksis pointed out. "He said the deal was for only three months. He said he even had to sell off one of your horses to pay for the extra feed."

"If Sentner has a problem he can talk to me about it. He doesn't need you as a messenger." Tom reached into a small box on the table and pulled out a wedge of yellow chalk. "*Mutta kylla,* Aleksis, you snuffle around a person's affairs like an old woman. If your wife wants to know about all this so badly, why doesn't she just come right out and ask?"

Aleksis sucked sharply on his teeth, but his hands remained flat on his knees, drumming. For a moment he looked as if he were calculating the exact distance between them. Finally he grimaced, shrugged.

"Ah well. To each his own." He stood up stiffly, shoved at his packing crate, and banged his head hard against the

pole he had forgotten was immediately behind him. "*Saatana, voi perkele kun otti kipiää!* You've got these buildings trained like a pack of goddamned Dobermans! Let me out of this dungeon." But as he set foot on the windowsill to twist his way out, he paused.

"At least tell me one thing, Tomi. Why in God's name go to all this trouble to get back to Finland when a Cunard Line ticket would get you there in less than a month, for eighty-eight dollars?"

Tom leaned back against his oil barrel, eyes tracing up the ladder above his head to the platform under the ceiling, and the silent brooding galaxies over it all. "The Cunard Line," he said slowly, and it was difficult to tell whether the edge that crept into his voice implied complaint or satisfaction: "The Cunard Line, Aleksis, sails only to places where people like you would want to go."

12

CLAY JACKSON

[Former Manybones Resident]

Aw, let's face it, he weren't nuthin' but a ringading nutcase. Now people pretend he was just odd, but what the hell, I know different. He'd lost a few bricks off the top, an' no mistake. Yeah sure, when he first come here he was all please-an'-thank-you-Ma'am, but that didn't last too long, now did it? Shit nosiree. I was workin' in a hardware joint name a' Gillis' at the time, livin' on the top floor over the store, and he was always comin' into town on a Sunday mornin' damn near bustin' in the glass on the front door, demandin' to get served cause he said it was Tuesday, or Friday, or some goddamn thing. Ya heard all 'bout that, eh? Well, people got a real bang outta that, th' way ya hear 'em talk about it now, but I was th' only sucker gettin' rousted outta bed every Sunday mornin', me an' the wife an' kids. Tell ya th' truth, I shoulda shot his goddamn toes

off is what I shoulda done; that mighta cooled down th' sonofabitch's excitement fer foolin' around with a perfectly good calendar. Damn sorry I never did. Bugger sure had it comin', an' that's a fact.

Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'm gettin' cranky myself in my old age. I never had much luck, I guess. But he sure was a trial, an' no mistake. Dished it out plenty, any old time atall, but when th' shoe got on th' other foot, why then he just couldn't seem to take it. Man had a temper on'm like a horse with saddle sores. We'd rib'm a little hit, you know, about bein' a pinko an' that sort of stuff — most alla them Finlanders was commies at the time; cops hadda shut down their hall, everythin' — but hoo boy, he sure could get touchy when he got poked. Shit yessiree. He'd get so mad he'd just pick up an' throw most anythin'. He wasn't any too tall, see, but he had a chest on'm big like a goddamn buffalo, so he could do a good bitta damage if he got the notion. Built just like my Uncle Ebenezer down t' Wyoming. Guys over at the Pennant railyards once told me he picked up one of them railway sledges, y' know the kind they keep clipped to them little speeders they horse around in, well he picked up one a' them an' just smashed the porch they was standin' on to kindlin'. Just *mashed* it. Seems they called'm a Flipper or Lappdog or some such thing. Well hell, everybody called everybody names like that in them days. Mostly still do. They used to call me "Dryhole" myself — on accounta my drinkin' mostly — but it never choked me up none. Bugger just couldn't take a joke, that's all.

One time, I remember, he showed up at a friend of mine's farm, Jerzy Moskavitch his name was, he's dead now, used to live out by the Broken Valley turnoff, next to Harry Bitner's place — shows up there an' asks can he borrow Moskavitch's

30/30. Now Moskavitch he's easy, he gives'm the gun, an' a coupla hours later Sukanen shows up again, gives back the gun, doesn't say nothin'. So Moskavitch gets curious, says whaddya need the big bruiser for, been no buffalo around here for years. An Sukanen says, didn't shoot me no buffalo, shot my horse. Turns out he'd been chasin' this horse of his all mornin', just couldn't catch'm, so he borrowed the gun an' *plugged* 'm. You see what I mean? No sense of humour atall. Guy had a temper like a rattlesnake.

Yeah an' he weren't much of a farmer neither, no matter what some people say. Some folks'll try'n tell ya he worked his damnfool tail off, but that was only when th' moon was right. Now maybe you didn't realize th' moon could be wrong, but Tom Sukanen, oh he knew all 'bout that. There was all kinds of times you couldn't do what you wanted cause the moon weren't just right. See, he always seeded his fields by the moon. He threshed by the moon too, though it never made no damn difference; he got no more yield off his fields than anybody else. I think he built that damnfool ship by the moon, if I'm not mistaken. Th' old goofball probably crapped by the moon, for all I know. He was just totally roped on all this moon business. An' all the horseshit he fed us about ploughin' against the wind so the dirt wouldn't blow so bad — he probably got that from the moon too. I can't believe it woulda made a pinch a' difference. You get a good stiff blow comin' down from the Coteau Hills an' it wouldn't matter if you'd ploughed your fields inna shape of a goddamn nun on her knees, they'd still end up against somebody's fence in southern Montana. He had a lotta crackbrained notions like that. Makes y' wonder what they feed'm for breakfast, up there in Finland where he come from.

My wife, she always said there was somethin' eatin' 'm bad enough so's y'always hadda keep your eyes wide open. She figured he was always lookin' for somethin' that ya couldn't buy. Her family, they was KKK on her daddy's side, an' she said she recognized the look. But then she was always gettin' spooked by people like that, so I never paid her much attention. Mostly he just give people somethin' to talk about, with all his gopherskin duds an' such. An' with his irritatin' ways. You know, that bimbo would argue about *anythin'*. Just *anythin'* to get people's dander up. He once accused old Reverend Jarvenpaa, now this'll blow your nose, he actually accused th' old geezer of bein' a *puff ball!* You know what I mean: a goddamn queen! He didn't use them exact words, acourse, but that's what he sure as hell meant. He said the old preach wore dresses under his Sunday suit. Called him an Egyptian something-or-other. I really thought I'd heard it all after that one. Down to Wyoming, they'da lynched 'm sure. But he hated them Laestadians most worse than any thin', cause they was always after'm for workin' on Sundays 'n such. Real old-fashioned thumpers, that bunch. They even tried t' sic th' Law on'm for that one. So he was always stickin' it to 'em whenever he could. One time I remember we had us one a' them whangdoozer hailstorms, I guess it musta been around '25 or '26 or thereabouts, and these Laestadians, real religious fanatics you know, don't believe in no hail insurance or nothin'— I never could figure it worth beans but it was somethin' about not arguin' with God about the way He run things or some shit like that — anyways, after th' big hail, when everythin's flattened right out an' everybody's wiped out for the year, he finds himself one of these Laestadians, it was George Labar, I think, or anyways one a' them guys who'd really taken a

lickin', an' he says hey George, he says, I was just talkin' to Dick Hiebert down t' the Wawanesa, an' he tells me I got me five bucks an acre comin' from the crop insurance. So tell me, George, how much is the Lord payin' you for yours?

Oh yeah, he liked t' get his pitchfork in when he could. An' some folks say he was pretty bright — about some things anyways — an' maybe he was; I guess I wouldn't know. But that whole business with his ship has to be the damnfoolest thing I ever saw, an' I guess I've seen some ripsnorters in my time. Now what in the name of billy hell would make a man do somethin' as ringading as that, d'you suppose? I kinda wondered, myself, whether the prairie would a done that to'm. Some men can't take it, you know, the prairie 'n all. Sometimes when you're sittin' out there, all by yourself I mean, just listenin' to the wind hummin' in the telegraph . . . well, it's an odd thing, y' know; it's just an odd thing. You got any idea what the hell I'm gettin' at? It's just like, after a while I mean, after a while you can get t' lookin' at things different-like, it's like you're not really on the prairie atall — not the prairie you're used to, anyways. It's *different*, that's all I'm sayin' I guess; it's different from what some people are used to. I used t' check survey stakes for an outfit I worked for back in the Forties, an' that sometimes happened to me, on the road. It's just an odd thing. I guess you'd have to have it happen to ya t' know what I'm talkin' about. An' maybe he couldn't get back out of it, maybe it happened to 'm once too often. Oh hell, I don't know — it just makes you wonder, that's all. It just makes you wonder.

Y' know, some people say he was gonna sail that ship back t' Finland, but that ain't what he told Gillis. He told Gillis he was headed for th' tropics, like th' Amazon River

or like that. Said he was goin' t' where she rained all day, every day o' th' week, from th' starta April t' th' enda November. An' hey, just considerin' how dry she was in them days, you know with the dustbowl blowin' an' all, I guess that was about th' only idea he ever had that made any sense at all . . .

13

PURITY IS BEST

The day Aleksis had confronted Tom with the letter that had appeared in the *Lakehead Chronicle's* March 1923 Correspondence section under the caption "Abandoned Son Seeks Whereabouts of Missing Father," Tom had refused to even read the clipping. Aleksis had countered by reading it aloud. A fifteen-year-old boy, listing his birthplace as Roseau, Minnesota, was asking for help in locating his long-lost father, whose name he could no longer remember. *They took mother away two years ago and we have all been sent to other homes. . . . Once mother told us that father went to Canada. I hate the people I live with here, and I want to go to Canada too.* The letter was signed *Einar Roanen*.

Aleksis looked at him closely but Tom remained indifferent. "I've told you before, I have no family," he shrugged. "I'm not going to invent one just because some kid wants to come to Canada from Missouri, or wherever he lives."

But after Aleksis left, Tom stayed seated in front of his stove, brooding over the boy's letter and staring at the plank floor beneath his feet. Evening came and went, the stock whinnied and bellowed in the barn, but he ignored them all. Finally, at four o'clock in the morning, just as the greying cloud-ranges under a barely visible Saturn were releasing their hold on the eastern horizon, he got up, assembled his tools, and headed out to the barn. During that day and the next he designed and built a self-feeding and self-watering system for the animals, filled all the bins to overflowing with grain, arranged with his neighbour on his southern side, Bill Sentner, to refill them every two weeks for three months, and loosed the stock into the coulee to range. Then he shouldered a sack of potatoes, nailed up his house, and headed off through a driving April blizzard. His course was southeast by south quarter-south, forty-eight degrees fifteen minutes north, ninety-three degrees twenty-seven minutes west. And an eight-minute margin for error.

The trek back to Roseau quickly turned into one disaster after another. Two days after crossing South Crowfoot Creek near Lendsford, he was forced to find shelter in a cramped cave in the Cactus Hills, dizzy and retching from a vicious attack of grippe. He made up some time rafting down the Souris from Weyburn to Plankston, but found the Northgate border-crossing permanently closed. The nearest crossing in an easterly direction, the International Peace Garden at Lake Metigoshe, was over one hundred miles down the line. Tom decided to wade into North Dakota under cover of night, across the sandbars of Des Lacs Creek. He was now an illegal alien with half a sack of potatoes on his back, wearing pants reinforced with "Purity Is Best" floursacking stitched across the seat, and less than

ten dollars in his pocket. A day later it cost him over three of those dollars to replace the boots he lost fording the Sheyenne Rapids west of Fargo City.

He arrived in Roseau on the afternoon of May 10, to find the cabin inhabited by strangers who shot over his head to run him off the property. His former neighbours had moved, and the clerk of the county court was barely civil. Aili Roanen, it appeared, had eaten diseased rabbit and had "lost her faculties." She had died four months later in the state mental institution in Duluth. As for the children, they had survived her and had been claimed by the County Department for the Destitute and Feeble-Minded. The DDF had its offices on Compton Street.

The Secretary at the Department for the Destitute and Feeble-Minded was unexpectedly courteous, but firm. She was willing to look up the case, and to explain all the proceedings they had followed in conducting the state-ordered disposition of the estate chattels and the children. She was prepared to permit him to examine all relevant documents contained in the Public Trustee's file. But she absolutely refused to disclose the whereabouts of the children. "They're with new families now, and they're adapting nicely, don't you see. It wouldn't be fair to the new parents to bring you together now. It would simply cause more disruption and stress."

"I have-it here by me one letter from mine son," Tom pointed out, laying the newspaper clipping on her desk. "He say-it me he not happy by the peoples he live."

The officer read the letter with interest, but refused to budge. "If this is your son, and there's no proof that it is," she assured him, "I'm certain this merely represents a period of adjustment. You know kids; they're never satisfied."

"But he is be-it with this peoples now two year. He say-it still he hate them."

"I can assure you, Mr. Sukanen, that your children are well taken care of." The officer's voice was becoming crisp. "I happen to be familiar with the family, and they're excellent people. They've taken in foster kids for years." She tapped down the documents in her file.

"And that, I'm afraid, is as much as I can do for you under the circumstances. My hands are tied. The law is very clear. And, if you'll forgive me for being informally frank for a moment, I feel that that's as much as you can reasonably expect. After all, Mr. Sukanen, you found it expedient not to concern yourself about your children's welfare for the past . . . almost twelve years. Your sudden interest in them now is really a little . . . late."

At the old boardinghouse on Walpole Street, Jack Walpole watched Tom staring a hole into the linoleum for most of the afternoon and finally put down his towel and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. "Listen, Tom, I probably shouldn't be doing this, but if it's your oldest boy you're looking for, they've moved him over to East Durbeyville. Somewhere in East Durbeyville. I don't know where your other kids are, but I do know that Einar goes to the St. Charles Junior Form. I got a young nephew goes to that school, and he mentioned it to me last year some time."

Tom looked up at the man in astonishment.

"Easet Durbeyville? He live-it now in Easet Durbeyville?"

"Far as I know. That's what my nephew said."

Tom was still gazing at the old man in the same way.

"Why you be tell-it me this right now?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess I got to thinking you might

be getting a raw deal." He wiped his hands on a rag hanging from his back pocket and turned back to the counter. "I used to know your Aili, remember. Far back as '95. The family was neighbours of my uncle's for years. The old man used to fix my roof for me. And I know that girl was never too easy to get along with."

Tom said nothing, but his face worked as if he were being pulled in several directions at once.

"And my Emmi? Velma? You be know-it anything and them?"

Jack Walpole shook his head. "Like I said, I don't know anything about the other kids. I just heard about your Einar."

Tom turned his gaze out the window, where evening was beginning to blur the edges of the huge old rhododendron bushes around the dining-room window. "Well I thank-it you for that," he said slowly, as if groping among unaccustomed words. "Sometimes I think-it is everything alltimes wrong, all wrong."

"I lost my wife last year, to pneumonia," Walpole agreed. "Been pretty much at loose ends ever since."

The pump on the water tank clicked, hesitated, then churned into life.

"My woman she take-it this childrens and go," Tom murmured, after a long while. "This woman she take-it this childrens away. I never don't understand-it all this. What they be want-it, and so, and so?"

"Never know till you get there, I always say," the old man sighed absently. He was towelling glasses on the diningroom counter, and his face was thoughtful and sad.

"I think-it all afternoon about Amerika," Tom said suddenly, after another silence. "Maybe I make-it . . . mistake." He seemed to be addressing the bushes through the window.

"Is maybe, I don't think-it so sometimes, is maybe not my place. You know-it how I mean? Maybe not my place."

"You're a lone wolf, Tom," Walpole said kindly, putting down a glass and picking up another. "Loners aren't at home anywhere, and the sooner you learn that, the better. Loners carry their country on their back."

"I come-it to Amerika nineteen hundert-one," Tom insisted. "They say-it New World. Better place. Lots of room for the breathing. But I am find-it everything same." His face had become lost in the gloom but the old man made no move to turn on the lights. "You know-it how I mean? Like old. Like Finland. Like all the places. Everywhere already be-it wrong. Everywhere already . . . Egyptians . . ."

They sat in the boardinghouse's two dilapidated armchairs, watching a handful of fruit bats flitting and swooping through the dusk, their webbed wings flaring and pumping like tiny bellows on the sides of their bodies. "Fixing up nests under the rafters again," Walpole grumped, leaning forward and then settling back again with a futile gesture. "Been trying to get ahead of the pesky devils since I bought the place in 1903. Tried absolutely everything."

Several bats looped in over the window and disappeared. A few moments later their dry scrabbling could be heard almost overhead.

"Even tried rat-poison."

"I make-it marriage. The childrens. I make-it some farms," Tom reasoned. "I working always, always. Alltimes work. Why for is be-it not enough? I make-it thresher — no. I tell-it ploughing — no. I make-it motore — no. Only *virhe*. Always *virhe*. Always the troubles."

"Yep, plenty of that," Walpole sighed. "Always plenty of that."

"Too much Egyptians."

"How's that again?"

"Too much Egyptians," Tom explained. "Egyptians, everyplace."

"Not sure I follow you, but it's a pretty big country to rattle around in," Walpole supposed. "Must seem like quite a circus sometimes."

"*Sirkus.*" Tom looked relieved. "*Kylla, kylla. Sirkus.* One old big sirkus."

"Three shots for a nickel," Walpole mused. "*Every*body wins."

The gaslights along the street had been lit and every fifth tree now stood out with an unearthly halo. It was the supper hour, and the sidewalks were empty. In the abrupt sweep of light from the occasional automobile, the knees and eyeballs of the two men gleamed briefly in the unlit room. The pump's grinding and rattling had turned into a low, steady grumble.

"Easet Durbeyville," Tom murmured, not turning his head or moving in his chair. "Easet Durbeyville . . . What time you be think-it the school she open in morning?"

14

A MATTER OF RECORD

Excerpt from the court records of the County Court at Durbeyville, Minnesota, in the matter of THE STATE VS DAMIANUS SUKANEN, Homsteader (May 8, 1923)

J.L. BENSON, (COUNTY PROSECUTOR): Your name and occupation?

H.M. COOPER, (WITNESS): Hector Cooper, Deputy Sheriff with the Durbeyville County Sheriff's Office.

J.L. BENSON: Would you inform the Court, Mr. Cooper, of the events which took place on May 5 of this year in connection with the matter before us today?

H.M. COOPER: Yes sir. We got a phone call from a Miss . . . Leslie Berryman, from Destitute and Feeble-Minded, informing us that a fellow named Damianus Sukanen, alias Tom Sukanen, was in the area. She thought there might be

some trouble about his children. She said that the children had become wards of the county a couple of years ago . . .

J.L. BENSON: The Court knows the background of the case, Mr. Cooper. How did your office respond to Miss Berryman's information?

H.M. COOPER: Well, sir, I took it upon myself to pass this information on to the principals of the schools in which those kids were enrolled, the Jefferson Elementary, the . . .

J.L. BENSON: Carry on.

H.M. COOPER: Oh . . . well, we got a phone call from the St. Charles Junior Form the next morning, that principal's name was Mr. . . . Halburton, I think; anyway he informed us that a man fitting Damianus Sukanen's description was loitering around the schoolyard and would we come down to take a look. I took it upon myself to proceed to the school, and I did find the man talking to a young boy . . .

J.L. BENSON: Excuse me, Deputy; do you see the man of whom you are speaking in this courtroom today?

H.M. COOPER: Yes sir, I do. He's that man there, in the prisoner's box . . .

J.L. BENSON: Let the record show that Deputy Hector Cooper has identified Damianus Sukanen, alias Tom Sukanen, who is charged with kidnapping in this case. Proceed, Deputy.

H.M. COOPER: Right . . . Well, I couldn't understand what they were saying because they sounded like they were talking in a foreign language, but the boy said his name was Einar Roanen, though the school has him enrolled as . . . Gerald Jackson . . .

M. KELLY, (MAGISTRATE): Jackson?

J.L. BENSON: At the request of the adoptive family, Your Honour. The D & F people made application on behalf of the boy to have his name changed . . .

M. KELLY: Ah. Well, proceed, Counsellor.

J.L. BENSON: Deputy?

H.M. COOPER: So I told Mr. Sukanen to move along, and warned him that we'd be keeping an eye on the boy, and then I accompanied the boy into the school and took it upon myself to inform his teacher of the situation. According to the statement she gave to the Sheriff's Office later that day, she talked to the boy about it again after I left, but I guess it didn't do any good.

J.L. BENSON: Yes?

H.M. COOPER: We got a call at the Sheriff's Office the next morning, about ten o'clock, from the principal of the St. Charles Junior Form, informing us that the boy was gone.

J.L. BENSON: Was it established at this time that the boy had been kidnapped by Damianus Sukanen?

H.M. COOPER: Well, not exactly. I mean, nobody actually saw them run off together. But of course it was obvious. So we put out an APB to all points between Durbeyville and the Canadian border, because the D & F people told us this Sukanen fellow lived in Canada — in the state of Saskatchewan. And we got them — I mean the Lancaster County Sheriff's Office got them — the next day, just about twenty miles south of the Emerson border-crossing into Manitoba. Sheriff Stevens sent me up there to verify the identification.

J.L. BENSON: You did so?

H.M. COOPER: Oh it was them all right. And they were headed for Canada — they told this to the deputy who got them and they told it to me later on too. We also found out that Sukanen didn't have a valid entry permit, so I guess he must have jumped the Line somewhere west of the Woods [Lake of the Woods — CR]. The way we figured it, Deputy Larson and me, is that Sukanen had this planned long before, and that the real . . .

M. KELLY: I suggest you restrict your observations to the facts, Mr. Cooper, and leave the interpreting to us. Anything else on this detainment?

H.M. COOPER: Yes, Your Honour. There was an escape attempt at Crofton.

J.L. BENSON: Proceed, proceed.

H.M. COOPER: Well, I was conducting the prisoners back to Durbeyville by car when they escaped custody during a . . . comfort break . . .

M. KELLY: I beg your pardon?

H.M. COOPER: They said they wanted to use a service station biffy, sir, and I let them. After they didn't return for some time I went in after them. They'd got out through a doorway into the garage itself, but I caught up with them again about a mile up the highway. They didn't get far.

J.L. BENSON: I see. Anything else?

H.M. COOPER: No sir, I think that's all.

J.L. BENSON: Thank you, Deputy. Your witness, Counsellor.

K. PERSHEY, (DEF. ADVOCATE): Just one question, Your Honour. Deputy Cooper, did the defendant resist arrest or become obstreperous in any way during your various dealings with him in this matter?

H.M. COOPER: No, sir. Not exactly, no. I mean, after I . . .

K. PERSHEY: Thank you, Deputy. No further questions, Your Honour.

M. KELLY: Mr. Benson, do you have any further depositions to make to this court on this matter?

J.L. BENSON: I do not, Your Honour.

M. KELLY: Mr. Pershey?

K. PERSHEY: None, Your Honour.

M. KELLY: Very well. In that case, Mr. Sukanen, do you have anything to add before I hand down sentence on the charges that have been brought against you this day?

D. SUKANEN, (DEFENDANT): It be-it the womans. One, she take-it away my childrens. All the monies. I live-it in basement, all-times. Three year, I cannot stay-it there. I am go-it to Canada. Now peoples here she take-it my childrens again. I say-it this not am be right. My woman, Aili, she now death. Emma, Velma, Einar, my childrens. Why you am be change-it name of mine boy?

M. KELLY: You were married to your wife how long?

D. SUKANEN: I am be-it marry this woman 7 October in 1906. She am be take-it my childrens one from one.

M. KELLY: I sympathize, Mr. Sukanen; I gather your domestic

situation in Roseau was less than congenial, though by whose fault I'm not in a position to say. However I'm afraid that your past domestic difficulties can be of no concern to this Court at this time. It might have been twelve years ago, but you did not avail yourself of our services then. You abandoned your family, Mr. Sukanen, and obliged the State of Minnesota to assume responsibility for it. In doing so you forfeited all rights to that family, which means, for all intents and purposes of law, that your kidnapping of your natural son is no less serious than if you had kidnapped a total stranger. I trust your attorney has managed to make this very important point clear to you.

Now, Mr. Pershey has made much of the fact that you are not familiar with American laws and American customs, and ordinarily I would incline to make allowances for such a point. But you have spent so much effort attempting to circumvent these laws that it cannot have escaped your attention that you were managing to break a very considerable number of them — and I don't believe that any civilized country countenances contempt for official authority of such a determined sort. You have entered this country by illegal means, abducted one of its citizens despite a specific police warning to keep the peace, then escaped lawful custody by subterfuge and misrepresentation, and now you expect me to overlook such anarchy because you are the child's natural father and have apparently had a change of heart with respect to your parental duties and responsibilities. Well I'm afraid you have pushed your luck too far, Mr. Sukanen. I have said that I sympathize with you in your predicament, but I must also point out that you have no one to blame but yourself. And in view of this, I simply cannot overlook such persistent lawlessness. I sentence you

to three months in the state penitentiary of Minnesota, at Duluth, after which you will be deported to Canada and barred from re-entry into the State of Minnesota for a period of seven years — until your youngest child is come of age. At that time the State will have fulfilled its obligations, and your relationship with your children will once again become your own affair. Do you have any questions pertaining to this sentence?

D. SUKANEN: I want am know why for he change-it name. Why for he change-it boy mine name.

K. PERSHEY: His Honour has sentenced you to three months, Mr. Sukanen. In the state penitentiary.

D. SUKANEN: You tell-it me what you be do-it now mine boy.

M. KELLY: You are not owed any explanations on the matter, Mr. Sukanen, as I've already told you. But I'm sure he'll be properly taken care of.

D. SUKANEN: My boy not happy by the peoples he live.

M. KELLY: I'm not prepared to take up Court time debating this issue with you, Mr. Sukanen. If you have no further questions relating to your sentence I will . . .

D. SUKANEN: You bring-it me mine boy this now . . .

M. KELLY: Remove the prisoner from the Court.

D. SUKANEN: You [garbled] Egyptians! [*sic*] New world this . . . [unintelligible] . . . circus! Broken! Never be-it anymore . . . [rest of remarks unintelligible — CR]

15

SUMMER OF '34

By the summer of 1934 the steady beat of Tom Sukanen's hammer had become an accustomed ringing in the ears of Manybones homesteaders from Springhorn to the Pennant Junction. West winds carried the sound along gullies and scissures like a telegraph network, and even the townspeople of Verlo came to recognize the clang of his anvil on days when the dust blew particularly hard from the northwest. In the evenings, when the brown sun had melted down and the day's raw heat began to radiate back out into space, homesteaders fanning themselves on their porches turned unconsciously towards this distant pulse as if listening to the beating of their own blood. The Reverend Sip Jarvenpaa, whose fundamentalist Laestadian Church had recently made its stand on a piece of donated land not far from the Sukanen homestead, complained bitterly to the village council that the tireless pounding distracted

his congregation and made a mockery of his Sabbath service. An increasing number of letters from members of this congregation informed the village councillor, in remarkably similar turns of phrase, of the growing community displeasure at this un-Christian example to the district's children.

Tom Sukanen's steamship, meanwhile, was rising from the parched prairie like a carefully watered plant. Her massive boiler, shaped and hot-rivetted by hand, lay ready among darkening piles of anchor chain, and her smokestack stood mocked up beside the barn. The hull (which, unlike the keel, was being built upright) had been laid out, framed and ribbed, and a first layer of lapped planking warped across her sides. Tom had caulked all seams with oakum and coated the planking with tar, over which he was now cold-rivetting a second plank layer, butt-edged, at right angles to the first. More oakum rope, another sealcoat of tar, and this shell would be sheathed with an outer skin of interlocking steel plates, some of which already lay cut and ready to assemble in the dry creekbed. Small portholes were outlined on many of the plates, and several had already been punch-marked and drilled.

"Damn fool acts like he's building the *Queen Mary*," Aleksis gruffed, back from a futile trip into town to make peace with the Bank of Montreal. "If he'd put that kind of effort into his farm, he'd be rivalling the Rothschilds by now."

Alvina poked and prodded her biscuit dough. "He hauled six bushels an acre last year. I can't understand how he can even afford seed."

"He doesn't use seed grain. He just throws in his own uncleaned stuff, right out of the bin." Aleksis sagged into a chair and fanned himself with his hat. "And how would you know he hauled six bushels last year?"

"That Henderson fellow told me. You know — beard, crewcut."

"That information's supposed to be confidential. George Henderson ought to have his ass kicked." He began unbuttoning his shirt and then stopped, frowning. "What the hell were you doing at the Elevator gabbing with the English?"

"I wasn't at the Elevator. I ran into him at the Hardware. I asked him about those meetings his wife's been organizing."

Aleksis returned to his buttons. "Is that crazy *Englandilainen* still at it? I swear to God there isn't a nosier, more meddlesome bitch in all Saskatchewan."

Alvina let that pass. "I thought you said yourself that Tom should stop this craziness."

"That's right. I said I think he should stop. I never said he should *be* stopped."

Alvina reached for the empty vinegar bottle and began to roll out the dough. In the heat, the sweat from her palms made the glass slippery and awkward to handle.

"Well? What did he say?"

"Who?"

"*Henderson!* Who the hell have we been talking about?"

Alvina threw disks of dough into a baking pan and slammed it into the oven. "Henderson said she was getting a lot of people to agree with her."

"About what?"

The oven door banged shut. "You know perfectly well what. That your brother is disturbed. Off his head."

Aleksis snorted scornfully, but said nothing.

"And what's more, I agree with her."

Aleksis threw his shirt angrily into a comer. "I wouldn't

agree with that witch if she tried to convince me the earth was round. All she ever seems to have on her mind is trouble. I don't know how that Henderson puts up with her." He picked up a dishcloth and began swabbing the grit off his forehead and neck. "And I'll tell you another thing. I don't want you getting mixed up with that bunch of interfering clucks. This is our business, not theirs, and if they want to clean up this community so bad let them start by getting off their high horses and stop acting like we're all just a bunch of backwoods DPs. The Finns have been in this province for over half a century, and we don't take that shit from anybody anymore. Especially not from the English."

Alvina scraped the remaining flour off the table and flung it into a barrel against the wall. Her mouth was tight. "Don't preach to *me*, Aleksis Toivo Sukanen. I haven't spent twenty years of my life sweeping floors and wiping children's noses to be talked to like a scullery maid by you. I'll go to those meetings if I very well please, and if I don't, I won't, and I don't care how long the Finns have been living in this country. That man is a menace, Finn or no Finn. Pulling a butcher-knife on small children is plain and simply sick, and if you can't see that maybe you should have your own head examined. Next time it'll probably be a gun. He has to be stopped before somebody gets killed, and if you won't do something about it, maybe somebody else should. You're just avoiding all this because he's your brother."

Aleksis threw up his hands. "Alvina, for Christ's sake, it was a joke! He caught those kids in his ship and he just wanted to give them a scare. You know bloody well he didn't touch them with that knife."

"He chopped off one of Malvin Moorehead's coat buttons

and terrified him so bad, Ellen Moorehead says he wakes up nights screaming and wets his bed again."

Aleksis snorted. "*Eihän tuo nyt mitään ollut*. So he wets his bed for a few nights. He shouldn't have been crawling around in that ship."

"And that, I take it, is supposed to justify the skinned pig hanging in the closet and all the rest!"

Aleksis tossed the cloth back onto the counter. "By God, I'll never understand you women. Here the garden's covered in drift again, the cistern's almost dry, there's an inch of sand on everything in here except the kitchen table, and you can stand there and seriously tell me you've got nothing better to do, that there's nothing more important in your life, than to stick your head together with a bunch of town busybodies to stop a man from chasing children off his ship?"

They glared at each other, eyes locked angrily, then uneasily in combat.

"You could say that," Alvina said finally, more quietly than she'd intended or felt. "You could just say that."

16

SUMMER OF '34

Continued . . .

As the summer burned on, and farmers tired of watching another year's crop wither and scorch, the Beverage Room at the Manybones Hotel filled up earlier and earlier each afternoon. *Might as well watch it die from where it's cool* someone had scrawled across the wall above the hotel's urinal. The last rain in southern Saskatchewan had fallen in June, but only briefly; since then the entire southwest corner had been blistering without a drop, and the occasional sprinklings which kept farmers in the rest of the area in an agony of hope and despair had still not amounted to more than a quarter of an inch. Even in Fox Valley, where the soil was heavier and the groundwater higher, the restless seas of wheat had developed unmistakable whitecaps, the sunburn on the tips of the heads that always spelled the beginnings of disaster.

"Mother said there'd be days like this," groaned Bill Kiniskey, whose quarter-section near the Junction had looked almost bumper only a month before. "Gimme a draft, Sharkey."

"'Lo Bob. Did she happen to say how many?"

"She always clams up when she gets to that part. Either that, or I wake up."

"Hey, Bill, how come you're not over at the Peltolas' auction?"

"Oh hi, Avro. Didn't see ya there for a minute. Don't tell me, is John Peltola goin' down?"

"Down for the count."

"If y'ask me, he's one of the lucky ones," Sharkey shrugged. "At least a few people still gotta coupla bucks to buy him out."

"Come on now, Sharkey, give us a break. We've had four dry years for chrissake; it's *gotta* break sooner or later."

"Yeah, well you just stand in front of your wife's mirror every morning and repeat that fifty times, buddy. Then maybe you'll believe it yourself when you say it."

"Best thing to do with this whole goddamn Triangle is just mothball it," Kiniskey sighed. "Let the PFRA buy it up and put it back to pasture. All this ruttin' around is just slow suicide."

"Now that's plain horseshit. If the grain companies paid a decent price you could make enough to live on anywhere you want around here." Bill Szandor, who had lost his farm near the Great Sand Hills earlier that year and was now feeding his family by caretaking it for the bank, refused to forgive the National Grain Company. "Cutthroat bastards gorge themselves on your bones and then shit back your pay into a thimble. And don't tell me prices could keep falling

like this, with half the wheat crop shot, without some damn fancy hankypanky going on somewhere. What we need's a goddamn marketing board."

"He's got a point," Sharkey adjudicated. "You're all payin' for the privilege of bein' buggered in the ear by National."

"Speak fer yerself, Jocko. I sell my grain t' th' Co-Op."

"That must just make 'em wet their pants," Sharkey nodded. "Who wanted this couple of draft?"

"Trouble is you can never tell where the grain companies end and the government starts," Kiniskey pointed out. "I can never tell the difference, the way that Bennett fella operates. If he helps us much more the way he's been helpin' us so far, he might as well come down here and just beat us all to death with his friendly stick."

"Ain't it the truth!"

"Those capitalist swine, they have now the perfect chance to put the ropes around the workers' necks," Arnie Ylioya offered, having intended to say this for some time. "If we don't be take us your means of production into our hands, they will make us broken just like that."

Sharkey clattered beer glasses into a tray and distributed clean ashtrays as if he were dealing out cards.

"Aw why don't you just can that Commie shit, Ylioya. I've *got* all the means of production I want; it's the *price* I'm gettin' that's breakin' me." Szandor spit a shred of tobacco off his lip. "You sound like you've been down to one of your Finn Hall meetings again."

"Hey, Ylioya, is that right? D'you guys really haul down the Union Jack and run up the Hammer 'n Sickle?"

"You're goddamn rights they do. RCMP from Abbey was up there just last week givin' 'em shit."

"If they want the Hammer 'n Sickle so bad, maybe they

just oughta, you know, just bugger off to where people, ah, where people fly the goddamn thing."

"Yeah, that's a fact, Ylioya. How come you Flippers keep hangin' around if all you want's th' Hammer 'n Sickle?"

"Atta boy, Kleppner. You straighten'm out!"

"All right that's enough," Sharkey decided, setting down his tray. "I had this joint messed up once already this month on that subject, and I'm gettin' bored with it. You guys wanna fight about politics, you go fight about it in the street."

"Hey take it easy, Sharkey. We was only razzin'm a bit."

"I know all about your goddamn razzin', Kleppner. You weren't barred from Lancer for singin' in the boys' choir."

Bob Kleppner muttered something under his breath about pinkoes and sympathizers.

"An' if you wanna make a federal case out of it, you can see me after quittin' time or go talk to the boss upstairs."

Nobody said anything for a while, and after a moment, largely from force of habit, most eyes wandered to the clear slit above the soaped-up portion of the room's windows to check out the western sky. It was unchanged, a few aimless puffs like motionless popcorn, nothing promising. Occasionally during the past several days larger banks of cumulus had piled up on the western horizon for a time, sparking with summer lightning, but they had always drifted away again to the south or southeast. They'd be lucky to get a few drops around Swift Current or Maple Creek.

"Aw well, it's all a crock and then some," opined Avro Pouss. "You can jaw politics six ways from Sunday but that doesn't change the fact that the land's overworked and the weeds are out of control, and who the hell's to blame for that?" Pouss was a welder at the Massey-Harris dealership

in town, which had put its three employees on half-days two weeks ago. "Why doesn't somebody come up with something to plant besides wheat wheat wheat?"

"Fact is, we thought of plantin' *you*, Pouss," drawled Kiniskey from the back. "Except that'd give us more of you, and the one we got's too many already."

"You can stick that," Pouss suggested placidly, "right where the sun don't shine."

"Tried that m' dear. Didn't grow there either."

"What we need is a market for thistles. Maybe the Japs would eat 'em, or the Turks," Szandor mused. "After the bank kicked Jorgenson off his farm, I'd of needed a mile-wide firebreak between his quarter and mine to keep his thistles out. And I didn't have no mile-wide firebreak."

"They oughta to make those banks to keep those homesteads clean," Arnie Ylioya tried again. "Those jackals they want-it those lands so bad, they sure should must keep them clean."

"Goddamn rights," Szandor agreed. "He's got a point there."

"Come on over and explain that to Sukanen sometime," Sam Cuthbert grumped. "You know the language, I don't. I've just about given up on my west quarter."

"What Sukanen? Aleksis Sukanen?"

"Not Aleksis. Tom. Old Tom. Down off Broken Valley."

"Most successful farmer this side of the Forty-ninth Parallel," Kiniskey laughed. "Raises thistles and ships."

"Well it's a wide-open quota isn't it? Bet he could get thirty bushels an acre off his summerfallow alone."

"No listen, that's exactly what I was talking about," Pouss pointed out. "That's exactly what I mean. There used to be an understanding in this part of the country. You take

care of your windward side or by Jesus we'll come and take care of it for you. Now what the hell's happened to that understanding? If this sort of shit keeps up, this country'll be *covered* in thistles, drought or no drought. I swear to God it'll glow in the dark."

"Too many people just don't give a hell anymore. Too many lettin' go."

"Well then, they should have their asses kicked," Pouss insisted. "It's just no way to run a railroad."

"Real easy fer you ta say, Pouss. Ya don't live onna farm no more, do ya?"

"He's got a point though," Szandor said. "Didn't there actually used to be a law on the books about weed . . . about, you know, weed control?"

"When I was still farmin' I don't remember no law," Sharkey snorted. "I just remember neighbours gettin' together for a cozy little heart-to-heart with any upwind bastard whose summerfallow started lookin' too pretty."

"Well, maybe we oughta pay a little call on the old fart and have a discussion about his summerfallow."

"Eh Cuthbert, is that loopy Flipper still building away on his *Flying Dutchman*?"

"Yeah, what about that, Cuthbert? I hear tell he eats raw horsemeat and insects."

"I wish he'd eat some of that hopper poison and do us all a favour," Cuthbert shrugged. "Of course he's still bangin' away. Why should he quit, when he can drive my stock crazy and ruin my farm to boot?"

"A few forks short of a load," Sharkey judged. "I got three beers here; where the hell's Arnie?"

"Will somebody tell me what the hell he's got . . . I mean what he figures on actually *doin'* with that thing?"

"Sail back to Finland, I think," Szandor said. "That's what I heard anyway."

Cuthbert shrugged. "Well that's not what he told Pulkinen. He told Pulkinen he was headed for the Persian Sea. Said that's where the world got started."

"He said *what*?"

Cuthbert began to look uncomfortable. "Well hey, don't look at me. That's what Pulkinen said."

"The world got started in the Persian Sea?"

"I'm just tellin' ya what he said. He said it was down there someplace. Between two rivers. One of 'em was called the Tiger."

"Th' old gumball musta cracked his pot."

"So what's he wanna do, go down there and raise thistles?"

"The Garden of Eden," Arvo Pouss laughed. "Paradise. It's in the Bible, you ignorant hick. Didn't you ever go to Sunday School?"

"Hey, get this get this. I jist remembered it. You know what he said to old Rev Jarvenpaa one time? No shit, this is great. Ellie told it to me. He said: Eve didn't give no apple to Adam in that Garden of Eden. No sir, she didn't. She give'm a tomato!"

"Haw!"

"Th' old Rev didn't know whether to suck or blow."

"He's a clown all right," Sharkey frowned, gathering more beer glasses. "But I agree with Pouss here: that shit with the thistles has gotta stop, and this fella's one of the worst. He needs some talkin' to, is what he needs."

"Well hey. Why don't we head over and have ourselves that talk?"

"Damn rights. We'll straighten 'm out."

"And anyways, I ain't even seen that ship of his yet," Kleppner agreed.

"It's goddamn huge."

"It's big all right," Cuthbert agreed. "Big as the hole in his fieldstone head."

"Well, the man's right. Time to talk thistles."

"Hey, bring a bottle of beer. We'll crack it across her bow and launch her."

"Shit, bring a dozen."

"Hold on a minute," Szandor bridled, setting down his glass. "I'm not so sure this is a hot idea. I hear tell the old buzzard's pretty cranky. And Sharkey said *talk*, not fight."

"Eh, it's a free country, isn't it? All we wanna do is give'm a little advice, a little, you know, encouragement . . ."

"Yeah, the old school cheer."

"Well, you young bucks can go chasing after lunatics in this heat if you want to," Kiniskey decided. "I'll be damned if I'll ride ten miles from a cold beer just to talk to a man about some weeds."

"You do what ya hafta, pops. We'll tell ya when the war is over."

"Yeah yeah," Kiniskey snorted, waving them away. "From what I hear on the wireless, you punks'll be gettin' all the action you can handle just about any time at all now . . ."

17

AVRO SUKANEN

[Nephew of Tom Sukanen; Pool-Room Proprietor, Swift Current]

Not his face, when I recall me of it, but his *hands*. I'll never forget his bloodied hands. As a kid, they always impressed the amazement out of me. For some purpose, you see, he just wouldn't wear his working gloves or anything, and he was always working with steel or barbed wire or rough wood. So he'd tear up those hands of his something terrific. His knuckles were always skinned and bleeding. Rebellious sight, really rebelling. And just between you and I, I think he was cock-proud of it.

But the worst time, sure, the worst time with his hands, was the time that bunch of cowboys from the beer parlour tried to burn down his ship. That time he used Bob Kleppner for a cinder rake. Hoo boy, I could just envisualize it too. The town was buzzing with it for weeks. Even us kids would have given our left testicles to see it. And

Kleppner didn't say much about it, but he spent a couple of weeks reciprocating in and out of Dr. Schellenberg's parlour, and Dad said it seemed like half the deadbeats in the district was encirculating around wearing bandages, though Mom said that was a considerate exaggeration. No sir, you couldn't fool with Uncle Tom and expect to go unscraped by it. Not most of the time you didn't. Cause he could get darn reactionary if people tried to push him around.

Course being who he was, Uncle Tom wouldn't have dreamed of putting the proper surgicals on his burned hands. No, he was way too bullish for that. So he put on shredded sow-thistles with mush — some kind of gum weed mush — and when he got the new skin over, finally, it was kind of yellow, like a chicken's beak, that kind of colour. And he got senseless in the nerves of his palms after that. No feelings in his palms at all. Always looked like a bit of a Negroid you know, with his palms that different colour . . .

Anyway it wasn't too long after that, maybe half a year, maybe a bit more, that he got the hull finished — well, at least finished enough so's he figured he'd maybe try to roll her out. You know, while she was still relevantly light. Not that she was, I want to tell you; even at that point the darn thing must have weighed a hundred ton if she weighed an ounce. He had her all tarred up, two layers of heavy planking, and then her whole outside covered with sheet steel — yeah, he was real proficient at metal-work, oh from way back, back when he was a kid. And he had to cut it all out by hacksaw too because his place had never been electrified. He could have been, it went right by his place, but for some reason he just never hooked up.

So what he needed, what he really needed, was a few of those big steamers people used to pull their threshing outfits

with. That's what he really needed to pull that thing. There were still a few of them running too, I checked around, but nobody wanted to have the most trivial thing to do with it. My dad, he thought they'd think he was crazy as Uncle Tom if he helped. That was the way most people relished the situation, actually. See, that was the era of the times, in those days. People just didn't have no patience at all for that kind of thing.

Now anybody else, you'd have used your head and called the whole thing off. That's what you would have done, right? But Uncle Tom, you just never knew for sure. He was a real prevailing sort of guy. So he decided he was going to use horses. Now you'd need an awful lot of horses to drag that thing onto the prairie, and through all those gullies. A *lot* of horses. And Uncle Tom, he didn't have all that many horses. He'd been eating them up, one after another, as he ran out of food. So I asked around, asked a lot of people, and I asked my dad, and some said don't be ridiculous, and some weren't all that particular about horses anyway, so I gathered up quite a few. See, I felt kind of sorry for him, trying to drag it with horses. He needed a couple of steamers, that's what he really needed.

Well the next problem was, he didn't have any real wheels. Under the hull, you know; to move the tow-frame. After he'd bought those building supplies from Port Arthur, well, that used up all his savings from twenty years' farming. Yeah, he was dead stone broke after that. I don't think people realized just how dilapidated he really was. He was so dilapidated, he couldn't even buy salt from the Hessler's Red & White. I know, because Hessler told me. He said Uncle Tom never came to his store after that. He'd use alkali dust from the sloughs, which I never could understand

it. Never even tasted salty, that stuff. And after a while his teeth turned black and started falling out. That alkali really degraded your teeth. It must have been the alkali that did it.

So what he did, see, he built himself his own wheels. Maybe eight, ten, maybe twelve of them. Most ingenial things you ever saw. First thing, he rolled up a bunch of real thin willow saplings into a circle, see, like this, a real fat circle, really twisted tight, just like a Christmas wreath I guess you could describe it, and then he built them up on the axles till they were, oh, maybe ten or twelve inches off the ground. Ten or twelve or even fourteen. Maybe that sounds kind of dumb, but it wasn't actually; he'd made wheels like that before, for his first wagon, when he first came up to Saskatchewan and didn't have any money for equipment. He said they'd worked just fine on that wagon. And he was putting a lot more wheels per square foot under this bruiser; he was contemplating plenty for the extra weight. What worried me though, it was going to be fifteen miles to the South Saskatchewan, to the mouth of Boggy Creek where he was going to put her in. There were even some CPR tracks in the way, somewhere out there, if I can rightly recollect myself.

Well we worked all morning and we got about ten feet. Ten feet, maybe twelve. It was a real unavailing endeavour. Those saplings just flattened out like squashed cats, after a couple encirculations. Uncle Tom, he whipped those horses like their backs were made of brass, but I had to stop him finally, cause a lot of them, you remember, they weren't his horses. Yeah, real wheels might have done it, but not those sapling things. Darn ingenial idea, but no cigar. I think a few years later he did get himself some proper wheels on there, but by then I was already gone and working in

Saskatoon. Had a real good job in a packing plant.

So you see, that's the kind of infliction you got into on the prairies in those days, if you didn't get along good with your neighbours. That doesn't seem so important today, but it sure was then, I'll tell you. Everybody depended on everybody else, for all kinds of help, and if they flushed you out, things could get really inconsistent. And Uncle Tom, I'd have to admit it, he got along with his neighbours about as melodiously as a porcupine in a nudistic camp. Somehow, it just seemed part of his characteristic. And after a few years of that, he couldn't have convinced a parish priest that there was a God. Which was a shame, because sometimes, as it turned out, he was absolutely dead to rights. That wet-dry thresher of his was one heck of an ingenial idea. You can see parts of that kind of design in every brand of rig working the harvest on the prairies today. And his promontory on contour ploughing — he'd been propositioning that idea from practically the day he got to Manybones, in 1911 or whenever it was. You only had to spend five minutes watching what the wind was doing to your fields to see he was right. So today it's all part of the graingrower's bible, but when Uncle Tom tried to sell them the notion, nobody would listen. Could have saved big parts of the Triangle if they had — even my dad admitted that eventually. But he said when Uncle Tom contoured his fields, they got dusted over like everybody else's, so that wasn't too convincing. But the point was, you had to make it a mutualistic endeavour; if you wanted the thing to work you had to have everybody doing it. And you had to all do it at the same time. And when they wouldn't do it, he got mad and let his own farm go to thistles — which I don't have to tell you the kind of reaction *that* got . . .

I'll tell you one thing though that's always profounded me: why the old bugger took a liking to me at all. He did, you know. He really liked me. It's something that's never really got into my comprehension. I don't remember being interested in anything he was interested in. Most of the time I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. His head was always so infiltrated with misunderstandable ideas, I sometimes wonder whether *he* really understood what he was getting at. But maybe it was just that I didn't get bothered by his grumpiness much. If he got cranky with me, I just cranked back. I think he actually liked that, you know. Like he'd get red hot at those Laestadians or something, they were always poking at him one way or another, and I'd say to him, I'd say: "Aw, Uncle Tom, that's just because they're so much like you. I think it's just that you hate the competition!" And he'd swear at me and call me a smartass kid or something like that, but you could tell he kind of liked being kidded around. Most people thought he was real unsocialistic, but I think that was just because they didn't take the time to get to know or understand him a bit. And, well, you know the expression: treat a horse like an ass long enough, and he'll start acting like one.

You take us kids for instance — I think he liked us kids just fine. People said he hated kids, but that was a lot of hooey. Sure, there were a few that kept giving him trouble, but it was their parents put them up to it, that's what it was. He'd let us have the little bits of wood there'd be lying around, after he'd sawed a board or something. He could carve like the dickens too; sometimes he'd carve us little doll-like things, really extraneous, like those scrawny little idols they show in the *National Geographic*. But the Moorehead kids now, the kids like that, they just wouldn't leave

well enough alone. Kept throwing things at him, yelling names, sneaking into his ship, stealing stuff. Just acting, you know, abominational. So the one day he invites them into the ship, and he's got a curtain hanging across a corner, and he tells them, he says: "You know what I do with abominational kids like you? I skin 'em alive and eat 'em." And then he tears away the curtain and he's got himself a freshkilled piglet hanging there, all skinned and dripping. Now you know about skinned piglets? How they can look just like a skinned kid? Oh Jeez, I'd of given a year of *my* life to see it. And just to make sure, he grabbed a big long butcher-knife and made like he was going to slit one of them up, I don't remember which, but he clipped off one of his buttons or something, and the kid nearly went cross-eyed for shit. That solved the problem in an awful hurry, I want to tell you. The parents went incontinent of course; they had the JP threaten to deplore him and various things like that, but nothing much ever happened about it. But you see what I'm talking about — how you could take a thing like that out of content? People always exaggerated most things about him. That's how it was.

I guess the main problem people had about Uncle Tom was, they couldn't ever tell if he was serious or fooling. And people get touchy when they don't know exactly what's the score. Sure, there was a lot of stuff Uncle Tom, he said it with a straight face but he was really only kidding. Him calling the Reverend Jarvenpaa the Anti-Christ, now that's the sort of thing I'm talking about. He just had it in for the old preach, and he never missed a chance to give him both barrels. But you should have seen how people came unglued about that remark. Or all that guff about radio impotizing people, that was all just joking around too. He liked

getting a rise out of people, and he got a kick out of how hoaxable they were. He told Sam Cuthbert, one time when Cuthbert had a bunch of rust in his well, he told him that the old Finnish way of solving that problem was to pour a bunch of wheat down the pipe, you know, to abstain the rust. So Cuthbert poured down the wheat and damn near burst open his pump, the grain boiled out of there so fast. Old Cuthbert had breakfast cereal on tap for weeks after that. On the other hand, he told Bob Gillis that the best way to emasculate the skunks under his store was to stick a Gramophone under there and play them lots of that, you know, that operatorical music — and he was right. Gillis was so desperate, he tried it, and it worked. Those skunks were zingo! out of there by next morning.

No, he was a hard man to figure, I'd be the first to secede to that. I always pegged him as one of those natural-born geniuses, those kind of people, you know, they just seem to write their own rules. I got a friend, for example, down at the Pennant CPR, he's one of those structuralist engineers, and he said that the boiler in Uncle Tom's ship plain wasn't possible. He said you can't roll quarter-inch steel like that without getting it all heated up. That's what he said: no ifs ands or buts about it. But Uncle Tom, well, he did it anyway. Cold-rolled it, and it looked like they delivered it straight out from Hart & Parr. He couldn't have heated it anyway; his forge was only two feet square. You'd need a bloody blast furnace to heat the size of plate he rolled for that boiler, and he didn't have any blast furnace either. He told me once he rolled it by the moon, how you could cold-roll steel without cracking it at certain phases of the moon. Now if you tried to tell that to a structuralist engineer he'd probably think you'd gone perennial on him

or something. Maybe I would too — but I saw the boiler.

Then there was his strange ideas about world history about how it recapitulates itself every couple of centuries or some such like that. Did anybody ever mention those ideas at all? Probably not; I never could get the whole hang of it either, but he had a darn complicated angle on it. Something about a big wheel meshing with a little wheel, and all sorts of guff like that. Big wheel and a little wheel. Let me see now. The big wheel was supposed to be all the nature stuff, like the animals and the plants and the continents, you see. Oh, and the weather and the seasons and all the rest. Pretty well anything you'd care to name except people. Uncle Tom didn't seem too illuminated about people. The people, now, they were the small wheel. Just people, and what they did. And the way he had it figured, the big wheel meshed with the little wheel, so the same things happened all the time, but they happened in different combinations. You see what I'm talking about? At least I think that's how it went. He actually explained it to me a couple of times but I've never been too sure I got it right. Oh yeah, and then the whole caboodle tied into the circulations of the planets — that's right, I'd forgotten about the planets. Oh yeah, Uncle Tom was always big on the circulations of the planets. He figured you could tell a whole lot about the fate of the world if you kept an eye on them. He was pretty sure we were in for a lot of trouble. He'd say, you know, he'd say to me: "Don't know how long that Little Wheel can last, Avro. Don't suppose it's gonna last forever. Yeah, that Little Wheel's been turning faster and faster." And then he'd say: "But don't you worry, Avro my boy. I'm keeping a close eye on her. And I've almost finished that ship."

Paul Thorndike, he had a homestead down at the river

— you know that Englishman who eventualistically let Uncle Tom set up a launching ramp on his Boggy Creek quarter — you know the guy I'm talking about? He died of blood poisoning after he cut himself on one of those machine parts Uncle Tom used to leave lying around all over the place. You didn't know about that? Oh yeah, and just a little cut too — but then it got infested, and they were snowed in and couldn't get to a doctor in time. I remember that really clear because he was phoning and phoning and there was nothing anybody could do . . . Anyway, Paul Thorndike, you know, he was real eriodite, spent half his time reading books and everything, and he always said he thought this stuff all sounded like it came from a bunch he called the . . . the Rosicrustaceans. I mean the wheels and the planets and all the rest. He said they were a fair bit like the Church of the Social Scientists. You know about those people? Now we've got a gaggle of them in this town and I'll tell you, I find it awfully hard to believe that Uncle Tom would bark at the same moon with those lugnuts. I never talk to them any more when they come to the door; I always hand them right over to my wife, Martha. That always teaches them, I'll tell you. She's hot water on a burn when she's cooking, that little number. I almost hate to do it to them, some days . . .

No no, Uncle Tom may have been erroneous about some things, but he was no dummy. You can quote me on that anytime, and make it double. No sir, he was definitely not your average dummy . . .

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CROKERSLAND

When the spring of 1937 failed to materialize, the farmers of southwest Saskatchewan became fatalistic and even the most dedicated optimists fell silent. After the previous year's record drought and a winter so cold and snowless there had hardly been enough moisture in the ground to cake and freeze the loose soil, April and May remained rock hard and rainless, putting even seeding schedules into serious jeopardy. The first chinooks, in early June, served mainly to thaw and rot the exceptionally large number of animal carcasses that littered the prairie from the Alberta foothills to the Souris River, and when winter was finally over three weeks later, summer swung into place so abruptly that many farmers managed to seed only flax before the dust began to blow once more. By the end of July the prairie was baking at a steady 110 degrees. The heat reduced most people to a dazed apathy, but some became strangely,

irrationally industrious. Arnie Ylioya spent weeks senselessly digging up his fences which the wind and soil had buried, then resetting them into the same shifting dust. Others attacked the soil drifts with large grain shovels, obstinately clearing yards and gardens that would be silted up again by next morning. Bill Kiniskey honeycombed the walls of his house with seventy-eight "air-holes" screened with sacks, then plugged them all up again when the dust on his parlour floor reached a depth of almost one and a half inches in a single night.

Business on Main Street sputtered to a halt. The relief train that had begun to stop at the Pool Elevator siding every three months now dropped off its salt cod, navy beans, and bales of old clothes from Ontario every three weeks. Many farmers who had so far stubbornly refused such handouts began swallowing their pride and lining up at the loading ramp.

To Tom Sukanen, all this was the thin edge of the wedge. He adamantly refused to register for the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Programme of 1934, or even to consider Relief. "*Mutta hululan sinusta tulee,*" he warned Vihtori, on one of his increasingly rare visits to the Markulla homestead. "You must be touched. They'll just pack you all up at the earliest opportunity and ship you back to the Russians."

"The way you look, you old *varas,*" Mrs. Markulla snapped, flourishing the dishcloth she was applying with more vigour than effect to the side of a blackened teakettle, "they should have sent you away long ago. But not to the Russians, if you catch my meaning."

If Tom Sukanen had ever been able to look self-conscious, he had lost the ability long ago. He gazed across the table at the old woman in absent-minded contemplation, saying

nothing. A piece of wire rolled idly back and forth between his teeth.

He had grown worn and tired-looking during the past several years. A bout of dust-pneumonia had left him gaunt and hollow-eyed, and he seemed to Vihtori more rueful, more preoccupied than he ever remembered him to be. The relentless work on his ship in the heat and wind, and at his forge, had weathered his face to a tough, grainy brown. He was wearing only his rawhide pants and a ragged undershirt, both dark and stiff with dirt.

"They'll get tired of supporting a bunch of starving farmers soon enough, and then they'll start poisoning that Relief food. You wait and see if they don't."

"They're just as likely to get tired of wastrels who produce nothing on their homesteads but a million thistles and a ship." Mrs. Markulla banged her kettle squarely on the stovetop lid. "Do you want tea or vinegar-juice?"

"I'm going to take one more try at fixing the old Hart & Parr," Vihtori sighed. "Ferguson's found some used steam pipes he'll let me have for a few dozen eggs. I'm going to pick them up on Thursday, Mother."

"A sheer waste of eggs, but if it makes you feel useful, I won't argue. That stupid contraption hasn't given us an honest day's work since your father bought it in '27."

"Well, it's just sitting there, and so am I." Vihtori got up to stretch his frame, automatically glancing out the window at the glaring sun. "Who knows, maybe I can get it fixed in time to give it to the bank in working condition when they foreclose on us."

"Vihtori!" Mrs. Markulla looked as if she might have touched wood if it hadn't been heathen. "Don't blaspheme."

"Someday they'll make engines differently than they do

now," Tom announced. He spat the piece of wire onto the floor beside his chair. "They'll plant them in the ground, like seeds, or maybe in something else. They'll grow them in rows, like wheat."

Vihtori blinked, but looked interested. Mrs. Markulla snuffed. "If they planted your head separately when you die, that's probably what it would grow into. A machine."

"Mother. You're getting carried away."

"*He'll* get himself carried away. And not a bad thought, either."

"It's stupid, this sticking three thousand separate parts together," Tom reasoned. "Cheaper to just plant an engine seed and let it grow."

Mrs. Markulla looked desperate to say something, but didn't.

"Now if we could just plant our stock that way, by their four feet and the tail," Vihtori grinned, "maybe they could grow long taproots and water themselves like cactus."

"Heaven preserve us, now don't you start." Mrs. Markulla had picked up her broom and was taking elaborate swipes at the piece of wire on the floor.

Tom had been looking out of the kitchen's east window, which faced onto the Markulla yard. "Oh yes, I was glad to see my calf out by the barn, *Markullan muari*. Where did you manage to find it?"

Mrs. Markulla stiffened, and her nostrils came alert. "What are you talking about, a calf?"

"*Minun vasikka*. My calf. The bow-legged Holstein."

Mrs. Markulla stopped whisking at the piece of wire. Her fists clutched more tightly around the broom.

"You don't own a calf, Tomi Jaanus Alankola. What you haven't already butchered you've allowed to die of neglect."

"It must have followed you home when you came by last Monday with your eggs. I'm obliged that you took the trouble to catch it and look after it."

Mrs. Markulla's eyes began to bulge. "When I came by your excuse for a farm on *Friday*, with my eggs which are too good for you but which I, for some reason understood only by God, persist in being willing to pay you for tanning my cowhides, which you never scrape properly, or stretch properly either — there was not a single cow or calf in your yard. Thistles gone berserk, tons of old junk, a mess beyond belief or human endurance, yes. A cow or a calf, no."

"I could take it home now if you would lend me a halter," Tom said to Vihtori. "It looks strong enough to walk home, though I don't suppose it's been fed much."

Vihtori looked both apprehensive and amused. He glanced around for his hat but the hook beside the door was empty. Mrs. Markulla looked like she was about to choke.

"Don't move a finger, Vihtori! Not one finger! I want to know exactly what this criminal is trying to say!"

"Say, *Markullan muari*? What can one help but say?" Tom spread his hands in a gesture of benign helplessness. "You obeyed your inner nature and enticed the calf. I suppose I can't blame you; it is a woman's way. But at least you might have fed it until it is return."

"At least I . . . might have . . . cretin!! Insect!!" Mrs. Markulla flung up her broom and Tom slid from his seat with one foot already half out the door. "Out of my house! Off of my property! One more insult from you and I'll . . ." She swung the broom in a magnificent arc that missed Tom's head by inches and slammed full force against the side of the stove, sending a bevy of pots crashing to the floor. "Heathen! Idol-builder! Go back to your miserable hole in

the ground and waste more money on your Golden Calf!!"

"Your hat, Tom." Vihtori pushed him quickly out of the porch and pulled the screen door closed behind them. "Wait, here's your boots. I'll get me my old pair in the barn on the way through."

"And don't you encourage that monster, Vihtori Markus Markulla!!" The screen door flung open and slapped hard against the side of the porch. "I swear by all that's Sacred and Holy, that scapegrace was sent here on the Devil's express orders to mortify me!"

As they ducked past the makeshift awning Vihtori had hung across the front of the house to shade the windows, the shock of the noonday sun forced them to clap their hands abruptly over their eyes despite their straw hats. The west side of the yard was ridged with sand, and everything in the yard was attached to long drifts, like sand-filled shadows. Vihtori's old Hupmobile, its engine removed and an axle-tree bolted to the front bumper, stood by the chicken shed under a tarp.

In the barn, the troughs in both horse-stalls were dry again, and Vihtori dipped a bucket into a covered barrel and carefully doled out more water. "*No hyvä ystävä*, you've done it again," he laughed, replacing the lid on the barrel. "She won't climb down off that one for at least a week."

Sukanen scraped horse dung out of the feed-trough with his boot. "They are all chickens," he shrugged. "Chickens and witches. Chickens and witches and gypsies."

"That happens to be my mother you're talking about," Vihtori pointed out, but he was still grinning. "I suppose I should defend her, but she seems quite capable of defending herself."

He pushed open the small hinged door at the rear of the barn and they stepped back out into the brutal heat, ambling west towards Tom's coulee. The morning breeze had quickened to a hot, gusty zephyr, and the land gleamed as if every Heck of silicone was a miniature magnifying glass. Vihtori pushed the brow of his hat even lower.

"If this keeps on much longer, I'd say we're done for. I'll bet any water you poured onto this field would evaporate before it hit the ground."

Tom grunted, but kept his gaze fixed on the restless soil ahead. The previous night's blow had riffled the fields into long, irregular wavelets over which the dust hovered and flowed like sharks' shadows over a waterless ocean bottom. When the wind gusted, the shadows flurried, reshaping into brief ghost-like flatfish or mantas.

"Hardly a sprout or a shoot anywhere," Vihtori sighed. "I set my seeder at eight inches this year, but it doesn't seem to have made any difference." He kicked at an oddly shaped clod of dirt but it was a mummified shrew from the previous winter. "Grain companies ship out the seed by rail and get it all back by return wind a couple of days later."

Tom scooped up a handful of dirt and studied it as he walked. "Wheat won't even come up this year," he agreed. He sucked in a gritty tongueful and rolled it slowly about his mouth. "Too much salt." He spat over his shoulder and the wind shredded the spit into gleaming filaments. "Been tasting like that since early May."

"Since Sentner's swamp dried up." Vihtori had been watching a plume of dust drift slowly down the Correction Road to the south, just ahead of a small convoy of farm vehicles: a Bennett-buggy, a grain wagon, and a dogcart

pulled by either a very small pony or a donkey. "Isn't that the Ylioya's Model-A down there?"

Tom squinted sharply, shading his hand over the brow of his hat. "It's the Ylioyas all right. Heading west." He spat again and sucked the flat of his tongue across his teeth. "Thought they weren't leaving 'til next week."

They stopped and watched the tiny procession plodding along at its funeral-march pace, its dark sack coverings giving it, in some indefinable way, an air of pathetic formality. The two men glanced at each other without comment, then turned and walked on. After a few moments a dip in the field hid the little procession from view.

Vihtori pulled a square of rag out of his pocket and wiped sweat and grime across his forehead. The smear made him look oddly jaunty and hopeless at the same time.

"Adela's been jabbing at me for over a year to pack it up and head for the Coast. She's been over at the Ylioyas' all morning."

The steady rise of the field now brought the procession back into view, its advance dust plume momentarily flattened by a gust of unfelt wind.

"I finally told her, if she wants to go that bad, well for God's sake just go. She hardly speaks to me anymore anyway. For all I know she could be with them, down there."

"Witches and gypsies," Tom muttered, glancing at the procession again. "She'll take your children and run, Vihtori."

Vihtori snorted and allowed himself a brief, humourless grin. "She'd never have a hope of getting those kids past my mother. Mother's been watching them both like a rattlesnake all year."

"They're both women," Tom pointed out, though without

his usual conviction. "When it comes to children, the only thing more unpredictable than one woman is two."

"Thought you might feel that way," Vihtori grinned. "Don't know why I thought so, but I did."

He stopped to pry a pebble out of his boot and then relaced it slowly, watching the procession disappear once more in a long fold in the prairie. Up ahead Tom walked on, oblivious, lost deep inside himself again. In the fierce heat, his body became enveloped in shimmering haze and his feet seemed to float several inches above the ground, like some unknowable alien slowly treading the air. He seemed not to be drifting away at all, but simply dissolving very slowly, inexorably, into the ether.

Vihtori stopped lacing his boot and gazed after him thoughtfully. He was certainly a strange man, this Tomi Jaanus Sukanen. After twenty-five years of what Manybones people insisted on calling their "friendship," he still felt as if he hardly knew him at all. As if he understood him no better than did the rest of all these narrow-minded stone-pickers who tapped their temples, spread lies about him, and jeered. All he had was his own, more first-hand list of things he had seen him do and heard him say, that he would never pass on to anyone. The night he had found Tom lying flat on his back among the thistles in his front yard, each eyelid propped up with a wedge of wood, staring fiercely up into the star-strewn sky. The time they had talked far into the night about that sky, Tom insisting that it could be used like a great curved mirror to show gigantic pictures which all the world would be able to see at the same time. Tom's sketches of a "wife-beating machine," an invention Vihtori had managed only with great difficulty to convince Tom to abandon. The day he had found Tom sitting in the

shambles of his half-built ship, homemade violin wedged clumsily under his chin, playing the saddest, most eerie music he had ever heard — the violin's chicken-wire strings producing sounds so harsh, haunting, and anguished that he had had to fight the impulse to immediately tiptoe back to his horse and escape.

And suddenly, he felt an impulsive rush of sadness and affection for this stumbling, awkward man, this man who boiled and skidded and shrank so unpredictably, who seemed to trip over every pebble and person but whose vision of the world and the heavens seemed as astonishing and complicated and unaccountable as those dust-filled, crazy heavens themselves. Maybe he really was mad, as almost everyone claimed, but if he was, there was obviously more to this business of madness than he had ever realized. It was curious, really, how strongly he felt drawn towards such bloody-mindedness. Such floundering. Such an uncompromising vision. Though it often made him feel stupid and embarrassed at the same time. As if he lacked something. Something he felt only lacking when he was around a man like Tom. As if he lacked . . . courage. Or something like courage. And suddenly he realized also, it became clear to him that he felt, that such people should be, in some way, protected. More for everyone else's sake, maybe, than for their own. That the trouble they caused was actually important. That they ploughed the ground. It was an entirely new idea for him and he tried to examine it more rationally as he hurried to catch up. They . . . ploughed the ground. They were as irritating as dust and as selfish and disrespectful and unsociable and outrageous . . . but they ploughed the ground. He had a quick image of Tom as a six-gang tearing through the compressed mass of

Manybones citizenry and he enjoyed the sight. Though he supposed he was in there too, somewhere, somewhere in that crowd. Hurling insults at this ploughman. Throwing stones. Making sure he continued to trip over everything in his way.

As he caught up to Tom he noticed for the first time how wearily his friend carried himself; how wind-burned and pitted the skin on the back of his neck had become. "My God," he thought, and it was more reflection than realization, "we're over fifty." He hadn't given his age much thought during the past decade. He hadn't given *anything* much thought, ever since he'd taken over his father's farm. It had taken all his attention just trying to keep the buildings and the machinery from falling apart. Even when there'd been nothing to do but brood, watching the wind riffle the soil away, or the sun burning the ears of wheat to a sickly white. That was what was so treacherous about Depression dust; it got into absolutely everything, even one's mind. Come to think of it, he might have paid a little more attention to Adela too, when all was said and done. Some of the things she'd shouted at him began to rise towards the surface, but he pushed them back down uneasily, before he could hear them again. Enough was enough, after all. No matter what might have been done about what. You grew a thick skin, and then you couldn't hear or feel so much any more. Sometimes it was hard to know what was most important. She should have grown a thick skin too; they could have lived together like two thick-skinned elephants in a circus.

Tom still seemed wrapped up in his own thoughts. They trudged across the southeast corner of the old Peltola place and then over into Tom's half-quarter under cultivation, its

contoured lines now barely discernible under its load of drift. The dust-silt swirled over their boots like waves of richly flowing velvet.

"Looks even worse on this part, if you ask me, Tom. Can't see any signs of sprouting anywhere. Not even towards that bluff."

For a brief moment Tom looked as if he were lost on someone else's property. Then he returned. "I haven't put down seed on any of it this year, Vihtori. There won't be any crops around here anyway. I'm letting it go. It's dry down to eight, nine feet."

Vihtori's face said nothing, but his pupils seemed to narrow. "You're throwing it in, Tomi? Giving it back to the gophers?"

"I don't think even the gophers would bother with it these days." Tom's voice was unhindered, already seemed well clear of the decision's emotional undertow. "I need more time for my ship, anyway. It's taking too long, and I'm not getting any younger. I used to think I had a lot of time, but I don't."

He pointed to the northeast, where the fields loped towards the horizon in wavy hillocks, curving and cresting like a quartering sea. "You know that Englishman, what's his name, the one who married Cristina Pulkinen — lives over there by the Boggy Creek mouth — Paul Thorndike, that's his name, Paul Thorndike. He's letting me set up the forge on the river. Where the creek comes in. On the south side of it, where the current's strong. It's good deep water. I can build a ramp there, and launch the ship."

Vihtori's face stayed carefully blank. The two men were in step again, had settled into an unhurried, distance-eating stride, their feet booting up matched spurts of dust. The

field rose and fell beneath them like an easy sweep of combers from the west.

"The hull is practically finished now. A little trimming left to do on the starboard bow, the bilge-pumps need cylinders, and I'm shaping the pistons for the engine. Still lots of work on the engine, but otherwise, she's on the ways." As he talked about the ship, Tom became more animated and his eyes brightened. "The keel's caulked and sheathed now. The propeller shaft is in. I hauled the boiler to the river last week in my hay wagon — broke both axles, but I got it there. The oiler's down there too, and all the anchor chain."

"And the cabins — you going to put them on a tow-frame too?"

Tom shook his head and his hat settled onto his ears. "I'm going to assemble the superstructure down at the river. It won't take long. I've got a few bits of it done already, but I'm moving all the lumber and parts down to the launch site too. I'll be finishing it there. And I can live in it too, this winter."

As always when he was alone with Tom and the talk turned to the ship, Vihtori could feel his doubts about Tom's pipe-dream easing. "Have you got the wheels for the tow-frames yet? If I can't get the Hart & Parr working, you're welcome to the drivewheels off the front."

Tom resettled his hat and nodded carefully. "I shouldn't have traded the wheels off my thresher for Skully's angle iron. That was a mistake. Now I need the wheels a lot more than I need the angle iron."

They had arrived at the rim of Tom's coulee and now stopped briefly to look into it, before circling down to its gate on its shallower side. The little enclosure looked like a miniature dustbowl all its own. Steady westerlies had

barricaded the house, chicken shed, and the two ship's sections with huge crescent-shaped sand-drifts, and the steep eastern slope had been transformed into a long, wind-sculpted rampway which began just behind the manure pile and rose smoothly right to the top of the coulee's eastern lip. Of the torn-down barn, only the top of its remaining fieldstone foundations was visible, and the chicken shed had lost its roof. Bits of farm machinery poked up through the sand in unexpected places. There was not a spot of green anywhere; even the huge thistles in the front yard were choked in sand.

"For the keel," Tom explained, pointing towards the non-existent barn. "I had to use all the planking for the keel."

Vihtori was still gazing at the hull, which had now been trimmed and painted and which, for the first time since he had watched Tom rivet steel sheathing over her sides and transom, had taken on the appearance of a real ship. Her smokestack was stepped, her portholes had been lined and bolted, and even without the keel and superstructure she seemed to be standing through the sand-waves like a low-slung frigate. When the wind gusted, the grit blowing off her bow flung up like flying spume.

"I've got the horses in the house," Tom said. "So there isn't much room to sit down. But we can make some coffee in the ship, if you like."

"I haven't been here for almost eight months," Vihtori marvelled. "You've made enormous headway, Tomi. I never would have believed it. That's really a ship, my friend."

"It's certainly a ship," Tom grinned.

Vihtori nodded again. "And are those diehards still coming around . . . you know . . . those drunks . . ."

Tom snorted, and his face darkened angrily. "They're the

Ninth Plague, right after the locusts. I work on the keel mostly at night now. When they come, I climb inside the ship and work there, or at the forge. Mostly they come on Wednesdays, but sometimes they sit out there and howl at me day after day."

"Bob Kleppner and his bunch?"

Tom's grin reappeared, faintly. "They've been back a few times. Not Kleppner himself, but some of the others. They stay on the other side of the gate now."

At the gate, which he had reinforced with dead poplar trunks, Tom removed several barriers of barbed wire and opened a small inset hatch to let them through. The little stronghold was every bit as messy as old Mrs. Markulla had described, especially around the forge, which now dominated the front yard like a throne surrounded by wave upon wave of scrap, half-finished machine parts, and piles of flat-iron. Vihtori dutifully examined a huge propeller, some reduction gear, and an ingenious goose-necked universal coupling, but he was watching, again, Tom's tired eyes and gaunt cheeks. He laid the universal coupling carefully back onto the sand.

"I can hear that hammer of yours very clearly over at our place, Tom. Usually when I wake up. Always when I go to bed. Often during the night. You're working yourself awfully hard, *hyvä ystävä*. Sometimes I worry about you a little. You should come over more often for supper."

Tom waved his hand over the sand-choked coulee with a sardonic grin. "My little garden, here, supplies me with all my needs. Thistles, locusts, and potato bugs. And when the horses are gone, there will always be gophers."

"I'm serious, Tom. You've got to take better care of your health. The well is not inexhaustible, after all."

Tom picked up a ragged piece of black-iron and flung it

hard at a large horsefly resting on a pile of fieldstones beside the forge. The high *ping* sang in the heat like an insect's exasperation.

"Health? Health? What the hell is health, Vihtori. The beer parlour is full of men taking care of their health. The farmers standing around in their barns watching their crops burn up are taking care of their health. The ones hanging themselves with stooking twine are taking care of their health."

He flung another piece of scrap-iron at the topmost fieldstone on the same pile and missed. "Look around you, Vihtori. What makes you think you've got all the time in the world? Your animals are dying. The bank wants your farm. Your wife wants to take away your children to the Coast. You've got a lot more trouble than I have, *minun hyvä mies.* All I've got to do is finish an engine, a superstructure, and some pumps."

And suddenly Vihtori found himself locked into a gaze so startlingly direct, clear, and forceful, it seemed to be raising him bodily off the ground. The prairie blurred; the grit blowing against his face lost its granular sting. In that hard look, hard at the centre and distorted around the edges, Tom loomed and diminished uncertainly, like the slow back-and-forth sliding of a magnifying glass. For a few interminable seconds Tom was once more a total stranger, a man of another life and place, with plans quite impossible to fathom and reasons too unsettling to accept. He seemed, for that brief permanent-seeming moment, an unbridgeable distance away, a great wasteland between Tom's eyes and his own, and the Russian thistle around them rattled like loose ship's tackle, or like a horse ploughing shortgrass, it could have been either sound.

"Tom," Vihtori said finally, and when he spoke he felt unaccountably like a traitor. "Tom, I wish you'd just tell me. Why are you building that thing?"

In the ensuing silence, he realized that Tom was no longer looking at him, but studying the unfinished trim on the starboard bow.

"You told me once you were going to sail her to some unexplored country called Crokersland. Or Crockersland, or however you pronounce it. But Adela looked it up one day when she was in Regina, and there is no such land, Tom. The librarian had to search for it for hours and hours. She said it was just the Arctic sea ice that some explorer, I forget his name, had mistaken for land. He was looking for the Northwest Passage. She said they had taken it off the charts almost fifty years ago."

He looked briefly into Tom's face for an answer, but its expression had merely shrugged into faint disdain.

"I just can't understand what you're doing, Tom. Sometimes I think I can understand it, but then I can't."

Tom's face remained immobile for several seconds longer. "Over six years ago, when I started building this ship, you didn't have to understand it," he said finally. "Why do you have to understand it now?"

"But the land, Tom. It doesn't exist. The librarian said it never existed."

"Librarians." Tom's disdain deepened. "Chart-copiers. Egyptians who sail the sea with pencils. All they know is what sailors choose to tell them."

Vihtori sighed helplessly and turned up his shirt-collar.

"You should all be building ships — the whole lot of you," Tom called back as he began climbing the ladder leaning up against the hull. "Maybe there *will* be another Great

Flood. Maybe there won't be. Maybe the land is there and maybe it's not. But I'll tell you one thing, and you can tell it to your librarian know-it-all too." He disappeared over the side and his voice echoed back like a foghorn, impossible to tell whether he was laughing or not: "If you don't start doing *something* pretty soon, you're all going to turn into pillars of salt!"

19

CRISTINA THORNDIKE

[Former Manybones Resident]

Well, you can call me skittish if you want — heaven knows everybody else did — but frankly, that man scared me half to *death* the first time I saw him, and I never heard or saw anything after that to change my mind. Mother used to call his kind a cloven hoof, an unclean spirit, and I don't care how superstitious that sounds, there really are such people — and he was one of them. He cost me a husband, that's right, a husband, and if that doesn't give me the right to pronounce on him, I don't know what does.

That first time, I was visiting my sister and her family, the Ylioyas you know, over by Gerber Lake, and all of a sudden this unearthly dark man just . . . *appeared* . . . you know, from behind the barn. We were husking corn in the yard; Esther almost had a heart attack. He asked us for a glass of water. He was really polite, I'll give him that, but he had

an old bed mattress tied onto his back, with one end sticking out over his head like this, and he looked . . . well he looked so . . . if he'd gone after us all with a club I wouldn't have been surprised, let's just put it that way. Of course Esther's kids ran off shrieking into the house, and Esther just sat there looking terrified, so I got him the water. He didn't thank me, no, he just nodded a few times, like this, and he didn't say who he was or anything. He just set down the jar and headed back off across the prairie. Afterwards Arnie — that's Esther's husband — he told us who he was.

Oh, I heard about him plenty of times after that, all his blaspheming and raising Cain, but I didn't see him again until after Paul and I were married and we'd moved onto a homestead by the river there, just a little southeast of Boggy Creek. Paul had inherited it from an uncle of his, who'd ruined it and then gone back to England. I guess if we'd had any brains at all we'd have taken one look at the place and headed for the Coast — then maybe I wouldn't be sitting here feeling like something the cat dragged in, half crippled with lumbago and arthritis. But we were young and foolish and Paul didn't know enough about farming to realize it was a waste of time. His uncle had dust-mulched that place for fifteen years, just like those agricultural pamphlets had told him to, so of course by the time he left you couldn't have grown a weed on it in Spring. Oh it still gets my dander up just thinking about it. First they tell you how to do it the wrong way for half a century, then when the wind blows the place away you can't find a hide nor hair of them anywhere, and the banks run you off the property without so much as a how d'you do. Oh they're an awful bunch of parasites, those government people and those bankers. Hardly an ounce of decency in any of them.

We hadn't been on that farm for more than a few months before they started jabbing away at us, fill out this form, fill out that, pay this penalty, too late for that deadline, pay up, pay up, pay up, pay up. They wouldn't have given us a dime's worth of credit if it had cost them their salvation. And that Farm Assistance Programme was just a bad joke. Just bandits, the whole lot. They must have all gone to the same finishing school — because they sure as mutton finished us.

But Sukanen. Sukanen. That old stinker. I can't for the life of me understand why anyone would be interested in him. What did he ever do for this community except cause ruckus and fuss and live like a Limb of Satan? There are dozens of people around here whose stories I could tell, people who stood their ground through that Depression, who worked themselves deaf, dumb, and blind to save their farms and bring their families through with decency and dignity. *Those* are the people that ought to be written about. Those are the people who suffered.

My God, when I think of the death and destruction. Those must have been some of the most wretched years human beings ever spent on God's own firmament. If I live to be a hundred I'll never forget a sound as awful as a billion grasshoppers just plain *chewing*. I still dream about it sometimes. And the endless drought that just got worse and worse. Every year we thought we'd hit the bottom, and every year it just got drier and colder. So many people got TB, and it seemed like every second childbirth was a miscarriage or a stillborn. I lost my only child that way . . . stillborn . . . and, well, maybe it was just as well. The less said the better I suppose. My brother-in-law, Arnie, finally had to shoot all his livestock because there was just no way

to get enough water for them anymore. People started hanging themselves in their granaries and barns. Everybody was on Relief. After our neighbour Mike Arnot died of a tumour and the sheriffs came to auction everything off, his wife, Jagna, took what little food she had, cooked those hangmen a meal, and then stood at the window crying her heart out while they sold everything she owned out from under her.

And all the while that Sukanen, that Devil's messenger, walked around with that *look* on his face, that I-told-you-so look, as if we all had it coming, as if he was . . . as if he was *enjoying* the whole thing. Well okay, maybe that's exaggerating, but he did once say to my husband that *we* were all the crazy ones and *he* was the only one making any sense. A ship in a dust-storm. That's the kind of sense he wanted us to believe.

Did I mention that he moved onto our property in the summer of '37? Well, I was dead set against it when my husband gave him permission, and I was a fool for not saying so in plainer English. Some people you've just got to stay as far away from as you can. Margaret Hollington, she was an English pretty-pretty from over towards Hazlett, never washed a dish in her life, obnoxious woman, but she was right about Sukanen; she said he was made of the original stuff of this earth, before compromises were ever dreamed of. Well you know what that original stuff was don't you? Dirt. Plain ordinary dirt. Yes, she said a mouthful, that one. Some people you've just got to wash your hands of.

Well and anyway, I was pregnant and sick. We couldn't make a living just off the farm; Paul had to work out whenever he could, and I didn't feel safe all alone with that *mielenvikainen* rutting around out there just over the hill. He used to bring us the odd jackrabbit he'd caught to trade

it for eggs you see, and he'd never knock on the door, he'd just stand there staring through the glass until somebody saw him and opened up. If you didn't know he was there and you just happened to glance up, especially at night if nobody else was home, you could get yourself a terminal heart attack. He frightened me half out of my wits a couple of times that way. And everybody thought I was just a complainer until later, a couple of years later, when he showed up just like that at everybody's door who owned a tractor, once he had his ship ready to haul. And then they all got a dose of what I'd been going through for all that time. And they didn't like it one bit better than I did.

Those eggs incidentally — he didn't eat them you know. He wrapped them up in gopher-skins and laid them out in the sun to hatch. He told Paul some woman had stolen all his chickens back on his own farm and this was how he was going to replace them. Nobody ever told me directly — nobody ever told you anything directly in that closed-mouthed little town — but I just know with every bone in my body he was running around all over the district blaming me for them rotting like so many dead fish in that 110-degree heat. He wouldn't have missed a chance like that. Not that Devil's grunt. My mother once said about people like him, she said: when they die, the mouth has to be killed separately, it's got such a life of its own. Otherwise it'd still be spewing poison from the grave.

Do you think he was a genius? Do you? Well, I've said it before and I'll say it again: if that's genius, I'm the Queen of Sweden. Would a genius sit in his cabin with a fire going and no chimney, and almost choke to death on the smoke all winter long? Is that genius? I'd go down there sometimes, you know, just to see if he'd poisoned himself yet with that

rotten horsemeat he ate, and in the winter you could always tell if he was home because the door would be slightly open and the smoke would be pouring out through that door. He was always *covered* with soot, all winter long, and his eyes were so red it made him look like a mad bull. And that's supposed to be genius. I tell you, if that's genius, then our madhouses are full of them.

But yes, sure, it was that ship that was the millstone around his neck. My Lord in Heaven he worked at that thing like a man possessed. Well, he *was* possessed in my humble opinion. Wouldn't you say so? Day and night, day and night, in every sort of weather — we sometimes wondered if the poor fool slept at all. People used to come to watch and just shake their heads. Our pastor, Sip Jarvenpaa, brought by his Confirmation class every year so the children could see what a possessed man really looked like. He said if someone ever managed to drive the evil spirits out of Sukanen, they'd pour out of him like a great herd of pigs. I wouldn't be surprised, though I don't think anybody could ever have managed to do it. He was a stubborn brute, that Sukanen.

Do I sound like I don't have a single good thing to say about Tom Sukanen? I'm not surprised. But I'll admit he did floor me once, and that was during a huge hopper wave that hit us in 1935. That was the first and biggest infestation we ever had in our area. Oh you could see the darn things for hours before they finally arrived, great swirling clouds of them piled thousands of feet into the air. The first sound you heard was just a kind of faraway hum, but that got a lot rougher sounding, and then, when they were getting close, the most terrifying crackling, the way I remember prairie fires sounding when I was a kid. We just

stood there gawking in front of the house — you know, the way you get when there's something too awful to think about coming right at you — and then the first ones went whizzing past, really fast and really banging into things hard, I don't even think we ducked . . . and suddenly Paul was hollering *get in the house get in the house* and we ran in fast and slammed all the windows and doors and then started whapping away at the ones that'd gotten in with us, because there were a whole bunch of them hopping and ricochetting all over the furniture. When we finally managed to catch our breath and listen, the house sounded like it was in a hailstorm and there were so many grasshoppers spattering against the windows, the house inside turned green — a real murky green, as if we were underwater. And through the middle of all that slithering and crackling, so help me God *you could still hear that darn fool's hammer pounding away,* just as loud and regular as if nothing had happened, and Paul said you know that's impossible, he's got to be *crawling* with the darn things, they must be in his nose and in his ears, how can he possibly . . . so later that afternoon, after the main bunch had gone through, we draped ourselves all over with some cheesecloth I had and went out to see how he was making out, and he was still there, not only working away as if nothing had happened, but *singing at the top of his silly lungs* — some Finnish song, I'll never forget it to my dying day, something about "when Autumn leaves are blowing"— some children's song about leaves in the fall. And he was all covered in green splatter from the ones that got between the hammer and the anvil and the handles of his tools were all slimy with grasshopper grease, but none of it seemed to bother him at all. There must have been a couple of hundred of them still chewing away on

his stooking-twine jacket even then. Oh yes, he was quite a show-off, that one, when he got the chance.

But bloody-minded? You have no idea. Tom Sukanen was without doubt the most contrary tree-stump I ever met, and never more so than when it was going to hurt him most. I tell you, that stupid man froze half to death in the winters and almost starved himself to death for years with the awful things he ate, *and still he wouldn't take a helping hand from anybody*. That just made me so mad I can still taste it. You'd go down there and see him living in all that filth, and then bring him some bread or whatever you had some extra of, and he'd not only refuse it, he'd treat you like you were trying to poison him or something! Once I tried to give him some old dishes because I'd noticed he ate everything out of rusty tin cans, and to my amazement he took them — I thought he was finally coming to his senses. But then he went right on eating out of those rusty tin cans, and I never did see him use those dishes the entire four years he squatted on our place by the river. No, I looked for those dishes every time I went down there to see how he was doing, and I never did see any trace of them ever again . . .

20

A JONAH

By the fall of 1937 everyone's worst fears had been confirmed. The crop failed completely, this time as far north as the 52nd Parallel. In the relentless 110-degree heat whole lakes dried up, adding their grit to the caustic dust which had been blowing off evaporated alkali swamps and ponds since 1936. Twenty miles southwest of Manybones, Gerber Lake became a stinking cesspit as thousands of carp and jackfish gasped and flapped their last on the baked lakebottom. Veterinarians recorded an epidemic of "hardware disease," as hunger-crazed cows and horses swallowed anything they could get down their throats — wood, scrap metal, wire, bits of discarded farm machinery. Dry electrical storms exploded across the skies without warning and without rain, turning the air blue-black and so thick it became difficult to breathe. Strange mutant strains of insects appeared — one a fly with a mosquito-like body

whose bite made horses stagger as if drunk, causing death within hours.

Grasshopper populations, already alarming in 1934 and 1935, now tripled and quadrupled. The poison distributed by the Department of Agriculture seemed only to spur them on to a greater frenzy. They ate everything that was softer than wood, whether clothes off the clothesline or straw off the broom. When they arrived in their long, winding, sky-high columns they darkened the sun and coated everything in their path with a writhing, grey-green skin. Children had to be fitted with masks or veils. Trains were slowed or forced to a stop, wheels spinning, unable to find traction on the grasshopper-greased rails. And when the columns eventually moved on they left behind them a squirming carpet of half-dead, mutilated bodies and legs that kicked and twisted spasmodically for several more days before finally lying still. People raked them into piles as high as doorways, burned them, and waited for the next onslaught.

On the south bank of the South Saskatchewan River above Cabri, where he had relocated his forge, Tom Sukanen merely shrugged. "The fire she be-it smoking one little more when grasshoppers they land-it on coals," he explained to Paul Thorndike who had dropped by to have a look at Tom's new base of operations. "But also then, I have-it now lunch any time I hungry."

Over the past two months he had loaded all his supplies, tools, and remaining lumber onto a borrowed grain wagon hitched to his two remaining horses, and had moved everything to this spot on the riverbank, where the mouth of Boggy Creek formed a natural rampway for the impending launch of his ship. His house, granary, and the remains of the chicken shed had all been pulled down and were

now being absorbed into the ship's superstructure, which he was building as separate components a few feet west of the launch site. The wheelhouse, chartroom, and living quarters would extend from the foredeck all the way back to amidships, with a second cabin, slightly shorter but of the same beam and height, back of amidships to the stern. The two structures would be linked by a long open gallery, pierced at its aft end by the smokestack and secured along both sides by lengths of oak or fir railing.

Thorndike surveyed the scaffolding and the scattered piles of rubbish dubiously. During the two years he'd lived in the district he had heard a story or two about the cracked Finlander who was building a steamship in a coulee three miles north of the Correction Line, but he'd never quite gotten around to driving over to have a look. Then the queer-looking fellow had suddenly shown up on his doorstep (Cristina had given a little gasp and then stiffened conspicuously), asking permission to squat on an unused piece of the riverbank on the south side of the creek. There seemed no good or civilized reason to refuse him, though Cristina seemed to have a few that didn't fit into either category. "People would think us boors," he reminded her after the stooking twine-clad man had shuffled off. "The land's no good down there anyway."

"It wasn't the land I was worried about," Cristina muttered, but refused to discuss the matter further.

One thing there was no point in glossing over: the fellow smelled like a Turkish toilet on parade. One definitely didn't want to get downwind of him. And although his face and neck were almost black from the constant sun and wind, he somehow gave the impression of ill health and hunger. Thorndike slapped another grasshopper away from his face and crushed it into the dirt with the others. "You

don't mean to say you're actually *eating* these beastly things! Good God man, if you need food, just let us know. We've got eggs we can't sell and wheat nobody wants, and I believe Cristina baked a lot of bread last Friday."

Tom nodded, but his face remained noncommittal. "I have-it lots wheat in my granary by farm," he assured his new landlord. "And I have-it my meat with me alway." He lifted several boards off a burlap-covered box and suddenly Thorndike realized where most of the stench had been coming from. Under the burlap lay a great haunch of raw horsemeat, blue-black and shimmering evilly, its entire surface frantic with maggots and flies. Tom seemed amused at the Englishman's speechlessness.

"Most times I yust hang-it this meats from the tree in this winds. Get hard skin. Tough. Good many months."

He pulled out a knife and scraped clear a bladeful of vermin, then cut away a small chunk of flesh and popped it into his mouth. "This way I am alway have-it meats if a horse be now die-it or no." He grinned broadly, following the first piece with another. "It be-it growing this ways now all by its own."

Ignoring the look of distaste that had begun to settle Thorndike's face, he proceeded to give him a brief demonstration of his most recent contrivances, a set of odd-looking but quite workable lift-stroke bilge pumps for his lifeboat, made from discarded automobile steering dampers, and a complicated universal-joint assembly for the ship's propulsion system. Thorndike's revulsion, caught just in time, began to evaporate, and he became increasingly intrigued. "That old fellow's not nearly as dumb as you might think," he marvelled to Cristina when he returned from the river over an hour later. "He's got a chronometer-gadget he's built

that's really the most extraordinary thing. Looks like a little Greek temple, in a way, with small carved pillars under a curved dome, but instead of a frieze he's fixed a strip of sawtoothed brass around it, like a thin crown. Then he's invented the most amazing little clockwork that's powered by falling drops of water, and that's what turns the dome, you see. The clockwork ties into the teeth of that brass frieze. Now what it actually does I'm not quite sure, his English is so hard to follow. But it measures either time or latitude, or maybe both. It seems to be a navigational instrument of some sort."

Cristina was trying to ward off the blistering heat by gluing newspaper over all the windowpanes. Her husband's enthusiasm did nothing to improve her mood. "I tell you he's a bad apple, Paul. He makes my skin crawl every time I see him. He could be building the sun, the moon, and the stars out there for all I care; I still wish you hadn't let him stay."

Paul Thorndike sighed and looked for a rag to mop his forehead and neck. "The way you women get when you're pregnant. You're spookier than a hounded deer. The man's a harmless eccentric, for heaven's sake; we virtually specialize in them back home. There's half a dozen on every streetcorner from Earl's Court to Piccadilly Circus. And this one's a natural-born frustrated engineer to boot."

"He might have been natural-born, but what he's doing out there now isn't natural any more. No it isn't. You go ahead and laugh, but if it was your son fifty years down the road I bet you'd be out there giving him a piece of your mind. Oh yes you would. Besides, every time he looks at me I feel I'm being *blamed* for something. Why should I be blamed for anything? What have I ever done to him?"

"That's only his manner, luv. He's crusty, a bit cranky.

And he's most probably lonely, living like that by himself all the time. Most likely doesn't have many friends. Not that I'd be surprised, considering how he smells."

Cristina slapped the last large piece of paper over the kitchen window and the room was plunged abruptly into a molten, yellow-brown gloom. For a moment both of them were transformed, became shadows, dimly haloed silhouettes in the sepulchral glow. Cristina balanced the dish of flour-paste carefully back to the kitchen counter, and when she spoke again, it sounded like a litany:

"Atte and Marlene Pirness: Five kids, stone broke, they haven't had a crop in three years and the two oldest kids have TB. Oskari and Velma Laine: Three kids, two of them sick; little Sulo's got polio and now Oskari's down with his second bout of dust-pneumonia. They lost a crop to hoppers and another to dust, and Velma's had two miscarriages and now she's pregnant again. The Kiniskeys. All right? The Kiniskeys: Little Berte is dead and every single one of their horses, from alkali poisoning. My brother-in-law, Arnie, had to shoot every animal in his barn because there was no more water. Bill and Elli whatstheirnames. The ones that got blown out in '34, over by the Great Sand Hills. Remember them? The Szandors, that's who I mean. The Szandors. They're working their place for the bank, just caretakers until the manager happens to feel like throwing them off. Everybody's losing family, losing farms, losing everything they worked for. But you haven't seen any of *them* building heathen images in their backyards. All of *them* still manage to keep themselves clean, come to church on Sunday, and give each other a hand when they can. You don't see any of *them* sneering and fighting and making a spectacle of themselves every chance they get."

Her voice had become impatient as an edge against tears, but at her husband's uncomprehending frown she swerved abruptly into anger.

"There is no *need* for anyone to live like an animal, Paul! No one has to eat grasshoppers like a savage! There's still enough food to go around, to feed everyone who needs help. We can still maintain some decency and humanity. We're *all* in bad trouble; it's no picnic for anyone around here — but we can't let it come to *that*!"

Paul Thorndike had begun to settle and resettle the brim of his cap, which was one of the things he always found himself doing whenever Cristina became emotional, but this time he didn't get a chance to start mentally pacing off his property lines, which was usually the next stage. Cristina barred the way. "Paul, listen to me for once! Something has got to be done about him. You think he's harmless, but I don't think he is. We're all on the edge, and that kind of man undermines everybody. Oh yes he does, and that's important. We can't afford his kind of vanity right now. We really can't. I don't know how to get that into your thick English head, but it's true — why can't you men understand these things! He can't be trusted. He's working against us all. He's a Jonah."

But Paul had been listening to something else. A faint chiming of steel, irregular, tentative, like cymbals being tuned, was drifting over from the riverbank; a sound remarkably clear for all its faintness — compelling, like code. Cristina stopped talking and listened as well. The ringing deepened, stopped, then ran up in short, syncopated flourishes, as if testing the signature, then abruptly burst into full, two-fisted clangour, reverberating and echoing like a carillon. For a few moments the rhythm continued to shift,

searching for counterpoint, groping for the stance, until it settled, finally, into a steady, driving, circular beat, a tempo oddly primal, foreign, yet formal too, as if accompanying a ritual long since forgotten or lost. The two listened intently, without speaking, following the backbeats and rhythm shifts until the repetitions had clearly established themselves and only the complexity of the rhythm continued to puzzle and fascinate. By then Cristina had had enough and was tapping her foot impatiently, unconsciously in time to the shipbuilder's beat.

"He needs help, Paul. In fact what he really needs . . ."

But Paul Thorndike had been intrigued once more, and was feeling impulsively protective of this odd Finlander's obsession.

"You're over-reacting, luv. As you often do." He raised his voice as Cristina looked about to protest. "Oh, for heaven's sake: we'll go down here if we're meant to go down, no sooner and no later, and no poor sod of a shipbuilding farmer can possibly make enough difference to have any influence on that. Surely you can't seriously think otherwise. Surely to God the world is still big enough for all of us, big, small or mad as a hatter. Maybe it's time you accepted that there are other ways to live besides the traditions everyone clings to so tenaciously around here. As if that's the only way to be decent and civilized. You've got to start giving a few other people some credit for their own peculiar values." Paul Thorndike wasn't used to making speeches, and when he did, they invariably made him voluble. "We're offered the opportunity to die every day of our lives, Cristina. Whether we accept that opportunity or manage to reject it is entirely up to us. If we have the strength and the will to go on living, there's nothing

can stop us. There are no accidents. What happens to us is what we want to have happen to us, whether we realize it or not. So there's never any point in blaming anyone else for our miseries. And there's certainly no point in hanging them on the likes of that old codger out there."

He stood up and pushed away his chair, barking his shin painfully against a footstool that had become harder to see in the gloom. "Damn! What the bleeding devil was that!"

Cristina's hand pressed against her mouth, couldn't contain a choked giggle. Thorndike groped around under the table and came up with the footstool, clenched in his fist like a captured pup. He was laughing too. "Bloody hell. One of these days I'm going to forget I'm right, and kill myself on this evil little thing."

21

AN INVITATION TO DINNER

It was on July 3, 1938, a year to the day since he had given up farming and moved his forge to the mouth of Boggy Creek, that Tom twisted the final tow-bolt into his steamship's keel and stood back to study his handiwork. The long, tall structure, still inverted but now mounted on a wide towing frame, rose from the coulee floor like a rust-red humpback surfacing through waves of sand. In the vicious heat its metal-sheathed sides were too hot to touch, and the air shimmering around it made it seem strangely alive. A few feet away its matching companion, the steamship's hull, rested right-side up on a similar tow-frame, both now fitted with a miscellany of steel wagon wheels and sturdy axles. The abandoned farms and farm machinery of the most recent, worst Depression years had proven a boon to Tom's shipbuilding venture, providing him with many badly needed parts he would never have been able to buy.

But he'd been unable to find any tow-cable heavy enough for this next part of the task, so he had attached triple-wound lengths of his own anchor chain to both the stern of the keel and the bow of the hull. This whole nautical procession was now ready to be hauled to the launch-site on the South Saskatchewan River.

The keel had taken much longer to complete than expected but had become, in the process, an involuntary work of art. Tom had originally intended it to be of the same steel-sheathed double-planked construction as the hull, but hadn't had enough money to include all the necessary steel in his first order. The collapse of grain prices in the following years had finally ruled out further orders altogether, and Tom had resigned himself to a keel of wood, fortified with whatever scraps of metal he had left over from the hull. But on March 17, 1936, the Manybones Pool Elevator caught fire and was damaged so badly, the Occidental Assurance Company of America wrote it off in favour of a new one to be built several hundred feet farther down the tracks. The remains of the old structure were torn down, and Tom was able to scavenge a large number of the metal plates which had made up the siding on the building. The plates were embossed with ornate insets of curling ivy vines, nasturtium-like flowers, and much frenzied fretwork characteristic of an earlier, less chastened time, but Tom hardly gave these embellishments a glance. The main problem with the plates was their small size, about eighteen by twenty-four inches; they had been nailed onto the elevator wall in an overlapping, staggered pattern, like shingles. It was obvious that they would quickly work loose if applied to the keel in the same way. Tom therefore unravelled six hundred feet of barbed fencing wire, painstakingly twisted

out the 1,800 barbs, and then stitched the plates across the keel's surface in one continuous sequence, without ever breaking or splicing the wire.

The methodical process took almost three months to complete, with the first several dozen plates using so little of the six-hundred-foot roll that each stitch obliged Tom to drag the end of his thread far into Cuthbert's summer-fallow, scrambling up and down the coulee's side until he had worn a deep rut into it. When he was done, he painted both keel and hull with several thick finishing-coats of a mixture of horse blood and his own urine. He insisted this concoction, absorbed by the metal, would withstand salt-water corrosion for decades.

Tom had, at this point, only a single horse left, a tough, powerful Clydesdale he'd been feeding through the Depression on straight grain and sow-thistle — a horse certainly capable of pulling several deadweight tons, but not nearly strong enough to drag either tow-frame unassisted. His Chevrolet had been stripped to the frame for parts, and the old steam thresher had been completely absorbed into the steamship's mechanical innards. Vihtori Markulla had never managed to repair his old Hart & Parr (eventually contributing several wheels and some engine parts to Tom's undertaking), and most other tractors in the district, whether gasoline or steam, were by this time either abandoned, in mothballs, or not in use for lack of fuel. And when word began to get around that Tom Sukanen had actually done it, that he was now ready for a tow to the river, even those tractors still in operation suddenly became for one vague reason or another unavailable.

It was during this time that Tom began a relentless, wordless pilgrimage through the district that soon drove

Manybones once again into an uproar. Within a short time it was clear that anyone owning a tractor of any description, whether steam, gasoline, wood, kerosene, or coal, could expect to find Tom on his doorstep sooner or later, invariably at the supper hour, staring in through the glass or, if there was no glass, waiting patiently for someone to happen through the door.

Tom made no effort to make these visits pleasant or easy for anyone. He wore his rancid rawhide pants and rag undershirt, and washed no more often than usual. He generally appeared without warning, accepted a grudgingly offered chair amiably, but always refused the housewife's food. He brought his own in a tobacco tin, which, if the family was fortunate, contained a mash of wheat grains and water. If not, it was horsemeat, which Tom ate raw.

He was withdrawn during these visits — polite but impenetrable — some reported him almost mute. He never explained his purpose in coming, never once brought up the subject of tractors, and even refused to discuss his ship at all beyond admitting, if the question was put to him point blank, that it was ready for assembly. He sat awkwardly in his chair, staring at the table, seeming indifferent to the stilted conversation eddying around him, and after the meal was over, expressed a brief thanks, picked up his tobacco tin, and left as abruptly as he'd come.

For some months, Manybones farmers were helpless. The community had always prided itself on its tradition of open-door hospitality, and no one wanted the reputation of having turned a neighbour from his door. "That Sukanen just plain *pitlamped* 'em," chortled Clay Jackson, who'd been lucky enough not to own a tractor at the time. "Just shone a light into their eyes an' they hadda open up

like he was the King of Siam. I gotta admit, I got a bang out of it." He sat hunched over a cheap kitchen table, alone in an overheated Swift Current flophouse, but his laugh was condescending. "Even so, it never got him a tow to the river, now did it?"

It was Oskari Laine who finally broke ranks and confronted Tom as he was entering the Laine yard. Laine was Manybones' unofficial blacksmith, a large, black-bearded Finn who had the reputation of refusing to shoe any horse that had been mistreated by its owner. He addressed Tom bluntly in Finnish.

"*Hyvä päivää*, Sukanen."

"*Hyvä päivää*, Oskari."

"I see you've got your tobacco tin with you. I've heard about that tobacco tin. From Parkinson."

Tom's nod was impassive. "Yes. I spent an evening there last Thursday."

"They said you did. On Monday. Is it the same tobacco tin?"

Tom's face remained inscrutable. "It is."

"Look Sukanen, *minun mies*, let me be absolutely frank. You're pushing people around, and I don't like being pushed around. If you want to eat at my table as my guest, you're most welcome. But do me the courtesy of having a wash in the stocktrough behind the barn. And when you're done, leave that tobacco tin outside. I'm told the smell takes days to clear out of the house."

Tom showed no surprise, and his expression merely changed to what the blacksmith described years later as "interested. Damned if he didn't look interested."

"They do not like my meat," he agreed, studying the tin as if the explanation might lie in its label's enthusiastic claims

for taste and quality. "And I can't eat theirs. The women cook it until all the vital nourishment has been destroyed."

Laine felt constrained to defend the womenfolk of Manybones. "I've eaten my wife's cooking for twenty years and it hasn't killed me yet," he pointed out stiffly. "I believe I can say the same for the Pouss's, the Pulkinens, the Fraynes, and everybody else."

"That may be true." Tom's nod was formal, unrepentant. "It's not for me to say."

"Besides, we're getting off the topic, which is my stock-trough. Do you wish to use it or not?"

(Laine never forgot Tom's answer, not because it meant very much to him at the time but because, as he put it bitterly: "That was the last day of my life, mister. It had nothing atall to do with him, he just happened to come by on that day, so he's kinda stayed in my memory a lot longer than he had any right to." That evening a violent tornado tore across a long, narrow strip of southern Saskatchewan, demolishing the Laine house and killing his wife and four children. Oskari Laine survived, but spent the rest of his life in Nova Scotia, drifting. "And also, maybe I remember it better now because I've thought about it more lately . . .")

Tom's look was hard, exasperated. "You've all got water on your minds so much, in this drought, you can't seem to think of anything else. But I'll tell you something, Laine. You think you can't survive without it, but I'll tell you something. It's not as important as you think, all this water. It's not that important. That's not what's important at all."

They stood there in the ruined yard like two of Sukanen's wooden figurines, carved at the moment of impasse. Tom's face seemed stiff with challenge and rectitude. Laine glared back stubbornly, annoyed but also somewhat embarrassed.

A dusty chicken underfoot tugged and picked at Sukanen's bootlaces.

"Look," said Laine finally, spreading his palms in a gesture of compromise. "To tow that galleon of yours down to Boggy Creek would take a couple of tractors at the very least. You want a twenty-ton steamer for that job. My little *pissa potta* here's got hardly enough guts to drag your anchor. It wouldn't be of any use to you at all." "And besides," he admitted when Tom's expression remained unchanged, "Sure, even if I *had* a bloody steamer to lend you I don't suppose I would because the whole damned thing is more ridiculous than the Temperance Movement! Why should I waste three hundred gallons of gas on a ship that'll draw three times the depth of the river you want to drag it to? Just so it can sit there on the river-bottom as a monument to your . . . your crackpot ideas about . . . about whatever you think you're trying to prove. I don't know what you're up to *minun mies*, and I don't much care, but I don't have much patience with it either and I won't be involved with it. If you're so damned sure of your miracles, why don't you give us a little practical demonstration and float it to the river yourself? If you'll do that, I'll even give you the coal you'll need to sail it away and get yourself out of our hair. Now does that satisfy you? Is that clear enough for you? And now will you let us eat our supper in peace?"

Sukanen hadn't moved. For a moment or two a deep-seated bitterness had begun to settle his mouth and eyes, but then his face simply drifted over and became hard as well. They stood there like that for a little longer, awkwardly, mute, but the issue had been settled, the case was closed. Sukanen turned and gestured towards the sagging barn, the bleached and sway-backed house, the useless

fields where the dirt scurried and tossed like outbursts of malicious laughter. "And there," he said, sweeping his arm from one horizon to another, "there is *your* monument to a fine New World. That's what you spent more than half your life accomplishing. Very impressive. You might as well have saved yourself the crossing. It's just the same damn shitpile you came from. And there's not a single one of you who can think of anything more important than whether the pigs at the trough are clean."

As Laine pondered Sukanen's receding back, his wife hurried over from the porch where she had been watching behind the curtain. "He's gone," she pointed out, surprised and relieved. "How did you manage that? What did he say to you?" She shifted her apron to cover a tear in her housedress. "Tenho's been hammering nails into the kitchen-bench again. Was that the tobacco tin of horsemeat Parkinson told us about?"

"I told him to wash in the stocktrough behind the barn," the blacksmith said wryly, but she could tell he was not pleased with his victory. "I told him he could have dinner with us if he washed and got rid of the tin."

"But, Oskari,"— Velma Laine looked shocked and amused at the same time —"that stocktrough is bone dry. There hasn't been a drop of water in it since . . . February or March."

"I know." The blacksmith was still watching the exasperating shipbuilder's dustcloud receding slowly across his southeast quarter. "And I've been thinking he must've known it too. He made some sort of crack about it."

Velma turned and led the way back to the house, manoeuvring her bare legs carefully past the dead clumps of thistle lying every which way across the path. The evening wind had picked up sharply and grit crackled against

the dried-out fence posts like intermittent bursts of static. The entire sky was covered with a reddish-brown haze. "You realize if he'd stayed, we'd probably have been stuck with him for the night," she consoled, following the haze to where it concentrated into a dense, angry rust on the southern horizon. "That looks like a really bad one coming over from Assiniboia way."

But Oskari Laine was still pondering recent events and life in general. "What always drives me nuts about people like that," he grumbled, ignoring the thistles stabbing at his ankles and calves, "is that he'll probably make it to his dying day without ever having to face up to the fact that he's absolutely and totally full of bull!"

22

THE TWISTER

By the time Sukanen had reached the eastern edge of Holstrom's southeast quarter, the wind had begun to whistle and the dust flowed over his boots like talcum powder. Meandering wavelet patterns on the surrounding fields kept straightening abruptly into long stiff lines of force, and darkness was falling fast, though the sun was still well above the horizon, obscured by growing thunderclouds of soil. Rolls of tumbleweed broke their moorings and tossed end over end, bounding past with an animal-like hiss. Sukanen pulled his head down into his collar and began to tack slightly east by southeast, trying to avoid the direct onslaught of the grit. His face was ridged with dirt and strain, and he looked bone-weary. Though his eyes were fixed on the ground ahead, his body followed his feet sluggishly. He stumbled down a shallow fold between two fields and let himself drift along it for some moments before

pushing back up the other side. The air had become thick and murky, and increasingly hard to breathe.

As he reached the old Peltola windbreak the wind swung in sharply from the southeast and now began to furrow the fields in earnest. The long-dead poplars, peeled and polished to bone, rattled and shrieked in the gusts. A distant row of oddly flickering sawteeth had to be Peltola's granaries, now empty for the fourth consecutive year. Tom hesitated briefly; the Peltola farm was abandoned and was a few miles closer than his camp on the riverbank. But the doors and windows had been boarded up by the bank's sheriffs, as the house was still in fairly good condition. Sukanen plodded on, leading into the wind with his right shoulder, his face shoved deep into the crook of his arm. As the heavier soils began to drive over the ground, the surface of the fields around him seemed to rise, cutting off his calves, then his legs, until he was floating hip-deep across a surging prairie, pushing stiffly against the current. He shut his eyes and then his mouth, wedging his nose hard against his sleeve and inhaling rapidly whenever the wind eased off for brief seconds. After a while the irregular breathing became automatic, and the monotonous whistling numbed him. Pushing ahead on unseen feet, his eyes and mouth sealed with sweat and dust, he sank deeper and deeper into a mindless torpor.

The next thing Tom realized, he was lying face-down in the dry watercourse of Miry Creek, spitting dirt and bits of thistle out of his mouth. The storm above him had grown into a full-fledged gale, and there were clods of earth the size of deer hooves flying through the air. A low, throaty fluttering, like gigantic wings beating the air, reverberated across the fields. For some reason his hair, which had

been streaming straight back along his head, now twirled every which way, tugging fiercely upwards off his skull. The boiling dust hissed and seethed like combers rushing across treacherous reefs.

Tom lifted his head carefully, shielding it with one arm, then struggled into a sitting position and pulled his shirt out of his pants. He tore as large a piece off the bottom as he could manage and wrapped it around his head, covering both nose and mouth. The soil was now blowing so hard that even the sand stung like nettles, and dead twigs or stubble were becoming dangerous projectiles. The sky had melted into that improbable mix of yellow and purple that no one, not even prairie drylanders, ever got used to, and the wind's whistling had risen to a high, protracted scream.

Sukanen had only just found his feet when the first clod struck him a glancing blow to the side of the head. Before he could shift positions, a second changed his expression of surprise to outrage, and a third caught him full force on the neck, almost knocking him down again. The fluttering had become a powerful thumping, then a terrifying sucking and flailing, like giant beaters pounding the earth. Sukanen doubled up and staggered forward, was hit again, caught himself, and drove forward once more, now careless with fury, his arms paddling wildly, face distorted with hate. "Bastards! Cowards!" The wind's scream was so piercing, his own went unheard even to himself. "Egyptians!" Suddenly, for a short puzzling moment, there was a lull, almost a silence, and then the ground all around him exploded into billowing clouds of dirt as the twister ploughed over the watercourse, hurling great chunks of sun-baked creek-bed into the air. Everything spun and howled; disintegrating clay rained down like broken pieces of sky. An uprooted

poplar trunk shattered into matchsticks a few feet from his head, then was sucked away as if it had merely been a vision. For a split second Sukanen saw the sun like an evil shrunken head grinning at him through the debris, and then the clouds of soil closed in and he was spinning too, the breath pressed out of him by a huge fist and his eyes bugging out like a deepwater fish's. His feet were in daylight but his hands were too far away to see, drawn up into the whirling black hole above his head into which everything disappeared. He was fascinated, and then he was furious, and then he was flung to the ground with such force that he just kept on going, past the point of impact, down through the ground that became quiet and quieter, that spun more softly and more slowly, that became darker and emptier, until it was utterly still.

23

SONTIANEN

When Sukanen came to, it was early dawn. The storm had passed, and only a slow hot breeze idled over the prairie, cloying and thick. A yellow-breasted meadowlark picked at a nearby roll of tumbleweed, searching for seeds. The sky had already reverted to its usual metallic blue, though it was still a little pale along its northern rim. In a few hours the horizon would be writhing with superheated mirages, but for the moment the tiny grain elevators of what was either Abbey or Lancer were still clearly visible in the distance.

Tom pulled himself to his knees and pushed away the soil that had nearly buried him during the night. His clothes, his hair, and his eyebrows were stiff with grit. The skin on his face and neck was so bruised and windburned, it felt totally raw. But there were no broken bones, and by some miracle his shirt was still on his back. He rose slowly to his feet, slapped himself hard all over his body, and then swivelled

to take his bearings, finding himself off the direct route to his riverbank by several miles. He was hungry and dizzy, and his tobacco tin was gone. He flicked the torn piece of shirttail at the meadowlark to frighten it off, and then knotted the four corners into an improvised turban against the sun. His throat was ragged and parched.

The prairie all around lay exhausted, grey, and empty. Gaping crater-like holes, each one marking the spot where the twister had bounced, led in a chain of blowouts from the direction of Assiniboia in the southeast towards Leader, north by northwest. He couldn't tell from this vantage point whether any farmyards had been hit. It all looked like a moonscape, or the surface of the planet Mars. Not a sign of life to be seen anywhere. The few scattered buildings he could make out tucked into the folds of dust were colourless and dead. It was the Land of Cain, of banished and desperate souls. A land returned to savagery and chaos. Only insects thrived in it. Only insects belonged in it. He listened absently to the drone of the horseflies until the sound began to crowd in on him, became oppressive, threatened to drown him out. He shook his head violently. "*Ole hiljaa!*" He snapped his turban once more at the meadowlark that had returned to its tumbleweed. "Shut up!" The droning shrank abruptly, but was merely replaced by a far-off, high-pitched silence that drifted towards him slowly, slowly and cunningly. "Bunch of cackling chickens!" The silence rang louder, from all directions. He mumbled: "Nothing but little stones." The singing advanced relentlessly, maliciously, absorbing everything in its path. His head began to echo with it, swelled with it. It billowed, larger and larger, wave upon wave, until it became so loud he could hardly hear it, so vast, it reached everywhere, much farther than

the ear could hear, much farther than the ear could fathom, out to the very horizons of the earlobes themselves. And he stood motionless at its very centre, a tinier and tinier speck of weariness and confusion, dwindling rapidly, shrinking, fading until he was almost nothing, nothing but a pair of torn and dust-covered boots on the bottom of a dried-up, useless ocean. A mute and treacherous ocean turned to stone.

As Tom stared into the ground at his feet, two probing antennae flickered into view along the edge of his boot. Seconds later, a large black beetle struggled out from under the sole. It stopped only long enough to brush off its head and mandibles, then scuttled away across the sand, legs and feelers rowing energetically. Sukanen gazed at it absently for some moments, then stepped on it without much conviction. The beetle burrowed out from under his boot and scrambled on. Tom blinked, pursed his lips, and stepped on it again, putting more weight on his foot. When he raised the boot the beetle paused as if feigning capitulation or death, then rose high on its legs and charged out of the bootprint at breakneck speed, thrashing up ridges and tumbling down creases as if its mainspring had been wound to the full. "*Sontianen*," Tom murmured, changing his position for a third and final stomp. "Shit-beetle." But then he seemed to think better of it and let the bug hurry on, making almost directly across the creekbed for darker soil on the other side. A droplet of yellowish fluid had oozed up along the separation of its dorsal plates, but it seemed otherwise unhurt. Tom toyed with it idly as it ran, trying to make it change direction with a twig or burying it under larger and larger heaps of sand, but it always dug its way out again and returned to its original course.

Tom was intrigued. "Little cretin. We'll just see about

this." He flipped it onto its back and watched its flailing appendages intently. The bug dug its feelers into the sand, jack-knifed at the neck, and rocked back and forth along its entire length, legs paddling the air. At the sixth try, it flipped over. Tom cleared his throat and spat a large blob onto it, which it ignored. After trying several times to make it climb into his palm, he scooped it up impatiently and it bit him on the middle finger, before throwing itself back down onto the sand. Tom grunted and examined the finger. The bite had been deep enough to draw a dot of blood. He found the beetle again several feet farther along and, as punishment, kicked it high into the air. It landed right-side up and clambered on.

Tom sucked his lips against his teeth, watching the beetle run. He chewed on his inner cheek. Finally he straightened up, looked around, and decided on the roll of tumbleweed the meadowlark had finally abandoned. He dragged it closer, crumbled its dry stalks, and began scattering them in a large circle around the fleeing bug. "Whoa up there," he grunted, throwing it back towards the middle each time it was about to breach the ring. "Hold on, hold on. Your last chance, shit-beetle." He dug about in his pockets and found a small box of matches which he set out on the ground. He selected a match, lit the circle in four places, and gave the bug a final shove back into the middle. The flames flared around the circle like a gas ring, and within seconds the bug was trapped. It stood stock-still, high on its forelegs, its antennae flickering.

Tom settled back on his heels to watch. The beetle approached the flames gingerly, to within four or five inches. It stopped briefly, then set off on a tour of inspection, crawling around the entire circle several times. The ring burned

fiercely, without gaps. The beetle turned and crawled around the circle in the opposite direction. Tom refuelled the ring with more tinder.

The beetle moved back towards the middle and waited. As the flames began to burn down it resumed its clockwise inspection. Tom filled in one half of the circle with larger bits of thistle, backing the beetle into the other half. There were now less than four inches left between the encroaching walls of flame. The beetle reared again, weaving frantically on its hind legs. Tom watched without expression. Suddenly it plunged into the dirt at its feet and began to dig. Tiny spurts of dust sprayed up as fiercely as if a miniature thresher were discharging chaff. The long black body seemed almost to melt into the soil. A minute later it was gone.

Tom stared down at the hole for a long time and then, without warning, he grinned. "Little cretin," he murmured again, and kicked a fieldstone over the hole. He stamped out the flames and embers, scattering the ashes with a few sweeping kicks that marked the spot with a plume of dust, and set off north by northeast, towards the river. For all his hunger and thirst, he looked almost cheerful.

24

CASTING OFF

When Tom reached his forge about noon, he stopped only long enough to guzzle several pitcherfuls of water, wolf down a huge helping of wheat mash, and throw a pick, shovel, and selection of woodworking tools into his dogcart. Despite the brutal afternoon heat and his own occasional spells of dizziness, he changed into his stocking-twine overalls, harnessed up the Clydesdale, and set out at a steady walk towards his homestead in the coulee. The tools in the dogcart rattled and bounced. At his fieldstone granary above the coulee's rim Tom dug into the aging grain and filled an entire floursack for the horse and a lard pail for himself. The wind during the previous night had torn off part of the roof, but he put off these repairs for another time. Below them, the keel and hull glowed in the low evening sun like bronze cult idols, casting long and grotesque shadows up the coulee's sides. As he led his horse down the old path, he

stopped every so often to study the various inclines of the coulee's sides, looking for the most shallow rise out of its bottom. When the horse was tethered in the foundations of his former tower he spent another hour double-checking his impressions and hammering a series of stakes up the coulee's eastern slope to mark his chosen route. Then he set an axe to what was left of his windbreak.

The slim poplars, like most trees in the area, had long since died and dried out. They fell easily, and Tom bucked them up into ten-foot lengths which he stacked near the remains of the old barn. Then he selected the thickest one and upended it in a tight hole six feet deep, about a dozen paces ahead of the hull. He wrapped the tow-cable several times around this upright post (or "spool"), lashing it tight. To wind the spool, he bored a large hole through its upper end and fitted in a long, arm-thick dowel, at a right angle to the buried shaft and about three feet above the ground. Half a rotation of this dowel wound up the cable's remaining slack. Tom's crude version of the deadman winch, one of the oldest hauling devices ever invented, was now complete.

By the time Tom had the winch ready to try, it was well past midnight and he found his horse lying on its side, asleep. But he had no intention of waiting until morning. He kicked the horse to its feet and led it over to the ship, to be fitted for the dowel with rope and harness. Now that he was so close to a possible solution, Tom was nervous and the horse responded in kind, fretting and fidgetting until Tom bellowed *"Olle saatana rauhas!"* and brought his fist down across its withers with a sharp whack. The horse reared and then stood still, quivering, while Tom gathered up the fallen harness and began again.

In the bright moonlight the sand in the coulee glistened like frost, though the temperature was still almost as high as it had been all day. Large drops of sweat trickled down Tom's face and onto the harness, making it slippery and hard to manage. A brown bat swooped low over the hull and the horse shied, whinnying. Tom bellowed again and jerked on the bridle. Halfway through the fitting he discovered he was short of harness and had to unravel his stooking-twine coverall for more rope, leaving him stark naked except for the remaining top half of his undershirt. The horseflies, which seemed never to sleep, appeared out of the darkness in hordes. There was more shouting and slapping, as flies and horse came indiscriminately within reach of Tom's fist. Finally he hit on the idea of smearing his entire body with horse manure, which distracted the flies quite effectively. After that, the work progressed quickly, and several hours later the horse was fitted and buckled into place.

Tom stood clear of the cable and gave the winch a last inspection. *"Ala mennä!"* The horse leaned into the harness and pushed. The spool turned slightly. The cable twanged as it stretched tight. "Come on! Hawrrrr!" The horse plunged and grunted. "Git up! Git up!! Get your ass up there!!!" Tom's fist slammed down on its rump and it whinnied anxiously. The dowel crackled and bowed, twisting under the strain. *"Ala mennä saatanan luulaja!!"* And suddenly the dowel was inching forward, slowly but steadily, and from out of the dark came the quavering screech of ungreased axles protesting as they turned. Tom leaped to the horse's side and threw his weight against the dowel which was now twisting around steadily but grudgingly, and when they came full circle they stopped as the cable touched their knees. The horse snorted and tossed its head.

Tom turned and hurried over to the hull amidships, where he squatted down to inspect the tow-frame's forward wheel which he had marked where the wheel dug into the coulee's sand. When he got up, a deep satisfaction had settled his face. In the moonlight the mark was easily visible, a quarter of a revolution clockwise from where it had begun, and the fresh deep rut the wheel had carved into the ground spoke for itself.

The ship of the Finnish drylander was on the move.

25

MARGARET HOLLINGTON

[Former Manybones Resident]

He stank. He never washed, and he stank. Now, that's small-minded of me, I know it is, but I can't help it. You can be as brilliant as you like, but if you don't wash, it's pointless. Don't you agree? And Tom was unapproachable. Simply unapproachable. Even as children we couldn't stand it. I'm sure he did it intentionally.

It must have been terribly uncomfortable in that hole of his. Uncomfortable and depressing. Sometimes I marvelled at how he seemed to manage. He was eccentric, of course, but if being eccentric means you have to live in a burrow like a prairiedog, well, it makes you wonder whether it's worth it, doesn't it? There must have been times, especially in the Twenties, when he looked around at all the rest of us, at our prosperous farms and big families, and he must have felt awful. Just awful. I know I felt that way when we

lost everything in '37. Simply terrible.

He worked on our place for quite a few years during harvest, but he was always a mixed blessing, my father used to say. He knew a great deal about farming and farm machinery, of course, but he always had trouble remembering who was in charge. That, and a very short temper. Disagree with him, and he simply dropped everything and walked off. He seemed to do that more and more frequently as the years went on. He'd developed a terrible pique about the fact that people wouldn't accept his rather unorthodox advice about ploughing and mulching, and various other suggestions I'm now told would have saved them a lot of grief if they'd swallowed their pride and listened — and he couldn't forgive them for it. Father spent absolutely hours trying to explain to him how that sort of attitude would get him nowhere in life, right or wrong, but he might as well have been hooting down an empty rain barrel. I don't know another people who can compete with the Finns for sheer bloody-mindedness.

Of course I was awfully young then and didn't understand what all the hullabaloo was about. When he started building that ship, I might have been five or six. In my earliest recollection of him he was living in the hull, with his horses penned in his house. Even then he already seemed fully employed provoking anyone he could get close to. He actually warned my father to be sure to keep my mother and her daughters indoors during seeding time because we might urinate on the seed and ruin it.

I don't know if it was before or after this uncalled-for bit of advice that Mother ordered us to stay well clear of him. Naturally we did nothing of the sort. But nothing worth mentioning ever happened. We'd go out there on Sundays,

which were his Wednesdays, and we'd all line up and start shouting for him. Sometimes he'd pop his head up through the hatch and stare at us. He always looked as though he slept inside a stove.

We girls would have *loved* to see the inside of that ship, but we never did. Old Tom was very definite about that. He said we had the Evil Eye, or some such balderdash. I can remember staring into the mirror for hours trying to see what he was talking about. But Harvey, my older brother, he went in, and Tom showed him around. He had a bed in there, Harvey said, that was shaped like a trough — like a V-shaped trough. Can you imagine such a thing? Simply droll. I thought at first it might have been an odd way of making sure he didn't roll out of bed, especially on stormy seas, but Harvey said no, it was just another one of his hilarious attempts to hatch turkey eggs. Apparently he wrapped them up in rags and slept over them to keep them warm. I never heard how long it took him to realize he didn't have quite the right equipment . . .

You know, I've asked myself for years if there was anything wrong with that man that a few good canings wouldn't have thrashed out of him as a child. I don't believe there was. He could be perfectly capable when he set his mind to it. You've heard about his violin? A spitting image of the Rorchester in the Eaton's Catalogue he'd copied it from, and I'm convinced that with proper strings it would have sounded entirely acceptable. He made a gadget that puffed wheat, just like the stuff you now buy from the cereal companies, and that, I'm told, involves some very complicated mechanics. His homemade sewing machine was also quite serviceable, considering he only intended it to sew sacking and leather. Mother said it had an irregular stitch;

you could see from his clothes that the tension wasn't right, but it certainly held his clothes together. He even built himself a knitting machine, quite a bulky-looking affair, but it worked too. He used to get Emilie Markulla, old Mrs. Markulla, to order his wool for him, from somewhere in the United States. Oh, ghastly colours of course. Simply awful. I'm told he used it to knit himself socks. Between you and me, I frankly doubt that. I doubt his wardrobe was that extravagant. All the Finns I ever saw wore simple shoepacks in their boots. Just a square piece of rag, wrapped round and round the foot.

No no, there was no good reason why he couldn't have pulled himself together and done something sensible with his life. No reason whatsoever. And the notion that he was mad is just as fanciful. Pure nonsense. I've toured mental institutions and I've talked to medical people, and when you take them aside most will agree that the majority of these people simply lack self-discipline. Gross self-indulgence, most of it. I think if you took a good hard look at all this shipbuilding piffle, you'd find just that — self-indulgent piffle. I think he may have played us all for monumental fools. Do you know what he called that ship? Yes, the *Sontianen*. I'm told that's Finnish for "dung-beetle." Can you imagine that? The HMS *Dung-Beetle*, from Manybones, Canada. No one could ever get an explanation for that name out of him, and I'm sure I know why. Nothing but cheap theatrics.

But I meant to mention that business about the police. The question was, I believe, whether I knew who might have called them. The answer, I'm afraid, is no, though I did call a few former neighbours who've also moved to the city here. None of them knew, or they wouldn't say. I can't for

the life of me understand why. People are such sentimental fools most of the time. It's a wonder they can pull on their socks in the morning, most of them.

Personally, I'd suspect Paul Thorndike or Samuel Cuthbert. I know Cristina Thorndike was quite upset at having him that close to her house. Of course Cristina Thorndike was *always* upset — at everything and everybody. And I know he regularly put the Laestadian Church people into convulsions — I dare say that was his one socially redeeming feature. But Sam Cuthbert had some quite legitimate grievances in my opinion. He claimed his stock went berserk whenever Tom sloshed blood all over his ship, and I'm inclined to believe it. Cows and horses are like that about blood. But you know, it could have been a dozen other people as well. Old Tom really did have an almost marketable ability to get under people's skin. And it all climaxed with those absurd supper-time assaults on people who owned tractors. That was definitely his *pièce de résistance*. You've heard about them, of course. A scream, really, though a bit of a puzzle too. The lack of tact was characteristic, but what I couldn't understand was the blatant begging. He'd become rather notorious, you see, for refusing any help he couldn't pay for. Always keeping in mind the exception of old Mrs. Markulla, from whom he accepted anything at all. But that was only so he could come back a week later and accuse her of having tried to poison him with her butter. Oh he was a bear for punishment when it came to Emilie Markulla. Proves my point about the canings, I should think.

So I wouldn't be a bit surprised if the police or the village councillor got quite a few calls after those shenanigans too. The Livingstones, I know, were furious, and they didn't

care who knew about it. Well it really *was* the height of gall when you think about it, expecting someone to drag this idiotic ship across fifteen miles of rolling prairie. You have to keep in mind that the country around Manybones isn't nearly as flat as it is around Regina here. Not nearly as flat. I believe he used to tip over his grain wagon on that slope behind his coulee quite regularly, it was so steep.

But, people will be people, I suppose — there seems to be no way of avoiding it. And if you want the truth, Tom Sukanen wasn't the only one making a fool of himself out of that whole tedious affair. That town had rather more than its share of silly fools, and the Brenda Hendersons of this world always seem to know exactly how to get them all worked up. By the time she'd gone through her little song and dance, she had them all convinced that Sukanen was the Devil Incarnate. You'd have thought the very future of the Empire was at stake. Oh she was sure he was going to murder all the children, she was positive he was a deadly influence on absolutely everything, from the town's moral fibre to, for all I know, the weather, the price of wheat, the birth rate, and the crops. Thank God he never heard about it; I'm sure it would have gone straight to his head. And he'd have been right too, if he'd made a quarter of the difference to anything this silly goose had him responsible for. And she had the nerve to call me a mischief-maker.

But people need someone to blame — that's always the long and the short of it. Especially the simple-minded ones. And Manybones is gone now, but even in its day it was a miserable little hole, full of fussy little people with fussy little fates. It seemed like no one ever got what they were after. You take that list of people I drew up — hold on a minute, I've got it right here somewhere . . . oh yes, here it

is, here it is. You simply have to go down that list to see what I'm talking about. This Markulla fellow, for example, Vihtori Markulla, he went into a terrible depression after '41 for some reason, gave up his farm and limped off to British Columbia to try to find his wife. She'd left him several years earlier, but then I suppose these fellows never learn. And Oskari Laine, well you know about him, lost his entire family in a tornado back in the late Thirties and I don't know what happened to him after that. Paul Thorndike died of a cut to the foot that developed gangrene, and Cristina, his wife, spent most of her life being the town know-it-all and now sits in a roominghouse in Saskatoon dying of blood cancer, though she insists on pretending it's only arthritis. Avro Sukanen . . . an utter waste. Bright lad, but simply no discipline. I dare say he was encouraged in this by his uncle Tom. He certainly spent more time with him than I would have thought wise. He was always making plans, big plans, complicated plans, but he seems never to have followed up on a single thing. Didn't even finish high school, and Lord knows there was nothing in his way. He left home early and just drifted about, and now I'm told he manages some wretched little den of iniquity in Swift Current or thereabouts . . .

Clayton Jackson? Just a lout. I believe he worked for Robert Gillis for a while, not very satisfactorily. An American ruffian, what can one say. And Judge Hensen, well, a civilized man in a pinch, a touch too ambitious perhaps, but he did end up in politics and headed the Canadian Transport Commission through some of its more forgettable days. He died of a cerebral hemorrhage just a year or so ago. Now this Bob Kleppner . . . Bob Kleppner . . . oh yes, of course, part of the Kleppner bunch from south of Pennant Junction.

Always drunk and disorderly, the whole pack of them. Bob Kleppner, if I remember rightly, finally enlisted with the British Infantry, and the Germans put him out of his misery.

Now Aleksis Sukanen, I'll admit, deserved better. Yes, I think it's fair to say he deserved better. He worked himself to within an inch of his coffin all through the Depression — nothing moves heaven and earth as persistently as a dissatisfied wife, as the saying goes — and he managed to hang on right through to the late Forties, when the money got better, and he found a buyer. . . . He'd put in irrigation by this time, good farm buildings and machinery. I heard the farm sold for close to a hundred thousand. And on the night before they were set to move out, on the night before, he caught his foot in a grain auger and bled to death. Before anyone knew what had happened. A brand new grain auger too, but apparently he'd been oiling the drive mechanism and had left the cover off. And the peculiar thing was, he was out there in the middle of the night, more like two in the morning, my husband said — now what he'd have been doing fooling with a grain auger at two in the morning in the middle of winter is quite beyond me. Rumour had it, another fight with Alvina, and he'd fled to the barn to get clear of her — that had become his habit in those last years. It certainly wouldn't surprise me. Those two had been at each other's throats since the mid-Thirties. Yes oh yes, the Thirties were awfully hard on prairie marriages . . .

Ah well, and of course there was Emilie Markulla. Mrs. Markulla Senior. Yes a tough old bird and believe you me, she was a force to be reckoned with. She never gave an inch to anyone while she lived and I'd be surprised if she's given anyone an inch since. She was still running her farm on the day she keeled over, a seizure they said, an apoplectic one I'm

sure. The day the Bank of Nova Scotia was reckless enough to try to repossess her farm, she grabbed the sheriff by the throat, so help me God, and threatened to put him across the River Jordan if he so much as *touched* a single piece of her property. And I want to tell you, that was the last she heard about repossession from anyone. She was loud and she was crude, but she was good for what ails you. She was an exception in that worthless town, and I've always been sorry that I didn't get to know her better, but you couldn't get close to her; she was as prickly as a sand-hills cactus. I've always felt it should have been Emilie Markulla who represented Manybones in all those town histories the government sponsored during Centennial Year, instead of your square-headed dreamer with his silly nautical pretensions. But people's tastes are shallow and unpredictable, there it is, what can you do — it's a wonder they can pull on their socks in the morning, some of them . . .

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CORPORAL G.T. MORTIMER

[RCMP, retired] *continued. . .*

. . . and sure, he may have been touched, may have been a raving madman — it wasn't for me to say. But I'll tell you, the way those timbers fit together, the way he'd hand-stitched those steel plates on, that was amazing, no matter how you felt about the rest of it. And I didn't even realize until somebody told me the next day that the red paint on her bottom wasn't copper sulphate. Didn't even occur to me.

He seemed pretty lonesome, anxious to talk — that's the impression I got, after he'd thawed out a little. I gather people weren't too pleased about what he was doing, and he wasn't much used to anybody being impressed. He gave me a little guided tour, told me how he'd made this piece and that, hauled out some of his homemade navigational instruments. The boiler and engine hadn't been installed yet; he said he had those sitting at the river someplace, so she was

still pretty wide open below-decks. Dark and hollow like a tunnel. She had no floor, just a few planks tossed across her ribs. You were taking your life into your hands every step you took. And she stank like an abattoir. At the time I thought it might have been rats or gophers caught in the bilge when he'd sealed her up, but I suppose it was that horsemeat he was so fond of. The JP told me later he ate rotten horsemeat all the time. Well, you get used to that sort of thing in the Force. I went up to Cutbank to pick up a body on one occasion, man had been dead for a week or so, and three barn cats jumped out of his bowels when I opened the door. They'd just dug in there and helped themselves. And vermin and dirt were as much a part of the misery of those times as Bennett-buggies and auction sales. Wells were dry and water wasn't wasted much for washing. If I'd had a dollar for every time we had to fumigate the detachment automobile, I'd have been a rich man by 1940. And maybe the wife might have felt a bit better about all those fleas she had to argue with every time she came to see me down at Abbey.

He looked a bit shaky though, so I asked him what he was eating, how he was making out for food. He didn't mention anything about the horsemeat at the time, but he showed me a big bucket of mash beside his bunk in the stern. Said he simply added a little more water and grain every few days. That didn't seem like much of a menu to me, so I asked him why he didn't rig himself a fishing line or two, go down to the river and catch himself some whitefish. That's what we used to do on our days off, if it wasn't blowing too hard. Well, he told me it was illegal! When I got back to Abbey that night I looked it up, and I'm darned if the old boy wasn't right. I hadn't even known about that myself. We

got moved around so much in those days, sometimes it was hard enough just remembering what province you were in, never mind the local ordinances. Course I don't suppose it's all that much different today. We only moved into this subdivision four years ago, and we've already been here a year longer than anyone else . . .

But the one thing I still couldn't understand, you see, was just how he expected to float that bucket even if he did get her down to the South Saskatchewan. I said to him, I said, how the hell d'you expect to get her over the sandbars, you couldn't get a scow through water that shallow; I'll bet she'd draw no less than fifteen feet right now, fully assembled. But he just grinned, and then he told me how he was going to do it, and you know, it was so simple, you wouldn't have seen it for looking. He'd made the keel and the hull separately watertight, you see, and if you floated them individually, they'd only draw about five or six feet. That keel looked wicked, but you had to remember that by itself it would flop over on its side and bob on the water like a cork. Her cabins and machinery, he said he'd simply load them onto a raft. He'd apparently been fishing trees out of the river at flood-time every spring since 1934, so he had himself quite a pile. The way he figured it, he'd tie the three sections together like a convoy and float the whole works down on the flood, right on through Saskatchewan and northern Manitoba, all the way to Hudson Bay. Did you know there was a river connection all the way from western Saskatchewan to the mouth of the Nelson River? First time I'd ever heard of it, but he had all the maps right there. Maps of Saskatchewan, maps of Manitoba, maps of places all over the world. I'd never seen such a collection of maps. He said he'd copied all the maps of prairie rivers

from old charts in the Prairie History Room at the Regina Public Library. And the rest he'd ordered over the years from the backs of old copies of *The Maritime Gazette*.

So it was that keel that had fooled everybody, I suppose. Upright in the water, the way you'd naturally think about it, it would have drawn at least twelve, maybe fifteen feet. On its side you'd only need a few. And he was planning to take that horse of his along on the raft, to help him winch across sandbars if they got stuck. When he got to deep water on the Nelson, he was going to ground the keel in the shallows, stabilize her, float the hull over top at high tide, and bolt the two parts together. After that I forget if he was going to pump her dry on the spot or first hoist the cabin on board, section by section, the way he was building it. I remember the boiler was going to be dropped straight down the stern hatchway, because I recall asking him why he'd made it such an odd, irregular shape. I'd never seen a hatchway shaped like that on any ship I'd ever worked.

Oh and he showed me the lifeboat he'd cooked up, with treadmill propulsion — like a bicycle, with pedals, you see. And that winch he was using to drag the ship forward — now there was an example of what Paul Bunyan might have done with the old lever principle. Only trouble was, he wasn't exactly setting any speed records. I think he was managing about six feet a day, not much more than that. But by God he was moving that ship to the river, you had to give him full marks for that.

Even so, when I left I had to hand it to him straight, I said now look my man, you've got a good operation going here but you'll just have to smarten up a bit about the rest of it. Get yourself cleaned up, put on some better clothes or wash the ones you've got, start eating some decent food or

get some from the relief trains, that's what they're there for — and most of all, stop bothering your neighbours. There's been some complaints, and if we keep getting them we'll have to come out here and serve you a summons. And when I got back to Abbey that night I called up the JP, told him the fellow seemed sane enough to me — other than that business about the great northern sea, you understand, but I suppose everyone's entitled to a rattle in their wagon somewhere. He was just your typical back-hills bachelor spinning his wheels a little and not taking enough care of himself. That was pretty common in those days anyway, with so few women around. The bachelors got to be a fairly gritty-looking bunch. And that was poor land up there, you know, too rocky and too dry. You often got the real odd-balls on the leftover land.

No, the JP didn't seem too pleased with my report. I remember that in particular because of what happened later. He said he'd have another talk with the people who'd been doing the complaining, maybe get back to me in a little while . . .

27

RAIN

The first major rainfall after eight years of virtually uninterrupted drought in southwestern Saskatchewan's Palliser Triangle began in late May of 1939 and kept falling for almost two weeks. When it finally came, the prairie was completely overpowered by it. The years of broiling summers and freeze-dried winters had baked its watercourses to cracked porcelain, and its fields were drifted over by a dust powdered so fine that for some time the raindrops just rolled around in it, without being absorbed. Water drained into the old streambeds as if pearling off glass, and within hours virtually traceless brooks and creeks such as the Slate or the Foxhide became dark brown torrents, tumbling with drowned rats and gophers which its rising waters had flushed out of ill-placed burrows. Planked wood had shrunk and cracked so badly over the years that roofs leaked in streams, soaking wallpaper off the walls

and drenching bedding and furniture. Dugouts and hollows filled and then overflowed, and the South Saskatchewan rose three feet in forty-eight hours. When the rain finally began to soak in, the fields and roadways turned into vast, treacly wallows across which both people and animals slipped and swerved and skidded like convalescents learning to walk again. Weeds and wildflowers seemed to burst into bloom overnight, and the cows stood in the sloughs up to their bellies and refused to move. For some of the children it was an entirely new world, a past fantasy they had only been told about, and mothers told giddy stories of youngsters frightened out of their wits by the steady downpour.

With the return of rain came the return of goods and a cautious credit. The shelves in Gillis's General Store (formerly Gillis's Hardware), almost empty by the end of 1938, began to fill up again with broadcloth and gumboots and sugar and celluloid collars — even a newfangled improvement on the icebox called a Frigidaire, which ran on coal oil and could be ordered from Chicago for sixty-five dollars. Talk of imminent war with Germany and the steady turnabout in the demand for grain convinced most farmers to seed every available acre, and the Pool Elevator agent in Manybones harvested much goodwill at the local Legion when he passed around a memo from the provincial Minister of Agriculture predicting 1940 grain prices to top $1.49 a bushel. Political sentiment ran high and expressed itself in diverse ways; recruiting stations everywhere reported a landslide business, the rapidly growing popularity of the newly minted CCF party (socialist) was causing panic in Liberal ranks, and the RCMP felt obliged to formally threaten the closure of the Finn Hall if the practice of flying a red flag above the Union Jack wasn't halted, stopped, and terminated

forthwith. The exodus from many parts of the Palliser Triangle, which towards the end of the drought had grown to resemble a stampede, now began slowly to level off.

During the next two years the weather began a gradual return to more normal spring and summer temperatures, and a consequent ten and then twelve bushels an acre (not good, not even average, but hopeful) proved the first step in easing Manybones homesteaders back onto their feet. The huge job of re-establishing the fields, this time at right angles to the prevailing winds, and their replenishment with potash and experimental fertilizers kept everyone frantically busy season after season. There was the Russian thistle to rout and the soil drifts to level. Tractors which had sat idle for many years were pulled out of mothballs and pored over, resulting in a brisk barter trade for used parts. A sudden and explosive market in pork pitched many homesteaders (and especially their children) head-first into the supplementary raising of pigs, which transformed any low-grade portions of a crop into high-yield bacon but also consumed an enormous and unrelenting amount of time. As more and more men volunteered for the armed forces, farm labour became increasingly difficult to find. In the spring of 1940 Sam Cuthbert's two eldest boys gave in to the blandishments of the Regina Rifles Regiment, and Bill Kiniskey's plans for his eldest son, Gerald, collapsed when the boy decided against taking up the old Peltola farm and joined the navy that fall. Elsie Berton complained in vain to the district Educational Inspector about the ever-present, ineradicable odour of pig in her classroom and about the extraordinarily poor school attendance, particularly among the boys. Throughout the spring of 1940 and 1941, during seeding weather, many boys were kept out of school for weeks at a time when the

available machinery and manpower was unable to plant the wheat quickly enough. So there was simply too much going on and too much to think about to pay much attention to an old man, far out on the now rapidly recovering prairie, still winching his incongruous ship inch by laborious inch across the wheatfields west by northwest of Battrum. An occasional farmer fumed at the inconvenience of having to detour around him with a gang-plough or the seeder, and Frank Severson, a Norwegian baker turned farmer who owned three quarter-sections along Boggy Creek, actually checked with the Abbey detachment about laws governing trespass and obstruction, but dropped the idea when he was informed that the first available court date was not until well into harvest time. Constable George Mortimer's wry suggestion that the fastest way to solve the problem might be to simply hook up a couple of John Deeres and haul the goddamn thing to the river once and for all was met with an unwilling shrug.

In the twenty-five months since Tom had begun to drag his ship out of the coulee, he had managed to cover a little under four miles. During this time he had worn out four winch-posts and broken two dowels, and the links in his tow-chain had become stretched from squares into ovals. Though he was pulling each section of the ship separately, and despite generous feedings and lengthy rest periods, his Clydesdale had been deteriorating steadily, unable to survive the brutal work on a diet made up largely of grass and rotting grain. Tom's face had become very pale and he continued to lose weight. He had no money at all, and even his meat supply had dwindled to the few gophers or prairie chickens he could manage to catch in his snares. Though he rubbed his gums vigorously with wolfwillow and clay, his

teeth had begun to loosen and the molars were breaking down. His left inner ear itched continuously.

But the ship crept on, inexorable, relentless. For days it would seem to lie motionless, an abandoned hulk under a vast blue inner shell of sky, and then suddenly it was gone, disappeared into the next hollow, with only the tip of its smokestack showing above the swaying wheat. More and more often Tom had to harness himself into the traces alongside the horse, forcing the groaning winch-post around, and if the tow-chain wound up too high on the shaft, raising it above knee level, neither coaxing nor the most brutal beating could force the horse to step over it. To reduce some of the friction on the winch-post, Tom gathered brown snails and slugs along the riverbank, which he crushed into a thick paste and smeared along the shaft as lubricant. When the horse gave out, usually in the early afternoon, he tethered it with feed and water, then walked back to the river — first fifteen miles, then, almost a year later, fourteen, over one and a half years later thirteen, by 1940 twelve, eleven — to hammer and weld far into the night. Virtually everything was ready now, the bilge pumps, oiler, powertrain, niggerhead, propeller, rudder, anchor chain, and navigational gear. The boiler, oiler, and the entire superstructure had been skidded in sections down the rampway Tom had smoothed to the river's edge, and bolted onto a large raft that lay chained to a stake among the bulrushes. The raft had been fitted with a crude rudder and a mast with sail, to serve as a steering head for Tom's three-section convoy. The only missing link remained the steam engine, which lay in bits and pieces around the forge and occupied all of Tom's non-winching time. The block had been bored and reamed, the sleeves were stamped out, and the crankshaft

had been ground into shape, but he had encountered some difficulties rolling the pistons to the tolerance levels required by the engine's design. For certain functions, the great strength needed to compensate for the limitations of some of his homemade tools was gradually becoming a major problem. Torval Skully, the machinist at the Manybones Welding & Machine Shop, had accepted Tom's leftover farm machinery in trade for such work on several earlier occasions, but there hadn't been a scrap of tradable machinery left on the homestead since the spring of 1940, fifteen months earlier, and Tom steadfastly refused to even consider asking for credit. So the pile of unusable pistons he had turned out and been forced to discard continued to grow.

As the fall of 1941 faded, and the night frosts became more and more intractable, the ship's progress slowed noticeably. Every day Tom seemed to have to wait longer and longer before the ground was thawed enough to dig in the next winch-post. Eventually he took to hauling up bundles of wood from the remains of his windbreak to feed small fires he set at regular intervals along his route, marking and softening the earth where holes were to be dug. At first the cold had been an advantage in that the wheels of the tow-carriages rolled more easily across the frozen ground, but this was now offset by the increasing effort needed for the digging. When mid-October brought a two-week respite of chinook weather, Tom gave his horse a rest and hastily shovelled out several months' worth of holes while he still had the chance. It turned out to have been a wise decision, and came not a moment too soon. The brief thaw ended abruptly on November 1 with a spectacular blizzard that closed down the season like a slammed door. Temperatures plummetted to 50 below, and snowdrifts as high

as the rooftops piled up against most houses and barns of southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan. A gale-force northeasterly blew for three full weeks, without interruption, gelling fuel tanks and bursting waterpipes. Rail service to many parts of the Triangle had to be stopped because even the rails were cracking under the intense cold.

And when it was over, the prairie lay everywhere glazed and paralysed, the air brilliant with malignant ice crystals, the landscape scoured and sculpted into viciously lovely lacework — locked into the rock-hard grip of deepest winter.

28

ELMER FRAYNE

[Implement Dealer, Pennant Junction]

That would have been the winter of '41 I suppose. Yes it was, it was, because I remember the new windbreaks we'd just planted all died again. Oh, I suppose we just hadn't covered them up good enough. You know you had to wrap those little devils in about six layers of sacking come a bad winter, and I guess we all thought the Thirties were done and gone. Sure goes to show you doesn't it? Half the time you don't have enough sacks, other half the time you don't have enough sense. Had to do the whole thing over again next spring.

But that sure was some blizzard, yessiree. A blue-ribbon Aunt Priscilla whangdoozer. After three days of it we knew the stock'd be flat out of water and feed, and it was my turn to do chores so I got to do them. Some people'd call that the story of my life, but I like to think of myself as a tragic

hero. Course it's hard to get some of the deadbeats around here to appreciate the difference, but I've never stopped trying. Isn't that right, Jeremiah Harkins? Jerry Harkins over there thinks the universe starts and ends with a Rochester four-barrel, whereas I at least realize there's also such things as split-phase speednut blower motors and universal pre-calibrated square-drive air wrenches.

But about that blizzard — you wanted to know about that blizzard. Mid-November, on the wrong side of fifty below and still falling, with crosswinds mixing it up like a Gopher Gloves match at the Shackleton Arena, and snowing so hard you couldn't tell which way was up or down — even my dad said now don't you try any of that hero baloney; you take that rope and you damn well use it. See, most every farmhouse around here had a coil of rope or stooking twine hanging on the wall in winter. In a blizzard you just took it down, aimed yourself in the direction of the barn, and uncoiled the rope as you went. So if you'd missed the barn you just pulled yourself back and tried again. It was supposed to be idiot-proof, and maybe it was. I'm probably the only high school graduate who ever missed a barn fifty foot long by thirty foot wide while crossing a hundred feet of yard, and then dropped the rope. Well, I didn't actually drop it; the wind just picked it up and blew it out of my hands. I don't even remember noticing when it happened.

And then, I guess, I did. I mean, things do get through to me eventually. Not like Thomas Earl Carrier here who . . . well, never mind about him. Tom stopped paying attention to the rest of us years ago, when they promoted him to High Priest of the Parts Department. Now the Second Coming of Christ wouldn't mean a thing to him unless it

was cross-referenced in his Parts List microfiche. You see the problem I'm up against around here.

Anyway, it was bad. There was only about a five-foot gap between the barn and the chicken shed and I must have passed right through it, because half an hour later I was still rowing through snow as hard as I could and I wasn't finding anything but more snow. It was blowing so thick I couldn't really tell whether I was walking or digging, for all I knew I could have been lying in snowdrifts half the time, just flapping my arms around. You lose all sense of time in weather like that; you can't tell whether you've been pushing against it for one hour or four. So when I finally realized I was thrashing away against this reddish sort of wall, I might have been there for quite a while already, and maybe I even hit it with my head a few times, because after that blizzard I had me a few scars across the forehead I couldn't really account for.

Course my first thought was that I'd found the barn on the rebound — darn thing was the right colour, after all, and there shouldn't have been anything else painted red for miles in that direction. So maybe I'd just been charging around in circles — God knows my first wife accused me of it often enough. But it wasn't the barn, wasn't anything like the barn, because this red wall turned out to be metal. And the only red-painted metal I could remember was on the side of old Tom Sukanen's ship — and that's exactly what it was. Old Noah Sukanen's goddamn ark.

Well, right away I realized I wasn't anywhere near where I thought I'd been. The last time I'd seen that thing it was sitting on Henry Kersell's southeast quarter, just to the south of us — Henry'd been bitching about having to tie up his dogs so they wouldn't take a chunk out of the old

man's hide. So all this time I thought I'd been pushing *into* the wind I guess I'd been running *with* it — and for quite a ways too. Somehow I'd gotten myself out of that yard and swung almost a full mile to the south. These Saskatchewan blizzards, I'll tell you — you boot around in them long enough and I swear they'll drift you down to Mexico or clean up to Hudson Bay. Just like real life, my dad used to say. You start off with a few beers at the Pennant Junction Hotel and you wake up in a cattle truck in Uranium City.

Well, there was obviously no point in trying to make it back to the house in that kind of weather, and anyway I could smell smoke now and again so I figured the old fart must be inside there with a good fire going. Trouble was, there was really no good way to get his attention. I must have felt my way around that tub half a dozen times but all I ever stumbled across was his horse, which was lying half-dead under a tarp under the bow. There was no ladder anywhere, and in that wind you couldn't have heard a body's voice if he'd been hollering straight down your ear. I banged on that hull with my fists till I damn near broke my arms, but I might just as well have been pounding on rock. What finally did it, I scratched up a good fieldstone and smashed that against her side for about fifteen minutes. That was what finally woke him up. And just between you, me, and the garden gate, it was none too soon either. Another five minutes and I'd have been wearing a halo and getting started on my music lessons. When he threw down his rope ladder it was all I could do to just get a grip on the bottom of it and hold on.

After that, I don't recollect much of anything for a while. I guess he must have dragged me up over the side and dropped me on some planks by the stove. That's where I

remember being when I came to. It was awful dark in there, you couldn't see much of anything, even after your eyes got used to it. He had the windows all plugged up with sacks, and the only light there was came in through some cracks here and there and mostly from the stove. I didn't even see him at all for quite a while because he was off banging away at something way up in the bow.

Now I'll be honest with you: people often accuse me of making mountains out of molehills, and, well, I guess they've got a point some of the time, because the way I see it, why take only a molehill when you can get a mountain out of the deal for the same price, you know what I mean? I mean, life's short, eh, and let's face it, by the time you get to be my age, most of the time it's boring. But listen, this story's the straight goods now; this old leather-face, as we say in Finnish, he didn't need any inventing. He was about the strangest human being I've ever had to spend five days in the belly of a ship with in my life. Did you ever have to take that poem "The Ancient Mariner" when you were a kid? Sure, *everybody* had to take it when I went to school. And that's what he looked like to me; just exactly like old Sukanen. Hair like a rat's nest, face so leathered up it looked like a crumpled paper bag, and then those eyes. Jesus Murphy, I swear the goddamn things they glowed in the dark. And the odd thing was, he hardly ever looked at you head on. None of that eye-contact crap they try to hustle at the monthly sales meetings around here. Mostly he'd just glare at you sideways, with his head turned half away — more like he was spying, not looking. Even that was enough to make your jaw come loose sometimes. And they were always a bit watery too, his eyes, so when he gave you that look they really, you know, glittered.

He talked all the time, the whole five days I was in there. Just babbled and mumbled and muttered all the time. Mostly in Finnish, which I can't speak much anymore but I can still understand. But sometimes you couldn't really tell. He was just busy busy busy. Just preoccupied as hell. Like a carpenter always muttering measurements to himself, the way they do when they're really involved in what they're doing. Mumble mumble mumble. And of course he was working on the inside of the ship all the time, so it didn't sound all that strange, really. He kept forgetting who I was. Sometimes he called me Avro, sometimes something like Eina, and now and then I was Vihtori. That didn't really bother me much either. The only times I got really spooked was when he'd stop mumbling for a while and just stand there, absolutely still, not moving a muscle. Like he was frozen stiff, or like he wasn't really there in his body at all. Like he was listening really hard to something. That always gave me the willies. Can't really tell you why, but that really scared me. And all this time that crazy ship kept rocking and groaning in the wind like we were heaving through a hurricane at a hundred miles an hour. Sometimes I really felt like I was getting seasick. And after I got hungry and swallowed some of that sourmash porridge he kept in a pail under his bed, well let me tell you, I was on the high seas for sure. I can't for the life of me figure how he survived on slop like that.

Did I mention about the blood? How his lips were always covered with blood? Well, he had steel dentures, if you can believe it; steel dentures that he'd made himself. That was what the blood on his lips was all about. His whole left sleeve was caked with it, from always wiping it across his mouth. It took me quite a while to catch on because he

mumbled a lot, and his mouth was pretty sucked in anyway. But he had two curved steel bars in there, with a bunch of screws twisted into them for teeth. I guess he'd made them up after his own rotted out. And they worked all right too, at least good enough for his rotten grain. But they didn't fit his gums very well. That was his problem. They must have been rubbing on his gums all the time. And I'm darned if I could figure out what kept them stuck in there at all. But that's where all the blood was coming from. Gums bleeding all the time. Yet he never once took those bars out, the whole time I was there. Not once, in the whole five days.

Most people around here think he was, you know, "gone with the wind" as the saying goes. I can see why they would, but I don't see it quite that way. This may seem like a strange example, but the way I think of him, he was like one of those high-performance cars that's been monkey-wrenched by its owner too long. The kind of backyard mechanic who always figured he knew it better than General Motors. You know the kind I'm talking about? These guys know their auto mechanics like the back of their hand, they could quote you chapter and verse on any repair procedure you'd care to name, and yet their cars are always the biggest hodgepodge of mismatched parts you can shake a stick at, and they run rough and look like hell. You ever noticed that about these guys? It drives me crazy just watching them drive down the street. That's the way I think about what happened to Sukanen, somehow. Too many years of monkey-wrenching. But he was pretty darn savvy underneath it all. Sometimes he talked to me just as sane as a Sunday preacher in May.

Once, I remember, he told me about a great voyage he was going to take, someplace far to the south, no place I'd

ever heard of, but then I've never known the first thing about the southern hemisphere anyway. All I remember was the Sea of Malagar, that was one of the places, but I may have got the pronunciation wrong because I never did find it in the school atlas. He asked me a few times if I'd like to go along, he said he could use a good deckhand in the Sea of Malagar. He said that it would take us about a hundred days to reach it, and that the seawater down there was always eighty-five degrees. He also said the water was clear as glass, and that you could always see the bottom no matter how far down it was. I still remember that part of it particularly well because as a kid I was always terrified swimming in the lakes and rivers around here. You could never see what was down there in the water all around you. It made my mind play awful tricks on me sometimes.

But the damndest thing I remember him saying — I guess I should have written some of this down, I'm sure I've forgotten half of it by now — but what he kept saying was that someday, long after he'd gotten the ship launched, sometime far into the future, there'd be millions of people watching her as she sailed across the sky. Yeah, there'd be millions of people watching the ship and on and on. Well, I kidded him about it at first, you know, told him he'd been drinking too much of his sourmash porridge — he seemed to like being kidded, I figured that out eventually. But he kept insisting on this, and finally I got it straight that he meant *reflected* on the sky, or maybe *projected* onto the sky, like the movies. See, I didn't realize it then, but I suppose he was talking about some primitive sort of television — doesn't it sound like that to you? I'd never even heard of television in those days, of course, it didn't even start in this part of the country till the early Fifties. But we had

the moving pictures in the Pennant Cinema, and he'd seen some in Manybones probably, so the way he must have figured it, they'd eventually get big enough projectors to project these pictures up against the whole sky or something. Because he kept saying that we'd all be watching her through our kitchen windows, everybody everywhere, right across the whole country. There was something else about the sun's rays and the northern lights, and ice crystals in the air, but that all got too complicated for me and I gave up trying to follow it. Still, he had a lot more going on upstairs than the average deadbeat around here, that's a fact, and I've often thought that if it really was TV he was talking about, the guy was a goddamn visionary.

Anyhow, like I say, there's probably all kinds of stuff I've forgotten by now, but that's some of it anyway. And maybe I would have stayed with him a lot longer and had even more to tell you, but he hadn't stored any firewood in that ship, and we ran out of wood. I mean he had wood in there, great piles of it, but nothing he'd let me chuck into the stove. I guess the problem had to do with me, too; I used to sneak in the odd chunk here or there to get the temperature up a bit, because he was so stingy with the heat. I had to keep my parka on the whole time. He'd only throw in the leftovers from his carpentry work, and sometimes that stove would be barely warm enough to keep a flame. He didn't seem to feel the cold at all, or he wouldn't let on that he did. Anyway, like I said, I snuck in the odd piece now and then and after about three days I'd more or less used up all the little bits that were around. And he seemed perfectly willing to just let the stove go out until he had more leftovers to spare. Which was really crazy, because he was in rougher shape than I was; he had a bad cough and

he looked like a skeleton. He needed the heat worse than me. So we froze our butts off for a day and then I managed to convince him to throw in some timber ends he probably couldn't have used for anything else anyway, but it was all like pulling hens' teeth and I could see this was going to be a real problem. So finally I'd had enough and I told him I was going to head back, storm or no storm. He stared at me for a while like I'd just told him my toe hurt or something, and then he shrugged and kept nailing his planks. But when I climbed up on deck he followed me with a sack of grain for the horse. The deck was slippery as hell and the wind was blowing just as bad as when I got lost in it the first time, so I guess I must have been crazy to head off in it again, but I'd just had enough of the whole thing. I took the sack of feed and told him I'd feed the horse, and then I climbed down over the side and he pulled the rope back up.

It must have taken me half an hour at least to dig my way through to that horse, and when I found it it was frozen solid, stone dead. But the crazy thing was, there was no way he could understand me any more in that wind. I hollered and he waved, and I hollered some more and he just kept on pointing in the direction I was supposed to go, and finally I figured, oh what the hell, he'll find out soon enough anyway. So I headed off in the direction he was pointing, walking backwards, pushing against the wind, and the last thing I remember seeing, almost like an apparition, was the old Finlander on the deck of his ship, hair flying, arms waving and flapping around, and then the snow closed in again, and he and his strange ship were gone.

And you know, he wasn't such a bad navigator either. I stuck with the direction he'd showed me, and half an hour later I fell against our chicken shed, and I was home.

29

FEAR THE LORD

Just before four o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, December 12, 1941, Paul Thorndike's first attempt to reach Vihtori Markulla failed when the telephone was answered by the unmistakable voice of the Reverend Sip Jarvenpaa saying "Fear the Lord and praise His Holy Name, good morning!" Thorndike hesitated, then decided against involving the minister and called back the Exchange's hello-girl to try again. This time he reached old Mrs. Markulla, who told him Vihtori was out in the machine shed replacing a wheel that had seized on the seed drill. "Could you please ask him to give me a call just as soon as he comes into the house?" Thorndike asked. "Please have him call me as soon as he comes in."

At the Abbey RCMP detachment office on the previous afternoon of Thursday, December 11, 1941, Corporal Mortimer

had arrived to find Manybones Councillor and County Justice of the Peace J.L. Hensen waiting for him. Hensen looked cold, and even more impatient than usual.

"Now see here, Corporal; I've been waiting for almost half an hour, and this isn't spring, you know. I've got a council meeting in less than two hours, and we have certain things to discuss. Your little sign here says 'OPEN AT 1400 HOURS'."

The corporal glanced at the thick file in the judge's hands and sighed. "I was slowed up in Shackleton on another suicide case, Mr. Hensen. The fourth suicide in this district this month." He unlocked the door and switched on the overhead lightbulb. "I can't for the life of me understand what's gotten into people around here. The weather's turned, the crops are coming back, and *still* they're hanging themselves with every belt and harness they can get their damnfool hands on." He pointed at a chair and dropped into his own behind an ancient oak desk. "Guy named Bill Kiniskey, farmed a quarter east of the Junction about five miles. Name ring any bells for you?"

The councillor was already riffling through the file which he had spread across an adjacent counter. "Only know his brother, a CCF rabblerouser." He scanned several pages of an arrest report and pushed them onto the policeman's desk. "I'm wearing my judicial hat now, Corporal. Let's see if we can't get through this in a hurry. First, what's the disposition on these drifters the CPR sent up from Brixton?"

"They were put to work for the day and released. Clifton kept an eye on them at the Yard."

"The safe-blowers from Winnipeg?"

"Sergeant Wilson took them down to Regina Saturday night. That little one, Jamieson or whatever his name was,

had a D & H out on him; they called up from headquarters on Wednesday."

"I see. Do you need a duplicate of the charges for your files? Well, take this copy; I'll just jot down the essentials when I get back. All right, that takes care of that. Now, these assault charges against Bill Stanwyck and Clayton Jackson."

"Ah yes." The corporal lifted a foot onto his desk and tipped his chair onto its back legs. "At the Manybones Hotel. It seems they mixed it up a little and Jackson broke Stanwyck's arm. An argument about local politics . . ."

The councillor smiled bleakly. "But you've charged them both. You said it was Jackson broke Stanwyck's arm."

"According to Stanwyck, yes. He was down here so fast, he must have had himself sent by wire. And he sang like a meadowlark in spring. I'm afraid I'm losing my patience with that kind of thing, Mr. Hensen. If these boys want to roughhouse around, they should have the grit to start and finish these arguments without public involvement. I'm getting tired of having this office clogged with nuisance complaints. My policy now is to arrest both defendant and plaintiff, and automatically charge them with each other's accusations. That ought to settle them down a little, if I don't miss my guess."

The judge studied the corporal coolly, as if appraising an electoral opponent. "I see. I see. Well, it's your decision, of course, though it strikes me you just might be shooting yourself in the foot. I certainly couldn't predict at this point how the Court will react to such an arrangement. It's unusual, to say the least. However . . ." He placed the two papers onto the growing pile and picked up another. "The Crown *versus* Damianus Sukanen. An obstruction

complaint brought forward by a Henry Kersell of Pennant, dated September 19, but still not filed. I couldn't understand why."

Mortimer gave an impatient snort, but his voice developed a slight edge. "In my opinion, that one falls into the same ballpark. Kersell wouldn't lodge the complaint himself; just wanted to hit and run. He claims that Sukanen's ship is straddling a public road, but I checked our maps and the road he's referring to is only gazetted. It probably won't be put in for years. You'd have to stretch your imagination a good bit to call that a King's Highway."

The judge pulled out his tobacco pouch and tapped some Virginia Fine into the crease of a cigarette paper. "I asked you to check on this fellow a few years ago, as I recall. There'd been some complaints then from a number of his neighbours I believe."

"That's right." The corporal pulled down his foot and straightened the blotter on his desk. "My impression at that time was that he was definitely odd, but harmless."

"Jennifer Moorehead claimed he attacked one of her boys with a butcher-knife."

"Jennifer Moorehead has never lodged a complaint with this office, about that or any other matter. Or if she has, I'm unaware of it."

The judge pursed his lips. "A few years is a long time, Corporal. I'm told he's been deteriorating for quite a while. He's been moving that boat across people's private property, and many of them have been expressing considerable annoyance. Some of the womenfolk are afraid to go into their yards at night. I had a call from Toivo Frayne, near the Junction, who told me his son spent part of the recent blizzard with the man in his ship. Got lost, apparently. The boy says

he lives on rotten grain and water, and he's got open sores that won't heal. He hallucinates all the time."

Corporal Mortimer sucked on his inner cheek and considered the judge's clean-shaven face. It looked too expertly razored for a home job; he must have stopped in at Koblensky's Barber Emporium after leaving his car at the B/A station. So maybe he hadn't been waiting for half an hour at all. "As far as I know," he said, dampening irony with a disarming grin, "having visions isn't yet illegal in the Dominion of Canada — unless, of course, they've been caused by opium."

The judge looked dubious, then decided not to be amused. "Look, Mortimer, I don't have the time right now to quibble over the finer points of law. This man's been making a firstclass nuisance of himself for the past ten years. I've got petitions and letters that would fill a five-bushel sack. Trespassing on private property, harassing his neighbours, threatening people with dangerous weapons, wanton destruction of private property — just how much farther is all this supposed to go? He's unpredictable, lives like an animal, eats food not fit for pigs, and spends day and night obsessed with this ridiculous vessel — surely plain common horse-sense should suggest to you that something may be seriously wrong with this man. And who's going to bear the responsibility if some tragedy occurs? If he ends up stabbing somebody, and we've been warned and forewarned and simply haven't confronted our legal duty?" He paused for a moment to suck flame into his perfectly cylindrical cigarette. "Because you're wrong, Mortimer, there *is* a law that applies here. It's called the Saskatchewan Mental Health Act and it provides for the right of every citizen of this province to psychiatric assistance if they can be

shown to require it — and it's my impression, though I'm no medical expert, that this Damianus Sukanen may require it. Now maybe I'm wrong and maybe he doesn't — but at least let's let the experts have a look at him and decide for themselves. This is not a decision that should be made by either you or me."

It was cold in the tiny RCMP office. The janitor who should have lit the stove at 1300 hours hadn't done so. Mortimer got up to gather some paper and kindling. "Just incidentally, what destruction of private property are you talking about? I've always heard that he's never hurt a soul in this district."

"He assaulted a man named Robert Kleppner on his property some years ago, though the man decided for his own reasons not to press charges. He also reduced a loading platform at the Pennant railyards to rubble with an eight-pound maul. Bill Stanwyck was there at the time and confirmed that for me when I checked with him recently. I don't recall whether Sukanen was charged with that particular caper or not — it would have been before your time."

"Bill Stanwyck does seem to get around," Mortimer grinned. "Did he happen to mention what provoked that little incident?"

The judge took a deep breath. "The man is *disintegrating*, Mortimer. He's dying on his feet, in plain sight of an entire community. If you can't accept at least that, I place the soundness of your judgement in question. This Sukanen either won't or can't seem to care for himself. And we've got a bad winter on our hands. The Frayne boy said he's got very little firewood in that ship, and only slop for food. Now I've been in touch with Jim Robertson in Shackleton — I believe you've met the doctor — and he's agreed

to provide a thorough medical check-up and an opinion on the man's mental stability. You'll need an MHA Requisition Form 600, which I've got with me here somewhere, and which I've already signed. The doctor said he'd be in his clinic all day tomorrow and on call Saturday, if that's more convenient. Sukanen's brother, incidentally, has agreed that something must be done. So has the Reverend Sip Jarvenpaa. Even the village council is informally unanimous. So I trust I'll be able to count on you, Corporal, to give this matter some serious attention."

The clock on the far wall, above the Bank of Montreal calendar that still showed December 10, scraped and clicked. Mortimer scanned the large section map on the cork board beside his desk, following roads and railways until he had located the little coulee amid its swirl of sock-shaped elevation lines. He sucked on his cheek again and looked directly at Hensen, who looked directly back.

"You seem a little more enthusiastic about this matter than I am, Mr. Hensen. Are you prepared to sign a warrant or a GCO?"

The judge's eyes narrowed. "Don't patronize me, Mortimer. I haven't asked you to organize a May-Day Parade. There's a man in your jurisdiction whose condition and deportment need looking into — that's all I said and that's all I meant. If it takes signing a lot of forms just to get you to do your job, I'll sign the forms. You have here, in any case, an obstruction complaint that requires investigation. And if that man dies in his ship this winter, it'll be on your head and your head alone; not mine. This office has been notified, and I'll put that in writing if you wish. You've been provided with a medical expert as the law of this province stipulates, and the rest is up to you and

the statutes. It's been that way since this province joined Confederation. Which reminds me; whatever happened to that report on Finn Hall you wrote up for Citizenship and Immigration?"

Corporal Mortimer was tapping a pencil against his blotter, accompanying an inaudible ragtime band. "And that's the name of *that* tune," he nodded wryly, tossing a pencil across the desk and against the judge's remaining files. He leaned back down to adjust the damper on the stove. "I couldn't say what they've got in mind for Finn Hall. Probably keep it closed for a few more years until things cool down. As for the report itself,"— he closed the damper slightly as the little Pride of Toronto began to roar —". . . I'm afraid there's nothing much I can tell you about it. It was an internal document, and therefore confidential. But if you write to Ottawa, maybe they'll make an exception and declassify it for you."

The judge permitted himself the faintest trace of a smile. "Maybe," he nodded, and opened another file. "Incidentally, when you head out to find this Sukanen, better phone a fellow named Paul Thorndike first. He lives near the entrance of Boggy Creek on the South Saskatchewan. Sukanen spends a lot of time on this man's homestead, I'm told."

When thirteen-year-old Avro Sukanen reined in his piebald at the yard gate on Saturday, December 13, after an early-morning canter to Gerber Lake, he was surprised to find the barn empty and the steel-wheeled Case standing by the kitchen's back door. By rights, that tractor should have been out on the twenty-acre field south of Juniper gully, hitched to a six-gang and turning stubble for winter rye. As he slipped off his boots in the mudroom he could

hear his parents arguing in the kitchen, his mother's voice high and strident above the clatter of pots and dishes.

"Oh face facts, Aleksis; for once in your life face facts! It's plain common sense, and you know it!"

His father's reply was unintelligible, a low murmur.

"That's not true. That's not true at all! And besides, Brenda Henderson only said what everybody else was thinking anyway. Just because you insist on keeping your head stuck in the sand doesn't oblige everyone else to do it."

Another low murmur from his father.

"Oh talking, talking! All the talking in the world wouldn't get that man to blink an eye if he could irritate somebody by keeping it open. Even Vihtori couldn't make him stop bothering people at their supper tables. And you — he listens to you about as much as you listen to me."

Young Avro hung his hat on a nail and gingerly shrugged out of his overcoat. He sensed instinctively that he could stop this dispute by simply stepping into the kitchen, and the power was awfully tempting, but then it might take days to find out what his Uncle Tom had been up to this time, and he really didn't want to wait that long. Because they were talking about Uncle Tom; that much he had already established. His mother always insisted everybody "face facts" when she got upset about Uncle Tom.

". . . and now he's going to *starve* himself to death, right there in front of everybody, as if his own flesh and blood are too low and stingy to give him a mouthful to eat — and how many times have I tried to give him a loaf of bread when he's come by here, Aleksis? How many times have I offered him a dozen eggs? It's spite, Aleksis; plain and simply spite! He's sick, sick in body and sick in mind."

His father's grumble grew a little louder.

"That's what you said . . . and look what happened. He went after a six-year-old with a butcher-knife. Cristina Thorndike went down to his shack the other day, to give him some eggs she had left over, and he charged out of his door waving a hammer in one hand and a wrench in the other. She said he looked like a mad bull, and she was pretty sure he'd have clouted her first and asked questions later if she hadn't run for it. She said she was pretty sure he didn't even recognize her."

"Then why can't . . . for instance . . . get him . . . pay his way?"

His mother's voice was becoming increasingly impatient. "It's too late for that, and anyway it would never work. I don't know anybody who'd be willing to do that for him now. Not even if you paid them. And he wouldn't agree to it anyway. You know that. No, Aleksis, the only way is North Battleford. I've said it before and now at least a few other people seem to be getting the same idea."

His father's reply was unintelligible again.

"Oh will you stop it for heaven's sake! It's not the same thing at all! This *is* being responsible; this *is* in his own best interest. If you could just stop and think about it for a minute, maybe you'd be able to see . . . Avro, is that you? Avro? Come in here, son; what are you doing skulking around the door? That was a short ride; did you get cold or something? Here, warm yourself by the stove; I think your sister left a little porridge you could finish up."

Avro saw that his father's face was drawn and puzzled, the way he always looked when something went wrong that he couldn't immediately go out and fix with a new bolt or a burst of extra effort. His mother's nose was red, which always happened when she got upset. The air was heavy with

irritation and disgruntlement. Maybe it would be better to escape to the barn after a quick warm-up by the woodbox.

His father stood up and stared moodily out the window, hitching his coverall straps forward and then letting them drop back onto his shoulders again. The sky was filling in, the clouds thickening from pale grey to ash. At this time of year that meant snow; snow, snow, and more snow. And maybe no school on Monday. Though with everyone in this kind of mood, it might be better if there was.

"Well . . . I suppose you're right." Aleksis Sukanen turned from the window, hitched at his coveralls once more, and sighed. "Go put your jacket back on, Avro, and pitch down some feed for the pigs. And be careful on that ladder — one of these days we'll get us a grain auger; that ladder is no solution at all. Don't forget about that bad-tempered stoat in the corner. And when you've finished that, bring the truck out and put it by the front gate." He turned and pulled down the telephone earpiece, churning the crank an unenthusiastic three revolutions clockwise. "Oh, and Avro! Make sure there's enough gas in the truck to get us to Paul Thorndike's place and back . . . "

Almost an hour after he had finished speaking with Aleksis Sukanen, Paul Thorndike was still pacing the floor near the telephone, waiting for his wife to come in from morning chores. Finally he tried sitting down on the parlour chesterfield. He felt incongruously cold, though the Herald boxstove across the room glowed rust-red with heat. Through the parlour's west window he could see the shorn expanse of his wheatfields, now bone-hard and grey under wind-sculpted waves of snow. The mountain ash beside the granary, which had somehow survived the drought and had exploded into

spectacular bloom early this spring, hung doubled over under its load of frozen red berries and rime. Thorndike shivered and got up to pace again, trying to keep his gaze inside, but it was the same from every window, that flat, implacable silence, like a great indrawn breath that couldn't be released. For the hundredth time he told himself that he would get used to it, eventually, and for the hundredth time he knew he had been a fool to come out to this godforsaken country, this windswept ocean bottom never intended for human habitation. You had to be born here, he thought ruefully; you had to have grown up here, and even then it was sheer perversion, trying to regress from human being to lizard in a single generation. He stopped before the stove and forced himself to stand immobile for several minutes, to drive the heat in under his fingernails at the very least.

From down at the river he could hear the muted heartbeat of the old man's forge hammer — not as regular nowadays, but just as relentless. The old sod was indomitable. Astonishing in some ways, he supposed, but finally pathetic. Just a monumental waste. Cristina had been right; the man dragged trouble behind him on a rope. Letting him use that piece of river land hadn't opened any doors at all; in fact half the Finns in the district had concluded that Paul Thorndike was a fool, and had made no effort to hide their opinion. More annoying than that, even Sukanen seemed to share their view. Cristina had walked over the previous Thursday to see how he was doing, and had come back livid. "He threw *bones* at me," she'd spluttered, rolling a handful of eggs back into their bowl. "And then he ran after me with a hammer and wrench! The crazy fool is starving, he's obviously starving, yet all I get is insults! That isn't just *sisu*, that's demented!"

Thorndike crossed over to the west window and stared out once more, eyes following the faint grey line that was his access road at right angles to the Correction Line. Aleksis Sukanen's green grain truck should have appeared on that road half an hour ago, but of course these Finns treated time like they had crop insurance on it. He'd hate to think what would happen if there was ever an emergency around here. "At your convenience" took on a whole new meaning . . .

The back door banged and Cristina stomped into the mudroom. She put down the eggs, pulled off her overcoat, and hooked the heels of her boots one after the other into the boot-tree. She set her rubbers neatly into the box for yard boots and draped her kerchief across the mitten-rack. When she paused for a few moments more to straighten up some of the coats and coveralls that had slipped from their nails, Thorndike became impatient and came to the door.

"Never mind all that. Do you have anything left to do in the barn or the chicken shed?"

Cristina looked up surprised.

"No. No, I don't think so."

"Then I think you ought to saddle up Felix and go visit Tanya Cuthbert for a few hours."

Cristina looked non-plussed. "I went to see Tanya just last week. The day before she left for Regina. To go to that eye clinic. She isn't back yet."

"Well Tanya or Jean or even Rachel, I don't care. I just don't want you around here until supper."

"I beg your . . ." Cristina looked at her husband sharply, and then suddenly her frown dissolved. "Oh. Oh, I see." She hung up the last coverall and picked up her eggs thoughtfully, as if they had suddenly ceased being eggs. "And when is all . . . when is all this supposed to happen . . .?"

Thorndike was already back at the parlour window. "That RCMP fellow said he'd be here around noon. And Aleksis should have been here half an hour ago. He said he'd be here by ten — but then you Finns . . . oh, never mind. The point is, there isn't any time for me to drive you anywhere, so you'll have to take Felix."

Cristina glanced at the kitchen clock and then at her husband, who was pacing the linoleum between the kitchen and the parlour door. "Calm down a minute, Paul, and think about what you're saying. It's over a dozen miles to Jean's place, and there'll be snow in a couple of hours. I'd never make it *there*, let alone back."

"Then Rachel's. Maxine's. The Ylioyas'. I don't care."

"The Ylioyas left for the coast five *years* ago, for heaven's sake. Paul — stop that senseless pacing for a minute, and I'll make you a cup of tea. I can't go to Rachel's anyway; we haven't been speaking for months. After those remarks she made about you at the Pouss's, I doubt that I'll ever have anything to say to her again."

Thorndike looked through the kitchen clock as if it was a window. "That ought to encourage her, if nothing else will. Maxine then; I suppose you can go to Maxine's?"

"Maxine can go to the lowest rungs of hell. She's a fanatic, a Laestadian fanatic. Alvina said she told a church meeting last month that I lost the baby because we drink alcohol."

Thorndike looked exasperated. "Cristina, this is your territory. These are your people. You were *born* here, remember? Surely to God there's still *somebody* you can spend an afternoon with around here . . ."

Cristina shrugged but looked embarrassed. "It's ridiculous, I know it is. But it's a small town, Paul. I've known

these people too long. Maybe I've outgrown this place . . . that's occurred to me more than once this last little while. I've been thinking we should probably get rid of the farm. Maybe go to Alberta, northern Alberta. Or the Okanagan Valley. I've got relatives out there, the Hulainens, they would probably be willing to give us a hand, maybe help you find a job . . ."

Paul's face expressed discomfort and his body impatience. "Cristina, you do pick the damndest times to discuss the most inappropriate of subjects. Just about the last thing on earth I want to haggle about with you at this moment is the subject of my goddamn uncle's . . . oh hang it all, there's Aleksis now. I was going to saddle Felix up for you before . . . oh good God Almighty. I can't believe what I'm seeing. I just can't believe it. That bleeding idiot has brought Cuthbert along. Samuel Cuthbert. Just exactly what we wanted in our hour of need. How could anyone be so dense as to bring along a sod like him. And after all the persuading I had to do on Vih . . ."

Cristina was already reaching for her coat. "Take it easy, take it easy, Paul. Everything will work out just fine. Cuthbert or no Cuthbert. You'll see. I'll ride over to Margaret Hollington's, that's only a couple of miles. She's a snob, but she makes good butter-cakes. And never mind about Felix, I'll saddle him up myself . . ."

30

AND PRAISE HIS HOLY NAME

At the riverbank, down in the basin-shaped depression where he had set up his forge, Tom Sukanen continued to pound iron, beating out a slide valve and assorted bits of motor casing still missing from the almost completed engine. He had been up since dawn, just in time to stoke up the dying forge fire, and though it now whistled with blue-tinged flames he continued to shiver violently in the 30-below cold. His gopherskin coat was soaked and steaming down the front, thickly rimed with frost across the back. He had bent too far down so often, scrutinizing his work by flamelight, that the hair over his forehead was singed to fuzz, sweat-soaked and tinged with ice. He had finally given up shaving some weeks before.

The day was vacant and lightless, but it wasn't until he glanced up and discovered several men standing on the low ridge overlooking the river that he realized why; the entire

sky had filled with a dense, leaden cloud cover which had sunk to the horizon on all fronts. That presaged more snow. And his coal supply was low again. He would have to leave the forge early today, pick a sackful from the tracks between Cabri and Shackleton before the blizzard hit. If there was still a sackful of coal to be found. He had scavenged that stretch several times this year already, and the train traffic was dwindling.

He stopped his hammering and pushed the stiffening slide valve back into the flames. With Mars so close to the earth and Jupiter in line with both, properly heated black-iron spread under the hammer like glazier's putty. But you had to be extra careful about the edges, which tore more easily. And the edges mattered a great deal on a slide valve.

A few flakes of snow drifted idly past his face. He blinked several times to be sure, because sometimes snowflakes weren't snowflakes. But this time they were. He noticed that the men had begun to descend the ridge, and that one of them was Vihtori. It was so cold that every intake of breath stung like a thistle pulled through the lungs. For no particular reason he reached for one of the snowflakes but missed. He supposed he was just too tired again. That seemed to be the reason for too many of the delays that had plagued him during the past several weeks. The pistons that hadn't fit tightly enough. The crankshaft he'd had to file down again and again. This slide valve. Somehow, it was becoming constantly harder to make things work. And, when he allowed himself to think about it, it was just too damned cold for this. Far too cold. Everything took too much heat to bend.

A shout and a volley of curses drew his attention back to the ridge. Paul Thorndike had lost his footing and was sliding towards him across the stubble. The clumsy Englishman

thudded against an overturned oil drum and sprawled to a stop across a pile of scrap metal that still contained a few useable axle rods. Tom adjusted his grip on the hammer and pulled the slide valve back out of the fire. There was a slight kink in the middle of its chamber that would have to be levelled very carefully. And one flange was still a touch too thick. The other was fine.

"Look out, Thorndike," Cuthbert warned from his position crouched well back on the hill. "Just keep a steady eye on that hammer there."

Thorndike threw Cuthbert a blue look and struggled to his feet, to inspect a torn pantleg and a small gash on his shin. Corporal Mortimer threaded a more careful route through the scrap piles and stepped up to the fire, pulling off his gloves over the welcome flames.

"Good mornin', Tom. A bit cold isn't it, to be outside building a ship?"

The kink in the middle of the chamber was flattening slowly, each blow like a thick eraser rubbering away an incorrect pencil line. Once that line was gone and the flange taken down, the valve would be just cool enough to flatten its underside without danger of reversing the warp. The RCMP officer was rubbing his hands over the fire and blocking access to the cooling trough, which would soon be a problem. The flange thinned slowly, but properly.

"I said, good *mornin'*, Tom! Isn't it a bit cold to be outside building a ship?" The corporal hollered more directly into Tom's left ear and Tom turned his head sharply, bringing them face to face. Corporal Mortimer, Corporal Mortimer of the RCMP, wearing a black fur hat and a clean blue uniform, with yellow stripes up both pantlegs and his hunting boots. Last time he hadn't worn a fur hat.

"You look pale, Tom," the corporal said, less loudly. "You didn't get yourself some milk and eggs like I told you."

"Hello and you, Mister Mortimer. Please not to stand by this cool-it box; he makes-it sometime much steam."

"I'm amazed to see you up and about in this sort of weather. Hell, you're sweating like a harvest-hand in August."

Tom looked around at all the other faces that had crept in about the forge fire: his brother, Aleksis, awkward and sullen; young nephew, Avro, anxious but curious; that remittance-man, Thorndike, who would never be a farmer; and Vihtori, who seemed strangely remote. Behind him, Samuel Cuthbert examined a chunk of gopher meat hanging by some stooking twine from a dead birch, making no effort to hide his scorn and disgust.

"Is be-it almost finish now," Tom said, and held up the slide valve for general inspection. "I make-him now just this mossie and some little more casing, and then I go." He jerked the redhot valve through the air to check its colour, and everyone but Vihtori startled back from the forge. The metal glowed dully but unevenly, and Tom dropped it back into the fire. "I make-him one more hot and then I look. If maybe good, is luck."

They all stood around for some moments, while the corporal stared thoughtfully at the traces of blood on Tom's lips and chin and Cuthbert grumbled impatiently from his position away from the fire. The lowering clouds were closing in steadily, bringing on occasional sharp gusts of wind. Ice fog had begun to fade out the river.

Aleksis cleared his throat and looked as if he was about to say something.

"Look, Tom," the corporal said quickly, "I'm no medical expert, but you look like you've been pushing yourself

pretty hard the past few months. Now I want you to come with me to Shackleton — get yourself checked out by Dr. Robertson — he said he'd be willing to have a look and give us an opinion . . ."

He stepped aside quickly to avoid Tom stumbling backwards towards the forge, dragging an old automobile fender through the snow.

". . . now Paul Thorndike here has agreed to take care of all your possessions while you're . . . while . . . Tom! I'm talking to you! Are you listening to me, Tom?"

The old man stopped briefly to dig around in his pockets for a nail, with which he began to scratch a pattern into the fender's paint. "I have-it not some money for you milk and eggs. Is lotsa much wheat and horsemeat, I have-it yet."

"*Hän on oikiasa,* Tomi, it's going to be one helluva winter, and you can't possibly survive on that swill of yours," Aleksis agreed. Tom's irritation grew visibly. "It's a good clinic up there, and you'll be getting all the medical attention you need."

"Not big enough, and it's the only piece of tin I've got," Tom grumbled to himself in Finnish, dropping the fender off the forge. He scanned the various scrap piles scattered about, encountering only frustrated, nervous faces. "What do you want here, Aleksis? Has there been any mail from Finland?"

"Can you understand what he's saying?" the corporal asked Vihtori.

"No, of course there's been no mail from Finland. Why the hell would there be mail from Finland?" Aleksis kicked the discarded nail under the cooling trough. "I'm talking about a clinic, Tom, a government clinic! Around North Battleford, up there."

"If they write from Finland, tell them I'll be there eventually," Tom instructed gravely. "But first I'll be sailing to a few other places, for a few years."

"*Sinä hullu narri;* the only sailing you're going to be doing is up your ass!" Aleksis exploded. "Jesus Christ on a crutch, haven't you had your money's worth *yet* out of all this cowshit?!"

"What the hell are they *saying*, Vihtori," the corporal demanded. "I don't under*stand* the Finnish language, for God's sake!"

"It's the law!" Cuthbert triumphed, coming up to stand beside the RCMP officer. "Tell him it's the goddamn law, Aleksis!"

Mortimer turned on Cuthbert angrily. "You're not being a great deal of help, Cuthbert. I'll thank you to stay out of this until we can get it sorted out."

Cuthbert shrugged, and walked around to the other side of the fire.

"You don't even need money for this place; the government pays for everything," Aleksis was pointing out sourly. "You just have to stop acting like a horse's ass!"

"I'm going to test the engine on Thursday," Tom said. "If you come around on that day, don't forget to keep a firm hand on your horses. The whistle on her doesn't have a lid on it yet."

Aleksis threw up his hands and turned to Markulla, who was watching them all unhappily from the fire. "*You* talk to him, Vihtori. You put some sense into his head. I can't even get my foot in the door."

"He's got a compass in there, Dad," Avro called up, scampering off the raft clutching a brass sextant in his fist. "And he's got all *kinds* of maps on the wall, and everything!"

Aleksis swung around. "You put that back, goddammit, or I'll whip you within an inch of your life! And stay off that raft completely. You wait over there by the fire until you're told. Don't you so much as move until I tell you!"

Tom had stopped sorting through his piles of scrap and watched thoughtfully as the chastened Avro returned his sextant to the forward cabin on the raft. When the boy had crept back to the fire, he studied his red-faced brother for a moment, then turned to the RCMP officer who was standing impatiently by the forge.

"Why for you have-it come, Mister Mortimer? Why for you come-it here with all this mens?"

Mortimer looked relieved. "All right, now maybe we can get somewhere." He pulled on his second glove and buttoned his jacket up higher on his chest. "Now listen, Tom, the last time I saw you I told you you'd have to clean up a bit, get yourself some decent food, that sort of thing. I don't think you've done that, Tom. You look awful. So I want you to come along with me to Shackleton, see a local doctor there, check out the bleeding in your mouth, that sort of thing. While we're at it, maybe we can get you into some warmer clothes, rustle up a good square meal or two. Now don't worry about your things here; Paul Thorndike will keep a close eye on everything; it'll be just fine until you get back. I've got my car sitting over in his yard; if you get a move on right now, we should be able to make it into town before the snow."

Tom's expression had gradually become more and more impassive. He picked up the fender he had tossed aside earlier and scratched in some new lines across its paint. "I don't am need-it warmer pants or nothing. I have-it many things I need. With thanks."

"The wife and I'll keep a tab on your gear, no problem," Thorndike agreed. "No problem there at all."

"*Helvetti*, it'll be like staying at a fancy hotel for nothing," Aleksis pointed out. "You don't even have to cook your own food."

"Mr. Sukanen, I'd appreciate your conducting this part of the conversation in English," Corporal Mortimer informed Aleksis stiffly. "I can't keep track of this parley in two languages."

"Okay, okay." Aleksis made a throwaway gesture with his hand. "He does not speak to the English so good."

Tom had dragged the old fender to his anvil and positioned it with the scratched pattern uppermost. Now he swung his heavy ballpeen in a tight arc, striking it neatly on the outside line. It was only an exploratory blow, a light uptempo for the work to follow, but the hollow fender bellowed like a kettle drum, and the corporal jumped nervously and then looked embarrassed. "Come on, Tom; the snow'll be on us in a few minutes."

Tom's pounding became firm and regular, and the orange fender began to change shape rapidly. Mortimer tried putting a hand on the old man's shoulder but the hammer wobbled dangerously close to his head and he stepped back again. "Tom! Goddamn it!" The fender slipped on the anvil but Tom didn't stop, and after a moment Vihtori sprang from the fire and pushed it back into position, shifting it slightly as the pattern required. As he worked Tom watched Vihtori out of the corner of his eye, his right hand maintaining the beat, and after a while he nodded and reached for his second ballpeen with his left. Now the rhythm filled out and took on depth, began to resonate, peal, acquired range, height, fists, speech, a rising tattoo that clarioned

its defiance and contempt along the river valley with such insistence, such growing anger and frenzy, that each of the five men listening must have felt in some intuitive way diminished, shamed, and accused, called into question for what they had come to resolve at the mouth of Boggy Creek on the bitterly cold morning of December 13, 1941. But they were all standing too far apart, were too much strangers to each other for anything to be changed, if they might have changed it at all. "All just a bloody waste of time," Cuthbert snorted, when Tom finally let the hammers fall, gasping and pouring with sweat. "He won't have any use for the damn thing anyway."

There was a silence as Vihtori pulled the new piece of engine casing off the anvil and dropped it on the pile of rod ends and misshapen pistons beside the forge-fire. The first flurries of snow, still light but hard as salt crystals, were beginning to pelt in from the east. "Let's go, Tom," the corporal said quietly, and turned back towards the ridge. "I don't have chains on that car of mine."

Tom glanced at him briefly, but his shrug was at no one in particular. "I no be can go-it to anyplace. You make-it big hurry, maybe get-it you home on the Lancer Road."

The corporal sighed with irritation. "Now don't give me a hard time, Tom. I'm as reasonable as the next guy, but if you won't come peaceably I'll have to put you in handcuffs."

Tom picked up the largest of his two ball peens and the scissor-shaped tongs he had hung on a hook on the side of the forge. The slide valve in the flames glimmered a soft, malignant white. Now and then tiny stars formed on its surfaces and snapped brightly as they extinguished into the air.

"I'm not kidding, Tom. I've got a job to do, and I don't have all day to do it."

Vihtori watched the tongs tighten on the slide valve. "Now hold you on a minute, Mortimer. You said you don't use no muscle. You gave me your personal own word."

"Then talk some sense into him like we discussed. If we stand around here much longer they'll be digging us out with an icepick."

Tom paid no attention to either of them. He had pulled the slide valve from the fire and was inspecting it carefully, his eyebrows dangerously close to the miniature shooting stars.

"Tomi, *odottaa hetki*; let me talk to you just for a minute."

Tom allowed Vihtori's hand to rest on his shoulder but didn't turn around. "*Ei minulla ole aikaa nyt*, Vihtori; this valve is ready to be worked."

"I know I know but . . . it can wait. Put it down, Tomi, just for a minute." He increased the pressure on Tom's arm gently and Tom looked up at him suspiciously, but put the valve back into the flames. "Tomi, look . . ."

The two stood there for a moment, awkward, unhappy, Vihtori's unfamiliar arm on Tom's unfamiliar shoulder, watching the snow closing in and the river disappearing, and a furtive Avro flinging snowballs onto the river ice despite his father's warning.

"I will not take handouts from anyone. I never have and I never will." Tom's voice was hoarse, low and tired. "I don't see why you'd want to convince me that I should."

"Handouts?"

"Clothes. Food. Government medicine. That's how it starts — and that's how they get you on their List, Vihtori. Then, the next chance they get, you're out. Out on your ear. And they take everything you own. Back to the Lapuanjoki. Or to prison. Or, maybe they mix in a little poison.

That's even faster. Easier. It's all a fraud, Vihtori. An unholy swindle. You took some Relief bundles from them five or six years ago; you should be especially careful."

Vihtori searched Sukanen's face carefully, but he saw only stubble, blood, a firm jaw and a cranky indignation. It was a face that had grown more distant over the past several years; he had felt helpless to do anything but watch as it slowly stiffened with bitterness and self-sufficiency. He felt now — had always had the feeling — that he should have been able to do better, that he had a better role to play than this. He had begun to feel this years ago, the time they had walked over to Tom's coulee to escape his mother's wrath over the Holstein calf caper. But then Adela had left, more stock had died, the bank had threatened seizure, and one thing and another — and then, as if those years had been telescoped into an instant, the phone call from Paul Thorndike.

"Tomi, look . . ." Vihtori cleared his throat and shrugged. "Look, this place isn't Relief, and it isn't charity. It *can* be; I guess some people treat it that way. But there's a farm attached to it, a wheat and dairy farm, and even a machine shop. You can work back your room and board and any medicine you need. You'd be paying your way as long as you wanted to stay. I'm willing to bet they even turn a profit on the operation."

Tom's eyes narrowed, but his body unstiffened with interest. "They've got a machine shop there?'

"A machine shop, and a dairy and pigs. And it's going to be a rough winter, Tomi. Don't forget you're over sixty. It makes a lot more sense to fatten up in this place until spring. Then finish *Sontianen* when the weather turns. You won't get much accomplished in this cold anyway."

Sukanen stood like a barrel being rained into, as if listening to the faint echo of the drops.

"Thorndike can look after the raft, and I'll look after the ship. I'll put a lock on the hatch so nobody can climb in. It'll all be there when you get back."

Sukanen shifted his weight to his other foot and spat out a mouthful of blood.

"They'll probably work you too hard and the pay isn't much, but you'd be in the shop where it's warm, and you could get yourself a proper-fitting set of dentures."

Tom grinned unexpectedly, exposing blood-covered gums and two blood-covered bars of steel. "I guess they don't really fit all that good, do they?"

"Not bad for an idol-builder, but they look like they're tearing your gums out."

Tom started a chortle that ended in a wrenching cough. "How is . . . aagh, damn it all . . . how is the old dragon these days anyway? She must be eighty-five if she's a day."

Vihtori's smile was rueful and uncharacteristically tight. "*Ei sitä voi auttaa*. Still running my life like I'm the Church Women's Auxiliary. I suppose that'll never change."

"They can't help it, it's in their blood," Tom agreed. "They're all mad and they're making us pay for it."

"Come on, Markulla, we haven't got forever," Mortimer called from the other side of the scrap piles. He had joined Aleksis and Paul Thorndike, all three of them flapping their arms about their sides to keep warm. Cuthbert had disappeared into the ship's aft cabin. Avro had found a T-shaped piece of scrap metal and was pretending to be Charles Lindbergh crossing the Atlantic.

"Just hold on your hat; we're coming right now pretty soon." Vihtori turned back to Tom and they stood there a

little while longer, watching the raft being erased, the ridge slowly disappear, the piles of scrap metal fade to white, and then, with remarkable speed, whirling flurries of snow smother everything, even the pile of empty coal sacks, until the little drum forge stood in the middle of utter blankness, just two men beside a barrel and nothing else, while the wind bluffed and fluttered and the snowflakes tinkled faintly, like falling bits of tin.

"The *Englantilaiset*, they're always in such a hurry aren't they," Tom mused, though he didn't sound as if it concerned him very much. "Remember back in Finland, I said they looked like maggots? Like maggots swarming over a shitball?"

"I wasn't born in Finland, Tomi," Vihtori said gently, not shifting his gaze from the void ahead. "I was born right here in Saskatchewan. Three days after my parents got here."

"All Egyptians," Tom nodded. "Always in a hurry. Ships seem to attract them like maggots. Just can't seem to wait to ruin their next continent."

31

CORPORAL G.T. MORTIMER

[RCMP, retired] *continued. . .*

. . . trouble? Not at all, not really. Well that's what we were trained for in the Force. You can't do it all with just shouting and muscle. You hear people out, and they'll fall into line. I just explained it to him very slowly and clearly, and after a while he saw the light. The only real problem was, we got tagged by a snowstorm, one whale of a snowstorm, and I had to borrow a set of chains from this Paul Thorndike fellow. Can't imagine why we didn't have a set in the detachment car. Somebody obviously hadn't gone by the book. But the embarrassing part was that Thorndike's chains were in an awful mess. He'd torn them up trying to get his truck out of some mud that spring, and we had to get the old man to forge us a couple of links for them first. Of course he took his good sweet time about it too. We didn't make it to Shackleton until well after dark, and

when we got there the doctor had already packed up and left. We spent the night in the town lock-up, on the floor.

I think he had a bad night of it, as I recall, though I can't say I remember why. With a man like him, it could have been half a dozen things. He'd been pretty co-operative at the beginning, got almost chatty there for a while, though it was mostly in Finnish which I couldn't understand — his mind must have been wandering quite a lot. A lot of the time he didn't seem to be talking to anybody in particular. But by the time we got to Shackleton he'd pretty much quietened down again, and after that he stopped saying anything altogether. Just answered if you asked him something very specific. I put down two mattresses in the cell at the back because he smelled so bad the corporal on duty wouldn't have him in the waiting room, and every time I woke up that night he was just sitting there like a hunched-up wet cat, staring at the drain-hole in the floor. Once he started moaning and rocking back and forth against the wall like a hurt animal, but when I shook him he stopped it right away. Even then I don't think he was actually sleeping; he just seemed to be drifting, or daydreaming, you know.

I can't remember why I didn't get him any better clothes; I'd meant to do that at some point or other. Maybe I just wanted them to see how he lived out there, by himself. But the medic only gave him a fast once-over and then signed him across to Battleford for more interviews and tests. I remember thinking, for those five minutes we could have saved ourselves half a day and taken him directly up there. Yes I do recall being a little browned off about that. Because I was pretty sure the whole exercise was just a Dry Heave anyway — it's what we called that sort of thing in the Force, in those days. Procedures for the sake of procedures. It

happens in any organization. Somebody gets bloody-minded. It usually settles itself out. He seemed sane enough to me — other than that ship business maybe. Oh I don't know. There were some ruffled feathers to be soothed, and they were being soothed. They weren't going to hold him up there any longer than it'd take them to find that out; I felt pretty certain about that. And we were heading into a bad winter; he was better off spending it in Battleford, inside. He wouldn't have made it out there in his ship, alone. I guess I couldn't swear to that, but I suppose the JP had a point. Not that I'd give him credit for it, mind you. People like that always got my back up awfully high, and there were a lot of them in the system. He may have had something to do with the fact that I was transferred to Fort Nelson in B.C. quite shortly after that. But maybe not. You can never tell. Those orders always came from too high up to know. And I suppose I shouldn't complain; I saw a lot of the country and they gave me a fair pension at the end. If you expect more than that from almost any organization, even the RCMP, you're just setting yourself up for grief . . .

32

WARD ADMISSION RECORD

PATIENT: *Damianus Sukanen, Manybones, Saskatchewan*
ADMISSION DATE: *December 15, 1941*
DATE OF BIRTH: *September 23, 1881*
HEIGHT: *5', 10"* EYES: *Blue* HAIR: *Light Brown*
RELIGION: *Lutheran*
PLACE OF BIRTH: *Vaasa County, Finland*
OCCUPATION: *Farmer*
FATHER: *Abo Alankola*
MOTHER: *Hilda Koupi*
MARITAL STATUS: *Widower, 3 children*
ABNORMALITIES: *Tip of small finger,* LH, *crooked; Third toe,* RF, *crooked; Scars on upper, lower* LL
CONDITION OF PATIENT UPON ADMISSION: *Fair*
STATE OF NOURISHMENT: *Fair. Some vermin. Clothes very dirty and in poor condition. Patient appears deaf in left ear. Gums severely lacerated.*

CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL PRACTITIONER

For Admission of a Mentally Ill Person, Prov. of Saskatchewan

I, the undersigned, *James Robertson,* a legally qualified practitioner in the Province of Saskatchewan, residing and practising in *Shackleton, Sask.*, hereby certify that I, on the *14th day of December, 1941,* and separately from any other medical practitioner, examined *Damianus Sukanen* of *Manybones, Saskatchewan,* and after due enquiry into all the facts in connection with the case necessary to be enquired into in order to enable me to form a satisfactory opinion, I certify that the said *Damianus Sukanen* is mentally ill (but not mentally defective) and is a proper person to be contained in a mental hospital, and I have formed this opinion upon the following grounds, namely:

Has delusions regarding his capacity for navigation, and plan for ship construction — with no reasonable purpose to serve. It is a non-realistic craze. The premises he uses for home bear out his mental state.

Other facts (if any) indicating mental illness, communicated to me by others: *Damage of property. Accosting neighbours. Refuses to accept relief food. Lives in a non-rational manner. Possibly harmless in behaviour but plainly unable to care for himself.*

Signed on this *14th day of December, 1941*
James Robertson

HISTORY SHEET

ENTRY INTO CANADA: 1911
ENTRY INTO NORTH AMERICA: 1901
BORN: SEPTEMBER 23, 1881
LANDED NEW YORK, MAY 10, 1901

WIFE DECEASED. THREE CHILDREN. JAILED IN U.S. (MINNESOTA) FALL OF 1910, SUMMER OF 1923.

They put you in jail? *It am be-it that womans. She break-it back, and I am prison six month maybe, maybe-so. And when I come-it back there they don't be let me inside, and the peoples.*

What did you do that made them send you to jail? *I don't be know-it anything why. My womans, we make-it fall in room of house. Some policemans coming into house for this. And* tuomari, *how you am say-it, he be-it say is law. The judger.* Kylla.

You came to Canada after that? *Yes. I just live-it there a few months maybe, and then I am in Canada. I fill-it homestead right away.*

Where did you take your homestead? *Round by Manybones, by that.*

When did you come to this hospital? *Is be-it when I was . . . when was* 15 Joulukuu, *year last. Yes, December,* kylla. *Last year, December.*

What is the date today? *Now January four,* 1942.

Well now, when you went to Dunblane, did you farm? *No Dunblane. Manybones. I am have homestead by Manybones. But no farm now. I fix-it mossies for my ship.*

What are "mossies"? *Mossines. Mochines. Boiler for ship, and so. Motores.*

Whereabouts did you live before you came here? *I be-it living in my ship right along. Sometimes am over by this river, in my bridge.*

What were you going to do with your ship? *Oh . . . I don't am be-it sure, maybe-so. Maybe fishing, fishing.*

You built a ship that size to go fishing? Kylla, *maybe. If find-it good place, maybe-so.*

Do you read the newspaper? *I don't be read-it newspaper long time. Long time, now and now. Sometime.*

Does that mean yes or no? *Sometime I see-it.*

You know there is a war on? *I am hear something about it, and talk.*

You know which countries are fighting? *I don't am know very good on this thing. Lots trouble.*

When did you start building your ship? *I start build-it she outside walls I build-it* 1931. *Some mossie I build-it* 1930 *and so.*

When did you leave your farm? *Was* 1938.

Were you aware that Finland had entered the war on the German side? *I . . . I don't am nothing with this. I make-it here farm and so.*

Do you know what day you came to Canada? *Was August* 1911. *I don't be know-it what day.*

Do you like Canada? *Oh, no trouble. I buy-it all these things I am use. I am be dwelling right along. I am be always in my place.*

So you're contented here? *What be-it means contented?*

They say you didn't get along very well with your neighbours. Is that right? *I don't be kick very much. It's okay, but I am be-it sorry I am taking out of work. I have-it lots of work for do. In spring I am making again on my ship.*

Did you talk to your neighbours much? *Not most and much.*

Why not? *They some be-it mad to me. I am not hear and so. When I am be-it in America, I am live-it with Finlander but in this country I am live-it myself.*

Why were you living the way you were? They say you didn't have any food and you didn't have any clothes, and you were in a pretty bad way. *I am be got a hundred and fifty bushel of wheat.*

Where? *In the bridge.*

The bridge? Kylla. *House on ship.*

I see. And how did you eat this wheat? *I am be eat it. I have-it in my bridge a grind.*

And that is all you ate? *Not all. I have-it some old horse.*

You ate horsemeat with your wheat? *Oh yes. Is better.*

Why didn't you take any relief food from the Relief Programme? *I don't be need-it nothing, nothing.*

How did you expect to get your ship to the river? *I am be draw it. I have-it three horse, but when I come in spring they kill-it some. No horse there now.*

What killed them? *I don't am know. I don't am see. It am be in the yard. Another one they kill-it. It was be hurt on prairie and come home. It sticked from foot right in heart.*

I'm not sure I follow. Are you saying someone or something killed your horses? *This horse all dead now. I don't am seeing them. Sometimes I be hear-it something, something. Maybe womans, maybe-so. Egyptians.*

Egyptians? Kylla. *Egyptians. Egyptians.*

Well, I think we can . . . *Then I have-it some other horse from the board by payment. My ship, you see twelve mile away. I build-it she ten year, twelve year, always she womans. No mossie, no tractor, nothing nothing. I be make-it all the things, all the things, nothing. Egyptians.*

Very well, Mr. Sukanen, I believe that will be . . . *I am go now soon, not long, all finish. I make-it couple thing, small thing, and so. No trouble. This oceans, very far . . .*

CONCLUSION

DR. MACPHERSON: I think he's clearly paranoid . . .

DR. WALTHERS: I'd like to see a picture of that ship.

DR. ADAMS: I read about it in the *Leader-Post* just a few years ago. Very odd-looking vessel.

DR. MACPHERSON: He told me that in Finland every home has its little forge and the men all know something about blacksmithing . . .

On admission, patient was very quiet, did not speak except to answer questions; co-operated reasonably well; went to bed quietly. Slept for three days, got up, dressed himself. Never initiated conversation of any kind. Sat quietly on chair, staring at floor. Displayed no initiative whatsoever. Occasionally stared out the window.

No hallucinations elicited. Emotionally patient is stolid and displays no interest in his environment. Three-month interview showed memory to have some defect, particularly in recent memory sphere. Patient exhibited a marked poverty of ideas, his thought content revolving almost entirely about details concerning his ship.

33

LOUISE GRIFFITHS

[Psychiatric Nurse, retired]

Oh yes, it was an awful place. I don't think anyone would give you an argument about that. My brother Renny worked there for a while as a cook; he used to call it the big glue factory. I don't even know what a glue factory might look like, but I wouldn't be surprised . . .

It sat out there on the prairie without a tree or a shrub to its name. Just bare and stark. They wouldn't spend a penny on the grounds. It was really only one long building you know, but it looked like about a dozen of them, all pushed together. With that huge chimney towering over them — I think it was mostly that chimney that used to give me the shivers. It looked so ominous. Oh yes. Renny said it always looked as if the only way to get out of the place was to be burned and fed to that chimney. You could see it from as far away as New Aberdeen, it was so tall.

Dr. Travers ran it all like a military camp. Oh yes. The doctors were like officers, the nurses were supposed to be sergeants, and the patients were the privates. Or worse. Dr. Travers, of course, was the general. Anytime he or any of his staff came to inspect the wards, we had to get up immediately and stand at attention. There were a lot of inspections. He always carried a little baton, which he waved in the air like this . . .

The place was just bulging. Just bulging. Oh yes. It was designed for seven hundred, but in 1940 — I was sent there as a student nurse — there were already two thousand patients squashed into it. Two thousand patients. Oh yes. Our ward was so crowded there wasn't enough space to squeeze in between the beds to make them up. We had to pull every second bed into the aisle to change the sheets. Before I left they even had beds in all the aisles. You had to pull them out into the hall so the patients would have room to dress and get out of the ward down to breakfast. One manic depressive from Davidson — I'll never forget her because she had a birthmark on her forehead that looked just like a star — she got herself stuck between a bed and a wall and I had to climb over eleven beds to get to her. Most of them with patients still in them. Oh yes. Not at all what they taught us in nursing school. I don't think anybody would give you an argument about that.

It was a bad time, that was part of it. People all over just letting go. Just letting themselves go. After that awful decade. All worn out. Lots of them shouldn't have been in a mental institution at all. We called them the lemming leftovers. It was actually the leftover lemmings at first, but somehow it got changed. Oh yes. They should have been in old folks' homes, or in rest homes. People like your man

Tom Sukanen. We called him the Capt'n, you know. But there weren't any old folk's homes in those days. Not in the prairies, no.

Now his medical records showed that he had some relatives in the province, but nobody ever came to see him. Not that I'm aware of, no. No wait a minute, I'm sorry, there was a man once, a friend, but the Capt'n had gone fishing by that time. Silly expression isn't it? But in a place like that, when you've worked in it for a long time, you get so tired of all the medical labels. So for the schizophrenic catatonics, we just said they'd gone fishing.

There were so many that slipped into it. Not as bad as the Capt'n, most of them, but enough to make life quite difficult. They don't eat much, that kind, but it takes at least two orderlies to feed them.

We wondered sometimes if the institution itself was causing some of it. But we didn't dare say anything. We were just employees, not staff. They'd arrive and just sit there, you know, staring around, and then, after a while, they'd just go blank. For days at a time. Oh yes. Sometimes weeks. Just nobody there. I'd sometimes get the feeling I was just shouting down a deep, empty well. Hallooooo down there. Nobody home. Gone fishing.

But the Capt'n, you know, he outdid them all. Every one of them. Oh yes. He may even have had something else, something different, he was gone so long. I'd seen it going on for weeks, like I said, but not for months, almost a year. I suppose you could say he became our best-known mystery patient. It was very odd. Usually when you take care of somebody for over a year you'd expect to find out quite a lot about them. But all we ever knew about the Capt'n was that he'd built some sort of ship somewhere

south of Leader, and that he planned to sail it back to Finland. Eventually his brother used it as a granary, I heard. Renny thought he'd seen a picture of it in the paper once. In the *Regina Leader-Post*.

The first few months he was in our ward he hardly said a word. Just sat on a chair and stared at the floor. Once he stopped an orderly and asked him where the farm was. Seemed he wanted to work on the farm. But they had twice as many men down there already as they knew what to do with. There wasn't any point sending him down to the farm. They were just as crowded down there as we were.

He wouldn't eat anything cooked or fried. We never figured out why. And he didn't sleep. Old people often don't sleep much, but he never seemed to sleep at all. He spent most of the night staring out the window. All day at the floor and all night out the window. Those Finnish people, you know, there's sometimes something very dour about them. Oh yes. Kalle Alto, our orderly, he was from Finland, and he was often like that. Grim and humourless. The headnurse used to call him our ray of darkness.

Sometimes, I remember, it was usually at night, he'd shuffle over to the wood box for a piece of wood and then he'd carve. Just little things, strange little dolls — odd shapes and figures you mostly couldn't recognize. About the only thing they had in common was that they all looked very stretched. You know, stretched apart beyond recognition. I'm sorry now we didn't take the trouble to save some of them; they really were quite unusual, but we were always so frantically busy. Kalle used to just throw them in the stove when he was cleaning up after his shift in the mornings. Once he did actually carve a very pretty little ship, the Capt'n, that Kalle set on the windowsill for a while,

but then that friend who came to visit a few weeks later saw it and asked for it, and Kalle gave it to him, and that was the end of them because the Capt'n had stopped carving by that time. Yes, I suppose I really should have saved at least one or two.

Kalle said that the night before the Capt'n went fishing he suddenly became very talkative and asked Kalle if he wanted to come along as a deckhand to the China Sea. He also told him that "the tide was up and there was no more time to waste." That was Kalle's story anyway. But you never knew about Kalle. His head was always full of wild ideas and stories. He used to spend hours talking to the patients when he should have been cleaning up; I think they made more sense to him than normal people. And from the things he'd tell about what they said or did, you'd have to have believed they lived in glorious fairylands, each and every one of them. Whereas anyone paying any attention at all could see that many of them were really quite miserable.

So who knows, really. Who really knows. But the point was, he was gone, and he stayed that way for almost a year. Oh, it made quite a stir in medical circles, you know. Oh yes. At about six months they even sent up a small medical team from Chicago, and they verified it. Not "verified" it exactly, but they confirmed it really wasn't any sort of coma. Sometimes it's hard to tell, because the sleep patterns of catatonics are often so unusual. Sometimes they don't seem to sleep at all, but sometimes that's all they do. Just sleep for weeks and weeks. Or what we call sleep. Because there isn't any other word for it. Or sometimes they may have been sleeping all that time, and it just wasn't obvious to us. It's fascinating, but it's also very confusing. There's

very little to distinguish the waking from the sleeping in a catatonic schizophrenic sometimes.

Some people seemed to think it was all a lark, this type of regression. They seemed to think it was an escape. Some sort of mental holiday. Even some medical people used to think so. Oh yes. Dr. Travers actually called it "supreme self-indulgence." They all got impatient because the catatonics were so much harder to take care of. They're almost like robots, you see. It's as if the different parts of their bodies are run by separate little machines, but there's nobody there at the controls. Nobody home. Nobody available to be badgered or told what to do. And if you want my opinion, that was hard on the officers' egos.

But it wasn't like that, mostly. Not in my experience it wasn't. I spent a lot of time with these people and I watched them pretty carefully. And whatever lives they led, wherever they were, I never felt they were getting much of a break. Not most of them, no. That would have been true of the Capt'n too. Of course that's just my personal opinion. My feelings about it. That's not scientific or anything. I'm not saying that. But I got the feeling, over the months, that he wasn't having an easy time of it. Wherever he was. I can't say exactly why, I suppose it was something about the way he kept his mouth . . . all tight and strained. Some days he'd mumble very strange words. Some days I'd almost swear he was wildly excited, though it was really mostly instinct I was going on. You'd catch little flickers of emotion brushing across his face sometimes. Often I got the impression he was very angry or terrified. And sometimes he'd groan, very faintly. He never relaxed that I ever saw. There was something very urgent about him. He hardly ever moved and yet he usually had this . . . this sort of exhausted

look on his face. Kalle often said he looked like he'd spent the whole night drowning.

We only had the Capt'n for about half a year, at first. Did I mention that? Only about half a year. They tried all sorts of treatments on him, but nothing ever pulled him out. They rubbed him down with Vaseline and put him in the ice-baths. They gave him shock treatments. They tried spray-therapy. They moved him around from one ward to another. Eventually he was sent back to us on the fourth floor, to the seniles. And finally I came in one day and found he'd died the night before. That was in May of 1943. The night nurse came over and told me about it right away. She knew I'd been kind of fond of the old man. Something ornery about him that I'd always liked. I guess I've always liked ornery people. I suppose it's because I've never really had the nerve to be ornery myself. Oh yes.

He had come back to us for a short while that night, though, because Kalle told me that he sat up suddenly in his bed, around two in the morning, and shouted: "Standby for the bow-line!" so peremptorily that a number of patients woke up and immediately started scrambling around. He said it in Finnish, of course, but Kalle said he could hear it perfectly clear right down to the other end of the ward where he was sorting prescriptions. "Standby for the bow-line." Isn't that just too quaint? And when Kalle ran over to see what was going on, there was the Capt'n already climbing down off the bed, looking enormously pleased with himself, carrying a chamber-pot under one arm — we used to use porcelain chamberpots in the wards, an absolutely stupid idea — and when Kalle asked him where he'd gotten to, he apparently said — Kalle wrote it all down, he was always very fastidious about this sort of thing — he

said very briskly: "Fifty degrees twenty minutes north, a hundred and seven degrees thirty-one minutes west." And then he dropped the chamber-pot. Of course it smashed into a thousand pieces, and Kalle said he was so busy worrying about the glass splinters all over the place that he didn't even notice that the Capt'n had sat down on a nearby bed and died. One of the patients eventually had to point it out to him . . .

EPILOGUE

Within a few weeks of Tom's departure, the *Sontianen* too ran into foul weather. Vandals looted her brass and metal parts; farmers from the surrounding area helped themselves to the loose lumber and hardware. Her propeller showed up a decade later in a North Dakota antique shop; a few of her navigational instruments and engine parts were eventually handed over to the Western Development Museum in Moose Jaw by anonymous donors. Her massive boiler and oiler attachment lay rusting on the shore of the South Saskatchewan until PFRA officials, preparing to dam the river to create Diefenbaker Lake in the 1950s, hired a local engineer to dynamite the machinery and sell the metal for scrap. Her superstructure disappeared entirely, though an old newspaper photograph provides proof that an unidentified homesteader family squatted in it for some years before the Second World War.

But the stripped-down ship, the keel and hull, survived. In an effort to save her from total destruction, Vihtori Markulla finally bought the *Sontianen* from the municipality (to which she had fallen after Tom's death) and had her hauled onto his farm. He used her as a granary during the war. After his death his son Wilfred carried on the tradition, steadfastly defending both the ship and her builder against their many detractors.

Over the years, Wilfred Markulla rejected various offers for the strange ship. A Texas gas-station owner tried to buy her for a roadside attraction. An amusement-park entrepreneur thought she might give a profitable boost to his tourist business. Then, in 1972, Moon Mullin gained Markulla's co-operation for a plan to repair and assemble the vessel for display in a small museum outside the city of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan (The Moose Jaw Pioneer Village & Museum). Hauled to this site, the *Sontianen* proved to be in remarkably sound shape — only an inch or two of the gunwales, which had been in direct contact with the ground, were slightly rotted. The gunwale repair, a new superstructure, and a coat of paint were all that was necessary to restore her (minus engine and running gear) to near-original condition.

And so she stands there, on the dryland prairie, awkward, immobile, in the grip of half a dozen heavy steel pipes which keep her upright, her keel on a slab of concrete, her bow pointed in the direction of Finland, and, more recently, with Tom Sukanen's body (exhumed and reburied) on her starboard side. It took an appeal to former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker to do it, but Moon Mullin refused to relent until the job was done. After almost forty years at North Battleford, the shipbuilder was finally returned to his ship.

AFTERWORD

I first encountered Tom Sukanen in *The West Show,* an eight-episode history of Saskatchewan created and produced by Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille. The play opened with Sukanen, played by David Fox, and his ship building, which consisted of placing on end pieces of a Joe Fafard jigsaw set. At the close of the brief episode, Sukanen refuses help from a friend and collapses in the traces trying to move his massive ship to the river. The image is that of the determined individualist, daring but failing. Later in the play, this image is rejected in favour of Saskatchewan themes of co-operation—in the story of Louise Lucas, for example. But the interpretation that *The West Show* gave to the Sukanen saga has always coloured my view of his story.

The West Show was performed in 1982 and was published later the same year in a NeWest Press anthology titled *Showing West: Three Prairie Docu-Dramas.* Ken Mitchell's full-length

play about Sukanen, *The Shipbuilder*, had its first professional production two years later, in 1984, although an earlier version was performed in 1977 at the University of Regina. It has had a long performance history, both onstage and on radio, and was published in 1990 by Saskatoon's Fifth House Publishers. In 1986, the original edition of Andreas Schroeder's *Dustship Glory* appeared from Doubleday, with a Ballantine paperback the next year.

The three stories have two things in common. They were all inspired by the sight of Sukanen's ship, the *Sontianen*, sailing over the prairies in a museum south of Moose Jaw. In his preface to *The West Show*, director Paul Thompson reports that actor David Fox "snooped around Moose Jaw" and brought the story of Sukanen back to Toronto. In his introduction to the 1990 edition of *The Shipbuilder*, Ken Mitchell remembers: "Coming upon the *Sontianen* fifteen years ago, I immediately envisioned the story: a Finn, a ship, the prairie. The reconstruction of Tom Sukanen's legendary ship at the Pioneer Museum a few miles south of Moose Jaw is itself a wonder." For Andreas Schroeder, too, it was that amazing ship. As he writes at the opening of his preface: "When I first encountered the *Sontianen* I was driving down Highway #2, south of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, just before sundown, and I caught sight of her, in full silhouette, as I came up over a rise. She was standing upright in a fallow wheat field . . . and she was so utterly and splendidly incongruous and absurd, this deep-sea freighter in the middle of the bald prairie, that every story-telling gene in my body immediately stood to attention" (vii).

The other quality common to the three stories is praise for Sukanen the inventor and builder: all recognize his heroic endeavour. In *The West Show*, Tom and his friend,

Stenner, describe the ship, the keel "lap-planked, tarred and caulked," with horse blood added to the paint so it won't corrode in salt water. The ship is twenty-five feet high, and Tom will float it down the Saskatchewan River, in pieces, on a raft. He is a supremely competent man. In Mitchell's play, Tom creates a sewing machine, a wheat-puffing machine, a violin, a threshing machine, a clock — and the ship, which is imagined on the stage, its skeleton "huge, advancing towards the audience." In order to drag his ship to the river, Tom devises a winch, described as making a "ratchet sound," and his constant hammering, a recurring image in Schroeder's novel, is created by percussion instruments in the play.

In *Dustship Glory* Schroeder of course has the descriptive advantage. He provides us with the clearest sense of Tom Sukanen working, building, his hammer beating though the pages and the community. And he is able to give us a detailed sense of Sukanen's creative ingenuity. Here is Schroeder's version of Mitchell's "rachet sound":

> The slim poplars, like most trees in the area, had long since died and dried out. They fell easily, and Tom bucked them up into ten-foot lengths which he stacked near the remains of the old barn. Then he selected the thickest one and upended it in a tight hole six feet deep about a dozen paces ahead of the hull. He wrapped the tow-cable several times around this upright post (or "spool"), lashing it tight. To wind the spool, he bored a large hole through its upper end and fitted in a long, arm-thick dowel, at a right angle to the buried shaft and about three feet above the ground. Half a rotation of this dowel wound up the cable's remaining slack.

> Tom's version of the dead-man winch, one of the oldest hauling devices ever invented, was now complete. (174).

After a lengthy struggle to harness his long-suffering horse to the winch, "suddenly the dowel was inching forward, slowly but steadily, and from out of the dark came the quavering screech of ungreased axles protesting as they turned." At long last, "the ship of the Finnish drylander was on the move" (175–76).

But Schroeder's novel does borrow one device of drama, in the form of the first-person interludes interspersed throughout the narrative — seven of them, plus Corporal G.T. Mortimer's comments. If Sukanen's story is a kind of heroic tragedy, in which an extraordinary man ultimately becomes, at the North Battleford hospital, close to no man at all, then the townspeople function much like the chorus in a Greek drama, allowing the hero to be described through the eyes of more ordinary folk. In the first of the commentaries, Elsie Berton ("Schoolteacher, retired"), repeats a comment of a former colleague, who used to say of Tom: "He always looks like he's just been kicked out of Paradise" (31). Elsie talks about how clever Tom was, especially with machinery: "He invented all sorts of ingenious equipment he really should have had the sense to take out patents for. He built an ugly little sled with a motor that was clearly the forerunner of the Skidoo, and he spent years developing a thresher that could separate and dry wet grain in one operation." But, she adds, "he was a boor, you see; that was the long and the short of it. He simply had no tact and no patience." And she conjures up a black image: "Tom once flogged his team so hard when he got stuck in a mudhole on Main Street that the Justice of the Peace threatened to have him arrested" (32).

Elsie also tells us how Tom "hated women" and blamed any and every misfortune on them — how he kept accusing Tanya Cuthbert of putting a hex on his eggs, to the point where her husband "worked up a lifelong vendetta" against Tom. "And I suppose you'd have to say Sam Cuthbert won, as he usually did. He got Tom's land in the end, and he got it for a song. His son farms it now, and he uses it mainly to run sheep. They always wanted a coulee like Tom's to run sheep" (35). That information, which I think we're to accept as fact, takes the story past its ending, with Tom's incarceration in the hospital. Elsie has other sharp comments to make about Tom, but it's clear from this how the chorus can work. In his preface Schroeder explains that he interviewed "various former homesteaders who had actually known Tom Sukanen in his lair" (viii) but that all the witnesses in the book "are composites, mixed and matched in part to protect their privacy and also to sharpen the issues" (ix). So while Elsie Berton is the author's invention, what she has to say is derived in some way from what he heard. Even the novel's title is captioned: "Based on a true story."

Fiction has the ability to move back and forth in time, and Schroeder begins midway through Sukanen's life, in the summer of 1934, with the assault on Tom and his ship by a crowd of drunks and idlers from town. They taunt Tom, calling him "Noah" and a Commie (because he's a Finn), and start clambering around his partially built ship, threatening to damage it, until Sukanen angrily begins a rain of hot coals on the intruders. "You just be fly-it home, yah! Run-it gone like rats! Go drown-it you in hell, *pakana*!" The other troublemakers run off, but their ringleader, Bob Kleppner, remains and sets fire to a pile of wood shavings from the ship. Enraged, Sukanen uses Kleppner's body, and

his own, to put out the blaze, though not before it catches the tar on the bow. Tom, with his prodigious strength, manages to douse the flames with two great vats of water, but Kleppner leaves with a warning to Tom that his neighbours are getting fed up and that people will be back. "What makes ya . . . think . . . you're so piss-assed special?" Kleppner asks (9). Tom is a loner, a misfit, and the community hates him for it. In the wake of this event, Sukanen's social isolation deepens: "It was after word of the 'picnic' (as the incident came to be called) spread that Sukanen finally turned his back on them all—all the gawkers, hecklers, mischief-makers, even the well-wishers. He did this quite literally, shifting his forge and workbenches and all his scaffolding in such a way that no one was any longer able to see his face" (11).

Tom is in many ways an unappealing character, and one ill suited to the role of tragic hero. Schroeder's success in *Dustship Glory* depends in great part on his portrayal of Sukanen, on his ability to create a figure to whom we are drawn, perhaps with mixed feelings, and who yet remains aloof, refusing to let us in. Above all, it is Sukanen's fierce privacy that the novel so well captures. A play has to make Sukanen talk; otherwise, there's no play — no drama. The novel can create dramatic scenes, in which Tom speaks to others, especially to his friend Vihtori Markulla, but it can also have him remain silent, allowing him to speak his true language, his building of the *Sontianen*.

In chapter 18, "Crokersland," Tom pays a visit to Vihtori and his mother, Mrs. Markulla. Walking through the impossibly desiccated fields, Tom and Vihtori commiserate about the drought, and Tom's words are simple and few: "Tom scooped up a handful of dirt and studied it as he walked.

'Wheat won't even come up this year,'" he tells Vihtori. "Too much salt" . . . "Been tasting like that since early May" (126). They continue their bleak tour, gradually falling silent, and we see Tom through Vihtori's eyes: "Up ahead Tom walked on, oblivious, lost deep inside himself again. In the fierce heat, his body became enveloped in shimmering haze and his feet seemed to float several inches above the ground, like some unknowable alien slowly treading the air" (128). Watching Tom, Vihtori experiences a sudden flood of emotion:

> He felt an impulsive rush of sadness and affection for this stumbling, awkward man, this man who boiled and skidded and shrank so unpredictably, who seemed to trip over every pebble and person but whose vision of the world and the heavens seemed as astonishing and complicated and unaccountable as those dust-filled, crazy heavens themselves. Maybe he really was mad, as almost everyone claimed, but if he was, there was obviously more to this business of madness than he had ever realized. It was curious, really, how strongly he felt drawn towards such bloody-mindedness. Such floundering. Such an uncompromising vision." (129)

It is a rich passage, and part of it could be Schroeder voicing his own response to Tom.

Vihtori's ruminations also evoke the dim and dusty '30s. Schroeder is splendid on those dark times. Wheat dies, soil drifts. "It had taken all his attention just trying to keep the buildings and the machinery from falling apart," Vihtori reflects. "Even when there'd been nothing to do but brood, watching the wind riffle the soil away, or the sun burning the ears of wheat to a sickly white. That was what

was so treacherous about Depression dust; it got into absolutely everything, even one's mind." His thoughts turn to his broken relationship with his wife, Adela: "You grew a thick skin, and then you couldn't hear or feel so much anymore" (130). There's a catalogue of family miseries — dead animals, dead children, dead farms. But though it all, Tom persists in his building, occasionally scavenging machinery from abandoned farms. In this landscape of defeat, his sense of purpose seems to his neighbours an unpardonable act of arrogance.

The climactic event is the great dust storm, the twister of chapter 22. Tom is walking home as the storm begins to brew, the wind whistling, transforming the dry prairie into a strange sea: "The dust flowed over his boots like talcum powder. Meandering wavelet patterns on the surrounding fields kept straightening abruptly into long stiff lines of force, and darkness was falling fast, though the sun was still well above the horizon" (164). Tom struggles on, but soon there is nothing but wind and dirt. "As the heavier soils began to drive over the ground, the surface of the fields around him seemed to rise, cutting off his calves, then his legs, until he was floating hip-deep across a surging prairie, pushing stiffly against the current" (165). Tom tears off a piece of his shirt to cover his face, but he is struck again and again with great clods of earth. When the twister arrives, he is flung to the ground:

> Suddenly, for a short puzzling moment, there was a lull, almost a silence, and then the ground all around him exploded into billowing clouds of dirt as the twister ploughed over the watercourse, hurling great chunks of sun-baked creek-bed into the air. Everything spun and

> howled; disintegrating clay rained down like broken pieces of sky. An uprooted poplar trunk shattered into matchsticks a few feet from his head, then was sucked away as if it had merely been a vision. For a split second Sukanen saw the sun like an evil shrunken head grinning at him through the debris, and then the clouds of soil closed in. (166–67)

When Tom comes to, in the following chapter, he sees a black beetle struggling up to the surface of the earth. It is a *sontianen*, a "shit-beetle." For no particular reason, Tom steps on it, but the beetle emerges from under his boot and scuttles off. Tom makes another attempt, but with the same result. Then he flips it on its back, but it succeeds in righting itself and moves on. He tries using a twig to make the beetle change direction, and he buries it beneath heaps of sand, but, as he notices, "it always dug its way out again and returned to its original course" (170). Finally, crumbling dry stalks of tumbleweed, Tom constructs a circle of fire, trapping the beetle — but when the circle narrows and the walls begin to close in, the beetle burrows into the earth and escapes. "Little cretin," says Tom, smiling. Tom's ship is thus named after the lowly dung beetle, a choice that perhaps reflects the townsfolk's contemptuous view of Tom as a creature of filth. (Earlier in the book, an angry Mrs. Markulla shouts at Tom: "Cretin!! Insect!!" [124].) And yet, of course, the beetle is also Tom the survivor, the man of "uncompromising vision" who will not be deflected from his goal, whether by the ferocity of nature or by people who would force him within social boundaries.

Ultimately, of course, Tom fails. As the book starts, with a confrontation, so it will end, in the cold winter of 1941,

when the will of the community at long last prevails. Reviewing a history of complaints lodged against Sukanen, the RCMP decides to intervene. With the help of the Saskatchewan Mental Health Act and a medical practitioner, who declares Tom insane, they separate him from his ship and have him locked up. Confined in the hospital, Sukanen is stripped of his purpose, and his withdrawal is complete: "Never initiated conversation of any kind. Sat quietly on chair, staring at floor. Displayed no initiative whatsoever. . . . Patient exhibited a marked poverty of ideas." A central theme in Schroeder's story of Sukanen is the power of the community to triumph over the individual. Despite his physical strength, his intelligence, and his singleness of purpose, Tom loses.

As Schroeder notes in his preface, over the years, as the legend of Tom developed, efforts had been made "to soften and warm Sukanen's caustic personality, until he'd become alarmingly reasonable and even altruistic — a virtual St. Christopher" (viii). But this desire — to "rewrite" unruly individuals in the direction of mainstream virtues and values — is another form of confinement. The power of Schroeder's novel surely lies in part with its refusal to romanticize. We are not asked to like Tom, or even to condone some of his less appealing traits. But we are asked to respect his right to be who he is and to set his own course, however quixotic, and we can only admire his perseverance. That it ultimately destroys him is a commentary not on Tom but on us. It is a reminder that in the quest for co-operation and consensus, space must be left for dissonance.

— *Don Kerr* [August 2010, Saskatoon]

Born in Germany, *Andreas Schroeder* emigrated to Canada in 1951, at the age of five. He went on to study comparative literature and creative writing at the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto amd has been writing full-time since 1971 — fiction, non-fiction, poetry, radio drama, journalism, translation, and criticism. He is the author of twenty-three books (most recently, *Renovating Heaven*, nominated for the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize), and his work has appeared in some sixty anthologies and in countless magazines. He holds the Rogers Communications Chair in creative non-fiction at UBC and lives with his wife in Roberts Creek, on BC's Sunshine Coast.

This book was set in Deepdene, designed by Frederic Goudy in 1927–28.