

Ride With Me, Maria Montana

by Ivan Doig

opening scene and plot synopsis

Well, old buddies, I am not a happy camper this morning. What we've got here is the Fourth of July, the hundredth time it has turned up on the calendar since the U. States of A. decided to let Montana in, so wouldn't you think we could do the holiday with some vim and vinegar by now? But no, today and all day it's going to be more of the usual. From Ekalaka to Yaak, we Montanans will bake our brains in the sun at rodeos, meanwhile consuming enough beer and fried chicken to cholestorate a vegetarian convention, waiting for dark so we can try to burn down our towns with fireworks. A centennial Fourth of the same old guff: hip-hip-hoorah, flap-the-flag-and-pass-the-sweg. This is the best we can do? Maybe it's an American condition, in this strange nation we have become, all helmet and sword and no brain or heart. But does Montana have to be in a patriotic coma too? Take it from Riley, friends: the calendar this morning says "Independence Day," but you can look high and low in the doings of Montana this centennial year and nowhere find a really independent Montana idea--like changing the name of this state of ours to something more appropriate, such as Destitution.

--"The Life of Riley" column
in the Missoula Montanian,
July 4, 1989

Click. From where I was sitting on the bumper of the Winnebago I was doing my best to outstare that camera of hers, but as usual, no such luck. You would think a person with an entire rodeo going on around her could find something more worthwhile to take a picture of

than me. Huh uh, not this Maria person. No more than an arm's reach away she was down on one knee with the gizmo up to her eye like she couldn't see without it, and just as soon as she'd shot she said as if it was something the nation was waiting to hear, "You're not such a bad-looking old coot, you know that?"

"The old part I do, yeah."

Click. Her next snap of the shutter caught me by surprise as it always did. After all this while, why didn't I know that the real picture Maria wanted was always the unexpected one, the one after you'd let your guard down.

She came up out of her picture-taking crouch just as a red and white calf sleepily trotted past us into the catch pen at the end of the arena. "And Kevin Frew has missed with his second loop!" the announcer recited the obvious in that tin voice we'd had to hear all afternoon.

By habit Maria fitted a long lens onto her camera and climbed atop the arena fence to aim out at the horseback figure who was disgustingly coiling his pair of dud lariats, but then didn't bother to take the scene.

"Folks, let's give this hard-luck cowboy a big hand of applause! It's
the only pay he's going to take home from here today!" My thumb found
the Frew boy on the program. Christamighty, he was only the first
contestant in the third section of calf roping. Down through all
the Fourths of July, if I had a dollar for every guy who entered the
Gros Ventre rodeo under the impression he was a calf roper I could
buy up Japan.

Maria was staying perched on the top fence pole while she scanned
through that telescope of a lens at the bleacher crowd across the arena.
She of course came to the attention of young Frew, who halted his horse,
doffed his hat and held it over his heart in a mock pretty way while
he yelled over, "Will this smile do?" Maria delivered back to him,
"The calf had a better one, Kevin," and kept on scoping the crowd.
Young Frew shrugged mournfully and went back to winding up his spent
ropes.

I regarded Maria there above me, that pert behind of hers nicely
enhanced by faded blue jeans, and her purple rodeo shirt like some

runaway blossom against the sky. Up there in sight of everybody for a mile, but oblivious to all as she searched for the right picture chance. Not for the first time, I wondered if her behavior somehow went with her name. Maryea when most others of the species were Mareea. She was a singular one in every way I could see, sure as hell.

I stood up, partly to unstiffen but mainly to turn it into the opportunity to announce, "I've had about enough of this." Of course my words meant the perpetual damn calf roping and the rodeo, but more than that, too. Maria ignored the more and wanted to know, "What's your big rush?" As she alit from the fence and turned to face me she made that gesture of swinging her hair out of her eyes, the same little tossing way she always did to clear her view into the camera. As always too, that sway of her head fired off a flash of earrings, silver today, against hair deeper than red; the double-rich color that on a fine horse is called blood bay. Maria's glorious mane of it was atop a narrow but good enough face and the figure, lanky for a woman, that somehow managed to be both long-legged and thoroughly mounded where women are

supposed to be mounded. No wonder every man afoot or horseback who ever saw her sent his eyes back for a second helping.

I might have known she'd start right in again on Topic Number One.

"Jick, you can't keep on the way you've been. I had to half drag you here today and now you can't wait to get back to the ranch and start feeling sorry for yourself again. That's just not the usual you. Since when does Jick McCaskill sit around like his tail is caught in a crack?"

She let up just long enough to see if any of that had registered on me. Only one other person was anywhere in the same race with Maria when it came to prescribing behavior for me, and I ^{wasn't} ~~wasn't~~ going to hear from that one ever again. All damn afternoon Maria had seemed determined to take up the slack. I was all too sure what was due next from her, and here it was. "You know as well as I do that you've got to get yourself going again. That's why I want you to come along with me on this."

I'd already told her no. Three times, N-O. Actually I guess it must have been four, because Maria never even starts to listen

until you say a thing the third time.

"Sitting sounds good enough to me," I tried on her now. "The world can use more people who stay sat."

But all that drew me was the retort that if that was the case, then I might just as well sit behind a steering wheel where'd I'd at least be doing somebody some good instead of holing up like I'd forgotten how to get out my own front door. Oh, Maria had more in store too, she always did: "None of the trip is going to cost you a nickel, did I tell you that? The newspaper will pay for it all, the use of your rig and everything." Before I could point out to her that free stuff is generally overpriced, she was busy informing me: "All you've got to do is drive over to Missoula and meet us Monday noon. Just put the rig in that lot next to the Montanian building, and the scribbler and I will find you there, okay? Is that so tough?"

How could I make her savvy the situation? Everything had changed on that night six months ago, none of it for the better. You can be told and told it will all heal, but that doesn't make it happen any faster.

Maria wasn't interested in waiting for my deep thoughts to swim to shore. Gathering her camera gear and giving the rodeo a last look to make sure there wasn't some calf-roping miracle to be recorded, she simultaneously was saying as if everything was settled: "I can count on you coming along, then."

"Like hell you can. Maria, have you heard one word I've said all goddamn afternoon? If it was just you involved, I'd maybe see this different. But goddamn it, you know I don't even want to be in the same vicinity as that Missoula whistledick."

"Jick. If I can put up with Riley for a couple of months, it shouldn't be that big a deal for you to."

She had me there. Of all the people in Montana who'd gladly buy a ticket to Riley Wright's funeral when the time came, Maria was entitled to the head of the line.

"You and him, that's up to you," I answered as I had any number of times before. "Though I personally can't see why you'd hang around that guy any longer than it takes to cuss him out, let alone from now to November." The rest of July, August, September, October, the first

week of November. Four months, Maria's version of "a couple."

"Because this centennial series is a chance that'll never come again." She still was working me over with those gray eyes. "Or anyway not for another hundred years, and I'm not famous for waiting, am I."

No, but she was definitely getting notorious with me for knotheaded persistence. How many ways did I have to say no to this woman? One more:

"Christamighty, Maria. This isn't getting us anywhere. Just take the rig yourself, why don't you?" I fished into my pocket for the Winnebago keys and held them out to her. "Here. The rig is yours for however long you're going to be chasing around to this centennial stuff. But include me out, okay? I'm not in any mood to go gallivanting all over the state of Montana with you and that Riley dingbob."

She didn't take the keys, she didn't even answer my offer of them. All she did was that little toss of her head again, as if clearing her hair out of the way would clarify me somehow too. People either side of us sitting on fenders and bumpers were starting to watch the pair

of us more than the rodeo. Wonderful. See the geezer and his girl while they duke it out on the glorious Fourth; we ought to have sold ringside tickets. I started to turn away and do what I should have done an hour ago, stick the key in the ignition of the Winnebago and head home to the ranch. Try that sometime when the next thing you hear is Maria saying slowly, in a voice not her usual one:

"Jick, I need to have you along."

It stopped me. It would anybody, wouldn't it? Need instead of want. Was that what was involved here? If so, it put a drastic new light on the matter. I scrutinized Maria. Need. Do people really know what they are trying to reach for with that word? I wasn't sure I could tell, any more.

"Maria. You're not just saying that, are you?"

Our eyes held each other for a considerable moment. Then she gave me that all-out grin of hers, honest as the sun, and admitted: "If I was it'd be the first time, wouldn't it?"

God, that grin. That world-by-the-tail grin that brought back what I was missing, these months since.

Going Winnebagoing around the countryside with her and the other one was still the last thing on this earth I wanted to do. Christamighty, four entire months of letting myself get just exactly where I knew not to get, between the pair of them. Maria the newspaper picture-taker, my headlong daughter. And writing Riley Wright, my goddamn ex-son-in-law.

But I need to have you along.

In back of Maria, out in the arena dirt a grunting guy was kneeling on a calf, trying to collect three of its legs to tie together. I knew how that caught calf felt.

—————
Missoula was sizzling. A temperature sign on a bank kept spelling out 94 in blinking lights, as if it needed any spelling out.



synopsis/page 2

I see this book as no longer than Rascal Fair's 400 pages, and likely closer to English Creek's 335 pages. The writing of it will require stints of travel in Montana this autumn and next--in one of which my peerless photographer Carol and I will emulate the wandering-with-a-Winnebago done by Jick, Maria and Riley--and then I'll need to spectate Montana's 1989 centennial hoopla until it culminates on November 8 of that year. Delivery date for the manuscript can be Feb. 15, 1990.

The voice of this novel will be similar to English Creek's--Jick thinking out loud, reflective when he has to be, laughing as often as he can. The storyline will be more like that of Rascal Fair; affairs of the heart, sometimes unsought, and the grit and glory of trying to cope with love and yearning. As the climax of the McCaskill family trilogy, this will deliberately be a rambunctious book, roving widely through past and present, into predicament and out again, sometimes rollicking and sometimes pensive, until in the reader's final moment with these McCaskills, Jick and the Two Medicine country and Montana are last seen on a day of new direction. Like the unquenchable narrator of The Book of Ebenezer Le Page, Jick "dies alive"--I hope in the spirit of his elegy for the English Creek characters at the last of that book: "...They stay on in me even though so many of them are gone from life."

###

check with Tom, to be sure Macmillan isn't going to want Maria on disc.

The End Toward Idaho

Gros Ventre: Jick and Maria

GV: centennial committee meeting (?)

Jick to Missoula, over Rogers Pass

Missoula: Jick sees Blondina

Moiese: buffalo, memory of Toussaint

Jick/Maria/Riley to Va. City thru Big Hole: memory of Wisdom J'son

Virginia City: Riley on vigilante hangings?

to Butte, thru Gallatin Valley

Butte: Anaconda Co., memory of Ed Heaney?

to Helena

Helena: Mont. Historical Soc., Isaac's letters about Angus

to Missoula: publisher chews them out

High Line

Gros Ventre: cent'l committee and cemetery, memory of Alec

Pine Butte: horseback, memory of Bob Marshall

Shelby: [Dempsey fight, memory of Stanley, Mac and Beth]

Bearpaws: Chief Joseph's surrender

Missoula: Riley is offered California job

Central

Crazy Mountains: Leona

Great Falls area: missile silos (future archeology) Vietnam - Toole

Lewistown

Missouri River/Russell Refuge (rafting/boating
Lewis & Clark)

Everything East

Fort Peck: memory of Depression

} Back-White LIFE

Jordan: memory of homesteaders

Ekalaka: Custer Nat'l Forest

Hyoman

Custer Battlefield and Roadkill Angels dance (Leona?)

The Day

Riley <->

Gros Ventre: raising the flag

<->

modern schoolhouse scene,

SCOTCH HEAVEN/page 2

This plot will be played against a backdrop of "loved life, and loved country," as Wallace Stegner remarked about English Creek. Put this simply, too: the notion for this novel of the homesteaders has tagged after me through life like a second shadow. My own western existence has bordered the lives of the last homestead generation, the settlers who poured into Montana between 1900 and 1918 under the spell of the dream of making the state "the last and best grain garden of the world." My father was born in a log homestead cabin south of Helena in 1901. Now that I am middle-aging and deep-bearded, I am told continually by older Montanans of my resemblance to D.L. Doig, the first of the family to come from Scotland to Montana. More vitally, however, by conversation and correspondence I've been accumulating lore from the remnants of those homestead families: what they ate, where they slept, who did the chores, what graced their walls, how children tethered their saddlehorses at the one-room school (a touch of elegance was for the school to have a hitching rail; otherwise, each steed was tethered to a separate sagebrush), how Christmas was kept on a treeless prairie (a tumbleweed was decorated).

Scotch Heaven's cast of characters will be largely new--Angus, Rob, others of the Barclay family and the other homesteaders along the North Fork--but there'll also be younger selves from English Creek. Stanley Meixell, arriving midway in the book as the "forest arranger" of the new Two Medicine National Forest. Toussaint Rennie, glimpsed again and again as he ingests the history of the Two country. Varick McCaskill is born, grows to be a Sunday bronc rider with another English Creek youngster, Dode Withrow. And on April 1, 1900, Lisabeth Reese is born and is on her way to becoming Beth McCaskill.

The story begins on the dock at Greenock in Scotland. Amid the steerage queue stand two young men, one eager and savoring it all, the other apprehensive of the days of the Atlantic Ocean ahead--"A situation like that asks a lot of a man who cannot swim. Or at least who never has." The queue slowly moves. "Robert Burns Barclay: that was Rob on the passenger list of the steamship James Watt, 22 June of the year 1889. Angus Alexander McCaskill, myself. The both of us, nineteen and green as the cheese of the moon and trying our double damnedest not to show it." Now, at last, they are aboard and America-bound.

"America. Montana. Words with their ends open. Words that were ever in my mind, and I am sure Rob's too, all the hours of that voyage, for we were threading our lives into the open beckon of those words. We were on our way to be Americans. To be--what did they call themselves in that far place Montana? Montanese? Montanians? Montaniards? Whatever that denomination was, the two of us were going to be its next members, with full feathers on."

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Every family is its own kind of riddle. Any that I've ever
 had anything to do with, at least. People on the outside only glimpse
 enough to make them wonder what in the name of Jesus H. Christ is going on
 in there behind the doors of their neighbors and friends, while those
 inside the family have ^{times} ~~time~~, sometimes lifetimes, of being fiercely
 baffled with one another. Can this one really be mine, parent and child
 think back and forth, eyeing each other like foreign species. Knots
 in the family line; the oldest story there is, and ever the freshest.

We McCaskills are not immune. That Monday morning after the Fourth,
 I got up at dawn still wishing that I'd stayed with my original
 inclination and just kept saying no, daughter or not, to Maria's big
 thee-and-me-and-he-in-a-Winnebago idea. Automatically I flipped the
 kitchen radio on for the weather, and instead →

about lost my hand to the ruckus of steel guitars and a woman

semi-shouting, "Just call me angel of the morning, baby! Just touch

my cheek before you leave me..." Some angel, her. Leaving the music on,

considerably toned down, as company, I tackled the daily question of what

for breakfast. Getting up as early as I do I need to stoke some prompt

food into myself, and although I take dinner and supper with ^{my hired couple,} Kenny and Darleen

~~Riley~~, over at the old house, you can't rightfully expect hired people to

climb out of bed at the crack of day any more, at least not at ranch wages.

In Missoula, Maria would be up by now too; she often prowled around town

shooting pictures in the fresh morning light. I was tempted toward the

telephone all the while that)

I was scrambling a batch of eggs with some leftover slices of baloney

slivered into them for body. I mean, it's not as if I had no grounds

for staying clear of that trip. There wasn't some kind of family

vacation etiquette that had to be observed here: "Sure, you bet, darling--

if there's one thing I ever did want to do, it's to circumnavigate Montana."

No, what Maria and Riley were out to perform in their series of stories

and pictures of the state as it went through its centennial commotion

was purely part of their work, and I'd be only a third wheel. If that

daughter of mine didn't want to ram around the countryside alone with Riley from here to November, let the newspaper dig down and hire her a bodyguard. Preferably one with experience as a coyote hunter, so that he could recognize what he was dealing with in Riley Wright.

"That was another oldie but goodie from Montana's home-grown c-and-w group, The Roadkill Angels, here on Melody Roundup. The time is 5:17.

In the weather outlook, temperatures here east of the Divide will hit the upper 80s today, and in western Montana they'll go into the 90s. So, hot is going to be the word..."

P. 13 follows →

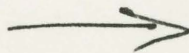
I shut the voice off. The hell with the radio guy and his word. I hate heat. Although, a scorcher would provide me a way to tackle Maria on the phone, wouldn't it: "You know I'm allergic to any weather over 75 above."

But when I came right down to it, I could not make that call-it-off call to Missoula. Digest all my reasoning along with the eggs a la baloney, and there still was the fact of Maria and myself alone with each other from here on, so to speak. She and I are the only Montana McCaskills there are now. My other daughter, Lexa, lives all the way up in Sitka, married to a fellow in the fish and game department there, both of them as Alaskan as you can get without having been born in an igloo. And Marce, my wife...

I swallowed on the thought of her again and sat staring out the kitchen window to the west. The mountains, the jagged rim where this Two Medicine country meets the sky, were clear and near today. A few patches of snow still showed white in the topmost clefts of Jericho Reef, but their destiny was evaporation in another week or so. Above and beyond the rimrock of gray Jericho stood the tall steep slopes of Phantom Woman

Mountain, while down at the hem of Phantom Woman, so to say, was the comblike outcropping of Rooster Mountain and the canyon where Noon Creek has its source. Then, south across Flume Gulch, the most mountain of all--the immense gentle bow of cliff half a mile high and more than three long, Roman Reef. I grew up looking at Roman Reef head-on from my father's English Creek ranger station and even yet my eyes can never resist that towering wall of stone. This ranch, which was started by my horse-raising grandfather Isaac Reese around a hundred years ago, is situated just the right distance from the mountains--close but not so close they can reach out and dump their every snowflake on you. The one Noon Creek place nearer the mountains was the old Ramsay homestead that is now the upper hay meadow of this ranch, and there you feel as if Jericho Reef might twitch in its sleep some night and squash you. Odd, how local the boundaries are in a country where you can see for a hundred miles. Only the gradual rise of Breed Butte about a mile from here divides this Noon Creek valley from the valley of English Creek and its South and North Forks, yet that partitioning seems to me as central and mighty and unalterable as the Continental Divide up there in those mountains.

Or maybe it is my life, divvied between the two valleys, that makes it seem so. What equilibrium I have ever had, I connect to a summer day, what, a full half-century ago, there between the valleys where the shoulder of Breed Butte levels into benchland. July then too, and haying time; I was a shavetail kid in the crew of my uncle Pete Reese, who yet was running this ranch then. Our tenth hay day there on Pete's benchland alfalfa, we were beginning to finish up. I was the scatter raker, and the first thing that morning I headed my horses, Blanche and Fisheye, to the southwest corner of that big meadow. We swooped and swerved over the stubbly field, dabs of stray hay accumulating ^{five-eighths} in the rake tines beneath me, and I suppose I was ~~off~~ off into a daydream as usual. Dode Withrow's hay crew was putting up a stack in the neighboring field beyond the fence, and before long the Withrow scatter raker was working the nearest end, like a reflection of my own raking. I began to watch how the Withrow raker went about his business, as who wouldn't. And saw it wasn't a him, but her. I remember, as exact as now, that I took a careful, careful look around to be damn good and sure none of our haying crew was watching before I waved to her. She waved back, we passed about a



hundred yards apart and trundled on in our separate ^{raking} routes. One of those moments that is a seed of so much else. Not for another fourteen years, the same amount as our age that haying summer, did anything come of it for the two of us. But that girl on the other scatter rake was Marcella Withrow, who when I finally did get enough sense to ask her to the altar became Marcella MsCaskill.

Marce. Marce at every window of my mind, any more. Ghosts aren't even necessary in this life; it is hard facts that haunt. I am finding that there is no way to get past this except to just outright say it: my wife Marce had been dead now for six months. Six months and four days.

I was not supposed to outlive Marce. In just that many words, there's what lay under all this, the brown trance that Maria kept telling me and telling me I had to pull out of. But how do you, when the rest of a life together suddenly turns out backwards. Not that it's ever a definite proposition, but any couple in a long marriage comes to have a kind of shared hunch, an assumption that is maybe never said out loud yet is ~~thoroughly~~ ~~definitely~~ there. My father died at sixty-five, and his father must have been a whole lot younger than that when the work of the homestead killed him; in both of them, the heart simply played out. So you didn't

have to be much of a betting person to figure I'd go off the living list considerably before Marce.

But cancer.

~~Goddamn the stuff anyway.~~ [#] It seems to know when people are least expecting the worst, and then it hits. A year or so ago, Marce and I thought we were on the verge of getting life solved. By then we had adjusted, as much as anybody ever does, to the breakup of Maria and Riley's marriage. We'd hired a young couple from Choteau, Kenny and Darleen Rice, to take the worst of the ranch work off our hands from here on. And we'd bought the Winnebago to do the traveling we had always promised ourselves--Alaska to see Lexa and Phil, and then somewhere away from Montana winters, maybe Arizona or even California. The brunt of our forty years of effort daylight to dark on the ranch seemed to be lifted at last, is what I am saying. So when Marce went in for that examination and was diagnosed as having lung cancer, it was one of those unbelievable can't-happen situations that a person knows all too well is true.) ~~The bastardly stuff that steadily ate the air away from her.~~

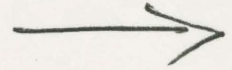
If only there had been some way for me to share my breath with Marce,

P. 17A follows →

to will it--

Brrrk brrrk.

The phone: what if it's Maria? What word had I better give her
now--that I'd go, or no?



I helled and braced.

"Uhhh, Jick, was you going to line me out on haying the Ramsay place, before you take off?"

Kenny's voice, kitchen to kitchen across the hundred feet between the old house and my and Marce's. Time had got away from me. Ordinarily I'd be out and around for a look at the sheep, then be over there by the time Kenny and Darleen were finishing up breakfast. Somewhere that routine had vanished, this morning of all mornings, and I hurriedly told Kenny, "I must've looked at the wrong side of the clock this morning. I'll be right over."

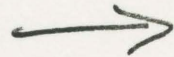
"Darleen's ~~style~~ got the coffee pot on," he assured me as if that was foremost in my mind as well as his, and hung up.

When I got over there, Kenny was walking jerky little circles behind Darleen while she did the dishes, neither of them looking at the other and their conversation going on a mile a minute. I know there's no one style for marriages, but theirs always startled me. While Kenny is forever doing his conversational perambulation or ~~incising~~ bringing a hand up to rub the back of his neck or swinging his arms or casting a look out the closest window to get his eyes into restlessness with the rest of him, Darleen just slopes along through life. Kenny now had a gingerly

beard he was trying to grow for Gros Ventre's centennial contest--beards for men, long hair for women--which gave him something new to rub this way and that, but when I stepped in, it was my face that got a surprised going-over from Kenny and Darleen both. Christamighty, did I look that rough? The two of them gave each other a side glance, then Kenny wanted to know, "Jick, how you doing this morning?" while Darleen chipped in, "All ready to hit the road, are you."

"Okay" and "more or less," I answered those. While Darleen coffeed Kenny and me for the day and we talked over the ranchwork and established that I'd be back from the trip every so often and in the meantime he could phone me whenever he was stuck about something--my private hope was that he wouldn't call every time he had to decide whether to approach a chore from the left side or the right--I wondered for the hundredth time lately why it wasn't any easier to be the boss of one guy that it was a half a dozen. Take haying as an example. When the dew went off this morning, Kenny would go up to the Ramsay ^{place} ~~place~~ and by himself cut and swathe the hay with one piece of equipment. Then after a few sunny days he'd run the baler along those swathes. A few days beyond that, he'd operate

the bale piler, and haying was signed, sealed and delivered. There in the familiar old kitchen, as Kenny got straight in his mind the order in which I wanted him to hay the Ramsay meadows and Darleen was offhandedly telling us how outlandish the prices were when she bought groceries at Rellis's Mercantile in her town trip yesterday, my thoughts



were back to the haying crew of this ranch in that remembered summer when I was on one scatter rake and Marce on the neighboring one. Besides me, silent Bud Dolson the mower man. The old Texan Perry Fox on the dump rake. Wisdom Johnson, more muscles than mind, as the logical stackman. One of the Hebner boys--Melvin or Vern? Vern or Clayton?--driving the stacker team of horses. And our boss, my uncle Pete Reese, on the new invention, the power buckrake. A dozen years after that when Pete, with no children of his own, let me buy this ranch on honorary son-in-law terms,)

haying crews still were pretty much like that, and stayed the same during my and Marce's first several years here. Or seemed to stay that way. But then the swather was invented and squeezed the jobs of mower man and dump raker into one. Next came the time when I at last decided I had to quit haystacks in favor of bales, the only form of hay that people would buy any more, and there went the stackman, the stacker team boy, the power buckraker, and for that matter my own old scatter rake job. Similar had happened on the sheep side of operating a ranch; no shepherders any more, just tightly wired pastures. And now that ranch crews had been perfected out of existence, so to speak, and a place such as this was mechanized into a one-man deal, here I was, getting too damn old to handle

all the tasks asked of that one man. Which of course was the reason for Kenny, and Darleen. Nothing against them, they were a good-hearted pair, but was this progress?

"...Joe Rellis goes, 'What do you want me to do, give ~~me~~^{this} stuff away?'" Darleen was concluding her grocery tale, "and I go, 'You bet that's what I want, but I sure don't see any sign of it happening."

I did what I could to grin approval of Darleen's defense of our kitchen budget, but my result was probably thin. All at once, the three of us seemed to be out of conversation. Something was missing, these mornings when we met about the ranchwork, and the other two knew it just as well as I did. But what was I supposed to be, the Mister Fixit of anything that bothered anybody any more? I was about to tell them I had to get to getting toward Missoula, when Kenny crossed his arms and put his hands on his shoulders as if hugging himself, and brought out:

"Uhhm, Jick, I met up with Shaun Finletter along the east fence there yesterday and he said ~~to~~ tell you he'd like to talk to you."

And here it was, yet ~~and~~ again. The missing. The first peep of it, anyway. Because, the fact was that though Shaun Finletter's tongue

would do the talking, the throat under the words was TriGram Resources.

The everloving goddamn TriGramites. Not twenty minutes after ~~the~~ ^{that} corporation bought the big Double W ranch from Wendell Williamson's California heirs-- as a tax writeoff, naturally--some guy in a tie was here to make me an offer for this ranch. Other TriGramites had tried me regularly the past half dozen years, and now that Shaun was their manager of the Double W I ~~was~~ evidently was in his job description too: buy out the old fart at the head of the creek. I have to say, in a way I missed Wendell Williamson, whom I despised heartily when he was alive. At least with Wendell you knew directly who was trying to gobble you; not some multi-bunch who saw you as a piece of acreage they could make tax arithmetic out of.

But. Life on this place without Marce wasn't the same life as when I could casually tell Williamson or TriGram or anybody else to go jump. How long did I want to try to operate this ranch by remote control through Kenny? How long could I? If only...but that other try, my bright idea before Kenny, had refused to become more than if. Jesus, but I wished for twenty years off my age. Hell, I'd settle for five. Yet even if I had some age off me, would it really do any good in terms of the ranch? Maybe people from now on are going to exist on bean sprouts and wear

polyester all over themselves, and lamb and wool belong in a museum.

Maybe what I have known how to do in life, which is ranching, doesn't register any more. What do the lawyers call it, a moot point?

"Did he," I at last responded to Kenny's relay from Shaun. At the stove Darleen was waiting for my real answer before she would lift the coffee pot and do us one last refill, as if my words might make the load too much to handle; and Kenny still was in his self-hug. Both of them watching me so closely it was as bad as being in Maria's lens again. They had reason. For if I sold, this ranch would simply be folded into the Double W holdings as one more cow pasture, the way every other ranch along Noon Creek had been. TriGram Resources saw no need for the Kennys and Darleens of this world.

I lifted my coffee cup to the ready position and said the only thing I knew to say: "Like I told you, I'll be back and forth every so often from this trip. Tell Shaun I'll have word for him sometime then, one way or the other."