

It hit me like a kick in the heart.

What is the saying?--life is one damn thing after another, and love is two damned things after each other. Both parts pertained in the instant after Riley's double-barreled ambush, oh, did they ever. Bad enough to me, the prospect of Mariah going into marriage misadventure with Riley again. But on top of that, the searing feeling of simply her going. California is the American word for away, and I knew perfectly well the declension of it. As if by rote, a time or two a year a visit would be staged, daughter dutifully back for some ration of days

or father descending south to clutter up the routine there for a mutually uncomfortable span. Periodic phone calls, Hi there, how you doing?-Good enough, how about yourself?, because letters are not habit any more. But beyond such dabs of keeping in touch, absence across distance. The formula of the young for moving a life from what it came into the world attached to. No parent can say it is anything but the history of the race, tidally repeating, yet each time the pain comes new.

At least I wasn't alone in being caught off guard in the cardio quadrant. Mariah stared lidlessly past me and my strangled cheeseburger at the author of this remarriage proposal or marriage reproposal or whatever the hell it amounted to.

"I suppose this is a little bit of a surprise," Riley said around me to her in his ever sensitive fashion. Still leaning far forward onto the counter, he seemed poised to plunge as far as it would take to convince Mariah. Cupid's own daredevil, all of a goddamn sudden. "But why wait with it?" he charged onward. "Mariah, this Globe job is just what we want to make a fresh go at life. It's like winning the lottery when we didn't even know we had a ticket."

Blinking at last, Mariah made herself respond. "Quite a change of geography you've got in mind." Quite, yeah. Somehow Mariah California didn't have the same ring to it.

"But don't you see, that's just exactly why we ought to do it," Riley hurried to expound. "New territory, new jobs. New--"

"Jobuh," she placed into the record to rectify the a he'd plotched onto the word. "You're forgetting, the Glob only invited you."

"A shooter like you," Riley assured her in revivalist style but obviously also meant it, "can latch on in no time, at the Globe or somewhere else if you want. Or if you want a chance to free-lance, or to just do ~~you~~<sup>your</sup> photography for the sheer utter fun of it for a change, that's in the cards now too--bless their sunglassed little heads, the Globe's going to be paying me more than enough for both of us to live on. How's that for a deal, hmm?"

He paused to see how that went down with her. I eyed her too, but with a different question in mind. How Mariah could even entertain the notion of retying the knot with Riley was beyond me. I mean, after our too-green marriage blew up, you could not have paid me enough to get me

to marry Shirley a second time. Talk about double jeopardy. Yet here was this otherwise unfoolable daughter of mine, sitting there not saying no to this human bad penny, which pretty much amounted to a second yes by default.

By now Riley had backtracked to where he'd been heading before her reminder of job singularity. He could get wound up when he half tried.

"New us again, Mariah, and I don't only mean being married another time. By the time we get through with this series we'll have done about everything we can, and maybe then some, at the Montanian. First thing it'll be right back to me trying not to write the identical columns I did a year ago or five years ago or ten, and you'll be back at shooting Rotarians and traffic lights being fixed. The Zombies Return to the Dead Zone, is what it'll be."

A would-be luncher came in the door, took one look at the madly gesticulating figure with a different color in each eye, and went right back out.

"You know as well as I do it's a fucking wonder that the BB and the bean counters let us do something like these centennial pieces even

once in a hundred years," Riley resumed. "I've--"

"What about your perpetual book about Montana?" I thrust in on him.

"I was coming to that. I've finally savvied there isn't going to be any book. Every motherloving thing I know how to say about Montana, I've already put into the column or will put into this series." Back to his main audience, Mariah. "Okay, I grant that it's not quite the same for you and your camera. The one thing this state is always good for is to sit and have its picture taken. Photogenic as a baby's butt, that's ol' Montan'. But think what a change of scene would do for your work too, Mariah, hmm? Everygoddamnwhere we look here"--Riley made a wild arms-wide gesture as if to grasp Montana at each end and hold it steady for us to see--"somebody or someplace is just trying to hang on by the fingernails, trying to figure out how to make some kind of a go of it against all the odds--a climate that's forever too cold or too hot or too dry or too fucking something else, and never enough jobs and wages <sup>that're</sup> always too low and somebody else always setting the prices on crops and livestock, and the place full of bigshot assholes like the BB who think the state is their personal shooting gallery, and people like us can't

even do our work right without having to beg help from our relatives,  
and--"

The expression on me stopped him. "Look, Jick, if you don't want  
to hear this--"

"Who says I don't want to hear it? Rant on."

He did worse, though. He looked squarely at Mariah and as if  
breaking the news to her said quietly:

"Montana is a great place to live, but it's no place to spend a  
life."

I couldn't just sit there and take that. "What, you for Christ's  
sake think California is the--"

"California," Riley overrode me, "is America as it goddamn is, like  
it or don't. Nutso one minute and not so the next. Mariah, this is a  
chance to go on up, in what we do. I know you want to be all the shooter  
~~'How good is there, 'hmm?'~~  
you can, just as I want to be all the writer I can. To do that we've  
got to get out of a place that has <sup>as many</sup> ~~all the~~ lids on it this one does."

Ardent as a smitten schoolboy, he reached for what to say and found:

"There's just more, well, hell, more California than there is Montana to

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the world any more."

"We'll count up after the earthquake and see," I put in just as rabidly.

Riley's eyes and mine held. Good God Almighty, how had I misread him yet again these past weeks? All the while I was fretting about Mariah drifting toward him, he was cascading back into infatuation with her. He hadn't been just having a randy night in Chinook, he was all too genuinely putting himself into that motel prance with Mariah. This goddamn Wright. You couldn't even rely on him to be deceitful.

From my other hemisphere Mariah was saying: "Riley, are you really sure about all this, I mean, California and. . .all? An hour ago we were both scared to a dry pucker that the BB was going to can us, and now you're--we're the ones deciding to pack up and pull out?"



"Life happens fast when it gets rolling," Riley coined. "And we can't possibly go as wrong the second time married as we did the first, right?" He must have noticed me opening my mouth to say not necessarily-- World War Two had followed World War One, hadn't it?--for he rapidly resorted to: "Or maybe let's just start the count from now instead of then." He dropped his voice into the rich tone of an announcer: "Together again, for the first time!"

There was a moment of threefold silence then, the two of them regarding each other past me as I perched there stewing.

"So?" Riley at last inquired. He gawked at the floor ostentatiously enough to draw the cafe owner's attention. "Do I have to get down on one knee? I kind of hate to, given Gyp's housekeeping."

"No," Mariah answered tightly. "I heard it all right from where you are." She put her hand on my arm as if to say wait, don't go, as though I was the one invited off to the land of quakes and flakes instead of her. Then she went around me and gave Riley a kiss that would have fused furnace metal.

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The Bago by now could almost guide itself in the groove it had worn



into this part of the universe, to Missoula and from Missoula, and the next day I drove rather absently, letting the motorhome and the freeway hum away the miles together while everything else was on my mind.

In the passenger seat Mariah too seemed to be on automatic, watching the weather--more rain; the spigot this ~~summer~~<sup>year</sup> seemed to be stuck open instead of closed--and the country as we headed east, past Drummond, past Garrison, the twin

paths of the freeway swinging south through the tan Deer Lodge valley and then ~~inexorably~~<sup>reverting</sup> east again, halving Butte into its old hillside mining section and the shopping malls on the flats below, all the route until then ~~having been~~ a running start up to Homestake Pass and the Continental Divide; and quickly across and down to the headwaters of the Missouri, past Three Forks, and onward through the fine fields of the Gallatin Valley, past Bozeman, past the Bridger Mountains. I noticed that all the while her camera stayed inactive.

Those road hours Riley spent at writing something--not a Montanian piece, because he and Mariah hadn't talked one over--the pucka pucka

rhythm of his laptop as intermittent as the mileposts rolling past.

~~the seasons~~  
 . . . In ~~that season~~ before the chinook, hunting magpies with  
our .22s my brother and I played at being Lewis and Clark along  
the swift small river they named for one of the enlisted men of  
their expedition. A captaincy apiece, we insisted on--neither  
of us ever bothering to imagine back into 1806 to be a startled  
and proud Private Shields putting his footprints beside water  
that still carries his name--for boys settle for momentary glory. . . .

Not until just beyond Livingston, when he let me know "It's this exit" and I swung the Bago north onto the suddenly thinner route of Highway 89 up the Shields River, did Riley put aside his wordbox and join the other two of us in watching the land.

The Shields River country was a new Montana to me. Accustomed as I was to the Two country's concentrated force of the Rocky Mountain Front along a single skyline, here I was surprised by piles of mountain ranges in all directions--the Absarokas to the south, the Castle range to the north, both the Bridger and the Big Belt ranges to the west, and to the east, over Riley's home ground, the high and solitary range called

the Crazy Mountains.

My pair of passengers stayed as mute as the ~~abrupt~~ <sup>ranges of stone.</sup> ~~Crazies.~~ Neither Riley nor Mariah looked forward to this chore, as I could readily understand. I was not, however, what could be called sympathetic. This reunification notion they had mutually lapsed into still seemed to me as crazy as those mountains up there. My one ray of hope was that the two of them at least hadn't hotfooted it off from Gyp's lunch counter yesterday to the marriage license bureau. "If we're going to do this California thing," Mariah had managed to stipulate when the kissing let up, "let's do it all new down there. Get married there, I mean."

Riley pretended to count the weeks to Globhood on his fingers, then consented. "I guess I can stand that. Maybe a change of preachers is a good idea anyway."

There in Missoula when the love doves eventually had to find their way back to the matter of the centennial series, something did develop that made me perk up. →

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After a final swig from his beer bottle and futile reconnaissance for any more french fries, Riley popped out with: "I dread to, but you know what I better do? Swing by the home place on our way east and break the news there."

Mariah gave her head a little toss and regarded him with extreme steadiness. "Break the news? You make it sound like a car accident."

"Joke, J-O-Q-U-E, joke!" Riley protested, but I had my doubts and quite possibly Mariah did too. However, there in Gyp's she let him get away with the explanation that he'd of course meant the news of the California job, the kind of thing that took a little getting used to for parents, sorry to say--with an ever so innocent glance in my direction.

Now Riley had me turn east off 89 at Clyde Park and head straight for the Crazies. The Shields River valley must have been a kind of basket of good ground, because there was farming right up to the base of the mountains. Nice tidy ranches, of the cattle variety, were regular along the road.

The Wright family's ranch was up on a last ledge of fields before the Crazy Mountains stood like vast long tents of white. The place

could be read at a glance as prosperous--the original clapboard house with a pleasant porch all the way across its front, the newer lower domicile where Riley's brother's family lived, the white-painted cattle sheds and pens, the nice grass of the tightly fenced pastures beyond. Country this orderly, you did wonder how it produced a guy like Riley.

Who, as we approached the driveway, cleared his throat and suggested to Mariah, "It might be best if you let me break the--tell about us."

She said with forced brightness, "Okay, sure, words are your department, aren't they."

I became aware of a heavy stare from Riley. "Who, me? I wouldn't even dream of depriving you of the chance to make the same wedding announcement twice in the same lifetime," I reassured him. "Besides, it ought to be highly interesting to hear."

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A yappity pup careened across the yard to challenge the Bago.

I braked just in time to keep him from becoming a pup pancake.

The canine commotion brought a woman out onto the porch <sup>of the older house.</sup> Plentiful without being plump, in blue jeans ageworn to maximum comfort and a red-checked shirt with a yoke of blue piping in emphasis across the chest, she still was wearing her hair in a summer hank--it sheened whiter than gray, grayer than white--more abbreviated than a ponytail, to keep it off her neck in back. Somewhat leathered and weathered, she nonetheless had a well-preserved appearance; time simply paid its respects to a face like that. She stood deliberating at the motorhome while the kiwi chorus of the pup reached new crescendoes, until Riley slid back the sidewindow and yelled out, "Call off your dogpack, Mother, we're relatively peaceful."

"Here, Manslaughter," she spoke to the barking guardian and patted a denim thigh for him to come to her. By now the woman had recognized Mariah's red hair as well as Riley's vocal presence and she came down off the porch striding quickly, in a kind of aimed glide, toward the Winnebago as if she had something vital to deliver. But when the Montanian duo stepped out of the motorhome, followed by me, Riley's mother halted a good distance away and somehow managed to gaze from

one to the other of them and both of them at once while saying  
diagnostically, "I saw by your performances in the paper that you two  
are tangled together again."

Riley, trust him, cupped a hand to his ear and asked, "Did I hear  
a 'hello' or was that thunder?" Then he braced on over as if doing  
a major favor by delivering a kiss to his matriarch.

"It would help, Riley, it really would, if you'd keep me informed  
as to when you're on speaking terms with her"--his mother gazed indicatively  
straight at Mariah--"so I can stay in step. Couldn't you have it  
announced on the radio or something?"

A watcher of this didn't have to be rocket-swift to pretty speedily  
realize that Riley's mother had as much peeve built up at Mariah as I  
did at Riley and for the one and same reason, the crash of their marriage.  
Why this surprised me any I don't know--just one more case of an in-law  
flopped into an outlaw--but it did.

Mar<sup>d</sup>iah looked like she'<sup>X</sup> rather be juggling hot coals, but she said  
to the silver-haired woman, "We maybe both better get in practice on our  
terms, how about."

Riley's mother eyed my daughter skeptically. Then perhaps registering the echo of McCaskill boneline in Mariah's form and my own over Mariah's shoulder, she cast her first full look at me. A moment was required to decipher me under the beard and then her eyes went wide.

"Jick!" she let out with her blaze of smile. "Hello again."

"'Lo, Leona."

Half a century it had been, since I first said that. Since Leona Tracy, as she was then, all but married my brother Alec.

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I cannot say that oldest storm from the past swept through me again, as I stood now in the yard of Leona Wright's ranch, because the memory of that summer of 1939 has never really been out of me. The June evening it began, when just at suppertime at our English Creek ranger station Alec and Leona rode in, I can recall to the very sound of the quick extra stick of firewood being rattled into the stove by my mother as she set at generating an already-cooked ~~supper~~<sup>meal</sup> for three into ample for five. Looking up from the Forest Service paperwork he'd been trying to contend with, my father watched through the window as my brother and the goldhaired girl, the fondest of arms around each other as they ambled, crossed the yard from their saddlehorses. "Glued together at the hip, those two," he reported.

"Safer that way than face to face," my mother stated.

He looked around at her, startled. She always could surprise him more than he cared to admit. Then Alec and Leona arrived, more like alit, into the kitchen with the other three of us, and the summer of war began. For it was during that suppertime, well before the butterscotch meringue pie that I'd been dreamily counting on for dessert, when Alec announced

that he and she intended to be married, that the college years and engineering career my parents had foreseen for him were nowhere in his picture, that he was staying on as a wage hand at the Double W until he and Leona could afford a preacher and a bed ~~and a roof~~ that fall.

Nineteen years old, him, and seventeen, her, and they believed they had all the answers to my father's increasingly biting questions, to my mother's clamped silence which was worse than her saying something.

Admittedly, that was not the first blowup ever to occur within our family, but the one that happened that night with the TNT of Leona added in knocked the absolute socks off us all. In my not quite fifteen years of life until then, there had been what I assumed was the natural McCaskill order of behavior--occasional eruption under our roof but always followed by a cooling down, a way found to overlook or bypass or amend, to go on in each other's company, which seemed to me the root definition of a family.

But then and there, with lightning suddenness my brother had gone into bitter exile. And never lived long enough, due to war, to retrace his way from it.

The preamble to all that was Leona. I suppose her beauty simply ran away with itself, spun beyond the control of the teen girl she was. That spring of 1939 she'd dropped Earl Zane--not that I can fault anyone for choosing a McCaskill over a Zane any day of the week--and her romance with Alec got hot and heavy in a hurry. Maybe he was overly taken with the, what can ~~it~~<sup>they</sup> be called, natural resources of a seventeen-year-old beauty. But there was always this about it: Leona could have switched Alec onto simmer merely by telling him she wanted to finish high school that next year, that they'd do well to see how their passion stood up across a couple of seasons. She did not say such, or at least did not say it until late in the summer--too late--after Alec had declared independence from our family and could not bring himself to retreat. Shape it as fairly as I can and it still comes out that my brother got hit coming and going by Leona Tracy, first bowled over by her and then left flat in the dust of her change of mind.

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Leona Wright, as she faced me now. It costs nothing to be civil and I had managed to be so the time or two I'd crossed paths with her in our grown lives, at Gros Ventre's town centennial where Mariah and Riley first veered to each other, then at their eventual wedding, and did again here, to the best of my power, as she said how sorry she'd been to hear about Marcella's death. That over, I drew into the background ~~again~~—Riley and Mariah were all but tooting with impatience—but couldn't help studying the once girl of gold who had gone silver. ~~At her peak, so to speak, Leona filled a blouse to the spilling point.~~ As the younger onlooker during Alec's courtship, I'd regarded the Leona of then as the bearer of the eighth and ninth wonders of the world. Now she was stouter with the years, weatherlines at her eyes and mouth, but still a highly noticeable woman.



And still a formidable smiler. Her face stayed wreathed in what seemed utmost pleasure even as she swiftly got down to basics with her visitational son. "What's the occasion? Have you used up all the rest of Montana in what you've been writing?"

The pup was running himself dizzy in circles around us. For his part, Riley looked like he was being rushed to his own hanging. Nor did confession seem to be good for the soul in this case, for he didn't appear any less uncomfortable after his recital of: "Mother, I'm switching jobs. They're giving me a column."

Leona lifted one silver eyebrow. "I thought you already have a column."

"This one's located in California."

Had the mother of Riley deigned to glance in the direction of her ex-daughter-in-law just then, the expression on Mariah would have told the rest of it, somewhat to the tune of And if you think that's something to swallow, chomp on the news that your son and I are going to get married again, you old bat. But Leona only gazed at Riley and switched to another smile, a measure of sadness in this one, before saying: "In California? Riley, is that supposed to be an improvement?"

An evening such as this, with the peaks and fields of the Shields

River country as fetching as Switzerland, a person did have to be more than a little screwloose to talk about living anywhere else.

Riley drew in a mighty breath and performed his explanati on to Leona that at the Globe he'd have twice as many readers as the ~~total~~<sup>entire</sup> population of Montana, that the salary there made the Montanian look like the two-bit outfit it was--I waited for him to get to the part about California being a better Petri dish of the world than Montana is, but he never did.

Mariah most notably was waiting too, for her rebetrothed to find his way around to that other announcement. Her earrings, sizable silver hoops, swung constantly, as if sieving the air, while she intently followed Riley's words and Leona's if-a-mother-won't-be-kind-about-this-who-will? mode of listening.

The declaimant still was on California and not yet even in the remote vicinity of matrimony, however, when ecstatic yips from the Manslaughter pooch directed attention to a heftier version of Riley making his way across the yard from the new house to our powwow.

"Hey there, Morg, you're just in time for the family reunion,"

Riley greeted him in what was at least distraction if not relief.

Giving Mariah a nod of surprised recognition and me a more general

one, the other responded in a tone that eerily echoed Riley's voice,  
 "What's going on, Riler?"

I could see Riley barely resisting some crack such as Don't beat  
beat around the bush that way, Morg, just come right out and ask. He  
 somehow forbore and resorted to manners instead. "Jick, you ever meet  
 my brother Morgan? This is none other."

Morgan Wright and I shook hands and mutually murmured, "How you  
 doing?" As soon as that was ~~over~~<sup>accomplished,</sup> Riley repeated his bulletin about  
 going to the job in California.

Morgan stood spraddled, thumbs alone showing from the weather-worn  
 hands parked in his front pockets, as though it might take all the time  
 in the universe to hear this matter out. Then he asked Riley with concern,  
 "Has California voted on this statewide yet?" which proved to me they  
 were full-blooded brothers.

With a merry growl the pup at this point attacked <sup>a</sup> ~~the~~ cuff of  
 Mariah's bluejeans in a spontaneous tug of war. Standing on the besieged  
 leg as methodically as a heron, Mariah lifted her other foot behind her  
 and gave Manslaughter a firm crosskick in his furry little ribs. The  
 pup let out a surprised wuh! and backed off to regard her with abrupt

respect.

The Wright family conclave didn't even notice, what with Riley giving Morgan the whys and wherefores of California while Leona took it all in again with the same regretful smile. Suddenly she turned toward Mariah and me as if utmost revelation had hit home. Mariah tensed defiantly, and I confess even I braced a little in genetic sympathy, before Leona said urgently:

"Have you had supper?"

For whatever reason, Leona addressed that straight to me, as though the two of us were still responsible for the care and feeding of these giant tykes, her Riley and my Mariah.

"Naw, but that's okay, we'll nuke us up some frozen dinners in the Bago, it'll only take--"

"You will not, John Angus McCaskill," she said in the distinctive Leona voice. "You'll come in the house and have something decent."

I do have to say, the venison steaks and new potatoes with milk gravy and fresh biscuits with honey and garden-pea salad with tiny dices of cheese that Leona served up to us will never be equaled by anything

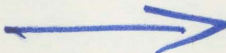


under tinfoil.

During food, which I have always liked to believe is inspirational, I finally ~~figured~~<sup>figured</sup> out Riley's case of topical lockjaw. The expression on him, which I can only liken to the look of the proverbial man in such crisis he didn't know whether to shit or go blind, I knew I had seen before, but when? Twice, actually. Most recently, there in the Medicine Lodge at the centennial committee meeting when he realized I'd sprung Good Help Hebner on him. But more vitally, that day of spring three years ago, when Riley palely delivered himself to the sheepshed beside Noon Creek to tell me he and Mariah had broken up.

Could it be, though? Such a garden-variety emotion behind Riley's evidently extreme quandary? A diagnosis can be simple yet complete. No, I now knew: more than anything, more than fear, fire, flood or blood, Riley Wright hated to look like a sap.

Hoo hoo hoo. Because that condition inevitably awaited him here, whichever guise he chose to put on. Trotting around with an ex-wife, as though he couldn't get away from the situation Mariah represented, plainly stood out to Leona as highly sappy. But the instant he tried explaining that Mariah and he



now saw the error of their divorce, Leona naturally enough would want to know why they wadded up their marriage in the first place then--and what answer was there to that but sappiness?

Meanwhile as Riley in his flummoxed state awaited some magical moment when Leona would welcome a defunct daughter-in-law back to her homey bosom, Mariah maintained a silence astonishing to me. I would have bet hard money this daughter of mine could not keep her lips hermetically sealed for this length of time under this amount of provocation.

By the time we had supped and pied and coffeed and been shoosed into the living room by Leona, quite a number of moments passed but none of them were noticeably magical between Leona and Mariah.

The closest came when Leona said with extreme neutrality, "I've been seeing your pictures in the paper. What was that one of the girl's head in a beer glass?"

Oh, for the simple green jealousy of that Kimi night, hmm, Mariah? She stiffly informed her once and future mother-in-law, "That's what's called an interpretive shot."

Leona looked as if she agreed that it needed interpretation, all right.

I was needing to divide my attention between the living room contestants and outside, because through the big picture window toward the Crazy Mountains I could see a palomino horse frisking in a pasture next to the cattle lot. Beautiful lightish thing there in the dusk, its mane blowing like flax. Morgan Wright long since had excused himself from us by saying that as much as he hated to miss any further details of Riley's future, he and his Mrs. had to go in to a centennial committee meeting tonight in Clyde Park. (I told him there was an awful epidemic of that going around.) Even if that ostensible master of this ranch had been on hand, Morgan was not the one I would have asked about that horse. Somehow I knew that lovely bright mare could only be Leona's.

"So do you still ride?" I inquired, then wished I had the sentence back to makings, because that way of putting it also asked or has age caught up with you too much?

"Some," Leona replied, her eyes following the path of mine to the

palomino but no smile finding her face this time, just a considering look. "When we're moving cattle I still help out. I tell Morgan that when I can't ride any more he may as well haul me to the dump."

The entire fifty years previous I would have thought, of course that is the case; Leona Tracy Wright was put into this world to enhance its saddle ponies with her golden--and later, silver--form, and when time ended that it indeed might as well conclude her, too. Life is temporary, after all, and the girl version of Leona had gone down its road at full gallop. But here on this ranch, on Leona's earned earth, I was beginning to see what more there was to her than that. The perfection of fencelines and thrifty pastures and leisurely cattle in the dusk, butterfat fat--she and the late Herb Wright must have worked like twin furies to build such an enterprise. And she had stayed on in evident working partnership with Morgan. And she had endured a decade or so of aloneness since her husband's death, a sum I found enormous after my, what, eight or nine months since Marcella's passing.

Still. Her icepick treatment of Alec, and all it led to. Would some version of our McCaskill civil war have happened anyway, between Alec and my parents, between Alec and me--a brother outgrowing the other

or one staying with the logic of bloodline while the second felt the need to yank free--even if Leona had not been blondly there to precipitate it? Possibly, quite possibly. We are a family that can be kind of stiffbacked. But Leona was who precipitated it, and the best I have ever been able to do with that fact is to keep a silence about it. Plainly enough Leona, by lack of mention to Riley and Mariah when they first met, when it would have been the easiest chance ever to say Isn't this funny, how? I used to go with a McCaskill myself, but we..., she herself wanted nothing said of that long-ago fling with Alec, of the McCaskill family mess it caused.

My pondering along these lines was interrupted by simultaneous blurts:

"Leona. Riley and I--"

"Mother. Mariah and I--"

The annunciatory pair also halted in the same breath, each tongue waiting for the other to do the deed.

"Maybe you want to take turns at it," I suggested, "a syllable or so at a time."

Riley scowled at me and huffed that that wouldn't be necessary, and as if he was reciting from memory a manual on dismantling bombs, he apprised his mother that he and Mariah had nuptial intentions again.

Even Leona couldn't come up with any kind of smile to cover her reaction to this.

"But then why ever did you--" she of course launched, causing Mariah and Riley to concurrently roll their total of three gray eyes and one blue one. I'd already done the route Leona was raking them along, so I gazed again at the outer world. The pup Manslaughter went tearing across the yard in pursuit of a magpie fifty feet above his head.

When his mother's invocation of their breakup was completed, Riley in turn lodged the protest, "That's neither here nor there." Which when you think about <sup>it</sup> was a sappy remark even for Riley. The point exactly was the attempted union of him and Mariah there, in the none too distant past, and now here again; the two of them just wouldn't not let the goddamn notion go away.

"Okay, now everybody knows," Mariah surprisingly broke her self-imposed silence to summarize. "Why don't we talk about religion, sex, or baseball instead?"

"California," Leona uttered, as if that fit the bill for an extreme topic. "I have trouble imagining you there, Mariah."

"Maybe I'll get used to it," Mariah answered edgily.

"Neither one of you got used to your marriage the first time, though,"

Leona essayed. "I'm curious--aren't you, Jick?" Downright purple with it, although I didn't say anything because Leona was doing just fine.

I could see where Riley got his knack for getting under the skin. Leona

studied the uneasy pair of intendeds with ~~relentless~~<sup>boundless</sup> interest and concern.

as she asked, "What's going to be different this time?"

"This time we'll know better than to both get mad for more than a month at a time," Riley floundered out.

"Leona," Mariah decided to try, "maybe Riley and I <sup>g</sup> did go ape, a little bit, in that divorce. You're welcome to blame me, if you want." At least that would balance things across family lines, given my attitude toward Riley. "But that doesn't change our getting back together," Mariah went on at a rattling pace. "This centennial trip

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has made us feel we want to stay that way." She snapped her head around to Riley so quickly <sup>g</sup> her earrings blurred. "Right?"

"Could scarcely have said it better myself," the wordsmith corroborated.

All of a sudden, from somewhere rang out a little ding and then a man's voice, as cultured as caviar, intoning: "Kahk vasheh eemya ee otchestvo?"





Riley, pretty much goosed up anyway even before this vocal development, ~~catapulted~~ ~~sprang~~ out of his chair. "Who the f--?"

His mother flapped a hand at him and instructed, "Shush now, Riley, I've only got ten seconds to answer in." <sup>#</sup> Now Leona could be seen to be concentrating with every mental fiber, her thumb and forefinger pinching together in an intent little o as if practicing to pluck from the air.

Then she threw her head back and recited firmly: "Ya Leeona Meekhylovna." <sup>eg</sup>

"The question in Russian was," the celestial male voice resumed, 'What is your first name and your patronymic?' If you were not able to translate it and answer in the allotted ten seconds, please do so now."

Leona smiled triumphantly and marched across the room to snap off a tape player and a gizmo plugged in beside it. "I set the lessons on a timer," she explained, "to catch me by surprise. It seems more lifelike, that way."

Riley gazed at her as if counting slowly to himself. After what maybe was an allotted ten seconds, he began: "Mother,"--

"Mahts," she promptly identified for him.

"Whatever. In plain English, in little words so I can <sup>try to</sup> get this--  
what are you doing studying Russian?"

"We're Sisters of Peace," Leona informed her son. He continued to look at her as if she'd declared she was Queen of the Williewisps.

"Our women's club here ~~in~~ <sup>along</sup> the valley, it's our centennial project," Leona went on. "We're a sister group to women like ourselves in Moscow. Mus kvah."

Kind of needlessly, it seemed to me, Riley did check: "I take it you don't mean the one in Idaho."

"Spoof if you want," Leona responded in a ~~tone~~ <sup>style</sup> that suggested he'd be better off not to. "I just thought it would be nice. To know how they talk. We're going to send them a videotape of the Clyde Park centennial day doings--Jeff is going to our cameraman." Leona looked over at Mariah as if just remembering her existence. "Cameraperson." I was recalling that Jeff must be Morgan's son--hard to think of anybody having Riley for an uncle. "I volunteered to learn enough to say a few things to them in Russian, on it," Leona went on as if Cyrillic from Clyde Park made perfect sense. I confess, in spectating Riley's

reaction to his mother the sexagenarian rookie linguist and Mariah's reaction to her and him, I'd lost track--maybe it did.

"My mother the peacenik!" Riley gabbled to Mariah in some mix of being perplexed and resigned and wary and proud.

"Mmm," Mariah responded ever so neutrally.

"I might as well be doing something with myself," Leona concluded.

"I have the time, after all." She smiled around at the three of us in equal allotments, her blue eyes steady within the <sup>fine</sup>wrinkles reaching in at their corners, then soberly focused on Riley and Mariah again. "Where are you headed next?" Her inquiry could just as well have meant what next plateau of folly they aspired to after remarriage and California, but that son of hers chose to answer in Bagonaut terms, that we'd wheel east from here, out into the big open of Montana away from the ~~ranges~~

ranges of the Rockies. Both he and Mariah, I was sorry to see, were beginning to look like they might survive this evening after all.

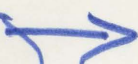
I let Riley finish with <sup>the</sup>travel orientation and start to make what he obviously hoped were evening-ending indications. Then I spoke what I hoped were going to be the magical seven words.

"Whyn't you ride along with us, Leona?"

Leona looked pleasantly startled. Mariah looked as if I'd invited a Tartar into the tent. Riley looked as if I'd poleaxed him.

"I mean it," I went on cheerfully. Did I ever. There was no forgiving Leona ~~her~~ that hurtful yearling romance with Alec and the consequences it walloped the McCaskills with, but this was no time to be pouty about that. What needed priority was the situation here in the room with us. Riley already was plainly provoked; he was in for a lot more aggravation if I had anything to do with it. I'd had my say, such as it was, to Mariah and this secondhand swain of hers after their Chinook night of ecstasy, hadn't I? A steady stout dose of Leona couldn't hurt as the next remedy to try on them, could it? "Come see some country," I spieled to her with enthusiasm. "I can guarantee you this about it, traveling with Riley and Mariah is the kind of experience you never even dreamed of before. Besides"--I couldn't help giving Mariah an innocent look--"you can't beat the price. The newspaper's paying for it all."

"What a kind offer, Jick. But I'd just be in the way," Leona demurred with a dazzling thanks-anyway smile.

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I assured her, "No more so than me." Quite possibly more effectively so, though. "These offspring of ours keep awful busy with each other," I sped on. "At what they're doing, I mean. Majority of the time, Leona, the two of them more than likely won't even notice you're around." Interesting that my tongue was capable of stretching itself so. The last person not to notice Leona must have been blind, deaf and on the other side of a lead door.



"You wouldn't mind, really?" Leona swung like a turret to the newspaper pair.

"No, no, no," Mariah managed with a swallow. "Not a bit."

"Entirely up to you and the Bagomaster, Mother," Riley got out, cutting me a now you've gone and done it glare from the corner of his blue eye.

"Jick?" Leona addressed me as if I was the next question. "This will teach you to make an offer like that."

# \_\_\_\_\_

"Snoose Syvertsen," Leona announced out of nowhere as the Bago purred past the Crazy Mountains and eastward along the Yellowstone River.

"You remember him, don't you, Riley?"

Directly behind me at his writing station in the kitchen nook, where his laptop output was sounding slim ~~and sporadic~~ this morning, Riley grumpily confirmed he remembered.

McCaskills in the forward seats and Wrights amidship, we had embarked down the Shields River valley from Leona's ranch an hour or so before.

Outside, the day for once was rainless and fresh, the clawed-out peaks of the Crazies as clear as could be in dazzling first snow. Weather within the motorhome, though, was heavy and electrical, just as I'd hoped. In the passenger seat Mariah was noticeably squirmy and kept her eyes resolutely on the Yellowstone River as if seeking a spot deep enough to sink a mother-in-law in, while Riley, as I say, was promisingly grumpy.

"Snoose was our choreboy a while, years back," Leona not unnaturally chose me as audience, "until he started herding sheep for a Big Timber outfit out on these flats. He'd go in to Livingston a couple of times a year to drink up his wages and whenever anybody asked him where he herded, he'd point off in this direction past the mountains and say, 'East of Crazy.'"

I chuckled and commentated, "At least the guy had his bearings," as if there were others in our vicinity, such as directly behind me and immediately beside me, who did not.

"I didn't get around to asking last night, Jick," Leona's words kept wafting distinctively to me as I drove. Hers was what I can only call

a woodsmoke voice. It came as if tracing its way through the air to you, certain wisps more pungent than others. A voice, it had always seemed to me, that perfectly well knew it could embody as casually as it cared to because main attention would ever be on Leona's fierier attractions. So in essence, the listening side of a conversation with Leona was a matter of catching her drift. "Sheep," I heard loft from her now. "You're still running them, are you?"

"Still am," I admitted. "After about forty years they kind of get to be a habit."

"Morgan has us running breeds of cattle I've hardly even heard of," came her comparable report. "Red Angus, and some Simmentals. He figures we've got to try different kinds every so often to see how they'll do."

Yes, I thought savagely, that is the very thing a ranch needs: a Morgan Wright to dab around with new notions, to try out new fashions of livestock and crops. To put fresh muscle into the land. Which is exactly what my ranch has had no prospect of ever since Leona's other son, the goddamn one behind me at that moment, turned down my offer.



429A

"I'm surprised Riley hasn't brought you home some buffalo from Moiese to raise for hood ornaments," I lobbed over my shoulder.

"Buffalo?" Leona asked, puzzled, looking back and forth from me to her determinedly utterly silent son.

"Riley can explain it to you sometime when he's got his tongue in gear," I said. "Rest area coming up," I noted the announcing blue sign ahead by the side of the Interstate, "everybody get in the mood."



Riley was so ticked off at me that he violated the first principle of freeway lavatories: don't pass up any chance to go. I hummed off by myself to the men's side and on into the ~~toilet~~ stall while Mariah and Leona, as silent toward each other as nuns with a vow, betook themselves into their side of the pleasant bungalow-sized brick convenience. So far, so good, on this Leona deal. Riley already was significantly twitching. Keep applying his mother to one end of him and his ex-wife fiancée to the other and maybe he'd bail out to California early just to rescue his nerves. My definite hunch was that nothing, no known force, could peel Mariah away from finishing the centennial series; so if Riley called it quits, while she refused to--second thoughts about mashing their lives together again might be seeded right there, mightn't they? At least it gave me a somewhat promising prospect to mull while I had to be sat.

Walls in a public facility have their own topics they're insistent on, though. I could not help but notice, in fairly neat small penciling



directly in front of me on the stall door, one lone unillustrated epistle among the various anatomy lessons and scenarios. Leaning forward as much as was prudent, I just could read:

The debris of hubris is the chassis of genesis.

I was contemplating my way through that when footsteps arrived.



# "What'd we ever do before all these rest areas?" came a voice entering.

"Just turn loose alongside the road? You know what they say, though.

'Pee by the side of the road and you get a sty in your eye.' But I don't remember that many styes, do you?"

"What all I don't remember would fill Hell's phone book," testified the other. As the duo zeroed in on the urinals, peeking under the stall wall as best I could I saw identical <sup>sets of</sup> streamline-striped jogging shoes-- both pair of which, I would bet, were off the same sale table <sup>the</sup> at ~~K~~ Mart-- blossoming out the bottom of very veteran blue jeans; by the sounds of their voices, these guys aged radically pore by pore upward from those zippy shoes.

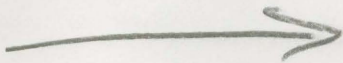
"Hullo, what've we got here?" the first voice was saying. "Somebody left us a love note."

"I hope like the dickens it don't say, 'Smile, you're on Candid Camera.'"

"No. Huh. Huh. I'll be damned."

"Ain't that something, though? How do you suppose people get theirselves into the fixes they manage to?"

Whatever they were reading above the waterworks had not caught my eye on my way in, but it seemed to be



something fairly sensational, because now several other guys were arriving--they were all of a group, at least from the evidence of universal speedstreak jogging shoes--and the note was the immediate topic of roundhouse debate.

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not break  
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"It says what? I never heard of no such thing." "Take a look for yourself, would you." "Let me get my reading specs on here--any more I can't tell whether I'm on page nine or it's something by Paganini." "Suppose the guy who wrote this is on the level? What do you think, Bill?" "What am I, the expert on lying? Don't answer that." More reading, to the accompaniment of assorted trickles. "Hell if I know. Funny damn kind of a situation he claims he's got himself into." "I can see how it could happen." "I don't." "There's this much for sure. These days, anybody'd who'd pick up a hitchhiker ought to know better." "Ought to, yeah, but maybe he was trying to do somebody some good. You can't fault a man on that, can you?"

I emerged from the stall into the debating group. There in a cluster, seven familiar faces and I gawked at each other.

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"You come across people in the ~~god~~dammest places!" exclaimed  
Roger Tate, who I remembered was the seniormost of the Baloney Express  
car corps. "How you doing, Jick?" All the others heartily chimed in



their greetings, old home week to the point where little Bill Bradley gestured in the pertinent direction and asked, "You seen this note on the wall here?"

"No," I admitted, "but I been hearing a lot about it." I moved up close enough to take my turn at examining the document.

BROKE AND BAREFOOT

no #

Mine is a long story, but to put it short as can be, I picked up

a hitchhiker yesterday when I left Coeur d'Alene, and after we

reached here, and I got too sleepy to drive any more, I told him

had  
he ~~had~~ to get out, ~~and~~ go on on his own, while I caught some sleep.

He did, get out that is, and I locked myself in the pickup, and

stretched out on the seat, ~~and~~ <sup>but</sup> when I woke up this morning, my shoes

that I had taken off, and all my money, were gone. I am stuck here,

until somebody can help me out. Any money you can loan me, would

help me buy gas and food to get home to Fargo, and I will take your

name, and address, and mail it back to you, quick as I can. I am

in the GMC pickup, red in color, at the east end, of the parking


lot. Thank you.

do  
not  
indent

You hear all kinds of stories of people begging in wheelchairs or whatever, then as soon as you're out of sight they hop up and stroll off to buy drugs with the money you just gave them. Evidently what people won't resort to hasn't been thought of yet. Naturally my mental question was the same as the Baloney Expressers: was this broke-and-barefoot note the newest kind of cheat?

Another round of democratic Roger-Bill-<sup>Nick</sup>~~Tony~~-Bud-Julius-Jerome-Dale debate produced the idea of actually going and taking a look at the guy in the red pickup. I was either born curious or became that way a minute later, so ~~of course,~~ off I set with the investigating committee.

As we were cutting across the parking lot past the fleet of clunkers my companions were ferrying to a used car lot in Billings, Riley popped around the hood of an idling Continental Freightways semi. "The women were starting to wonder if you fell in," the knothed <sup>u</sup>loudly addressed to me as he strode up. Then he recognized the company I was in. "Don't tell me. The Methusaleh Hot Rod Club is on the loose again. Watch out, world."

Inevitably the Baloney Express gang greeted Riley with verdicts on his piece about 



them that, coming from them, he regarded ~~that~~ as high praise. Then I explained to him our mission to the east end of the parking lot and he glanced nervously over his shoulder in the direction where his mother and Mariah were waiting for us in the Bago, precisely as the two women emerged around the semi in search of the searcher they'd sent scouting for me.

The sight of the seven geezers whose collective rumps she had presented to the reading public made it Mariah's turn for wariness, but they unanimously assured her that photograph of hers had presented their best side to the world. Her first grin of the past 48 hours broke out on Mariah as she asked what the occasion here was. Leona meanwhile was in an all-purpose smile while trying to get a handle on any of this, and after the Baloney Expressers' sevenfold explanation ~~about~~ the Broke and Barefoot note and I'd introduced Leona to each of them in gallant turn and the entire general scrimmage of us had started moving toward the pickup in question, she dropped back beside me and wondered in a whisper, "Jick, do you know everybody in Montana?"

"That's pretty much getting to be the case," I acknowledged.

"You want to watch out," she whispered again, "or you'll end up as Governor."

The vehicular description "red in color" proved to be a wishful memory of the beat-up pickup's faded appearance, and the young guy in it didn't look like much either. When our delegation drew up around him and he cranked down the window on the driver's side, the face framed there was one of those misfitting ones with not enough chin or mouth but a long thin nose and a wispy blond mustache, scraggly, really. His eyes were red-rimmed and darted around miserably among what must have looked to him like a posse from an old folks' home. Treed in a sapling about to snap, was the impression he gave.

But any con man worth the name would know precisely how to appear so simultaneously victimized and embarrassed, wouldn't he. The Baloney Expressers clustered around the driver's side window, as attentive a jury as they had been while watching Riley ~~change~~<sup>wrestle</sup> the Bago tire two months ago.

Roger Tate spoke the doubt of everybody. ~~"On~~<sup>"One</sup> thing that's hard to savvy, Mister, is how somebody could get at you that way in a locked pickup."

"For the longest time I couldn't figure that out either," the young guy confessed tiredly. "I knew goddamn good and well I'd locked both doors. But what the bastard did, I finally caught on, was he unlocked ~~opened~~ his wing window while I wasn't ~~watching~~ <sup>looking</sup>"--the pickup was so old it did have those vent windows with a little catchlock that moved about half an inch for opening them--"and after I ~~was~~ <sup>fell</sup> asleep he must've snuck back and reached in through it and got that door open. And took off with my money and shoes." The guy swallowed and looked like he was about to bawl, but seemed to feel he had to tell it all: "Didn't even leave me my socks."

The congress mulled that testimony. One of the Walker brothers, Julius, remarked: "You're quite a sleeper."

"Mister, I know it sounds fishy. I almost can't believe it myself, what happened. And nobody until you guys would even come near me to hear about it. But jeez, it's the truth," he concluded, his face saying the awful realization of how much predicament his life's quota was.

Nor was his situation eased any when two or three ~~Expressers~~ <sup>Expressers</sup> simultaneously asked whether he'd called the highway patrol or sheriff yet. The young

guy squirmed and looked away from all our eyes, down at the steering wheel. "Can't do that. My license plates are out of date--couldn't afford this year's." A majority of the Baloney Expressers at once investigated at the rear of the pickup and verified that the North Dakota Peace Garden State license plate was 1988's.

In the kind of tone a district attorney would use on a pickup thief, Bill Bradley wanted to know: "You say you're from Fargo, what were you doing all the way over in Coeur d'Alene?"

"Looking for work. I come from Coeur d'Alene originally. When there wasn't any jobs there, I got on driving tractor for my wife's uncle outside of Fargo. But he got droughted out again this summer, same like last summer, and he had to let me go." This chapter of his story poured out of him, either well-rehearsed or from the heart. "I hoped something maybe'd opened up, back home there. But jeez, all there is in Coeur d'Alene any more is changing bedsheets for tourists and they don't want people like me for that. Logging's down. Mining's gone to hell. Farmers and ranchers can't afford to hire. What am I supposed to do?" That last word broke out as a rising note toward wail, dooo?

I stood staring past the silent elderly heads at the wispy-whiskered specimen of woe and his faded illegitimate pickup. Curious no longer, I now was furious. When I was not much younger than him, other pickups were on the road, passing through the Two Medicine country from the droughted-out farms of the High Line with the bitter farewell GOODBY OLD DRY painted across their boxboards, and families of the Depression crammed aboard with whatever last desperate possessions they had managed to hang on to. The human landslide set loose by auction ~~ham~~ hammers cracking down. Two rages balanced in me: that here fifty years later there still was no goodbye to that grief of being driven from the land, or that a clever beggar would play on that memory of misery to coax money from us.

Out of that bloodsurge of the past, I called sharply to the pitiful or conniving face in the pickup window:

"There in Coeur d'Alene, did you ever know somebody named Heaney?"

Leona was a little distance from me, and out the side of my eye I saw her stir at that remembered name.

"Mister Heaney? Sure." The young guy lost a little of his

complexion of despair as he found something definite to offer. "I used to mow his lawn. Ray Heaney? In the insurance business?"

The Baloney Express totality swiveled to watch my reaction. In my mind now was the Heaney house on St. Ignatius Street in Gros Ventre, Ray and I sprawled beneath tall cottonwoods on that lawn of another time, our boyhood best friendship now thinned to lines jotted on Christmas cards exchanged from his insurance agency to my ranch. . .

I nodded, which brought a chorus of "Well, hell, okay then" and "Good enough" from the group awaiting my verdict. Roger Tate swung around and told the young guy, "We got to have a little conference over here. You just sit tight."

Eagle-beaked old Dale Starr proved to be the fiscal lobe of <sup>Baloney</sup>~~Baloney~~ Express. While the others looked to him to decree a sum that would get a man enough gasoline and meals to carry him from the middle of Montana all the way across North Dakota to Fargo, plus putting something on his feet, Dale in turn squinted at Riley and asked, "You in, Shakespeare?" Riley said he supposed he was. It seemed to be just assumed I was a donor, so Dale inquired next: "Ladies?" Without looking at each other,

Mariah and Leona each nodded inclusion into the ante. Dale promptly announced, "Okay then, nine bucks a head."

After we'd all dug down in wallets or pockets or purses for Dale, he in turn riffle-counted the sheaf of bills, nodded, and handed the money to Roger Tate. Who led us back to the pickup and told the young guy, "Here's \$99 to see you home. Take care."

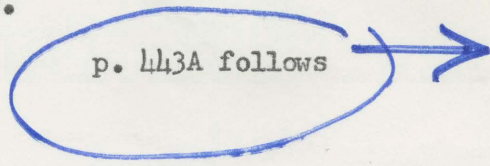
The guy choked out several versions of thanks and promises to repay, then started the clattery pickup and headed out onto the Interstate. None of the eleven of us said anything as we watched him go. He had a lot of miles ahead of him yet to Fargo, and still faced walking into a shoe store in Billings barefoot.

# \_\_\_\_\_

After that not particularly restful stop, we let the freeway go on to Boston while we sideroaded north. Naturally I reverted to watching our retread lovers deal with Leona's presence. Jangled but not yet to the point of disintegration, was my reading of Mariah and Riley's mutual mood so far. They were taking refuge in their work insofar as they could. True,

no Montanian piece came to light from our excursioning through Rapelje and Harlowtown and Shawmut and Judith Gap. But shooter and scribbler

kept reminding each other in earnest that they absolutely utterly just could not afford to flummox around the way they had at the outset of the trip; as one or the other of them phrased it at least once a day, "We don't have time for a fucking scavenger hunt." And it sounded to me as if both Mariah and Riley actually grasped that, this time; these two were educable about anything but themselves.

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It wasn't many days into this Leona phase of the trip before we came to an intersection, close to the exact middle of ~~Montana,~~ <sup>the state,</sup> where the sign pointing south said one hundred miles to Billings and the sign pointing east said one hundred miles to Jordan. The Montanian duet chose east, and so we Bagoed onward into country where a hundred miles to anywhere seemed a highly conservative estimate.

#



Keep your eyes on the horizon was in a song that came around fairly often on Melody Roundup on the Bago's radio and the landscape surrounding us now was much like that, a kind of combination of horizon hypnotically the same and the earth letting out a stretching yawn as it drew its edgeline against the sky. The Big Dry, <sup>prairie</sup> ~~this~~ region out ahead of us was called, partly because Big Dry Creek traces across it but also for the general precipitation picture. Not this year, though.

After the drought of the past couple of summers, even this gaunt <sup>the state</sup> ~~midriff of Montana~~ had received decent rain this year. I would bet that

it was green years of this sort which fooled the homesteaders into settling out here in the first place. This was a neighborhood ~~of the~~ <sup>state</sup> where I had never set foot <sup>but</sup> yet felt I knew something of, ~~as so~~ ~~often is the case in Montana.~~ When I was a kid during the Depression, one of the county school systems somewhere out east here got so strapped for funds that the only musical instruments that could be afforded were harmonicas, and so harmonica bands were formed. Fourth of July solemnity, graduation day, any of those type of functions featured mouth organ musicians en masse and for a few years there I devoutly wished our

own Gros Ventre high school would either go broke enough or sensible enough to forget about stuff like trumpets and put us all on harmonicas.

I mean, wouldn't it be something to hear Pompous Circumstances, as my father called it, orchestrated by a schoolful of harmonica kids?

People were not many out here any more. Now that it was after Labor Day, as we drove we regularly saw the bumblebee colors of schoolbuses moving along rural roads. But even that scene scarcened ~~promptly~~ here at the onset of the Big Dry country.

Pucka pucka pucka, Riley's wordbox began to tune up as we rolled on.

41 In the red schoolhouse of his head, Jefferson, great Tom,  
calculated the doubling of America westward. He knew that miles  
in chunks could be whittled into dreams, farms, nation, and out  
of that Jeffersonian box of mind came an orderly arithmetical  
survey system which put the pattern of mile-square sections on  
the land; came his 1803 bargain with France for the Louisiana  
Purchase, the frontier expanse all the way from the Mississippi Valley  
to the western side of what is now Montana; came his instructions

enigmatic  
 to his ~~dauntless~~ young personal secretary Meriwether Lewis to  
find a cohort--the steady William Clark, he turned out to be--  
and explore up the Missouri River into this new dreamscape.

# In the presidency of Lincoln, Abe who had built farm fences,  
came the Homestead Act. That broadstroke of legislation in 1862  
and its cousin laws proclaimed: come west, come into the Jeffersonian  
vision, come gain yourself a piece of the earth by putting your  
labor--your life--into it for this little sum of years.

# Into Montana, mostly in the first fraction of the twentieth  
century, came scores of thousands of homesteaders in the greatest  
single spate of agricultural migration in American history. . . .

# —————

We pulled into Winnett for the night. A grocery store. A couple  
 of bars--one doubling as a cafe. A gas station out by the highway.  
 Highway sheds, grain elevator. A school, nice and modern. Some houses  
 that were being lived in, but not as many as there were empty ones  
 and vacant lots. What was saddest to see, though, was not just the  
 proverbial grass growing in the street but little jungles of morning glory

vines snaking out.

And that was pretty much the town except for the courthouse. You might not ever think so if you didn't know, but Winnett, population two hundred, is the county seat of Petroleum County.

"Which," Riley announced out of the books he'd been looking stuff up in as I drove us along the scanty main street, "has a total population of--brace yourselves, gang--six hundred, in an area, hmm, bigger than the Los Angeles Basin."

"There he is on California again, Jick," Leona shared with me as if we were on a mutual quest for an antidote. She had taken off her Walkperson headset that had been reciting Russian into her and was gazing around Winnett as if she'd always been meaning to pay it a visit.

"Maybe you two want to put some of this elbow room in your suitcases for Globland," I in turn suggested to Mariah and <sup>Riley</sup>~~him~~ as I aimed the Bago into the otherwise empty Petrolia RV Park. "Sounds like you could sell it by the inch down there."

The Montanian team ignored our parental remarks and scanned out the window at trafficless and pedestrianless Winnett. "Let me guess,"

Mariah eventually intoned to Riley. "What we need here is a photo of Jefferson rolling over in his grave, right?"

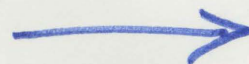
I will say for Riley that he was bright enough to immediately pack himself off uptown--so to speak--out of range of Mariah's photo-thinking mood. Myself, I figured she and her camera would charge right out and *the challenge of* tackle Winnett, but this daughter of mine could still surprise me.

When Leona offered to come out and help me hook up the utilities, Mariah slick as a wink told her no, no, she'd be more than glad to help me at that herself, she knew Leona had lots and lots of Russian to pipe into her head yet.

So out we went, Mariah and I, *and* around to the side compartments of the Bago. She had been waiting her chance to get hold of me alone. "Thanks a whole hell of a bunch, Daddio," she let me know in a tone that would have peeled paint.

"What, for my general sainthood or something specific?"

"You know goddamn good and well," she said, yanking the electrical hook-up cable out of its cubbyhole a mile a minute. "For inviting the Duchess of Moscow along."



"Figured you'd appreciate having some female company on the trip for a change," I responded with an extreme poker face. "The benefit of an older wiser woman and all that."

"Benefit, sure, you bet," Mariah bobbed her head as if bouncing each word at me. "Now any time I get a craving for it I'll know how to order borscht."

"In California," I cautioned, "they probably call it liquid essence of beet."

Mariah

That headed her off on Leona, at least. ~~My daughter~~ eyed me as if debating whether this next issue was worth taking to war. "You really don't want me to go to California, do you."

I bent to fasten the Bago's water intake hose into the campground spigot. Not that I'd entirely intended it, but this left Mariah with the honey hose--the toilet drain--to gingerly drag out and handle.

"What I really don't want, Mariah, is for you and Riley to carve grief into each other, the way you did the first time. California is only the wrapper that comes in."

McCaskills, daughter and father, looked at each other over

the utility hookups. We both were so taut that a breeze would have twanged notes out of us. <sup>#</sup> Mariah at last shook her head.

"Nice try, but this"--she indicated with a lift of her chin toward Leona's chesty silhouette in the Bago sidewindow--"isn't going to change anything between Riley and me."

"Then you got nothing to worry about, do you," I asserted back to her. "You and Riley can practice at marriage again by each having a beloved in-law around."

# —————

In this promising outlook for disruption, that night after supper I figured a game of pitch might be just the thing to help matters along.

Remembering his trouncing when we'd played at Three Forks, Riley sent me a narrow look and stated: <sup>"Huh uh."</sup> ~~I~~ don't participate in blood sports."

But just as I'd hoped, Leona was not about to let him squirm out of it. "I don't see <sup>any</sup> ~~that much~~ competing nightlife in Winnett, do you?"

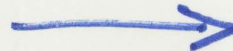
It didn't take much doing on my part to contrive the next, either.

"Why don't you and me take them on, Leona? Show these heirs of ours how the game is played, why not."



Riley of course had things so backwards he was actually relieved to be partnered with Mariah rather than me or his mother; it was Mariah who twitched at the generational pairing, but what could she say? No way around it for her, which T-totally suited me. If she figured she was going to remake life with this Wright guy, first let her consider the mess he could make of merely a hand of cards.

Pearl Harbor with playing cards instead of bombs, is the nearest description I can give of what ensued. Leona



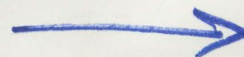
and I played circles around the other two. Mariah bid tersely and Riley grandiosely and by the end of the second hand we led them 6 to 2 in the hole. I had to start to worry a little that Leona and I would have the game won before Mariah's agony of playing partners with Riley had been sufficiently prolonged.

Leona, though, helped. While Riley was deep in ponder of an untakable trick, she maternally observed to him:

"You must have left your luck outside tonight."

"Hmm? Oh. Right, Mother."

Riley's problem was, he thought through the cards and out their other side. When he should have been calculating trump, he was off beyond in contemplation of whether the queen of diamonds had her hair in a wimple or a snood, and why jacks came to be called jacks instead of knaves, on and on until he was somewhere out in the forest that surrendered the



woodpulp that the cards were made from. I suppose that is the literary mind, but it is pitiful to see in a game of pitch.

It was during the next hand, while we once again waited for Riley to play a card, that Leona remarked she had something she'd been wondering about.

"How do you two"--she coolly included Mariah in her inquiring gaze--  
"decide on what story you're going to do?"

Riley stroked his mustache rapidly. "It varies, Mother," he said and tried to run his jack of trumps past me, which I had saved my queen precisely for.

"I've been trying to watch how you work together," Leona went on, "but I guess I don't quite savvy it yet. Do you match the pictures to the words or the words to the pictures?"

Mariah blinked as if she'd been asked to explain nuclear physics.  
"Ehmm, both, kind of."

And often neither, I felt like adding about their periodic dry spells on the centennial series. Instead I observed to Leona, "You know they warn a person about ever watching sausage being made. It's a little bit like that with this newspaper stuff."

Leona just smiled. I'd begun to notice, though, that she had different calibres of smiles. The broad beaming expression that seemed to welcome all of life--the Alectric smile, I thought of it as, for I had first seen it on her when she and Alec were sparking each other, that summer of fifty years ago--shined out most naturally. You could read a newspaper by the light of that facial glow. But there was also a Leona smile that her eyes didn't quite manage to join in; the smile muscles performed by habit, but there was some brainwork going on behind that one. And then there was one that can only be called her foolkiller smile; when you got it, you wondered if you'd been eating steak with a spoon. Mariah got that one a lot.

With Mariah nicely on low boil, the next logical mission of the evening was to lend Riley some aggravation. As a former child and now an all-too-veteran parent, I pretty much instinctively knew what would do the job.

"I bet you're like me, Leona--never imagined, when he was a snip of a kid, Riley would grow up to be such a leading citizen. I know with Mariah, there were times when I wondered how the world was ever going to be ready for her." From the corner of my eye I knew Mariah

was giving me a murderous stare, perfect to my purpose. Riley was just pulling his head out of his latest mystical contemplation of his hand of cards when I delivered the opening to Leona. "Funny to think back to what they put us through when they were little, huh?"


"Funny is the ~~world~~<sup>word</sup> for it," Leona brightly informed us as Riley uneasily held his cards in front of him like a tiny shield. "He was a holy terror when he was little. The summer he was four, his dad started taking him with, out to the cattle. Here the next thing I knew, Riley was refusing to pee in the bathroom. The only way he'd go was outside--his little legs spraddled like he'd seen his dad do out on the range." She looked fondly at Riley as if exhibiting him at the county fair. "He killed off my entire bed of ~~pancies~~<sup>daisies</sup> that summer."

"Mother, will you for God's sake lay off my urinary history and--"

"Must be something about their generation, Leona," I put in remorselessly. "Maybe the doctors in those days fed them orneriness pills before they sent them home with us as babies from the hospital, you suppose? Mariah now, the story on her is--" and I of course I proceeded to tell

about the time she was in grade school and every recess Orson Zane would pester the daylights out of her but always was sneaky enough to get away with it until finally the day Mariah carefully spit down the front of her own ~~coat,~~<sup>dress,</sup> presented the damp evidence to the teacher as Orson's, and got him the curative spanking he was overdue for.

Leona laughed as mightily over that as I had over Riley taking a cowboy pee in the ~~posies,~~<sup>posies</sup> our offspring meanwhile stewing in silence. Eventually, though, Riley glumly thought out loud for our benefit: "You know, folklorists just put numbers on stories that crop up time and again."



Number 368, The-Chihuahua-Who-Took-One-Nap-Too-Many-In-The-Microwave-Oven. Parents ought to do that. Just call out the numbers. Save yourselves the trouble of doing the telling."

"But Riley, hon, the telling is the fun of it," Leona told him instructively.

"Besides, numbers don't go high enough for all the stories parents save up as blackmail," Mariah noted with a censorious glance my direction.

"Speaking of numbers," I glided to, for we'd played out the hand in the course of the conversation, "what'd we make, partner?"

Leona turned over the tricks she and I had taken and counted out high, low, and jack. "Tree," she reported with satisfaction, which by now we all knew was Russian for three.

"We treed them again, did we?" I thought that was pretty good, but nobody else seemed to catch it. Mariah was intent on my scorekeeping from the treasury of kitchen matches, to see how bad her and Riley's situation was by now. They'd actually scored a point, which wiped out their deficit of one in the hole--Leona's and my total now had reached ~~eleven--~~ ~~seventeen--~~ and I congratulated Mariah on their advance up to nothing.

"Gosh, Dad, just what I always wanted, a goose egg," she said in a dripping voice. "When I get done with it, what part of the goose do I ~~eat~~<sup>stick</sup> it back in?"

Riley had ~~wandered~~<sup>gravitated</sup> off to the refrigerator and fetched a can of beer for each of us, plus his latest inspiration. "You ever hear that old country-and-western sermon about how a deck of cards stands for life?" He dropped into a deep drawl. "Thurr're fifty-two cards in the deck, don't yuh see, one fer every week a the year. The four suits, hearts an' diamonds and' clubs and' spades, reperzents the four seasons a the year. They also mean the seasons a the human heart--love an' wealth and' war an' death. Add up all the spots ~~of~~<sup>a</sup> all the cards and they come out to three hundred sixty-five, one fer every day a the. . ."

He paused at the expression on the other three of us. "You heard it?"

"Yes," stated Leona.

"Lots and lots of times," said I.

"Mmm hmm," even Mariah put in delicately.

"Oh." Riley busied himself picking up the cards he'd long since been dealt. "Whose bid?"

#



Now that there were four of us, commotion started each morning in the Bago. The minute there was enough dawn, Riley was Spandexed up and out running the ridgeline. Mariah got down and Janed on the floor between the cab and the kitchen nook. Leona tucked herself behind the table there in the nook, put her headset on like a tiara, and ingested Russian. I meanwhile did breakfast duty and tried to stay out of the various lines of fire.

Funny, what will bug a person. So as not to fill the ears of the rest of us with constant Moscowese, Leona performed silent recitation; that is, simply moved her lips in Russian to answer the headset questions. Myself, I considered it downright thoughtful of her and probably so would have Mariah, if she hadn't had to pop up in her exercise repetitions and every time see Leona wordlessly mouthing something--<sup>one exertion by Mariah</sup> ~~she~~ <sup>situp</sup> would meet with a mute appeal about the way to the train station, <sup>her next contortion</sup> ~~a~~ <sup>leg lift</sup> would have as backdrop a request to pass the salt. I noticed Mariah's workouts grow grimmer until she finally had to stop in mid-tummywork and ask:

"Mmm--Leona?"

The older woman blinked down at her, lifted off the headset and automatically palavered: "Puhzhahlistah, puhftuhreetyeh vahpros yeshcho

ras. "Please repeat the question again."

"Uh huh, right," Mariah said with a careful breath. "What I'm wondering is, how can you learn to say a word without saying it?"

Leona smiled interestedly while she considered. Then unloaded:

"I suppose the same way you can put yourself through Jane Fonda's exercises without being Jane Fonda."

#

indent

¶ . . .The voices remember and remember. It was the second summer on the homestead, one of the early innocent years before the dry part of the weather cycle scythed <sup>across</sup> ~~around~~ on these arid plains, and the June rain had granted them a blue lake of crop, the blossoming flax that homesteaders sometimes resorted to until they could work the sod sufficiently to attempt wheat on it. The out and away husband was ~~outside~~ on some chore, as he always seemed to be, and the wife was at the stove, as she always seemed to be, when the three-year-old daughter called from just outside the door of the shanty.

¶ "See my snake, mommy."

4 "Janie, hon, I don't have ti -- See what? Janie, show me."

4 "My snake. He mine. I killed him."

4 There in the yard the child had taken the garden hoe and  
hoed the rattlesnake in half. . . .

Road, road, and more road was the menu of this day as we headed  
east toward Jordan.

We passed prairie creeks in their deep troughs of flood-cut banks.

Dome formations poked up on the horizon like clay bowls upside  
down.

Fenceposts became more spindly and makeshift, crooked and thin  
as canes out here so far from forest.

Between Mosby and Sand Springs we met a Blue Bird Wanderlodge with  
Minnesota plates and I could imagine that motorhome coming on a straight  
line, on cruise control, the 750 miles from the Twin Cities.

"A jackrabbit must have to pack a lunch through this country,"

I eventually couldn't help but observe as we went on through more miles  
of scantness.

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