


# RICHARD RUSSO EMPIRE FALLS

'He combines good  
old-fashioned  
story-telling with a  
large-hearted wit'  
*Sunday Times*



Winner of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize 

Richard Russo

EMPIRE FALLS



V I N T A G E

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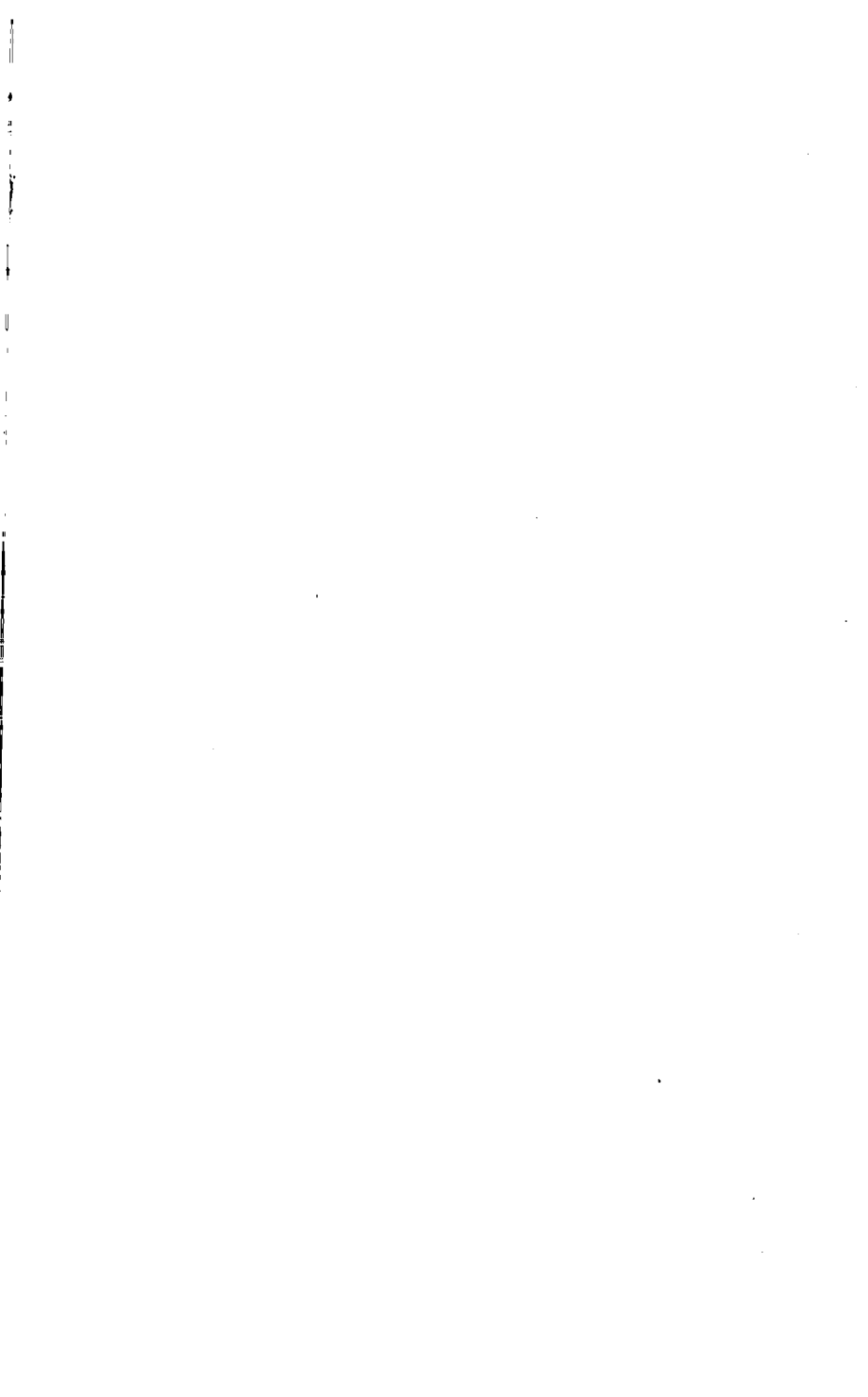
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*For Robert Benton*

## A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

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# EMPIRE FALLS



## [ P R O L O G U E ]

**C**OMPARED to the Whiting mansion in town, the house Charles Beaumont Whiting built a decade after his return to Maine was modest. By every other standard of Empire Falls, where most single-family homes cost well under seventy-five thousand dollars, his was palatial, with five bedrooms, five full baths, and a detached artist's studio. C. B. Whiting had spent several formative years in old Mexico, and the house he built, appearances be damned, was a mission-style hacienda. He even had the bricks specially textured and painted tan to resemble adobe. A damn-fool house to build in central Maine, people said, though they didn't say it to him.

Like all Whiting males, C.B. was a short man who disliked drawing attention to the fact, so the low-slung Spanish architecture suited him to a T. The furniture was of the sort used in model homes and trailers to give the impression of spaciousness; this optical illusion worked well enough except on those occasions when large people came to visit, and then the effect was that of a lavish dollhouse.

The hacienda—as C. B. Whiting always referred to it—was built on a tract of land the family had owned for several generations. The first Whitings of Dexter County had been in the logging business, and they'd gradually acquired most of the land on both sides of the Knox River so they could keep an eye on what floated by on its way to the ocean, some fifty miles to the southeast. By the time C. B. Whiting was born, Maine had been wired for electricity, and the river, dammed below Empire Falls at Fairhaven, had lost much of its primal significance. The forestry industry had moved farther north and west, and the Whiting family had branched out into textiles and paper and clothing manufacture.



Though the river was no longer required for power, part of C. B. Whiting's birthright was a vestigial belief that it was his duty to keep his eye on it, so when the time came to build his house, he selected a site just above the falls and across the Iron Bridge from Empire Falls, then a thriving community of men and women employed in the various mills and factories of the Whiting empire. Once the land was cleared and his house built, C.B. would be able to see his shirt factory and his textile mill through the trees in winter, which, in mid-Maine, was most of the year. His paper mill was located a couple miles upstream, but its large smokestack billowed plumes of smoke, sometimes white and sometimes black, that he could see from his back patio.

By moving across the river, C. B. Whiting became the first of his clan to acknowledge the virtue of establishing a distance from the people who generated their wealth. The family mansion in Empire Falls, a huge Georgian affair, built early in the previous century, offered fieldstone fireplaces in every bedroom and a formal dining room whose oak table could accommodate upwards of thirty guests beneath half a dozen glittering chandeliers that had been transported by rail from Boston. It was a house built to inspire both awe and loyalty among the Irish, Polish and Italian immigrants who came north from Boston, and among the French Canadians, who came south, all of them in search of work. The old Whiting mansion was located right in the center of town, one block from the shirt factory and two from the textile mill, built there on purpose, if you could believe it, by Whiting men who worked fourteen-hour days, walked home for their noon meal and then returned to the factory, often staying far into the night.

As a boy, C.B. had enjoyed living in the Whiting mansion. His mother complained constantly that it was old, drafty and inconvenient to the country club, to the lake house, to the highway that led south to Boston, where she preferred to shop. But with its extensive, shady grounds and its numerous oddly shaped rooms, it was a fine place to grow up in. His father, Honus Whiting, loved the place too, especially that only Whitings had ever lived there. Honus's own father, Elijah Whiting, then in his late eighties, still lived in the carriage house out back with his ill-tempered wife. Whiting men had a lot in common, including the fact that they invariably married women who made their lives a misery. C.B.'s father had fared better in this respect than most of his forebears, but still resented his wife for her low opinion of himself, of the Whiting mansion, of Empire Falls, of the entire backward state of Maine, to which she felt herself cruelly exiled from Boston. The lovely wrought iron gates and fencing that had been brought all the way from New York to mark the perimeter of the estate were to her the walls of her prison, and every time she observed this, Honus reminded her that he held the key to

those gates and would let her out at any time. If she wanted to go back to Boston so damn bad, she should just do it. He said this knowing full well she wouldn't, for it was the particular curse of the Whiting men that their wives remained loyal to them out of spite.

By the time their son was born, though, Honus Whiting was beginning to understand and privately share his wife's opinion, as least as it pertained to Empire Falls. As the town mushroomed during the last half of the nineteenth century, the Whiting estate gradually was surrounded by the homes of mill workers, and of late the attitude of the people doing the surrounding seemed increasingly resentful. The Whitings had traditionally attempted to appease their employees each summer by throwing gala socials on the family grounds, but it seemed to Honus Whiting that many of the people who attended these events anymore were singularly ungrateful for the free food and drink and music, some of them regarding the mansion itself with hooded expressions that suggested their hearts wouldn't be broken if it burned to the ground.

Perhaps because of this unspoken but growing animosity, C. B. Whiting had been sent away, first to prep school, then to college. Afterward he'd spent the better part of a decade traveling, first with his mother in Europe (which was much more to that good woman's liking than Maine) and then later on his own in Mexico (which was much more to his liking than Europe, where there'd been too much to learn and appreciate). While many European men towered over him, those in Mexico were shorter, and C. B. Whiting especially admired that they were dreamers who felt no urgency about bringing their dreams to fruition. But his father, who was paying for his son's globe-trotting, finally decided his heir should return home and start contributing to the family fortune instead of squandering as much as he could south of the border. Charles Beaumont Whiting was by then in his late twenties, and his father was coming to the reluctant conclusion that his only real talent was for spending money, though the young man claimed to be painting and writing poetry as well. Time to put an end to both, at least in the old man's view. Honus Whiting was fast approaching his sixtieth birthday, and though glad he'd been able to indulge his son, he now realized he'd let it go on too long and that the boy's education in the family businesses he would one day inherit was long overdue. Honus himself had begun in the shirt factory, then moved over to the textile mill, and finally, when old Elijah had lost his mind one day and tried to kill his wife with a shovel, took over the paper mill upriver. Honus wanted his son to be prepared for the inevitable day when he, too, would lose his marbles and assault Charles's mother with whatever weapon came to hand. Europe had not improved her opinion of himself, of Empire Falls or of Maine, as he had hoped it might. In his experience people were seldom happier for having

learned what they were missing, and all Europe had done for his wife was encourage her natural inclination toward bitter and invidious comparison.

For his part, Charles Beaumont Whiting, sent away from home as a boy when he would've preferred to stay, now had no more desire to return from Mexico than his mother had to return from Europe, but when summoned he sighed and did as he was told, much as he always had done. It wasn't as if he hadn't known that the end of his youth would arrive, taking with it his travels, his painting and his poetry. There was never any question that Whiting and Sons Enterprises would one day devolve to him, and while it occurred to him that returning to Empire Falls and taking over the family businesses might be a violation of his personal destiny as an artist, there didn't seem to be any help for it. One day, when he sensed the summons growing near, he tried to put down in words what he felt to be his own best nature and how wrong it would be to thwart his true calling. His idea was to share these thoughts with his father, but what he'd written sounded a lot like his poetry, vague and unconvincing even to him, and he ended up throwing the letter away. For one thing he wasn't sure his father, a practical man, would concede that anybody had a nature to begin with; and if you did, it was probably your duty either to deny it or to whip it into shape, show it who was boss. During his last months of freedom in Mexico, C.B. lay on the beach and argued the point with his father in his imagination, argued it over and over, losing every time, so when the summons finally came he was too worn out to resist. He returned home determined to do his best but fearing that he'd left his real self and all that he was capable of in Mexico.

What he discovered was that violating his own best nature wasn't nearly as unpleasant or difficult as he'd imagined. In fact, looking around Empire Falls, he got the distinct impression that people did it every day. And if you had to violate your destiny, doing so as a Whiting male wasn't so bad. To his surprise he also discovered that it was possible to be good at what you had little interest in, just as it had been possible to be bad at something, whether painting or poetry, that you cared about a great deal. While the shirt factory held no attraction for him, he demonstrated something like an aptitude for running it, for understanding the underlying causes of what went wrong and knowing instinctively how to fix the problem. He was also fond of his father and marveled at the little man's energy, his quick anger, his refusal to knuckle under, his conviction that he was always right, his ability to justify whatever course of action he ultimately chose. Here was a man who was either in total harmony with his nature or had beaten it into perfect submission. Charles Beaumont Whiting was never sure which, and probably it didn't matter; either way the old man was worth emulating.

Still, it was clear to C. B. Whiting that his father and grandfather had enjoyed the best of what Whiting and Sons Enterprises had to offer. The times were changing, and neither the shirt factory, nor the textile mill, nor the paper mill upriver was as profitable as all once had been. Over the last two decades there had been attempts to unionize all the factories in Dexter County, and while these efforts failed—this being Maine, not Massachusetts—even Honus Whiting agreed that keeping the unions out had proved almost as costly as letting them in would've been. The workers, slow to accept defeat, were both sullen and unproductive when they returned to their jobs.

Honus Whiting had intended, of course, for his son to take up residence in the Whiting mansion as soon as he took a wife and old Elijah saw fit to quit the earth, but a decade after C.B. abandoned Mexico, neither of these events had come to pass. C. B. Whiting, something of a ladies' man in his warm, sunny youth, seemed to lose his sex drive in frosty Maine and slipped into an unintended celibacy, though he sometimes imagined his best self still carnally frolicking in the Yucatán.

Perhaps he was frightened by the sheer prospect of matrimony, of marrying a girl he would one day want to murder.

Elijah Whiting, now nearing one hundred, had not succeeded in killing his wife with the shovel, nor had he recovered from the disappointment. The two of them still lived in the carriage house, old Elijah clinging to his misery and his bitter wife clinging to him. He seemed, the old man's doctor observed, to be dying from within, the surest sign of which was an almost biblical flatulence. He'd been turning the air green inside the carriage house for many years now, but all the tests showed that the old fossil's heart remained strong, and Honus realized it might be several years more before he could make room for his son by moving into the carriage house himself. After all, it would require a good year to air out even if the old man died tomorrow. Besides which, Honus's own wife had already made clear her intention never to move into the carriage house, and she lately had become so depressed by the idea of dying in Maine that he'd been forced to buy her a small rowhouse in Boston's Back Bay, where she claimed to have grown up, which of course was untrue. South Boston was where Honus had found her, and where he would have left her, too, if he'd had any sense. At any rate, when Charles came to him one day and announced his intention to build a house of his own and to put the river between it and Empire Falls, he understood and even approved. Only later, when the house was revealed to be a hacienda, did he fear that the boy might be writing poems again.

Not to worry. Earlier that year, C. B. Whiting had been mistaken for his father on the street, and that same evening, when he studied himself in the

*mirror, he saw why. His hair was beginning to silver, and there was a certain terrier-like ferocity in his eyes that he hadn't noticed before. Of the younger man who had wanted to live and die in Mexico and dream and paint and write poetry there was now little evidence. And last spring when his father had suggested that he run not only the shirt factory but also the textile mill, instead of feeling trapped by the inevitability of the rest of his life, he found himself almost happy to be coming more completely into his birthright. Men had starting calling him C.B. instead of Charles, and he liked the sound of it.*

WHEN THE BULLDOZERS began to clear the house site, a disturbing discovery was made. An astonishing amount of trash—mounds and mounds of it—was discovered all along the bank, some of it tangled among tree roots and branches, some of it strewn up the hillside, all the way to the top. The sheer volume of the junk was astonishing, and at first C. B. Whiting concluded that somebody, or a great many somebodies, had had the effrontery to use the property as an unofficial landfill. How many years had this outrage been going on? It made him mad enough to shoot somebody until one of the men he'd hired to clear the land pointed out that for somebody, or a great many somebodies, to use Whiting land for a dump, they would have required an access road, and there wasn't one, or at least there hadn't been until C. B. Whiting himself cut one a month earlier. While it seemed unlikely that so much junk—spent inner tubes, hubcaps, milk cartons, rusty cans, pieces of broken furniture and the like—could wash up on one spot naturally, the result of currents and eddies, there it was, so it must have. There was little alternative but to cart the trash off, which was done the same May the foundation of the house was being poured.

Spring rains, a rising river and a bumper crop of voracious black flies delayed construction, but by late June the low frame of the sprawling hacienda was visible from across the river where C. B. Whiting kept tabs on its progress from his office on the top floor of the Whiting shirt factory. By the Fourth of July the weather had turned dry and hot, killing off the last of the black flies, and the shirtless, sunburned carpenters straddling the hacienda roof beams began to wrinkle their noses and regard one another suspiciously. What in the world was that smell?

It was C. B. Whiting himself who discovered the bloated body of a large moose decomposing in the shallows, tangled among the roots of a stand of trees that had been spared by the bulldozer that they might provide shade and privacy from anyone on the Empire Falls side of the river who might be too curious about goings-on at the hacienda. Even more amazing than this carcass

was another mound of trash, which, though smaller than its carted-off predecessor, was deposited in the same exact area where a spit of land jutted out into the river and created in its lee a stagnant, mosquito- and now moose-infested pool.

The sight and smell of all this soggy, decomposing trash caused C. B. Whiting to consider the possibility that he had an enemy, and kneeling there on the bank of the river he scrolled back through his memory concerning the various men he, his father and his grandfather had managed to ruin in the natural course of business. The list was not short, but unless he'd forgotten someone, no one on it seemed the right sort. They were mostly small men of smaller means, men who might've shot him if the opportunity had presented itself—if, for instance, he'd wandered into their neighborhood tavern when they had a snoot full and happened to be armed. But this was a different quality of maliciousness. Somebody apparently believed that all the trash generated in Dexter County belonged on C. B. Whiting's doorstep, and felt sufficient conviction to collect all that garbage (no pleasant task) and transport it there.

Was the dead moose a coincidence? C.B. couldn't decide. The animal had a bullet hole in its neck, which could mean any number of things. Perhaps whoever was dumping the trash had also shot the moose and left it there on purpose. Then again, the animal could conceivably have been shot elsewhere by a poacher; in fact, an entire family of poachers, the Mintys, lived in Empire Falls. Maybe the wounded animal had attempted to cross the river, tired in the attempt, and drowned, coming to rest below the hacienda.

C. B. Whiting spent the rest of the afternoon on one knee only a few feet from the blasted moose, trying to deduce his enemy's identity. Almost immediately a paper cup floated by and lodged between the hind legs of the moose. The next hour brought a supermarket bag, an empty, bobbing Coke bottle, a rusted-out oil can, a huge tangle of monofilament fishing line and, unless he was mistaken, a human placenta. All of it got tangled up with the reeking moose. From where C. B. Whiting knelt, he could just barely see one small section of the Iron Bridge, and in the next half hour he witnessed half a dozen people, in automobiles and afoot, toss things into the river as they crossed. In his mind he counted the number of bridges spanning the Knox upstream (eight), and the number of mills and factories and sundry small businesses that backed onto the water (dozens). He knew firsthand the temptation of dumping into the river after the sun went down. Generations of Whitings had been flushing dyes and other chemicals, staining the riverbank all the way to Fairhaven, a community that could scarcely complain, given that its own textile mill had for decades exhibited an identical lack of regard for its

downstream neighbors. Complaints, C.B. knew, inevitably led to accusations, accusations to publicity, publicity to investigations, investigations to litigation, litigation to expense, expense to the poorhouse.

Still, this particular dumping could not be allowed to continue. A sensible man, Charles Beaumont Whiting arrived at a sensible conclusion. At the end of a second hour spent kneeling at the river's edge, he concluded that he had an enemy all right, and it was none other than God Himself, who'd designed the damn river in such a way—narrow and swift-running upstream, widening and slowing at Empire Falls—that all manner of other people's shit became Charles Beaumont Whiting's. Worse, he imagined he understood why God had chosen this plan. He'd done it, in advance, to punish him for leaving his best self in Mexico all those years ago and, as a result, becoming somebody who could be mistaken for his father.

These were unpleasant thoughts. Perhaps, it occurred to C.B., it was impossible to have pleasant ones so close to a decomposing moose. Yet he continued to kneel there, the river's current burbling a coded message he felt he was on the verge of comprehending. In truth, today's were not the first unpleasant thoughts he'd been visited by of late. Ever since he'd decided to build the new house, his sleep had been troubled by dreams that would awaken him several times a night, and sometimes he found himself standing at the dark window of his bedroom looking out over the grounds of the Whiting mansion with no memory of waking up and crossing the room. He had the distinct impression that the dream—whatever it had been about—was still with him, though its details had fled. Had he been in urgent conversation with someone? Who?

During the day, when his mind should've been occupied by the incessant demands of two factories' day-to-day operations, he often and absentmindedly studied the blueprints of the hacienda, as if he'd forgotten some crucial element. Last month, his attention had grown so divided that he'd asked his father to come down from the paper mill to help out one day a week, just until the house was finished. Now, down by the river, his thoughts disturbed, perhaps, by the proximity of rotting moose, he began to doubt that building this new house was a good idea. The hacienda, with its adjacent artist's studio, was surely an invitation to his former self, the Charles Beaumont Whiting—Beau, his friends had called him there—he'd abandoned in Mexico. And it was this Beau, it now occurred to him, with whom he'd been conversing in all those dreams. Worse, it was for this younger, betrayed self that he was building the hacienda. He'd been telling himself that the studio would be for his son, assuming he would one day be fortunate enough to have one. This much rebellion he'd allowed himself. The studio would be his gift to the boy, an

*implicit promise that no son of his would ever be forced by necessity or loyalty to betray his truest destiny. But of course, he now realized, all this was a lie. He'd wanted the studio for himself, or rather for the Charles Beaumont Whiting thought to be either dead or living a life of poetry and fornication in Mexico. Whereas he in fact was living a life of enforced duty and chastity in Empire Falls, Maine. On the heels of this stunning realization came another. The message the river had been whispering to him as he knelt there all afternoon was a single word of invitation. "Come," the water burred, unmistakable now. "Come . . . come . . . come . . ."*

*That very evening C. B. Whiting brought his father and old Elijah out to the building site. Up to this point he'd been secretive about the house without comprehending why. Now he understood. He and Honus sat his grandfather, who hadn't been out of the carriage house in a month, on a tree stump, where he instantly fell into a deep, restful, flatulent sleep, while C.B. showed his father in and around the frames and arches of the new house. Yes, he admitted, it was going to be some damn Mexican sort of deal. The detached structure, he explained, would be a guest house, which, in fact, he'd decided that afternoon, it would be. The river's invitation had scared him that badly. When they finished the tour of the hacienda, C. B. Whiting took his father down to the water's edge and showed him the mound of trash, which had grown since morning, and the moose, which had ripened further. From where they stood, C.B. could see both the moose and old Elijah still asleep but rising up on one cheek every now and then from the sheer force of his gas, and while C.B. couldn't reasonably hold himself responsible for either, he felt something rise in the back of his throat that tasted like self-loathing. Still, he told himself, the occasional flavor of self-recrimination on the back of the tongue was preferable to throwing away the work of his father's and grandfather's lifetimes, and he found himself regarding both men with genuine fondness, especially his father, whom he had always loved, and whose solid, practical, confident presence could be counted on to deliver him from his present funk.*

*"It's God, all right," Honus agreed, after C.B. had explained his theory about the enemy, and then they watched for a while as various pieces of detritus bobbed along in the current before coming to rest against the moose. The elder Whiting was a religious man who found God useful for explaining anything that was otherwise insoluble. "You better figure out what you're going to do about Him, too."*

*Honus suggested his son hire some geologists and engineers to study the problem and recommend a course of action. This turned out to be excellent advice, and the engineers, warned whom they might be up against, proved*



*meticulous. In addition to numerous on-site inspections, they analyzed the entire region on geological survey maps and even flew the length of the river all the way from the Canadian border to where it emptied into the Gulf of Maine. As rivers went, the Knox was one of God's poorer efforts, wide and lazy where it should have been narrow and swift, and the engineers concurred with the man who'd hired them that it was God's basic design flaw that ensured that every paper cup discarded between the border and Empire Falls would likely wash up on C. B. Whiting's future lawn. That was the bad news.*

*The good news was that it didn't have to be that way. Men of vision had been improving upon God's designs for the better part of two centuries, and there was no reason not to correct this one. If the Army Corps of Engineers could make the damn Mississippi run where they wanted it to, a pissant stream like the Knox could be altered at their whim. In no time they arrived at a plan. A few miles north and east of Empire Falls the river took a sharp, unreasonable turn before meandering back in the direction it had come from for several sluggish, twisting miles, much of its volume draining off into swampy lowlands north and west of town where legions of black flies bred each spring, followed by an equal number of mosquitoes in the summer. Seen from the air, the absurdity of this became clear. What water wanted to do, the engineers explained, was flow downhill by the straightest possible route. Meandering was what happened when a river's best intentions were somehow thwarted. What prevented the Knox from running straight and true was a narrow strip of land—of rock, really—referred to by the locals as the Robideaux Blight, an outcropping of rolling, hummocky ground that might have been considered picturesque if your purpose was to build a summer home on the bluff overlooking the river and not to farm it, as the land's owners had been bullheadedly attempting to do for generations. In the end, of course, rivers get their way, and eventually—say, in a few thousand years—the Knox would succeed in cutting its way through the meander.*

*C. B. Whiting was disinclined to wait, and he was buoyed to learn from his engineers that if the money could be found to blast a channel through the narrowest part of the Robideaux Blight, the river should be running straight and true within the calendar year, its increased velocity downstream at Whiting's Bend sufficient to bear off the vast majority of trash (including the odd moose), downstream to the dam in Fairhaven, where it belonged. In fact, C. B. Whiting's experts argued before the state in hastily convened, closed-door hearings that the Knox would be a far better river—swifter, prettier, cleaner—for all the communities along its banks. Further, with less of its volume being siphoned off into the wetlands, the state would benefit from the*