

Hawk Creek · *Bruce Holbert*

DECEMBER 1911

THE SKY HAD ALREADY RIPENED to grey when the twins stood up from their desks in the single room of the schoolhouse. The last of the day's wood ebbed to coal and ash in the black furnace near the front of the room. Mrs. Jefferson pulled on her sweater, then her husband's riding coat lined with sheepskin. She stepped to the middle of the room and faced the boys. They hitched themselves a little taller when they smelled her flower scent, a garden haunting them from summer.

Luke closed the book in front of him. He grinned at the words on the spelling list. Mrs. Jefferson knew he'd memorized them and would be able to recite their definitions as well if she asked. Luke wore a yellow shirt and grey pants, though the clothes passed back and forth between the boys enough that they were never a very good indication. She could tell the two apart only by their manner. Three minutes in a room you knew Luke from his brother, Matt, who at this moment seemed to be searching for knot holes in the worn floorboards.

She had always felt odd with boys this age. Eighth graders started to recognize that she was a woman, and they evolved from the shy, soft-faced children whom she could charm with a smile or raised eyebrow to boys more volatile. A slow trickle waiting on spring, she imagined, watching the indentation on the inside of Luke's lip as he bit, trying not to smile at her and give himself away. She thought of her husband, Vernon. He'd felled a tree the wrong way. The tamarack had slipped off its stump then exploded, slashing a blade of splintered wood into the fleshy part of his neck below his jaw, and forcing it out behind his ear. Vernon had been boyish really—he played at things like work or love—and that's why she had married him when he asked four years earlier.

Luke had drank whiskey before; when he and Matt were home alone, they poured shine into fruit jars and dared each other to gulp. That fuzzy burning in his stomach was what Mrs. Jefferson felt like. With her so near, he wondered why Matt shied, his eyes still on the floor or staring at the scratched out letters of his spelling list. Luke had searched for Mrs. Jeffer-

son all year, trying to find her insides underneath the flat teacher voice and quiet graceful gestures of her hands to the class as she read or called for questions. Now, her face floated over the two boys, and she stared at some point above their heads. Luke was the best reader and speller in the class. Mrs. Jefferson called on him for the answers when no one else could remember them, but he could not figure where his teacher went off to when her eyes stared out windows or past the rows of desks that lined the schoolroom. Each time he caught the smell of her, he wanted more to know everything.

Linda nodded at Luke's work. His words were carefully printed, and next to each was another word that meant the same in case she asked for synonyms in class. He looked up at her, and she could not keep her hand from combing through his hair just once.

"We're going to have to get you a smarter teacher," she said to Luke. "School is getting too easy for you."

The boy smiled but shook his head. "I don't want another teacher," he said.

Luke didn't need to stay after. He'd remained to be with her. She knew that Luke would wait, moping on the porch until she let Matt go, so she kept them both. It didn't seem fair, after all, to leave Luke outside, with the wind cracking at the willows in the yard, and the sky calling an early end to the sunlight; better to let them both stay than leave one to stand in the cold.

"How are you getting along?" she asked Matt.

Matt said nothing, but held up his paper for her to see.

"You still have a couple misspelled." Mrs. Jefferson pointed to two words at the bottom of the page.

"Sorry ma'am," Matt said.

Matt was not a schoolboy, she knew. He was better at tinkering. He liked to light the stove and fix the fire in the morning, and she'd given him that job in autumn when Luke and he had started coming to school early. He would start the kindling burning, and she would shoot new and difficult words at Luke to spell or define.

Luke shook his head. He stared over Matt at his desk. "Dumb," he mouthed to Mrs. Jefferson.

"Two out of twelve isn't so bad." She smiled, more at Luke than Matt. "Rome wasn't built in a day."

The two smiled back. She listened to them breathing, an intimate sound to her, alone for so long.

"You two better get along out of here then." She took the papers from the desk. "Storm's sneaking up on us."

She watched the boys walk to the door. She pictured Vernon again, his broad callused hands on her shoulder and waist when they danced at the Fort on Saturdays, not pulling at her, just there, a steady thing. She was surprised at how well she remembered. The nails were yellowed by cigarettes, the hair dark and wiry between the bones of his knuckles, the same hand that dangled from under a sheet when they carted him out of the forest.

Through the window, she saw the boys button their jackets and pull on stocking caps with their fists. Their horse wheeled north and west and snorted. Snot flew onto their coats. They stared with the horse over the Okanogan range. Luke untied the reins and pointed, and his brother, too, blinked at the heavy grey clouds lopping off the peaks and driving across the plateau toward the Columbia River and Hawk Creek.

Ed Lawson clenched his eyes and peered toward the horizon as the first hard gust of wind batted the shutterless window. He wasn't surprised. His back had been stiff all week. Winter on his place was predictable, snowfall, then a settling, followed by another fall. The snow had always come quietly, a gentle gathering sound on the rooftop, the next daybreak giving the barn, the rock canyon a bright shape in the blue morning.

His wife had been worrying the kitchen window since the cattle in the pasture behind the house had started lowing and wandering toward the opened barn door. A half empty pint bottle stood in the center of the table. Ed swirled the coffee cup below his mouth and let the fumes sting his nose.

"Twins should be back by now," his wife said.

He breathed some more over the cup. "They'll be along soon. Probably stopped some place to play ball."

Ed watched the front of her head disappear in the reflection on the glass as his wife turned away from the window.

"You know it's too cold for baseball."

"Never too cold for baseball if there's chores to do when you get home." Ed drank deep, letting the burning alcohol find his insides. He faced the

window again. Snow and wind rapped the crosshatched glass.

"Jesus," he said. "Looks like she came straight from Alaska."

His wife nodded, her heat-warmed face softer, eyes creased at the edges by wrinkles and too much time in the sun. She had been a decent looking woman once, round-faced and thin above the hips. Ed took another drink. His wife stared into the blackness, over the fallow fields, the cattle left after sale, back into the stone-thick draw that followed Hawk Creek to the sluggish Columbia. Ed imagined the water stirred up and stout, white caps foaming in rows. The rhythm of the river, the current's certain pull, deeper, there all the time. A storm could do beautiful things to a place, clear out the air, leave it swept clean like a new room.

For Ed, the blizzard was as natural as breathing. It was the way the sky worked in winter. Once the storm let up and the sky emptied to blue, he'd walk the property, cutting new tracks in the snow, on the lookout for cougars or the few wolves that lived in the cliffs. His fenceline followed the creek bank, the rocky steppes, the brush above the river. Other homesteaders had taken up lots adjacent to his. He watched from his ranch, letting them plant too early, or harvest too late. They'll work it out for themselves, he figured. He owed them nothing. He had a history here. That wasn't something you loaned to the new neighbors.

He joined his wife at the window. Her head swiveled when she caught scent of the liquor in his breath, and he winked at her. It was winter, his planting was done. Spring would come soon enough. Outside, the sky fastened itself to the ground, making one color. An oak crate tumbled past. It splintered against the wall of the house.

"Ain't fooling around this year, Mother."

She watched as Ed pulled on his gloves and tested his fingers inside them. He shrugged on his long jacket and found his hat in the cabinet above the bed.

"Boil some water for coffee. They're liable to be pretty frosty when I find them," he said. He opened the door and the cold blasted through the house. A lamp shook and light wavered over the kitchen. He waved to her then stepped toward the corral. The light in the doorway became first a shadow then nothing, enveloped by the sideways storm.

Flat clouds looked like the whole horizon as they approached the two boys. A purple streak broke the sky. The sun had been smeared away, and

tongues of snow spiraled, sometimes moving up instead of down, or staying halfway, at eye level, scouring the twins' exposed skin. A week later the papers from the Fort would report a fifty-degree temperature drop in twenty-seven minutes. An Arctic cold, they would call it.

The horse didn't move. She was a three-year-old Appaloosa mare, Mule, named for moments like this. Luke clenched the reins in his red hands. The rawhide straps frosted white to the bridle where they were thawed by the horse's breath. Luke shook his head at Matt. "Son of a bitch won't budge."

The wind tipped Matt off-balance and set him back into the saddle as he tried to dismount. He clamped his cap tighter, slid off the saddle, and walked the three steps to Luke. He grasped the reins below Mule's mouth. The horse's breath warmed his hands, and he let them stay there for a while. A thin layer of ice clung around her neck and under her belly. Mule's open eyes floated inside her head. Each boy tried goading the horse, separate, then together, shouting and quirting her face. The snow drifted behind their bodies as if they were trees or hills. Wind snapped Luke's hat from his head and tugged it hard down the road. Ice gathered on his brows, it stuck to his hair, pulling the strands together and clotting them like blood. His eyes widened. Matt pulled hard and Mule stepped forward.

"Get on," Luke said.

The dappled mare took their weight, swayed a bit in the wind, then tried a step. Matt held to Luke in front of him. The wind forced their heads down and blistered their hands and faces. Luke couldn't grip his fingers over the reins, he held the straps where they were. The twins gazed into the ground, eyes tearing, and tears freezing to their skin. They were conscious only of what was below them: the muscles in Mule's chest as she tried another step, the hole her hoof and leg punched into the crusting snow, obliterated afterward.

They travelled this way for a half mile. The freeze climbed the mare's low chest, white reaching to the stirrups that held Matt's feet. The boy's boots banged against her flanks. Her breath pressed out in short, dutiful gasps. After each step, she rested, the tendons in her legs thick as furniture. Below and above was nothing but snow, and the boy had ceased pulling the reins. The bit clung to her tongue on the next step, froze and grew inside her mouth. She snorted and blew out her nose, ran four strides, tipping one way then the other.

Matt felt the mare's weight shift. He kicked one foot from the stirrup and pulled at Luke's shoulders. Together, they sank into the waist high snow. Luke remembered jumping from the loft of the barn into soft hay stacked on the dirt floor. He closed his eyes. Matt shook him. Their father had taught them never to stay still in the cold. "It'll freeze you to the spot," he had said. "Nobody'll find you till the Chinook brings the spring thaw."

Luke rose finally. In the slanting snow, they watched the mare walk backward, then disappear, eyes open, chest rising, steam coming from her wide nostrils.

The wind screamed and spun the surface of the ice, making it look like a hundred tiny streams running.

"We're gonna get covered up," Luke shouted. A tear iced one eye shut.

"This way," Matt pointed the direction they'd come, to the skeleton of an elm they could still see.

Linda Jefferson coaxed the furnace fire. A few coals flickered red but most had fallen grey and cool. Unread themes lay at the corner of the wash counter, and the children's empty desks haunted her under the shadows cast by the flickering lantern. The road from the school to her small house had ceased to exist a half an hour ago, like everything else. The snow had erased the world. Wind hammered at the north side of the building. She checked the latch on the window and wondered how the glass could hold the weather out. She thought of falling snow, the soft touch of it on her cheek, the pines bearing the gentle weight in their feathered branches. She had always looked forward to winter. She admired the crisp clear freezes, the long hours of darkness, evenings by a fire with a book or her students' papers, her husband around her, under the heavy quilt later, and the shepherd dog at the foot of the bed, a warm balance to the night outside her walls. The dog still slept with her. She talked to it often, as if it were a person, her confidante. She thought at times she might be going crazy, but she figured loneliness gave a person some rights others didn't have.

She stayed at the window, letting the snow play tricks with her eyes. It sketched faces in the steely air, tossed up an image and wound it away before she could recognize it. She imagined a story the storm was trying to tell, and concentrated harder on the pictures, feeling that it might be her life she were seeing. She wanted to prepare. A shadow etched into the bliz-

zard, hung just outside her understanding, but it didn't float off like the others. She squinted her eyes, but the shape didn't waver. Shoulders and the thick neck of the horse began to appear.

A pair of her husband's wool pants that she had worn for riding still hung in the closet. She pulled them on over her pantaloons and under her dress. Outside, the wind mauled her, flying ice cut her face. Her arms swam in the surge of white air. Her path was covered over after each step. The horse belonged to the twins. The saddle rested taut against its frozen chest. She touched the horse's face. The jaw was rigid like iron rod, and she drew her hand back. The horse's glassy eyes remained open. Snow had piled up, almost crawled over its back.

Ed Lawson was lost and he knew it. He regretted the snow shoes in the barn he'd decided against. For half an hour he'd followed what he thought was the road up from the creek wash. The school hung on a wheatland plateau above the ranch that jutted toward the river like the end of a table. But now he had slogged into a stand of birch that he recognized as somewhere west of the trail. The tree branches cut wiry lines in the white. They clattered against each other in the wind. Ed raked the snow from his face with his wool glove and leaned against a birch trunk. In the back of his throat, he could taste his stomach stirring: this afternoon's coffee and shine, a couple of eggs from breakfast. He belched once and the pain eased. The pint bottle clanked inside his jacket. When he worked off his glove and opened it, the wind stole the warm alcohol aroma. He drank.

"Oughtta keep Old Dan away for a few more minutes." His fingers branched, stiff on the bottle, and the glass seemed to join his hand. He considered them for a moment, gazing at the liquid, half gone. His numb hand gently raised it again, and then a third time. The glove dropped from the warm crook of his armpit and skittered away like a field mouse before a plow. Ed nodded, acknowledging that it was punishment for meandering and a sign to move on. He finished the bottle first then threw it against the tree. He wished for the warmth of a cigarette. The boys would be home now, their mother soaking their feet in his hot coffee water. He would give them what for when he got back, sending their old man out in mad man's weather. He might even be mad enough to take off his belt and let them have a taste of the strap.

A fence lined the road to the creek. It was Linda Jefferson's best chance to find the boys. Her gloves clung to the barbs, and clumps of wool tore away in places. The cold air touched her hands and spread, numbing her arms and shoulders. She followed the fence and hoped they hadn't strayed too far. The snow rose like water, drifted against the fenceposts and rolled in waves over the flat fields. The wind was all noise, the sound of a person alone, she imagined. She wondered if a person could drown in this weather, if the snow climbed high enough and there was nothing left but snow. No air to breathe. She stopped and held to a fencepost and forced in a breath.

The snow rose around Luke and Matt as they huddled at the edge of a naked elm. They pressed their faces into the sharp bark to hide them from the wind.

"It's going to be okay," Luke said.

Matt nodded.

"Say it," Luke closed his white hand over his brother's shoulder. "Say it will be okay."

Matt nodded again. "It will," he said.

Luke kneeled in the snow. Matt stood over him. "What should we do?"

Luke hugged the tree. "Just hold on," he said.

Snow began to fill the indentation his legs and hips formed. To Matt, Luke looked like he was half gone, disappearing in front of him. He put his hands under Luke's arms and lifted. Luke stared at him like an animal waiting to be fed. Luke had taken care of them before. Whenever his parents left, his mother told Luke to watch out for Matt. Matt was sixteen minutes older than Luke, but those minutes had meant nothing, though Matt clung to them when the two argued for privileges. Luke had always been ahead of him. In school he read earlier and better and wrote in neat, tiny letters that Mrs. Jefferson praised. When they fought, Luke won. He did things Matt never expected, and in the end, Matt would have to cry uncle. He thought this made Luke stronger, and he worried that he had missed something from the very start when they were babies and he couldn't remember. He worried that Luke had figured things out before him and gotten everything. But now, Matt felt his whole insides shifting; his stomach cramped and then relaxed. He was the strong one. He wondered

if it had been this way all along. He looked at Luke.

“Up,” Matt said. “Up the tree.”

Ed stood finally. It took him awhile to determine how hard he should lean into the wind to keep moving forward without falling down. He tipped and caught himself, then rocked back. He lost his balance twice, leaving slender craters in the snow that seemed not like his shape at all. He hoped the boys were home. The storm shoved at his shoulders and chest, and he tilted his body farther. He bore straight north. A mile, no more, and he would be toasting in front of the fire, the soles of his feet drying, turning pink as pigs in the heat. He busted through drifts. His hips led the way for his legs and chest. The powder separated for him. There was no sky, so he watched the snow in front of him, his head angled down and forward, eyes seeing nothing but white, until after three steps that came fast from gravity, he floated into the air, flying, carried by the storm. His arms circled and the breath in his chest rose. He thought he would see his ranch from far above, the river’s wide bend at the Gifford Ferry, the Fort up the Spokane, Kettle Falls. He thought he would see everything.

Linda Jefferson cut a thin trail in the snow. She thought it was a good thing that she could skinny her way through the storm. She’d spotted the boys balled like coons or porcupine midway up the elm tree.

Matt had to shake Luke a long time to wake him, and they floundered back toward the schoolhouse in a chain, Linda breaking the snow, Matt between them squeezing her gloved hand and Luke’s. They sliced through the blizzard together. Luke dropped twice face down in the drifts. She feared she and his brother might have to haul him, but he struggled up when they towed him by both arms. He’d lost his hat, and she gave him hers. She touched the blisters on his face gently. He didn’t flinch. She wondered if they would scar.

Matt held his brother’s hand, but it was like holding nothing at all. He couldn’t feel its weight or what might be inside it. Luke was speaking. “So much snow,” he said, and then he smiled. Matt tugged at him. Luke couldn’t make out the figure ahead, and he wondered if it were God or maybe his dad come to get them.

“Father,” he said. This is what the bible called God. No one turned

around and Luke felt only his arm, pulled taut as bailing twine, dragging him along. Matt dropped his hand around his brother. He took his weight now, and listened to his voice. Steam rose from his mouth.

"Say it," Luke screamed, his spit warm against Matt's cheek for a moment before it froze.

Matt made out the schoolhouse's shape first, from about fifty yards away. He pointed, and Linda changed her direction. The horse, she noticed, had been swallowed by the wind and ice, only a high spot in the playground.

Snow in the doorway had drifted past the knob. Matt and Linda clawed, the powder lashing past them to expose the plain wood planks. Luke lay back. He thought his eyes had frozen open, closing them was a relief; they still worked. When he looked again, the backs of his brother and his teacher in the cold bent like humped hills. The snow that they shoveled out floated above them for a moment, a cloud. He could see Mrs. Jefferson's gold hair, dull with ice. He leaned forward to help, but couldn't find his hands.

Linda grunted and the snow gave a little bit to the door. "Keep at it," she shouted. Matt didn't hear, but continued to dig even after she'd gained the few inches they'd need to crawl through. When they turned back, only Luke's arm stuck up from the drift. Linda screamed, thinking of the horse. Matt swatted the snow away, found Luke's nose, then his eyes. "Wake up!"

Linda bent down, but couldn't feel his breath through the wind. "We'll take him in," she said.

Inside the schoolhouse, the air was cold and still. The wind cried and waffled against the building. Matt shuddered. They lay Luke on the floor. Mrs. Jefferson untied his frozen shoe laces, her gloves fumbling with the threads. She screwed off his socks. Luke's yellow, bloodless feet shone in the faint light from the window.

"Get the blankets from the closet," she said as she unsnapped Luke's pants. Matt lay one blanket on the floor.

"Why did you boys stay in that tree so long?" she asked. Luke's pants were off and his white boxer shorts glowed. They were soaked with snow and sweat.

"Didn't want to get covered up." Matt stood in front of the furnace, but could find no heat. The wood crib was empty.

"It's out," he said.

"There's matches in the top drawer," Mrs. Jefferson told him.

Matt watched her roll Luke onto the blanket near the stove. "No wood."

Her head rose for a minute. The shape of her face in the light trembled, the slant of her forehead, the clean line of her straight nose and half-open mouth. "Books," she said finally. "Tear the pages out."

He found math books stacked behind the desk. "You sure?"

"Yes. Do it."

He ripped the pages and piled them in the stove. His hands would not pinch onto the match. He made a fist, jammed the stick between two knuckles, and struck the sulphur head on the wood floor. The flare of orange seemed like a dream. When he set it against the pages, they lit and curled above the cold ash. He doubled the pile, gazing at letters, numbers, whole equations unraveling. The flame steadied and he added a book, then another. He didn't feel any warmer, but the light flickered, and it was a color other than white.

The books wouldn't burn long. Matt found the hatchet in the empty wood crib and began on the desks. He tossed in the legs and the ribbing of the seats. The fire snuffled at the varnished wood.

"Come here," Mrs. Jefferson said. He left the stove door open for the light. "Undress," she told him. Luke was already naked on the blanket. He coughed and wheezed.

"Hurry." She had unbuttoned her jacket and wrenched off her gloves. The blankets sat next to Luke's clothes. Matt's underwear stuck to his skin and made a sound when he pushed them off his legs. He stacked his clothes and stood, shivering in the orange light, then covered himself with his hands.

"Get on the blanket," she said. He watched her lift her blouse over her head. Her hair hung up in it for a moment, then dropped from the shirt to her shoulders again. Through the burning, he could smell her flowery scent on the clothes that settled next to him. She bent at the waist and her dress dropped, then her pants and pantaloons. The wood darkened underneath them. She stepped out of the puddle. Her eyes were shut. She reached behind herself with both hands and undid her camisole then curled her knickers down her legs.

Mrs. Jefferson lay between Luke and his brother on the floor. Luke watched her lean across his chest for another blanket, smelled her darker odor in the orange light. Her thick nipple stroked his chest, her hair made a half crescent to the bottom of her neck. It looked like fire, and with her over him, the paper ash fluttering in the apricot light like warm snow, he felt vaguely content, ready for sleep.

Linda saw the boy's chest catch, then stop. Her hand rested against his ribs. Nothing moved. She tapped at his sternum with her knuckle and pressed her cheek under his nose. She rocked on the blanket with the realization. The liquid heat of the fire washed over her spine and ribs and muscles and skin. Matt watched as Mrs. Jefferson opened her mouth and placed it on top of Luke's. He thought they were kissing, and for a moment, he envied Luke. Air passed from her into his brother. Luke's chest rose with her breath, then deflated. She breathed into him twice more, then her watery eyes stared at Luke. She waited. Luke's tongue lolled in his mouth. With her thumb and forefinger she closed his eyes. The flesh felt cool and damp, like her own. She was afraid suddenly that she couldn't tell living from dead, that all of it might be the same. Her breath came like a weight from her lungs. The blanket slid over her shoulders. She turned toward the living boy, who lay on his side facing the wall. He tensed his legs and buttocks against her cool skin, but as the warmth built between them, his muscles relaxed. The wool from the blanket tingled. Matt twisted his hips further into the space she had made for them. Her breasts parted as he pressed closer. Once he looked over her shoulder to see, but she forced him back onto the blanket. "Let him sleep," she said. She lifted Matt a little to slide one arm under his belly. She brought the other around far enough to meet it, tight enough to make a box, to squeeze the square of each elbow with her hands until her arms shook with exhaustion. She squeezed until she believed that death ran through her like blood. She was amazed at the emptiness, the dark room, the hollow opening her arms formed. The boy stayed small inside it, but his warm breath touched her wrists. At least he was alive. Her nose bent against his hair. She could smell the musty wet of the snow on him. The live one, she thought. She turned one palm and traced his chest. The muscle of his heart opened like a fist, then closed; his diaphragm dragged in the warmer air; his whole body worked. She let her hand drift farther down to the adolescent hair below

his hips, and the flesh it covered. He shook and began to grow in her palm, and she felt his heart beat again, when, by some sort of natural knowledge, he turned and she guided him inside her.

Ed Lawson, still alive, let the snow cover his face until the wind was gone, the sky was gone, and he was left with the quiet. His back had been broken in the fall. The tingling in his legs told him so. A rock forced one shoulder forward, and he figured it had been the same rock maybe that had picked him from his flight and snapped him in half at the foot of the bluff. He had turned warm, almost hot but not quite. It was a fine feeling, like bathing in his own blood. His mouth didn't move. He wasn't much of a praying man, it seemed like cheating to start now, and there was no one to talk to. This wasn't so bad. He was warm, and it was quiet enough. He'd been afraid at first, when he couldn't move his legs. His chest ached and quivered, and he wondered how long it would work. He realized it wouldn't be enough. "Just go to sleep," he said finally. He found a thought that would comfort him and held to it: at least he was here. He let himself picture the farm, then the river and the creek. He imagined the spot where water met water. A stand of locusts and one tall fir circled a wide wash, the Columbia tugging Hawk Creek amiably away, as though they were friends, brothers. He'd grown up in this place, lived only here. He had never figured he missed much. The trees were pretty in fall and the ranch took good enough care of them, meat and a little wheat and some apples from the orchards to sell at the Fort. He caught a whiff of something that he recognized, like a smell from the kitchen when food's on, and he closed his eyes. The storm had somehow brought him to his own place, the land he owned.

When dawn splintered the next morning, it brightened the west wall of the schoolhouse blue then pink and orange. Matt awoke, gazed at the pure light. His legs ached and semen clung to the thin hair on the inside of his thigh. His muscles felt old. It hurt to move them. The stove fire had taken all the math books. Only a few spellers remained scattered in front of the black metal. He had chopped four more desks during the night. Mrs. Jefferson lay with her arms and legs forward extended like a cat to the place he'd slept. He could smell her, them. Luke did not move. Matt bent to

touch him, to affirm what he already knew. Luke's skin was cold and tight like the hide of an animal. Matt didn't cry. He was surprised and disappointed that he couldn't. The room was cold, too. He dressed. His pants were still damp along the cuffs. Mrs. Jefferson stirred in her sleep. Matt walked to the window. Outside the glass, the sky was blue and clear and so deep he could see the peaks of the Okanogans, the rock slides where snow couldn't hold, the blue-green sprinkling of pine blown clean by the wind. Steam rose from the river, long columns broke away and danced, and the earth in front of him was all one thing, simple, colorless, impossible to know.

After a time, Mrs. Jefferson turned over. Matt could hear the blankets shift like wind. "Luke," she said from the floor behind him, "It's cold. Come away from the window."