

Ride With Me, Mariah Montana

by Ivan Doig

## THE END TOWARD IDAHO

Well, old buddies out there the other side of the ink, I am not a happy camper this Fourth of July morn. What we've got here is the hundredth time the grandandglorious 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 hiss and vinegar by now? But no, it's going to be more of the lame old usual. From Yaak to Ekalaka today, 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 burn down our towns with fireworks. A centennial Fourth of the same old guff: hip-hip-hoorah, flap-the-flag-and-pass-the-swig. Maybe it is an American condition, in this strange nation we have become, all helmet and wallet 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 this centennial year and nowhere find a really independent idea--like changing the name of this state of ours to something more appropriate, such as Destitution.

--"Wright Angles" column  
in the Missoula Montanian,  
July 4, 1989



Click. From where I was sitting on the bumper of the Winnebago I was doing my utmost to outstare that camera of hers, but as usual, no such luck. You would think, wouldn't you, that a person with a whole rodeo going on around her could come up with something more highly interesting to spend film on than me. Huh uh, not this cameraperson. No more than an arm's reach away she was down on one knee with the gizmo clapped to her eye like she couldn't see without it, and 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 Mariah wanted was ever the unexpected one, the one after you'd let your guard down.

She unfolded up out of her picture-taking crouch and

stood there giving me a gotcha grin, her proud long mane of hair deeper than red--the double-rich color that on a fine horse is called blood bay--atop the narrow but good enough face and the figure, lanky but not awkwardly so, that somehow managed to be both long-legged and thoroughly mounded where the female variety is supposed to be mounded; one whole hell of a kit of prime woman suddenly assembled. I just sat there like a bumper ornament of the motorhome. What's a guy supposed to say, thanks ever so much for doing exactly what I wish to hell you would cut out doing? ~~##~~ Just then a sleepy bleah issued out of a Hereford calf unconcernedly trotting 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 Mariah twirled a long lens onto her camera and in a couple of quick pulls climbed atop the arena fence to aim out at the horseback subject who was disgustedly coiling his pair of dud lariats, but then didn't bother to snap the scene. "Folks, what do you say we give this hardluck 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

sm  
caps



under the impression he was a calf roper I could buy up Japan.

Mariah was staying perched on the top fence pole while she scanned through that telescope of a lens at the jam-packed grandstand crowd across the arena. Involuntarily I found myself seeing the surroundings in the same bit by bit way she was (through her picture-taking apparatus.) What this was, the woven wire between the posts and poles of the arena fence sectioned everything in front of my eyes into pieces of view about the size of postcards. So when I gazed straight across, here would be a wire-rimmed rectangle of the rows of rodeo-goers in dark glasses and their best ~~hats~~ <sup>Stetsons</sup>. Seek a little higher and the green tremble of the tall cottonwoods along Gros Ventre's streets was similarly framed; like the lightest of snowfall, wisps of cotton loosed from the trees slowly posed in one weave of wire and floated on into the next. Farthest beyond, there ~~was~~ <sup>hung</sup> the horizon rectangle, half sky and half cliffwall of Roman Reef and its companion mountains, up over English Creek where it all began. Where I began. Where she'd begun.

Everything of life picture-size, neatly edged. Wouldn't that be handy, if but true.

I shook my head and spat sourly into the dirt of the rodeo grounds. Blaze of the July afternoon notwithstanding, this was yet another of those days, half a year's worth by now, when my shadow would have frozen any water it passed over.



Naturally Mariah had come to the attention of young Frew, who halted his horse, doffed his rodeoing hat and held it over his heart in a mock pretty way while he yelled across to her, "Will this smile do?" Mariah 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 her there above me on the fence. That pert behind of hers nicely enhanced by bluejeans, and her snapbutton turquoise-colored western shirt like some runaway blossom against the sky. Mariah on high. Up there in sight of everybody for a mile, but oblivious to all as she waited for the next picture to dawn. Not for the first time--more like the millionth--I wondered whether her behavior somehow went with her name. That eye sound there in Mariah, while any other of the species that I'd ever encountered was always plain ee Maria. She was a singular one in every way I could see, for sure.

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 all-afternoon rodeo and this perpetual damn calf roping, but more than that, too.

Mariah ignored the more. "What's your big rush?" she wanted to know, all innocent, 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 sudden 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 the illustrious hair. As if just the motion of her could strike sparks from the air. No wonder every man afoot or horseback who ever saw her sent his eyes back for a second helping.

"Jick, somebody's going to use you as a doorstep if you keep on the way you've been," she started right in again as if I was running a want ad for advice. "I had to half drag you here today and now you can't wait to mope off home to the ranch and vegetate some more. I mean, what is this, suicide by boredom? Before, you were never the type to sit around like you got your tail caught in a crack." Before.

"You know as well as I do that you've got to get yourself going again," she supplied in the next breath. "That's why I want you to pack your socks and 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 Mariah never starts to really 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."


Wouldn't you know, all that drew me was the extended comment that if such was the case then I might just as well plop my butt behind a steering wheel where I'd at

least be doing somebody a minimal amount of good, hadn't I. She let up just long enough to see if any of that registered on me. Judging not, she switched to: "I don't see how you can afford not to come, the newspaper's going to pay for the whole trip, the use of your rig and everything, didn't I tell you that already? And if you think that isn't a real deal you don't know the bean counters they've got running the Montanian now." Before I could point out to her that free stuff is generally overpriced, she was tying the whole proposition up for me in a polka dot bow. "So all you've got to do is bring the motorhome on over and meet the scribbler and me Monday noon, is that so tough?"

Tough, no; impossible, yes. How could I make her savvy the situation? Before, I'd have said I could shoulder whatever was asked of me, this included. But everything changed for me on that night six months ago, none of it for the better. You can be told and told it will all heal, but that does not make it happen any faster.

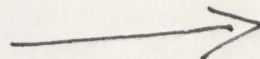
Mariah wasn't waiting for my deep thoughts to swim ashore. Gathering her gear into her camera bag, a lightweight satchel made of some kind of synthetic but painted up to resemble appaloosa horsehide, complete with her initials as if burnt in by a branding iron, she simultaneously was giving

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the rodeo a final scan to make sure there wasn't some last-minute calf roping miracle to be recorded and saying over her shoulder as if it was all settled: "See you in Missoula on Monday, then."



"Like hell you will. Listen, petunia--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, let alone go chasing around the whole state of Montana with him."

"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, Mariah 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 for the life of me I can't see why you'd hang around that joker Riley any longer than it takes to cuss him out, let alone all the way from now until the celebrating gets over." The rest of July, August, September, October, the first week of November: four entire months, Mariah'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 digging gray eyes. "Or anyway not for another hundred years, and I'm not particularly famous for waiting, am I?"

"Christamighty, Mariah." How many ways did I have to say no to this woman? "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 Bago is yours for however long



you want it and I don't give a good goddamn how poor a specimen of mankind you take along with you. Okay?"

She didn't take the keys, she didn't even answer my offer of them. No, all she did was that little toss of her head again, as if clearing her firecloud of hair out of the way would clarify me somehow too. People either side of us on their perches of bumpers and fenders were watching the pair of us more than the rodeo. ~~Wonderful.~~ <sup>Swell.</sup> See the world champion moper Jick McCaskill and his girl while they duke it out on the glorious Fourth; we ought to be selling ringside tickets. I started to turn away and do what I should have done long since, stick the key in the ignition of the Winnebago and head home to the ranch. Try that, though, when the next thing you hear is Mariah saying ever so slowly, in a voice not her usual bulletproof one:

"Jick. Jick, I need to have you along."

Damn. Double damn.

Going Winnebagoing around the countryside with her and the other one was still the last thing on this earth I wanted to do. But need instead of want. Do people really know what they are trying to reach for with that word? I wasn't sure I could tell, anymore.

I scrutinized Mariah. Her, too? Her own wound not yet scarred over, either?

Our eyes held each other for a considerable moment. Until I had to ask her outright:

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

# A kind of crinkle, or maybe tiniest wince, occurred in her expression. Then she gave me that all-out grin of hers, honest as the sun, and said: "If I was it'd be the first time, wouldn't it?"

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

In back of Mariah, 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.

Christamighty. Four entire months of letting myself get just exactly where I knew not to get, between the pair of them. Mariah the newspaper picture-taker, my headlong daughter. And writing Riley Wright, my goddamn ex-son-in-law.

# —————

Missoula was sizzling. 93, the temperature sign on top of the Montanian building kept spelling out in blinking lights, as if it needed any spelling out.

I still had the majority of an hour before noon when Mariah and Riley were to present themselves and I'd already used up the scenery from the parking lot. The Montanian offices fronted onto the Clark Fork River, in a building that looked as though it had been installed before the river -- a gray stone heap with an odd pointy-topped round tower,



turret I guess it'd be, bellying out over its front entrance. When the rooftop temperature sign wasn't broadcasting a terrible number, it recited in spurts. Or tried to. First:

IF IT'S N WS

Next:

THEN IT' IN

And lastly:

THE MONTA IAN

~~B7c~~  
s.c, centered,  
with the "missing  
letter" gaps  
aligned vertically  
down the page

Over and over again. I had to wonder what they thought about that gaptoothed brag across the river where the other newspaper, the Missoulia, was headquartered in a new low building like a desert fort. Mariah had told me it is rare to have two papers in one town any more, but who ever said Missoula is your average place.

I'd acquired a discarded copy of today's Montanian when I stopped at Augusta to coffee up before coming over Rogers Pass, but purposely wasn't reading it because that'd have seemed like giving in to the blinking sign. I figured it wouldn't count if I just leafed through to see whether Mariah had any photos in. The picture with her credit under it, though, I almost missed, not expecting to find her handiwork in the sports section. A balding softball player gasping on third base after running out a triple, his stomach pooching out under a T-shirt which read Keep Montana Green. Shoot a Developer.

Since I had the newspaper open anyway, I took a peek at



Riley's column next. Same as ever, the Wright Angles heading and the all too familiar Riley mug, so favorable a picture of him it surely had not come from Mariah's camera, and then the day's dose of words.

indent  
Riley's  
newspaper  
material  
throughout

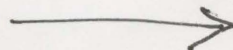
The year: back there somewhere. The season: youth.  
We are six in number, three of each and much aware of  
that arithmetic.

Curlicues of drawl from the car radio. The girls  
sing along, and prairie hills squat all around the  
endless highway. We are, as the road-restless word  
that year says it, motating. Our green Studebaker  
coupe motates to the music of time, "melodied radio-  
special" for us, announces the disc jockey, "by the  
one and only Mr. Hank Williams."

Fast miles of lost romance banner behind us, who  
still think high school is the world. The gold-haired  
girl leans softly nearer the radio and hums at the hills  
easing past. Mr. Hank Williams echoes the wail life  
made as it happened to him, and might to us.

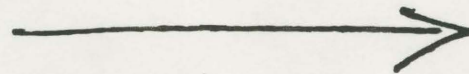
And some more like that. Riley was working himself up into a road mood, was he. Probably he never had to exert himself to be in a girling mood.

What roused me from Riley, not that it would have taken much, was the heavy whump of a car door against the passenger-side of the Bago. A brand new Bronco





had pulled into the parking space there, and a guy with a California look to him was squeezing out and frowning down at his door edge and what must have been the first paint chip out of his previously virgin vehicle. My sympathy was not huge. I cast him a go-eat-a-toad-why-don't-you glance to let him know so, then stuck my head back in the newspaper while he gave the dusty put-putting Bago--naturally I had the generator on to run the air conditioning--and me some eyeball time before he vanished into a side door of the Montanian building. I figured he must be a bean counter.



During the energy boom when there were some actual dollars in this state, a big California newspaper named the Globe --unfondly referred to by Mariah and for that matter Riley as the Glob--bought up the Montanian. A person has to wonder: is everything going to be owned by somebody somewhere else? Where does that eventually end up, in some kind of circle like a snake eating its tail?

I checked the dashboard clock again; still half an hour till noon. Well, hell. Given that I'd already made a six-hour drive from the Two Medicine country to get here and there was no telling what corner of the state Mariah and Riley would want to light off to when they showed up, it seemed only prudent to stoke myself up a little. I went back to the middle of the Winnebago to the gas stove and ~~little~~ refrigerator there and from what was available began scrambling a batch of eggs with some slices of baloney slivered into them for body.

To combat the stovetop warmth I put the air conditioner up another notch. Pretty slick, if I do say so myself--one apparatus of the motorhome putting forth hot and another one canceling it out with cold. Next I nuked myself a cup of coffee by spooning some instant into a mug of water and giving it a <sup>strong</sup> minute in the microwave. Looking around for anything else to operate, I flipped the radio on for dining company. And about lost my hand to the ruckus of steel guitars and a woman semi-shouting:



"Somewhere south of Browning, along Highway 89!  
Just another roadkill, beside life's yellow line!  
But morning sends its angel  
in a hawk-quick flash of light!  
Guiding home forever  
another victim of the night!"

Some angel, her. Leaving the music on but considerably toned down, I seated myself to do justice to my plateload of lunch and the question of what I was doing sitting here in a Missoula parking lot eating eggs a la baloney.

Every family is a riddle, or at least any I have ever heard of. People on the outside can only glimpse enough to make them wonder ~~just~~ 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, sometimes lifetimes, of being 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 bloodline. The oldest story there is, and ever the freshest.

We McCaskills are far from immune. I still wished mightily that I had stuck with my original inclination and kept saying no, daughter or not, to Mariah's big thee-and-me-and-he-in-a-Winnebago idea. If that daughter of mine didn't want to ram around the countryside alone with Riley Wright while Montana went through its centennial commotion, let the newspaper dig down and hire her a bodyguard, why not.

Preferably one with experience as a coyote hunter, so that he could recognize what he was dealing with in Riley.

"Up along the High Line, on Route 2 east of Shelby!

The guardian in action <sup>is</sup> ~~in~~ Angel Number Three!

Now chrome collides with pheasant,

sending feathers in the air!

But heaven's breeze collects them

with a whisper of a prayer!"

"That was another oldie but goodie from Montana's homegrown c-and-w group, The Roadkill Angels doing their theme song for you here on Melody Roundup," the radio voice chirped. "The time now is 11:47. In the weather outlook, temperatures east of the Divide will hit the upper 80s the rest of this week, and in western Montana they'll continue to climb into the 90s. So, hot hot HOT is going to be the word..."

I shut the voice off. The hell with the radio guy and his word. I hate heat. Although, a week of scorchers would provide me a way to tackle Mariah about getting out of this trip, wouldn't it: "Sorry, <sup>petunia,</sup> but I'm allergic to any weather over 90 above--it makes me break out in a sweat."

But when I came right down to it, I knew I could not call things off that easily. Digest all my reasoning along with the pan of lunch and there still was the fact of Mariah and myself alone with each other, so to speak, from here on. She and I are the only Montana McCaskills there are now. God, it happens quick. My other daughter, Lexa, lives up in Sitka, married to a fellow with the fish and game department there,



both of them as Alaskan as you can get without having been conceived in an igloo. And Marcella, my wife...

I swallowed on the thought of her again and sat staring out the motorhome <sup>side</sup> window to Mount Sentinel and the University of Montana's big pale M up there, branded onto the mountain's grassy flank in white-painted rocks. Already the slope of Sentinel looked tan and crisp. By this time next week, wherever the Winnebago and I and Mariah and goddamn Riley might be, haying was going to have to get underway at my ranch by my hired couple, Kenny and Darleen. There was that whole situation, too. Even yet, in the worst of the

nights when the question of what to do with the ranch was afire in my mind, I would turn in bed to where she ought to be and begin, "Marce..."

Her at every window of my mind. Ghosts are not even necessary in this life. It is hard facts that truly haunt.

I was not supposed to outlive Marcella. In just that many words, there is the history of my slough of mood, the brown trance that Mariah 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 ever can be a definite proposition, but any couple in a long marriage comes to have a kind of assumption, a shared hunch about who will die first, which is maybe never said out loud yet is thoroughly there. Our own fund of love, Marcella's and mine, seemed to have its eventual sum clearly enough set. My father died at sixty-five, and his father must have been a whole lot

younger than that when the labors of his Scotch Heaven  
homestead ~~did him in.~~ ~~killed him.~~ In both of them, the heart simply  
played out. So, you didn't need to be much of a betting  
person to figure I'd go off the living list considerably  
before Marcella.

But cancer.

Only a year or so ago the two of us thought we were on  
the verge of getting life pretty well solved. By then we  
had adjusted--as much as parents ever do--to the breakup of  
Mariah and Riley's marriage. We'd hired a young couple from  
down at 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, secondhand but with under fifty thousand  
miles on it, to do the traveling we had always promised  
ourselves--Alaska to see Lexa and <sup>Travis</sup> ~~Lyle~~, and then somewhere  
away from Montana winter, maybe Arizona or New Mexico 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. And so when Marcella went in to the  
Deaconess Hospital in Great Falls for that examination and  
there on the X-rays was the mortal spot on not just one lung  
but both, it was one of those can't-happen situations that  
a person knows all too well is actual. Six months before  
this Missoula forenoon--six months and six days, now--the air  
of life went out of my wife, and the future out of me. Her  
death was as <sup>if</sup> I'd been gutted, the way a rainbow trout is



when you slit his underside all the way to the gills and run your thumbnail like a cruel little plow the length of the cut to shove the insides out.

An eruption of light where the side door of the Winnebago had been. I jerked back, blinking and squinting into the bright of noon.

"Hi, how many days you been here?" swept in Mariah's voice and swiftly the rest of the swirl of her, led by the ever present camera bag she hoisted ~~in~~<sup>g</sup> with both hands.

"You're the only person left in America who's always early."

"Gives people something to say about me, at least," I fended.

"You've got this place like an icebox, you know that?" As usual, her attention was in several directions at once, roving the inside of the motorhome as if she only had sixty seconds to memorize it.)

Today she was equipped with two or three more cameras and other gizmos than usual slung across her shadowplaid blouse, evidently loaded for the road. None of it seemed to weight her down any. A mark of Mariah was that she always held herself so straight, as if parting a current with her breastbone.

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Her  
~~Mariah's~~ flying inspection lit on the frying pan with  
its evidence of recent scrambled eggs, and that brought out  
her grin. Which is to say, it brought Marcella into human  
face suddenly again, as if my thoughts of her were rendered  
visible. In most other ways Mariah was built McCaskill,  
but like her mother she grinned Withrow. So many times





I saw it originate on old Dode Withrow whenever he and my father talked sheep in the high summer pastures of the Two Medicine National Forest, and it awaited me on his daughter Marcella my first day in the first grade with her at the South Fork schoolhouse--that grin, 100% pure, which seemed to reach out <sup>from</sup> all the way behind the eyes, to tell the world Pretty good so far, what else you got up your sleeve?

Trying desperately to get myself off that remembering train of thought, I put into voice: "I wasn't actually all that hungry, but--"

"--you figured you'd better eat before you got that way," Mariah melodically finished for me with a laugh. With a quick step she closed the distance between us and leaned down and provided me a kiss on the cheek. <sup>Another</sup> ~~One~~ of the things about Mariah was that she closed her eyes to kiss. I always thought it was uncharacteristic of her, but I suppose kissing has all its own set of behavior.

Her lips sampled my cheek only an instant. She pulled back and stared at me. <sup>H</sup> After considerable scrutiny of the scissor-eyed kind only a daughter or wife can deliver, she asked: "What, did you fall face down on a porcupine?"

"You never seen a beard before?" I said in innocence. I suppose maybe that was a generous description of the not quite week of snowy stubble on my face; but I was growing the whiskers as fast as I could.

"Beard?!? Jick, 'beard' has always been next thing to

a cussword with you! What brought this on?"

"What do you think did, the centennial, of course. They're having a beard contest for it, up home. I figured I'd get in the spirit of things." Actually I didn't know why, after 64 3/4 years, I suddenly was letting my face grow wild. All I can report is that the morning after the Fourth of July I took stock at the mirror and thought to myself, hell with it, let her sprout.

"Jick, you look like what's left of a wire brush."

"It'll get to looking better."

"I guess it's bound to." She gave me another stare almost strong enough to wipe whiskers away, then shook her head and said, "Listen, I just came to say I'm not really here yet." My impulse was to retort that I knew she wasn't all here or the two of us wouldn't be about to go gallivanting around the state of Montana with that Riley dingbob, but I abstained. "To stay, that is," she more or less explained.

"I've got a shoot I have to do. The Rotary Club speaker. Big fun," she droned in a contrary voice. By now she was fiddling with the <sup>middle</sup> camera around her neck as if the orator already was barreled in her lens. "How about if you stock us up on food while I'm doing that, okay? Riley's finishing up another of those thumbsucker columns of his and he's supposed to be done about the time I am. He better be, the turkey." <sup>Mariah</sup> ~~She~~ hefted her photographic warbag and spun for the door. "See you."



Off she vanished Rotaryward, and I drove the Winnebago over to the big Buttrey's store at the east end of town. One thing about having spent a lifetime tending camp for sheepherders is that you don't dillydally in the presence of acres of groceries. Pushing the cart up one aisle and down the next, I tossed in whatever I came to that I figured we might conceivably need in Bago living. Supper of course was closest on my mind, and at the meat counter I contemplated pig liver until I remembered Mariah's golden words: "The newspaper will pay for it all." I threw back the liver in favor of the three biggest ribeye steaks I could find.

All the checkout lines were busy--I guessed this was city living, people buying scads of stuff in the middle of the day--so I parked my cart at the end of a line of four other carts at least as loaded as mine and settled to wait.

I didn't stay settled long.

Only the moment of so it took to study idly along my neighbors in front of me in the grocery line until my eyes arrived at ~~came to~~ the woman, about my age, being waited on by the clerk at the cash register. I was viewing her in profile and that snub nose told me with a jolt.

Holy H. Hell, it couldn't be her, out of a past that seemed a thousand years distant. But yet it indubitably was. I mean, I know what is said about why coincidences so often happen: that there <sup>actually</sup> are only twelve people in the world and the rest is done with mirrors. But magic dozen or no, this was her for real. Shirley. My first wife.



For the next several eternal seconds I wondered if I was having some kind of attack. My knees went flimsy, as if something was pushing into them from behind, so that I had to put a hand to the grocery cart to steady myself. Simultaneously my heart seemed stopped yet I could almost hear it butting against my <sup>s</sup>~~breath~~bone. My guts felt snaky, my blood watery. Normally I do not consider myself easy to spook. But where was there any normal in this, coinciding in a checkout line hundreds of miles from home with somebody you mistakenly barged into marriage with so long ago?

That marriage had been committed right here in Missoula. I was at the university on the GI bill, my last year in forestry school when Shirley and I connected ~~up with each other.~~

Shirley Havely, as she was then, from the town of Hamilton down toward the south end of the Bitterroot Valley. In that college time her figure was more on the tidy side than generous and her head was actually a bit big for the rest of her, but it was such a terrific head no ~~man~~ <sup>male</sup> ever cared: a black cloud of hair that began unusually high on her forehead, creating a perfectly straight line across there like the top of a full-face mask; then black eyebrows that curved winningly over her bluebird-blue eyes; then that perky nose; then a smile like a lipstick advertisement. She





was a Theta and a theater major and ordinarily our paths would not have crossed in a hundred years, but Shirley had a taste for life on the edge of campus. As did I, in those afterwar years. I hung around with some of the married veterans who lived ~~and partied~~ in prefab housing called Splinterville and at one Saturday night get-together there the two of us found ourselves at the keg of Highlander beer at the same time and she tested me out in a voice as frisky as the rest of her, "You're the smokejumper, aren't you." I surprised myself by smiling a smile as old as creation and giving her back, "Yeah, but that ain't all I'm up to." It happened fast after that, beginning with an indelible weekend when a Splinterville buddy and his wife were away and Shirley and I had the privacy of their place. Then the day after graduation in 1949, we were married. We stayed on in Missoula while I smokejumped that summer, that wicked fire season; on the Mann Gulch blowup in August, thirteen smokejumpers burned to death when the flames ran them down one after another on a tinder-dry grassy slope; and ever after I carried the thought that I could have been one of them if I hadn't been out of reach of the muster telephone on a trail maintenance project that day. Whether it was the fever of living with danger or it



simply was the temperature of being young, whenever I got home from a parachute trip to a forest fire, whatever time of day, Shirley and I plunged straight to bed.

When that wore off, so did our marriage. After I passed the U.S. Forest Service exam and was assigned onto the Custer National Forest over in eastern Montana, Shirley did not last out our first summer there. It tore us both up pretty bad. Divorce was no everyday thing then.

That was then and this was now, me standing in the land of groceries gaping at some grayhaired lady with whom I'd once popped into bed whenever it crossed either of our minds. I still was totally unlaced by coinciding with Shirley here. What was going through me was like--like a storm of time. A kind of brainfade, I can only say, in and out, strong and soft, like the surprise warm gusts that a chinook wind hurls down from the mountains of the Two Medicine country: a far-off roar, a change in atmosphere, a surge of thaw where solid winter had been minutes ago, but the entire chinook rush taking place inside me, forcing through the canyon country of the mind. Right then and there, I'd have stopped all remembering that the sight of Shirley was setting off in me if I could have; don't think I didn't try. But I couldn't make my brain perform that at all, not at all. Even the familiar way she was monitoring the clerk at his tillwork, keenly counting her change as he drew it out before he in turn would count it into her hand, I



recognized all the way to my bones. Shirley always not only dotted every i and crossed every t, she crossed every i and dotted every t too, just in case. With but one monumental exception; me.

I caught my breath and tried to think of anything adult to step forward and say to her. Remember me? logically invited some response along the lines of I sure do, you parachuting sonofabitch. Or How you been? was equally meaningless, for although Shirley was still attractive in a stringent way it was plain that the same total of forty years had happened to her as to me since that altar mistake we'd made with each other. No, search as I did in myself, there seemed nothing fitting to parley to each other now. While I was gawking and trying not to seem to be, Shirley did give me one rapid wondering glance; but with my everyday Stetson on and sunglasses and the struggling whiskers, I must have looked more like a blind bum wanting to sell her a pencil than like anybody she'd ever been at all interested in.

"There you go, Mrs. Nellis," the clerk said cheerily as



he positioned the final sack of groceries in her cart, and away Shirley went, one more time.

"Get everything at Buttrey's?" Mariah asked when she and I reconvened in the Montanian parking lot.

"Uh, yeah." Plenty. My mind still racing with it all as I stowed canned goods and other belly ammunition in the Bago's warren of compartments. Why were those married youngsters, Shirley and me, back into my life? It wasn't as if I hadn't had better sense since. After I found my way out of the Forest Service and into ranching on the same land where I was born, after I mustered myself and married Marcella in the springtime of 1953, I put that failed first try with Shirley out of memory. But now right here within sight of where that mutual wrong guess began, where education took on a darker meaning than a dramatic girl or a green punk of a smokejumper ever bargained for, that long-ago error <sup>insisted on</sup> ~~was~~ preening its profile to me. What right, even, did that episode have to come swarming back at me again? Doesn't time know any statute of limitations, for Christ's sake?

Out of memory. Suddenly it chilled me, there in the blaze of that Missoula day, suddenly to be aware that there may be no such place.

"I can tell by looking that you're antsy to get going," Mariah was saying over her shoulder as she busily stacked film into the refrigerator. I admit, I was about half tempted to respond, just to see the effect on her beaverish



activity, By the way, I just met up with the woman who could have been your mother.

But the day had already had sufficient complication and so I kept on with my storekeeping and just conversed, "How was your Rotary shoot?"

"Same as a kabillion others. God, I can't wait to get going on the centennial. Something realer than lunch faces."

This time she had shown up loaded for bear, equipmentally speaking. As she continued to move gear in--black hard-sided cases somewhat like those that hold musical instruments but in this instance I knew contained her camera lights and stands, then a suitcase-looking deal that she said was a Leafax negative transmitter, which told me nothing, and another case with portable "soup," as she called her stuff for developing proof sheets of her pictures, then a cargo of ditty bags which must have held all other possible photographic dealies-- I was starting to wonder whether there was going to be room in the motorhome for human occupancy.

When she at last ran out of outfit to stash, Mariah gave a quick frown in the direction of the Montanian building and the prominently absent Riley <sup>Wright,</sup> then in the next second I and my unshaven condition were under her consideration again. Oh sure, you bet. Up to her eye leapt a camera.

"Mariah, don't start," I warned. "I am not in a photogenic mood."

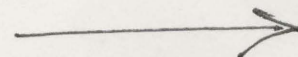
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She dropped the camera to the level of her breastbone, holding it in both hands while she gazed at me as if she couldn't understand what I could possibly be accusing her of. With a ~~sweet~~<sup>honey of a</sup> grin she asked, "Don't you think you're being unduly suspicious?" and right there under the sound of icious I heard the telltale click.

"Hey, damn it! I just told you--"

"Now, now," she soothsoaped me. "Don't you want the history of ~~the~~<sup>that</sup> beard recorded? If the world's supply of film holds out, maybe I'll eventually get a picture of you looking presentable."

I kept a wary eye on her, but apparently she was through





practicing camera aggravation on me for a while. Now impatience simply was making her goosier second by second.

Her hair swung restlessly. Today's earrings were green-and-pink half moons which I gradually figured out represented watermelon slices. "All we need is the scribbler," her one-way conversation rattled on, "but you know him, you'd have to pay him to be late to get him to be on time."

"The slanderous McCaskill clan," in through the motorhome's doorway arrived the voice, still as satisfied with itself as a purring cat. "Ever ready to take up the bagpipes against a poor innocent ex-husband."

So here he was, Mister Words himself. I had not laid eyes on him in, what, the three years since he and Mariah split the blanket. But ducking into the Bago now the sonofabitch didn't look one eyeblink older. Same slim tall build, an inch, maybe two, shorter than I am. But notably wide and square at his shoulders, as if he'd forgotten to take the hanger out of his shirt. Same electric hair, wild and curly in that color that wasn't quite blond and wasn't quite brown; more like applesauce, which I considered appropriate. Same foxtail mustache, of the identical color as his hair. A person's first glimpse of ~~him~~ <sup>this character,</sup> hair seemed to be the main agenda of his head, the face and anything behind it just along for the ride. But the guy was slyer than that, a whole hell of a lot. I have seen him talk to people, oh so casually asking them this or that, and before they knew it they'd been interviewed and were about to be served up with gravy on them in the next day's newspaper.



He was studying me now. I stonily met his nearest eye, surprisingly akin to Mariah's exact gray, and waited for something wisemouthed from him, but all he issued was, "Managed to find your way to civilization from Noon Creek, hmmm?" which was only average for him. Even so, up in me came the instantaneous impulse to snap at him, let him know nothing was forgotten, not a thing mended between us. Instead, for Mariah's sake I just uttered the one flat word of acknowledgment: "Riley."

Meanwhile Mariah looked as if there was a dumpload she wanted to deliver onto him, but instead she expelled a careful breath and only asked: "Did the BB have any last words of wisdom for us?"

"You bet. I quote exactly: 'Make our consumers sit up and take notice.'" Riley swung back to the doorway, stuck his head out and intoned to Missoula at general in a kind of robot voice: "Consumers of newspapers--it has come to the attention of our leader, the incredible BB, that your posture leaves something to be desired. So sit up and take notice." He pulled back inside with us and said with a sense of accomplishment, "There, that ought to do it."

sm  
caps

Mariah regarded him as if she was half terminally exasperated, half helplessly ready to laugh. "Riley, one of these days he's going to hear you mouth off like that."

Riley widened his eyes under applesauce-colored eyebrows. "And demote me to a photographer maybe even? Shit oh dear!" Next thing, he was at the doorway again, sending



the robot voice out again: "BB. I didn't mean it. Mariah Montana made me do it."

"Demote?" Mariah pronounced in a tone full of barbwire.

"Listen, mittenhead. You can barely handle the crayons you write with, let alone a camera."

Uh huh. We hadn't so much as turned a wheel yet and the road war was already being declared by both sides. The two of them faced each other across not much distance there in the middle of the motorhome, Mariah standing straight yet curved in that wonderful womanly way, Riley cocking a gaze down at her from that ~~wilderness~~ ~~headcloud~~ of hair. ~~They even looked like an armed showdown, Mariah with the slings of cameras around her neck and across her shadowplaid blouse, Riley with one of those telephone beepers holstered on his belt and a fannypack tape recorder on behind. That's not even counting the air daggers their eyes were sending each other.~~

An outside soul couldn't help but wonder how they could stand to work under the same roof, even though Mariah had explained to me that they didn't really need to cross paths all that much at the newspaper, Riley's column appearing as it did without photos except his own perpetual smartass one. So

imagine the mutual nasty surprise when Mariah unbeknownst put in her suggestion to do a series of photographs around the state during its centennial celebration and Riley in equal ignorance put in his suggestion to write a series of stories about same, and their editor the BB--his actual name



was Baxter Bolitho--decreed that they were going to have to do their series together, make a mix. Likely that's how gunpowder got discovered, too.

Which of them relented now I couldn't really tell, but it was Riley who turned a little sideways from Mariah and delivered to me as if we were in the middle of a discussion of it: <sup>#</sup>"Still hanging onto the ranch, hmm, Jick?" <sup>#</sup>To think that he would even bring that subject up. <sup>#</sup>"How's that going?" he pressed, blue eye fixed steadily on me.

Him and his two colors of eyes. I don't know what that particular ocular condition is called, maybe Crayola in the genes, but ~~on~~ <sup>on</sup> Riley the unmatched hues were damn disconcerting--his way of looking at you in two tones, flat gray from one side and bright blue the other. Rampant right up to his irises.

I returned his ~~look~~ <sup>gaze</sup> squarely and gave the ranch answer I'd heard ~~Marcella's~~ <sup>Marcella's</sup> father Dode Withrow give whenever my own father asked him that question during the Depression, the selfsame answer that Montana ranchers and farmers must have given when times turned rocky for them in 1919 and the early Twenties, and probably back before that in the crash of 1893. "Doing good, if you don't count going broke."

Brisk, or maybe the better spelling is brusque, Mariah passed between us toward the front of the motorhome, saying, "This isn't getting anything done. Let's head out."

"Mariah, you keep forgetting," Riley spouted in her wake. "Your license to boss me expired three years ago." At some



leisure he proceeded to give himself a tour of the layout of the motorhome.)

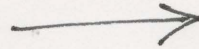
The gate-leg table where he'd have to write on his computer or whatever it was in the case he was carrying. The bathroom with its chemical toilet and the shower just big enough for a person the height of us to duck into. The kitchen area with its scads of built-in cupboards all around the little stove and refrigerator and microwave. Riley of course recognized the principle of that miniature kitchen and delivered me one of his sly damn grins. "Jick, I didn't know you sheepherders have engines in your wagons these days." No, there was just a hell of a lot he didn't know. One silo after another could be filled with what this yoyo did not know, even though he did go through life as if it was all being explained through him.

"Tight goddamn outfit," I heard Riley mutter as he finished nosing around. I flared, thinking he was referring to the Winnebago, which was as capacious as Marcella and I had been able to afford; but then I realized from the note of resignation in his voice that he meant the management of the Montanian, who utterly would not hear of four months of travel expenses for Mariah and Riley until she came up with the frugal notion of using my Bago.

Something other than the fact that the newspaper's bean counters would sooner open their veins than their wallets

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seemed to be bugging Riley, though. He fixed a long look onto Mariah's camera bag as if the fake white hide with brown spotted pattern was in fact the rump of an appaloosa. He'd had that equine paint job done and given her that bag the first Christmas they were married. I wondered if during the breakup of their marriage it ever occurred to Mariah to tell him he was the resident expert about a horse's ass, all right. Now he prowled some more, nosing into





one end of the motorhome and then the other, until finally he turned to Mariah and asked: "Well, where do we sort out?"

"Sort out what?"

"Our bodies, Little Virgin Annie," Riley enunciated so elaborately you could all but hear his teeth click on that second word. "Where do we all sleep in this shoebox?"

Mariah sent him a satisfied glint that said she'd been waiting several thousand whetted moments for a chance like this. "I sleep here," she indicated the couch along the wall opposite the kitchen-and-table side. Then with a toss of her head she aimed his attention, and mine, to the bed at the very rear of the motorhome, scrunched in between the toilet and closets and overhanging storage compartments. "You two," she gladly informed Riley, "sleep there."

"Oh, come on!" Riley howled, honestly aggrieved. "This wasn't in the deal, that I'd have to bed down with Life's Revenge here!" indicating none other than me.

"It sure as hell wasn't anywhere in my plans either," I apprised him.

"Then one of you delicate types sleep on the pulldown instead," said Mariah, which Riley and I both instinctively knew was a worse proposal yet. Guys our size, only a bare majority of the body would fit into the ledge bed that pulled down above the driver's and passenger's seats and the rest of our carcass would have to be folded up like an accordion some way.

"I wonder if it's too late to volunteer for the South Dakota centennial," Riley grumbled, but tossed a knapsack onto the rear bed as if deciding to stay for a while.

By default then, the wordbird and I unhappily resigned ourselves to being bedmates, and once Riley got his laptop computer and a fannypack tape recorder and a dictionary and a slew of other books and a bunch more kit and kaboodle aboard, it finally looked like the historic expedition could strike off across Montana. Something was yet tickling at my mind, though. Here we were into the afternoon already and nobody had mentioned the matter of destination. Thus I felt compelled to.

"How far do we have to get to today, anyway?"





"Moiese," Mariah proclaimed, as if it was Tierra del Fuego.

She and Riley kept going on about their business as if that wasn't some kind of Missoula joke, so I had to figure it wasn't. "Now wait a goddamn minute here, am I right that Moiese is just up the road a little ways?"

"About an hour, yeah," Riley assessed, helping himself to a handful of the fig newtons he'd discovered in a cupboard. "Why?"

"Are you telling me I got up before daylight and drove my butt off for half a day in this rig just to chauffeur you two somegoddamnwhere you could get to and back in a couple of hours yourselves?"

It was Riley and Mariah's turn to look at each other, accomplices unhappily harnessed together. Riley shrugged and chewed a cookie. "Having you along as chaperone is <sup>strictly</sup> Mariah's idea," he pointed out. "I wanted Marilyn Quayle to come, myself."

"Shove it, Riley," he was instructed by Mariah. To me, she stated: "Moiese is where we both think the series ought to start. Begin the world at the right end, as somebody always said to me when I was growing up."

In the face of being quoted back to myself I surrendered quick and fished out the Bago's ignition key. "Okay, okay, Moiese it is. But how come there?"

Riley's turn to edify me. "Jick, companion of my dreams, we are going to see the ideal Montanans," he announced as if he was selling stuff on TV. "The only ones who were ever able to make a decent living in this state, before the rest of us

came along and spoiled it for them."

Since I'd never been up into the Moiese country, I didn't have a smidgen of an idea what he was yammering about.

"Meaning who?"

Riley, damn him, gave me another sly grin.

"The buffalo."

#

Tracking buffalo from a motorhome the size of a small boxcar was an occupation I had never done, and so when we rumbled across the cattleguard--buffaloguard, I guess it'd be in this case--into the National Bison Range at Moiese, I didn't know how things were going to go. Especially when the Range turned out to be what the word said, a big nice stretch of rolling rangeland that included Red Sleep Mountain sitting fat and slope-shouldered across the southern end of the Flathead Valley, enough country for livestock of any kind to thoroughly hide away in. The best I could imagine was that we'd need to creep the Winnebago along the gravel road until maybe eventually some dark dots might appear, far off across the prairie. About as thrilling as searching for flyspecks, probably.

For once, I was short of imagination. Just a couple of hundred yards beyond the Park Service visitor center, all of a sudden here were a dozen or so buffalo lolling around like barnyard cows.

"How's this for service?" I couldn't resist asking



Mariah and Riley as I braked the Bago to a stop within fly-casting distance of the buffalo bunch. But he already was intent on them, leaning over my shoulder with notebook and pen ready for business, and she long since had rolled down her window and connected her camera to her eye.

Their goatees down in the grass, the miniature herd methodically whisked at flies with their short tasseled tails. Huge-headed. Dainty-legged. Dark as char. I knew buffalo only from the stories which the oldest of Two Medicine oldtimers, Toussaint Rennie, held me hypnotized with when I was a boy, and so it was news to me that a buffalo up close appears to be two animals pieced together: the front half of a shaggy ox and the rear of a donkey. There is even what seems like a seam where the hairy front part meets the hairless rear half. But although they are a cockeyed-looking creature--an absent-minded family where everybody had put on heavy sweaters but forgot any pants, is the first impression a bunch like this gives--buffalo plainly know what they're on the planet for. Graze. Eat grass and turn it into the bulk of themselves. Protein machines.

These munched and munched while we gawked. Digestion of both sorts until suddenly an old bull with a head big as a mossy boulder began butting a younger male out of his way, ~~snorting~~ ~~grunting~~ ominously to tell the rest of the planet he was on the prod, and of course at that exact same moment came the

sound of the passenger-side door as Mariah went out it.


"Hey, don't get--" I started to yelp and simultaneously bail out of my side of the Bago to head her off, but was halted by the grip of Riley's paw on my upper arm.

"Far be it for me to poke my nose into McCaskill family affairs"--oh, sure--"but she generally knows what she's doing when she has a camera in her hand, Jick."

True, Mariah so far had only slipped her way in front of the Bago to where she could sneak shots at the bulls doing their rough stuff, but I was staying leery about how she was going to behave with that camera. Long lens or not, she had a history of getting right on top of whatever she was shooting. Years ago at a Gros Ventre rodeo, Marcella and I heard the announcer yap out, "Folks, here's something a little bit different! Mariah McCaskill will now..." and we looked up to see this daughter of ours hanging sideways off a running horse, snapping the view a bulldogger would have as he leaned off to jump onto the steer. We counted ourselves lucky that at least she didn't jump.

These buffalo now were not anything to fiddle around with.

Compact though they were, some of them weighed as much as a horse, a big horse; couple all that muscle and sinew to those wicked quarter-moon horns and you have a creature that can hook and rip open a person. The reputation of buffalo is that even a grizzly bear will back off from them, and for once I vote with the bear. My buffalo unease was not helped any by their





snorelike grunts, umhh. . . umhh, which somehow kind of hummed on in the air after you heard them. I noticed even Riley keeping half an eye on Mariah despite his unsought advice that there was nothing in her behavior to sweat about.

She did nothing too suicidal, though, in firing off her clicks as a pony-sized calf suckled on its mama or the proddy old bull laid down and vigorously rolled, kicking all four legs in the air as he took his dust bath--up until the point where she climbed onto the top of the Winnebago to see how the buffalo scene registered from up there.

My heart did some flutters as Riley and I listened to her prowling around on that slick metal roof. I mean, oughtn't there be some kind of hazard rule that a photographer never do anything a four-year-old kid would have the sense not to?

My flutters turned into genuine internal gyrations as the old bull shook off the last smatters of his dust refreshment, stood for a minute with his half-acre head down as if pondering deeply, then began plodding directly toward the motorhome.

"It must take nerves of utter steel," Riley observed to me.

"What, to be a photographer?"

"No, to be Mariah's father."

Riley's mouthery wasn't my overriding concern by now, though. The buffalo bull continued toward us in a belligerently businesslike way, horned head growing huger with every undeviating step.

"Hey, up there," I leaned out the Bago window and called nervously to Mariah on the roof. "How about coming down in? This old boy looks kind of ornery."

Answer from on high consisted of a sudden series of whingwhingwhings, like a little machine going. It took me a bit--about four more paces by the inexorable buffalo--to recognize the blurty whing sounds, which kept on and on, as being the noise of a motorized camera. Maria sometimes resorted to when she wanted to fire the shutter fast enough to capture every motion. As now. "You've got to be kidding," her voice eventually came down but of course none of the rest of her. "When am I ever going to get closer buffalo shots than this?"

Only when skewered on a buffalo horn if she happened to slip off that roof. I had my mouth open to roar her some approximate version of that when I became aware of two dull pebbly eyes regarding me out of a mound of dense crinkly hair, around the front end of the motorhome. I yanked my head inside at record speed, but the buffalo was nearsightedly concentrating on the vehicle anyway. Experimentally he shifted his

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full weight sideways against the metalwork below the hood and began to rub.

The motorhome began to shake vigorously.

"I figured this rig must be good for something," Riley contributed as the buffalo settled into using the grillwork for a scratching post.

Jesus, the power of that itch. The poor old



Bago was rocking like an outhouse in an earthquake. Umhh... . umhh,  
three-quarter-ton

the beast grunted contentedly as he scraped and scraped. To look at

up close, the hide on a buffalo is like a matted mud rug that hasn't

been shaken out for many seasons, so there was no telling how long this

bison version of housecleaning was going to go on. From my perch in

the driver's seat, every sway of the Bago brought into view those

up-pointing horns, like bent spikes thick as tree limbs. Whingwhing

whingwhingwhing from above told me Mariah still was merrily in action,

but my jitters had had enough. Without thinking I asked over my shoulder

to Riley: "If you know so goddamn much about buffalo, how do we get rid

of an itchy one?"

"A little noise ought to make him back off," Riley diagnosed with

all the confidence of an expert on large mammals and reached past me

and beeped the horn.

The honk did send the buffalo scrambling away, but only far enough

to whirl around. Those dancy little legs incredibly maneuvered the

top-heavy bulk of the creature, then propelled it head-on at us.



Squarely as a pointblank cannon shot, the buffalo butted the grill of the Bago with a crunching Bam!

"Shit oh dear!" Riley <sup>expressed</sup> ~~uttered~~ in something like awe.

"Hey, quit, you sonofabitch!" I shouted. Properly that utterance would have been in the plural, for I was including in it both the hornthrowing buffalo and goddamn hornblowing Riley.

Overhead there had been the sound of a bellyflop, a person hitting the deck. At least there hadn't been a photographer's body flying past.

# "Mariah?!" I squalled next, mesmerically watching the buffalo back off <sup>exact</sup> with ~~deliberate~~ little steps, as if pacing off for another go at the grill. "Will you get yourself down here now, for Christ's sake!?"

Riley was poking the upper half of himself out the passenger-side window to try and locate her, for all the good that did.

"No way," arrived the reply from the roof. "I know that buffalo can't climb up here. But into the cab with you two lamebrains, I'm not so sure."

"Then can you at least hang onto something while I back us out of here? I'll take it as slow as I can, but. . ." Butt was still the topic

on the buffalo bull's mind too, from the look of him. As I eased the Bago into reverse and we crept backward down the road with Mariah prone on the roof, he lumbered toward us at the same gait as ours, patient as doomsday. Not until the motorhome at last bumped across the hoofcatching grillwork of a buffaloguard and we were safely on the other side of that barrier and the massive fence, did our pursuer relent.

When we halted and Riley and I piled out, that daughter of mine relinquished her armhold around the rooftop air duct and climbed down perfectly unscathed. The Winnebago, though: its grill had a squashed-indent as big around as a washtub. The abused vehicle looked as if a giant fist had punched it in the snoot.

Luckily the hood would still open, just, and as far as I could tell the radiator had survived. "How, I don't know," I stormily told the Montanian perpetrators and punctuated by slamming the hood back down.

"Honking the horn was a perfectly dumb-ass idea," Mariah rendered.

"Riley's who did it," I self-defended.

"Then that explains it."

"Don't get your kilts flapping," Riley told us soothingly. "A little



flexible arithmetic is all we need." He flipped open his notebook and jotted the reminder to himself. "I'll just diddle the expense account for the cost of fixing the grill when we get a chance. The bean counters will never know they've been in the Winnebago repair business."

"Speaking of," I gritted out, "Now that the two of you are done with your goddamn buffalo business, let's get the hell out of--"

Riley stirred in a suddenly squirmy way, like a kid who's had an icicle dropped down the back of his neck.

Mariah jumped him. "You haven't got what you need for a story yet, have you."

He grounded her with an appraising look and the rejoinder, "And you haven't got the picture you're after, have you."

Christamighty, all that uproar and neither one of them had anything printable to show for it? They called this newspapering? I suggested coldly to the pair of them, "How about reporting a buffalo attack on an innocent motorhome?"

"Buffalo Bonks Bago," Riley considered. "Naw, the BB would only give that story two inches on the pet care page."

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Their stymied mood prevailed until Mariah proposed, "Let's go up Red Sleep for a look around, how about." Riley said with shortness, "Good as any."

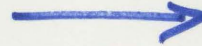
Red Sleep Mountain is not hospitable to 27-foot motorhomes, and so as far as I was concerned it was up to Riley and Mariah to hitchhike us a ride up the steep one-lane road with a park ranger. Rather, it was mostly up to Mariah, because any ranger with blood in him would be readier to take along a red-haired woman of her calibre than mere Riley and me.

Shortly we were in a ranger's van, rising and rising, the road up Red Sleep coiling back and forth and around, toward the eventual summit of the broad gentle slopes. Although no more buffalo, other game more than abounded. We drove past antelope curious about us and elk wary of us and every so often sage chickens would hurl up into a flock of flying panic at our coming. At least here on Red Sleep my eyes could enjoy what my mind couldn't. I was thoroughly ticked off yet, of course, about the Bago's bashed-in condition. But more was on me,

p. 42B follows →



too. The morning's encounter out of nowhere with Shirley. The firefly  
 thoughts of the mind. Why should memory forever own us the way it does?  
 That main heavy mood I'd been in ever since Marcella's death now had  
 the Shirley layer of bad past added onto it. Was I radically imagining  
 or did life seem to be jeering under its breath to me is that all you  
can do, lose wives?



I shook my head against that nagging theme and while Mariah and Riley carried on a conversation with the ranger I tried to make myself concentrate on the land spreading away below our climb of road. Montana west of the Continental Divide, the end toward Idaho, always feels to me as if the continent is already bunching up to meet the Pacific Ocean. But even though this was not my preferred part of the state I had to admit that the scene of the moment was A-number-1 country. North from the buffalo preserve the Flathead Valley stretched like a green tile floor, farms and ranches out across the level earth in highly orderly fashion, while to the west the silverblue Flathead River curved back and forth broad and casual, and to the east the Mission Mountains tepeed up prettily in single long slants of slope from the valley floor to peaks a mile and a half high. Extreme, all of it, to an east-side-of-the-Divide inhabitant like me accustomed to comfortable intermediate geography of foothills and buttes and coulees and creeks. But extremely beautiful too.

The federal guy dumped us out at the top of Red Sleep where there was a trail which he said led shortly to a real <sup>good</sup> ~~pretty~~ viewpoint.



While he drove off to check on the whereabouts of some mountain sheep, the three of us began hoofing.

Out in the tall tan grass all around, meadowlarks caroled back and forth. Here atop Red Sleep the afternoon sunshine felt toasty without being overwhelming. I'd begun to think life with Riley could even prove bearable, if it went on like this, but I had another think coming. We were in sight of the little rocky outcrop of viewpoint when he stopped in the middle of the trail, swung around to me and asked right out of nowhere:

"What do you say, rancher? Could you get grass to grow like this on that place of yours?"

Well, hell, sure. I thought so, anyway. What was this yoyo insinuating, ~~implying~~ that I hadn't paid any attention to the earth under me all my life? Riley was truly well-named--he could rile me faster than anybody else ever could. I mean, I saw

this point about the wonderful grass of this buffalo preserve. Knee-high, thick as a lawn, it was like having a soft thicket beneath your

feet. Originally this must have been the way prairie America was, before farming and ranching spread over it.

"Yeah, my place could likely be brought back to something like this," I responded to goddamn Riley. One thing for sure, that mustache wasn't a latch on his mouth. The ranch. Why did the SOB have to keep bringing up that tender topic? On this grass matter though, I finished answering him with "All it'd take is fantastic dollars" and indicated around us to the tremendous miles of tight ten-foot-high fence, the elaborate system of pastures, the just-so balancing of how much grazing the buffalo were allowed to do before the federal guys moved them to fresh country. Sure, you bet, with an Uncle Sam-financed setup like this I or just about anybody else above moron could raise sheep or cattle or any other known creature and still have knee-deep grass and songbirds too, but--

The but was Riley's department. "But in the good old U. States of A., we don't believe in spending that kind of money on anything but the defense budget, do we. The death sciences. Those are what get the fantastic dollars, hmm, Jick old buddy?"



Having delivered that, wherever it flew into the pigeonhole of his brain from, Riley spun around again and went stalking off <sup>down</sup> ~~up~~ the trail.

He all but marched over the top of Mariah where she knelt to try a shot of how a stand of foxtail was catching the sunlight--sprays of purplish green, like unearthly flame, reflecting out of the whisks of grass.

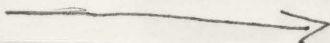
Riley, typical of him, had freshened another bruise inside of me with his skyblue mention of my ranch. What in the name of hell was I going to do with the place? I trudged along now trying to order myself, Don't think about the ranch. Like that game that kids play on each other: don't think about a hippopotamus, anything but a hippopotamus is okay to think about, but if you think about a hippopotamus you get a pinch, are you by any chance thinking about a hippopotamus?

I am not as zippy on a trail as I once was, but before too long I caught up with Mariah and Riley at the rock finger of viewpoint. Below, Red Sleep Mountain divided itself judiciously into two halves of a V, letting a small stream and its attending trees find their way down between. Then beyond, through the split of the V the <sup>neatly</sup> tended fields of the miniature Jocko River valley could be seen, and immediately

P. 46A follows →

over the Jocko, mountains and timber accumulated into long, long rising lines of horizon. By all evidence, the three of us were the only onlookers in ~~this~~ whole encompassing reach of ~~planet~~ ~~country~~.

Picturing that moment in the mind, it would seem a scene of thoroughest silence. But no. Warbles and trills and solo after solo of sweet sweet and wheep wheep and deedeedee: the air was magically busy.





None of us spoke while the songs of birds poured undiluted. I suppose we were afraid the spate of loveliest sound would vanish if we broke it with so much as a whisper. But after a bit came the realization that the music of <sup>birds</sup> ~~birds~~ formed a natural part of this place, constant as the glorious grass that made feathered life thrive.

I take pride that while we three filled our ears, I was the one who detected the promising scatter of dark specks on the big slope to the west; at least my eyes aren't lame. After I wordlessly pointed them out to the newspaper pair, those dots grew and grew to become a herd of a couple hundred buffalo. Bulls, cows, calves, by the tens and dozens, spread out in a nice graze with one of the stout pasture fences blessedly between us and them so Mariah couldn't caper out there and invite a stampede onto herself. Of course, even this pepper pattern of a herd across an entire mountainslope amounted only to a fingernailful compared to the buffalo millions back in the last century. But I thought them quite the sight.

Mariah broke the spell. "Time for a reality check," she levied on Riley. "So what are you doing to do in your Great Buffalo Piece?"

Riley's pen stopped tapping his notebook. "I won't know that until I sit down and do the writing, will I."

"Come off it, Tolstoy," Mariah said as if telling him the time of day. "Since when don't you have an angle to pull out of storage? Here's-my-ever-so-clever-idea-about-buffalo, and then plug in the details."

"Oh, it's that christly easy, is it," he retorted, starting to sound steamed.

Mariah sailed right on. "So, what can I best shoot to fit with your part of the piece? Buffalo, or country, or grass, or what?"

He gave her a malicious grin. "The birdsong. Get me that, that'll do."

For half an instant, that put me on his side. I wished they'd both can the argument or discussion or whatever kind of newspaperperson conversation this was, and let the air music stream on and on.

4 But Mariah had on her instructive voice now, not a good sign.

"Don't freak, Riley. All I'm asking is for some idea of what you're going to write."

"Buy a Sunday paper and find out."



"How crappy are you going to be about this? Let's just get down to work, okay?"

"I am working! At least when you're not yapping at me."

"Then let's hear some of those fabulous words. What's your <sup>buffalo</sup> ~~story~~ angle going to be?"

"I'm telling you, I don't know yet!"

"Tsk," she tsked briskly. "A tiny wee bit rusty out here in the real world after all that sitting around the office dreaming up columns, are you?"

"Mariah, ring off. Shoot whatever the fuck you want and they'll slap it on the page next to whatever the fuck I write and that'll be that. Simplissimo."

"Two half-assed pieces of work don't equal one good one," she said, all reasonableness.

"We are not going to be Siamese twins for the next four months!" he ~~hotly~~ <sup>g</sup> informed her. "You do your <sup>your</sup> ~~job~~ ~~your~~ way and I'll do mine mine!"

With equal heat she responded, "No! The series won't be worth blowing your nose in if we do it that way!"

It must have been some marriage, theirs. By now I'd gone off a ways to try and not hear anything but the birds and the breeze in the grass, but I'd have had to gone into the next county to tune those two out.

no 4

Quite a day for the Montanian task force, so far. Newspapering is nothing I have ever done, but I have been around enough work to know when it is not going right. Here at the very start of their centennial series, Mariah and Riley both were spinning their wheels trying to get off high center.

Does time make fancy knots ~~nothing~~ to entertain itself this way, as sailors did when ships were vessels of wind and rope? Cause to wonder, for a centennial started all of this of Mariah and Riley. Not this one of Montana's statehood, of course, but a number of years ago when the town of Gros Ventre celebrated a hundred years of existence.

no 4

That day Mariah was on hand in both her capacities, so to speak; as somebody who was born and raised locally, and for the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner as its photographer, there at the start of her career <sup>of clicking.</sup>

Thus she was in natural orbit on the jampacked main street of Gros Ventre that centennial day, and it was Riley who ricocheted in--I would like



to say by blind accident but there was more to it than that, as I suppose there ever is. Riley's mother's side of the family was from Gros Ventre originally and so it could be said he was only being a dutiful son by coming with her to the reunion. My suspicion, though, is that he was mainly fishing for something to write in his column. When was he ever not?

In any case, I was witness to the exact regrettable minute when Riley Wright hooked up with Mariah. Late in the afternoon, after the parade and the creek picnic, with everybody feeling gala and while the street was clogged with people catching up on years of news from each other, extra commotion broke out at the Medicine Lodge saloon. Young Tim Kerz, who never could handle his booze, had passed out drunk and his bottle buddies decided a ceremony was called for to commemorate the first casualty of the day. Scrounging up a sheet of thick plywood, they laid out Tim on it as if ready for the grave--his beer bier, Riley called it in the column he wrote--to the point, even, of folding his hands on his chest with a purple gladiolus clutched in them. Then about a dozen of the unsobriest ones began tippily pallbearing Tim out of the

Medicine Lodge over their heads, the recumbent body on high like a croaked potentate. Somehow Mariah seems to sense stuff like this before it can quite happen. She had raced up into a third-story window of the old Sedgwick House hotel with a panoramic view down onto the scene by the time the plywood processional erupted out of the Medicine Lodge, singing and cussing.

And then and there I noticed the tall shouldery man with the notebook and pen, one intent eye gray and the other blue, <sup>lifting his gaze</sup> ~~gazing~~ over the tableau of Tim and <sup>the</sup> ~~his~~ tenderly held gladiolus to Mariah above there as she worked her camera.

I had skyhigh hopes for Riley Wright originally. What daddy-in-law wouldn't? Oh, true, matters between him and Mariah had taken a couple of aggravatingly slow years to progress toward marriage. First the interval until a photographer's job at the Montanian came open for her. Then after she moved to Missoula for that, a span when carefully nothing was said by either us or them but Marcella and I knew that Mariah and Riley were living together. On their wedding day in 1983 we were glad to have that loose situation ended. ~~And~~ <sup>so</sup> then here



Riley was, in the family. An honorary McCaskill, so to speak. In

his own right a <sup>semi-famous</sup> ~~semi-famous~~ person because of his newspaper column,

although some of that fame was a grudging kind from people who yearned to give him a knuckle sandwich for what he wrote. Just for instance, a few years ago when agriculture was at its rockbottom worst and corporations got busy taking each other over and hemorrhaging jobs every time they did, Riley simply ran a list of the counties in Montana that had voted for Reagan and put at the end, How do you like him now? Or the time he wrote about a big farming operator who was plowing up thousands of acres of virgin grassland in a time of roaring crop surpluses--farming the farm program, it's called--and then letting that broken earth sit fallow and victim to the wind, When he becomes dust himself, the earth will spit him back out.

But when Riley wasn't armed with ink, he truly looked like a prime son-in-law. Oh sure, even in his nonwriting mode, any moment of the day or night he was capable of being a smart aleck. But better that than a dumb one, I always figured. No, exactly because Riley was the kind of sassypants he was toward life--his natural Rileyness, call it--I made my offer. An afternoon in April three years ago,



in the middle of lambing time, this was. He and I were sharing coffee from my thermos outside along the sunny south wall of the lambing shed. Bold black and white of a magpie strutted the top of a panel gate, and Noon Creek rippled and lulled, but otherwise just we two. A few minutes earlier when I'd seen Mariah and Riley arrive in his old gunboat Buick I momentarily thought it interesting that after we waved hello mutually, he headed straight down here to the shed while she went into the house to Marcella. Nothing major suggested itself from that, however, and so far as I knew, father- and son-in-law were sipping beanjuice companionably amid the finest scenery there can be. Spring can be an awful flop in the Two Medicine country. Weeks of mud, every step outdoors taken in overshoes weighted with the stuff. Weather too warm for a winter coat <sup>but</sup> ~~and~~ cool enough to chill you into a cold. Then comes a day such as this to make up for it all. Just west of us, seemingly almost within touch, the mid-air skyline of the Rockies yet had ~~cold~~ white tips of winter, sun-caught snow on the peak of Phantom Woman Mountain and the long level rimrock of Jericho Reef, but spring green colored all the country between us and the foot of the mountains--

P.54A *planned*



the foothill ridges where my lamb bunches were scattered, the alfalfa meadows pocketed away in the willow bends of Noon Creek, the arcing slope of Breed Butte between our ranch and those of English Creek, green all.

I recall that Riley looked a little peaked, like he was in need of a fresh turn of season right that moment. But then the stuff he and Mariah dealt with in their news life would make anybody ready for some recuperation by week's end, wouldn't it: a schoolbus wreck, or a guy getting high on something and blowing his wife and kids away with a deer rifle--Christ only knew what messes he and she just averagely had to write about and take pictures of, any given week. So Riley's expression of having been through the wringer bolstered my decision to speak my piece now. I mean, when better? Any number of times he had been heard to grouse about newspaper life and how he ought to just chuck it and go off and write the book he wanted to do about Montana, and equally often

Mariah would wish out loud that she could do her own idea of photography instead of the Montanian's, so I honestly and utterly believed that Marcella and I were handing them their chance.

The ranch was theirs to have, I told Riley on that pivotal day. Marce and I wanted the place to be his and Mariah's as soon as they liked. Maybe not the biggest ranch there ever was, but every acre of it financially clear and aboveboard; perfectly decent grazing land, a couple of sections of it still the original native prairie grasses that were getting to be rare, plus the new summer range we'd just bought on the North Fork of English Creek; every bit of it strongly fenced, which was needed when you neighbored onto a grass-sneaking cow outfit such as the Double W; irrigation ditches already installed to coax maximum hay from those creekside meadows; haying equipment that maybe was a little old but at least was paid for; decent enough sheepshed and other outbuildings, brand new house. Here it all <sup>sat</sup> ~~was~~ for the taking, and at their ideal age, old enough to mostly know what they were doing and young enough that they still had the elbowgrease to do it, Riley and Mariah could run this place with a dab of hired help and still find time



to work on their own words and photos, couldn't they? A golden

chance for the two of them to try, at the very least.

But do you think goddamn Riley would see it that way?

"Jick, I can't."

"Aw, sure you can. I know this isn't your country up here"--Riley originally was off a ranch down in the southern part of the state, on the Shields River near the Crazy Mountains; the father in the family died some years ago but the Wright cattle outfit still was in operation, run by Riley's brother--"but the Two has got some things to recommend it, now doesn't it?" I held my thermos cup out in a salute to the royal Rockies and the sheep-specked foothills and the fluid path of Noon Creek. I don't care who you are, you cannot doubt the earth's promise on such a spring day.

"If it's the sheep that're bothering you, that's fixable," I splurged on. "This place has put up with cattle before." And for that matter horses, the original livestock my grandfather Isaac Reese brought onto this Noon Creek grass almost a hundred years before; and hoofless commodities such as hay, <sup>those</sup> beautiful irrigated meadows created by my uncle Pete Reese before he passed the ranch to me. I am on record as having declared that in order to keep the ranch going I would even resort to

dude ranching, although as the joke has it I still don't see why they're worth fattening. In short, three generations of us had contrived, and every once in a while maybe even connived, to keep this Noon Creek ranch alive, and all the logic in me said Riley was the purely obvious next candidate.

"It's not the sheep."

"Well, okay, the money then," I hurried to assure him. "That's no big deal either. Marce and I have <sup>hashed</sup> ~~hashed~~ it over a lot and we figure we can all but give you two the place. We'll need to take out enough to buy some kind of house in town, but hell, the way things are in Gros Ventre these days, that can't cost--"

"Money either," Riley cut me off. He had a pale expression on him like he'd just learned he was a stepchild. Pushing away from the warm wall of the shed, he turned toward me as if the next had to be said directly. "You're a contradiction in terms, Jick. A Scotchman too generous for his own good."

"In this case, I got my reasons," I said while trying mightily to think what was the unseen problem here. It's not every day a guy



turns down a functioning ranch.

Riley flung the cold remains of his coffee, almost the cupful, to the ground. "You really want to hear some advice about this place?"

"Yeah, sure, I guess."

"Sell it to the Double Dub," he stated.

I felt as if I'd been slugged behind the ear.

Offer after offer had been made to me by Wendell Williamson when he was alive and snapping up smaller ranches everywhere to the east of me into his Double W holdings--the Gobble Gobble You, in the nickname that own-everything penchant so rightly earned for the Williamson outfit. The same appetite in my direction was being continued by TriGram Resources now that the Double W and the rest of the Noon Creek valley with it was theirs, courtesy of a buyout of the Williamson heirs in California. Every one of those offers I had always told Williamson and the TriGramites to go stuff.

"Jesus, Riley! That's what I've spent the majority of my life trying not to do!"

"Jick, get out while you can. Ranchers like you aren't going to

have a prayer. The pricks running this country are tossing you guys to the big boys like flakes of hay to the elephants."

I still didn't tumble. "I know I'm pretty close to being history, but that's just exactly why the place ought to go to somebody younger like you," I argued back to him. "You and Mariah could have quite a setup here, and TriGram and the rest of the world go chase their tails. Why the hell won't you give it a try, at least?"

He and I stood staring at each other as if trying to get through to each other from different languages.

"Jick," Riley blurted it, "Mariah and I are splitting up."

Whatever is the biggest size of fool, that was me, there in the spring sunshine of the ranch I had just tried to give him, as Riley dropped the end of their marriage on me.

I turned away from him toward the mountains, my eyes stinging.

By God, at least I would not bawl in front of this person.

# —————

p. 59A follows



Three years that had been now, since everything went crash. And the memory of it festered just as painfully even yet, here on Red Sleep Mountain.

"What, you want to give the BB the satisfaction of telling us he knew all along we couldn't manage to team up for this?" Mariah's latest interrogation of her fellow employee pierced across the grass to me.

Riley delivered in turn, "If the choice is one honeybucket-load of 'I told you so' from the BB or four months of this kind of crap from you--"

Just then the federal guy beeped the horn of his van, signal for our ride back down the mountain with him, ~~and~~ off we trooped to the trailhead, each of those two in their separate mads and me perturbed at them both. Was this what they called getting the job done, throwing snits?

Back at the Winnebago, silence now as sourly thick as their argument had been, I decided to use the chance to fill the air with what was on my mind. # "Too bad you two weren't hatched yet when there were people around who had really seen some buffalo." # As fresh as ever to me were those tales from Toussaint Rennie when I was but a shavetail kid, fourteen or fifteen years old, of having viewed buffalo in their original

thousands and thousands when he himself alit in Montana as a youngster.

"Before Custer," as Toussaint dated it, a chuckle chasing his words out his crinkled tan face. "Before those Indians gave Georgie his haircut,

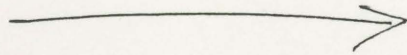
Jick. I was like you, young. My family came in from Dakota. We saw the end of it, do you know. Buffalo, then no buffalo."

"Yeah," I kept on remorselessly as I drove toward the original dozen dark grazers we'd encountered, who by now had drifted around a corner putting the high fence between us and any more possible butting of the Bago, "Toussaint said the Two Medicine country was absolutely buffalo heaven at first." I guess I was pouring it on a little, dwelling on Toussaint and what a sight the buffalo were to his fresh eyes, but damn it all, I did feel justifiably ticked off about having been enlisted into this big centennial journey that had petered out here in its first day.

<sup>eyed me severely</sup>  
 Mariah ~~looked over at me~~ from the passenger seat as if about to say something, thought better of it, then resumed <sup>a</sup> ~~her~~ fixed gaze out the window. Behind her on the sidecouch where he was staring into his Persian, notebook as if it was in ~~Greek~~, Riley stirred a little. "Geography time, class," he announced in a singsong schoolma'am voice. Then in his ordinary annoying one: "If this peerless pioneer of yours came from



I could tell that she was seeing the day again shutter click by  
shutter click, sorting over and over for the fretful missing picture  
of the essence of Virginia City.



For his part, Riley swirled his G-ball and took a major gulp as if it was soda pop, which it of course ~~almost~~<sup>virtually</sup> was. Then he grinned at me in that foxy way, but he seemed interested, too. "And?"

"And so I just wondered if you'd maybe thought about some kind of story about the mining here. How it tore up the land like absolute hell and all."

Riley nodded acknowledgment, but said: "Mining has got to be Butte, Jick, when we get there in a couple of days. What the gold miners did here isn't a shovelful compared to Butte."





Dakota Territory, how come he was called Tucson?"

"That was the way it was pronounced, but spelled T-O-U-S-S-A-I-N-T,"  
I took pleasure in setting him straight. "Nobody could ever ~~figure out~~ <sup>get it out of him</sup>  
just what he was, but maybe French Cree. He's buried under a Cree cross  
up home, ~~at least.~~ <sup>anyway</sup>"

"Metis," said Riley.

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. The ~~guy~~ <sup>sonofagun</sup> did know some  
things. The Metis were Canadian French Crees who came to grief in 1885  
when the Riel rebellion in Manitoba and Saskatchewan was put down and  
their leader, Louis Riel, was hung. Out of that shattering <sup>episode,</sup> several Metis  
families fled south <sup>across the border</sup> into our Two Medicine country. But as I started  
to point out to Riley in case he thought he knew more than he did,  
"Yeah, but you see, by Riel's time Toussaint already had been in the Two--"

"Your guy Toussaint," Riley butted in on me. "How did he talk?"

"What the hell do you mean, how did he talk? Like any of the rest  
of us."

"Jick, I bet if you think about it, he didn't." Quick as this,  
Riley was in his persuading mode. "Do something for me a minute.

Pretend you're him, tell me what Toussaint told you about the buffalo in just the words he said."

I gave the scribbler an X-raying look now. Which did everloving Riley want, a driver or somebody to play Let's Pretend?

"Stop! Right here!"

Mariah's urgent shout made me slam on the brakes, at the same time wildly goggling around and trying to brace myself for whatever national disaster this was.

After the ever so loud scrushing noise of tires stopping too fast on gravel, in drifted the fluting notes of a meadowlark, answered at once by Mariah's quick click.

Daughter of my own loins notwithstanding, I could have throttled her. Here I figured the Winnebago was on fire or some such and she'd only wanted a picture stop.

I blew out the breath I'd been holding and with the last patience in me sat and waited for Hurricane Mariah to climb out and click off a bunch more shots at whatever she'd spied, but no. Our dust hadn't even caught up with us before she announced, "Okay," meaning drive on.

p. 62A follows →



p. 62A taken out, 22 May '90, to replace missing page in reading copy  
for Las Vegas ABA.

word by word right then instead of all those decades ago when Toussaint was yet alive. As if the telling was not at my own instigation. "When it came the season to hunt, I rode to the Sweetgrass Hills. From up there, the prairie looked burnt. Dark with buffalo, here,

there, everywhere. It was the last time. Nobody knew so, but  
it was. The buffalo were so many, the tribes left each other  
alone. No fighting. Each stayed in place, around the buffalo.  
Gros Ventres and Assiniboines at the northeast. Piegans at the  
west. Crees at the north. Flatheads at the south. For seven  
days, there was hunting. The herd broke apart in the hunting.  
I rode west, home, with the Piegans. They drove buffalo over  
the cliffs, there at the Two Medicine River. That, now. That  
was something to see."

It was not seen again, by Toussaint's young eyes or any others.  
Killed for their hides or killed off by disease caught from cattle,  
the buffalo in their millions fell and fell as the cutting edges  
of the American frontier swathed westward into them. That last  
herd, in the last west called Montana, was followed by summers



of scant and scattered buffalo, like crumbs after a banquet. Then  
came the Starvation Winter of 1883, hundreds of the Piegan  
Blackfeet dying of deprivation and smallpox in their creekside  
camp. A hunting society vanished there in the continent-wide  
shadow of a juggernaut society.

Say the slaughter of the buffalo, then, for what it was:  
they were land whales, and when they were gone our sea of life  
was less rich. The herds that took their place were manmade--  
ranch aggregates of cattle, sheep, horses--and to this day they  
do not fit the earth called Montana the way the buffalo did.

In the words of the old man the color of leather:

"Those Indians, they said the buffalo best. They said, when  
the buffalo were all here the country looked like one robe."

# —

This buffalo stuff of Riley's when it showed up in the Montanian,  
 I read with definite mixed emotions.

I was pretty sure Toussaint would have gotten a chuckle out of  
 seeing his words in the world, outliving him. →

~~after his death~~ <sup>9</sup> That about the manmade herds, though. What, did  
 goddamn Riley think I ought to have been in the buffalo business instead  
 of the sheep business all these years? And Pete Reese before me? And  
 my McCaskill grandfather, who withdrew us from Scotland and deposited  
 us in Montana, before Pete? I mean, you come into life and livelihood  
 with some terms already set, <sup>don't you?</sup> The Two Medicine country <sup>already</sup> was swept clear  
 of buffalo and thick with sheep <sup>and other livestock</sup> by the time I came along. So why did  
 I feel the prod of Riley's story?

And, yes, of Mariah's photo atop it. It was the one she'd shot,  
 sudden as a fingersnap, out the window of the ~~motorhome~~ <sup>motorhome in that slam-on stop</sup> while Riley  
 was trying to persuade me to Toussaintize. One of the high thick  
 fenceposts of the buffalo range enclosure, with a meadowlark atop it.  
 That beautiful black V dickey against his yellow chest, his beak open  
 to the maximum, singing for all he was worth. Singing out of the page  
 to the onlooker. And under and behind the songbird, within the fence  
 enclosing that wonderful restored grass, dark hazes of form which the  
 eye took the merest moment to recognize as buffalo, dim but powerful,  
 indistinct but unmistakable.

# —————



The next day after Moiese the famous newspaper pair had me buzz us back down the highway to Missoula and keep right on going--when I asked if they wanted to stop at the Montanian for anything, Mariah and Riley both looked at me as if I'd proposed Russian roulette--south through the Bitterroot Valley. Well, okay, fine; as we drove along beside its lofty namesake mountains and their attendant canyons, even I could see that here was a piece of country well worth shooting and writing about, fertile shelf of valley for sixty-five uninterrupted miles with ranches and ~~housing developments~~ <sup>residential areas</sup> nervously crowding each other for possession of it, and any number of times in our Bitterroot route I figured my passengers would want to pull over and start picture-taking and scribbling in earnest.

Wrong a hundred percent. "Old news," Mariah and Riley chorused when at last I politely inquired whether they were ever going to get their butts into gear at chronicling the Bitterroot country's highly interesting rancho de la suburbia aspect. Old news? If I was translating right, the Bitterroot and ~~now~~ <sup>the way</sup> it was populating was just too easy a story for these two. I couldn't help but think to myself, what kind of line

of work was this story stuff, that it was hard to get anything done because it was too easy to bother with?

The next thing I knew, the Bago and we in it were across Chief Joseph Pass and over into the Big Hole. Well, okay, etcetera again.

Now here was a part of Montana I had

always hungered to see. The Big Hole, which is actually a high wide

valley so closely ringed with mountains that it seems like a sudden

grassy crater, has a reputation as a hay heaven and in fact the ranch crews

were putting up that commodity fast and furious as we drove past hayfield

after hayfield where beaverslide stackers, big wooden ramplike apparatuses

which elevated the loads and dropped them like green avalanches onto the

tops of haystacks, were studiously in action. Blindfolded, I could have

told you what was going on just from the everywhere smell of new hay.

You don't ordinarily see haymaking of that old sort any more, and I'd like to

have pulled the <sup>motorhome</sup> ~~Bago~~ over onto the side of the road and watched the

scene of the Big Hole for a week steady--the new haystacks like hundreds

of giant fresh loaves of bread, the jackstay fences marching their long

xxxxxx lines of crossed posts between the fields, the timbered mountains



like a decorated bowl rim around it all.

Yet the one blessed time we did stop so Mariah could fire off camera shots at a beaverslide stacker ramping up into the Big Hole's blue loft of sky, Riley chewed the inside of his mouth dubiously and asked her if she was sure she wasn't just jukeboxing some scenery. "Doesn't work,"

he dispatched her beaverslide idea. By the same token, when we hit the small town of Wisdom, far famous in the old horseworking days for the army of teamsters who jungled up in the creek willows there while waiting for the haying season to start, and Riley proposed doing a Wisdom piece of some kind, Mariah suggested he check the little filing cabinet he had up there instead of a brain and count how many wistful little town off the beaten path that, lo, I will now discover for you versions he'd churned out in that column of his. "Doesn't work," she nullified Wisdom for him.

So that was that for the Big Hole, too zero on the Mariah-Riley centennial scoreboard.

# —

Ditto for the Beaverhead Valley after that, nice substantial-looking westerny country that anybody with an eye in his or her head ought to have been able to be semi-poetic about.

# —

Ditto after the Beaverhead for the beautiful Madison River, a murmuring riffle in its every droplet, classic water that was all but singing trout trout trout.

# —

Ditto in fact for day after day of traipsing around southwestern Montana so that he or she but more usually both could peer out of the Winnebago, stew about whether the scene was the one that really truly ultimately ought to be centennialized, and decide, "Doesn't work." Doesn't work? Holy J. Christ, I kept thinking to myself, don't you pretty soon get to the point in any pursuit where you have to make it work? At this rate it was going to take them the next hundred years to get anything told about Montana's first hundred. Their weekly deadline was marching right at them and increasingly Riley was on the phone to the BB, assuring him that worldbeating words and pictures were just about on their way into the Montanian, you bet. Why, I more and more wondered, did Mariah want to put herself through this? Riley in and of himself

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was rough enough on the nerves. Add on the strain of both him and her breaking their fannies trying to find ultraperfect topics for the series, and this daughter of mine had let herself in for a whole hell of a lot.

It showed. We were down near Yellowstone Park at Quake Lake, where the earthquake in 1959 sloughed a mountainside down onto a campground of peaceful sleepers, when Riley prowled off by himself into the middle of a rockslide slope and I happened to comment to <sup>Mariah</sup>~~her~~ that if he didn't muster what little sense he had and watch his footing up there, we'd be shipping him home

p. 68B follows →

to his momma in a matchbox. That was all it took for ~~Mariah~~<sup>her</sup> to answer with considerable snap:

"Dad, I know your opinion of Riley by heart."

She ~~rarely~~<sup>hardly ever</sup> slipped and called me Dad. Mariah arrived home at Christmas from her first quarter away at college calling her mother and me by our given names. Maybe because she'd been somewhat similarly rejigged herself, back east in Illinois, where the nickname "Mariah Montana" was fastened onto her by her college classmates for her habit of always wearing bluejeans and a Blackfeet beaded belt and I suppose generally looking like what people back there figured a daughter of Montana must look like. Or maybe being on a first-name basis with her own parents ~~had~~<sup>been</sup> simply Mariah's way of saying, I'm as grown as you are now. Even as a little girl she had seemed like a disguised adult, in possession of a disconcerting number of the facts of life. Our other daughter, Lexa, was a real ranch kid, always out with me among the sheep, forever atop a horse, so much like Marcella and I had been in our own growing up that it was as if we'd ordered Lexa from the catalogue. Mariah, though, ever seemed to be the only author of herself.



Almost before we could catch our breath about having this self-guided child, she discovered the camera and was out in the arena dirt locally at Gros Ventre or down at Choteau or Augusta as a rodeo photographer, wearing hightop black basketball shoes for quick footing to dodge broncs. Tall colt of a girl she was by then, in one glance Mariah there in the arena would seem to be all legs. Then in some gesture of aiming the camera, she would seem entirely arms. Then she would turn toward you and the fine high breasts of the woman-to-be predominated. Next it would be her face, the narrow length of it as if even her smile had to be naturally lank. And always, always, her mane of McCaskill red hair, flowing like the flag of our tribe. Even then guys were of course eyeing her madly, and by the time she was home from college for summers on the bucking circuit, the rodeo romeos nearly stared the <sup>ring</sup>~~third~~ finger off her left hand trying to see if she was carrying any gold. But a wedding band was not the circle that interested Mariah. Throughout high school and those college years of hers at the Illinois Institute of Technology, a place her mother and I had never even heard of before she chose it for its photography courses, and on into her <sup>first</sup>~~job~~ of taking

pictures for the Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, only the camera lens cupped life for Mariah.

Until Riley.

That marriage and its breakup should have been sufficient cure of Riley for her, it seemed to me. Yet here she was, putting up with him for the sake of doing this centennial series. Here he was, as Riley as ever, like whatever king it was who never forgot anything but never learned anything either. And here I was, half the time aggravated <sup>by</sup> ~~at~~ the two of them for letting themselves wallow around the countryside together this way and the other half <sup>provoked</sup> ~~aggravated~~ at myself for being ninny enough to be doing it along with them.

# —————

All in all, I was just this side of really peeved when we pulled into Virginia City, which Mariah and Riley had taken turns giving a tense pep talk about on our way up from Quake Lake, each needlessly reminding the other that this was it, this was the place, they had to do some fashion of story here or perish trying.

Not a town to improve my mood much, either, old Virginiapolis.

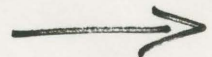
Sloping down a brown gulch, one deliberately museumy street--sort of an outdoor Western dollhouse, it struck me as--crammed with tourists like

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sheep in a shearing pen. But I determinedly kept my mouth shut, even about having to navigate the Bago in that millrace of people and rigs for half an hour before a parking spot emptied, and we set off on foot for whatever it was that these two figured they were going to immortalize here.

All the rest of the day, another scorching one, we toured around like everybody else, in and out of shabby old buildings from the 1860's when Virginia City was both a feverish goldstrike town and the capital of brand-new Montana Territory and up onto Boot Hill where vigilantes did their uplifting ropework on a crooked sheriff <sup>is</sup> ~~and his~~ gang, and I myself utterly could not see the attraction of any of it.



More than that, something about our tromping through town like a Cub Scout troop fresh off a yellow bus <sup>wore</sup> ~~got~~ on my nerves more and more. Riley, you might know, seemed to be writing an encyclopedia about Virginia City in his notebook. And Mariah was in her surveying mood--today she was even lugging around a tripod which made her look like a one-person surveyor crew, constantly setting up to sweep her camera with the long lens along the streetful of sightseers below us from where

we stood hip-deep in sagebrush on Boot Hill, or aiming out across the dry hogback ridges all around. This was tumbled country. Maybe it took convulsed earth of this kind to produce gold, as had been the case in the Alder Gulch treasure rush here. Now that I think it over, I suppose some of what was grating on me is what a wreck the land is after mining. Miners never put the earth back. At the outskirts of Virginia City are miles of dishwater-colored gravel heaps, leavings of hydraulic and dredge mining like monstrous mole burrows. Or scratchings in the world's biggest cat box, whichever way you want to put it. If Mariah's camera or Riley's pen could testify to that ruination, well, okay, I had to figure that the day of lockstep sightseeing was maybe worth it. Maybe.



So I was somewhat mollified, the word might be, as the three of us at last retreated into a bar called The <sup>Goldpanner</sup> ~~Nugget~~ for a drink before supper, Riley rashly offering to buy. <sup>4</sup> Inside was not quite the oasis I expected, though. As we groped toward a table, our eyes still full of the long summer sunlight, Riley, cracked in a falsetto tone, "Basic black, very becoming." Indeed the bar's interior was about as dark as a moviehouse, with flickery little bulbs in phony gas lamps on the walls, but a person probably couldn't do any better in a tourist town.

Out of the gloom emerged a strapping young bartender wearing a pasted-on handlebar mustache and a full-front white apron the way they used to.

"Gentlemen and lady," he orated to us. "How may I alter your consciousness?"

It took me aback, until I remembered where we were. The Virginia City Players do summer theater here, and this fellow must be either an actor or desperately wanting to be. He was going to need a more receptive audience than Mariah, who took no notice of either his spiel or his get-up while specifying a Lord ditch for herself. I told the young Hamlet, "You can bring me a scotch ditch, please." It occurred

to me that I still had to get through supper with Riley, so I added:

"Go light on the irrigating water, would you." Then I remembered

Riley was buying and tacked on, "Make the scotch Johnny Red, how about."

Riley was regarding the pasted-together bartender as if he ~~constituted~~ ~~was~~ the world's greatest entertainment. All Riley said, though, in a kind of movie cowboy voice, was, "Pilgrim, I'm gonna cut the dust of the day with a G-ball."

When the drinks came and Mariah and I began paying our respects to Lord Calvert and Johnny Walker--respect was right; Holy Jesus, in this place the tab for drinks was \$2.50 apiece; I could remember when it only took 25¢ to look into a glass--I glanced across ~~at Riley~~ and wondered disgustedly how we had ever, even temporarily, let into the family a guy who would sabotage his whiskey with ginger ale. But I suppose it couldn't really be said Riley was a G-ball drinker then. It was hard to know just what to call him. The very first night of this excursion of ours, in St. Ignatius after the buffalo range, ~~Riley~~ <sup>he</sup> had studied the bottles behind the bar for about an eon and eventually asked the bartender there what

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he sold the most seldom of. "Water," the St. Ignatian cracked, but then  
~~he~~<sup>9</sup> pondered the inventory of bottles himself a while and nominated "Sloe  
gin, I guess it'd have to be." Whereupon Riley ordered one. Our night  
in Dillon, he'd taken another long gawk behind the bar and ordered an



apricot brandy. In Monida, it'd been a Harvey Wallbanger. In Ennis, a benedictine. Evidently he was even going to drink goofy this whole damn trip.

But Riley's style of imbibing, or lack of one, was not what surprised me worst here. No, what got me was that I noticed he was holding his notebook up right in front of his eyes, trying to catch any glimmer of light from the sickly wall lamps, while he thumbed through page by page, shaking his head as he did and at last asking Mariah hopefully, "Got anything that works?"

She shook her head too, halfmoon earrings in and out of the red cloud of her hair as she did. "Still zippo."

This was just about it for me. An entire damn day of touring this old rip-and-run gold town and not a particle of picture or print to show for it? After having chased all over this end of Montana? Little kids could produce more with fingerprint<sup>2</sup> than these two were.

I opened my mouth to deliver the message that the Bago and I had



had enough of this centennial futility and in the morning would head ourselves home toward the Two Medicine country and sanity, thank you very goddamn much just the same--when instead an electronic chicklike peep peep peep issued from Riley's wrist.

"Shit oh dear," he uttered and shut off his wristwatch ~~alarm~~ ~~peep~~. "I've got to call the BB about the teaser ad. He's going to be pissed when I tell him it'll just have to say 'Virginia City!' and then as vague as possible." As he groped off in search of a phone, Mariah too looked more than a little apprehensive.

Civilly as I could, I asked her: "Have you ever given any thought to some other line of work?"

"I know, the way Riley and I have been going about this must seem kind of strange to you." Kind of? "But," she hurried on, "we both just want this centennial series to be really good. Something different from the usual stuff we each end up doing. It's, well, it's taking a little time for the two of us to hit our stride, is all."

Despite her words her expression ~~was~~ <sup>stayed</sup> worried. Tonight this was not at all the bossypants daughter who'd gotten me into this dud of a trip. This was a woman with something grinding on her.

"Maybe it's Riley," I diagnosed.

That got a rise out of her I hadn't expected. "Maybe what's Riley?" she demanded as if I'd accused her of orphanage arson.

"Well, Christ all get out, isn't it obvious? Riley goes through life like he's got a wild hair. Don't you figure that's going to affect how you're able to work, being around a walking aggravation like him?" What did it take to spell it out to Mariah? Riley flubbed the dub in that marriage to her, he turned down my ranch and as much as told me straight to my face that I was a dodo to try keep the place going-- not exactly the most relaxing soul to have around, now was he?

Speak of the devil. Riley returned out of the gloaming, appearing somewhat the worse for wear after the phone call.

"So how ticked off is he?" Mariah asked tautly as he plunked himself down.

"Considerably. This is about the time of day anyway he wakes up enough to get mean. The bewitching BB and his wee bitching hour. But he was shittier than average, I'd say." Riley fingered his mustache as if making sure it had survived the withering phone experience. "What he suggested was that instead of the teaser ad, he just leave a blank space in the paper all the time with a standing headline<sup>e</sup> over it:

Watch This Space--Mariah

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and Riley Will Eventually Think of Something."

That plunged them both into a deep brood. ~~Oh~~ Oh, sure, Riley surfaced long enough to say as though it were a thought that was bothering him: "You know, every now and again that tightass SOB can be surprisingly subtil." But otherwise, these were two people as silent as salt.

The stumped look on the pair of them indicated they didn't need to hear trouble from me at that very moment. Besides, the Johnny Red was the pleasantest thing that had happened all day and it was soothing me sufficiently to begin what I thought amounted to a pretty slick observation. "I don't know all that much about newspapering, but--"

"--that's not going to keep you off the topic anyway, hmm?" Riley unnecessarily concluded for me. "What's up, Jick? You've had something caught crosswise in you all day here."

"Yeah, well, I'm just kind of concerned that you two didn't get anything today"--I nicely didn't include again, yet, or one more goddamn time--"for your series."

By now Mariah seemed almost terminally lost in herself, tracing her camera trigger finger up and down the cold sweating glass in front of her.

At least agreement could be reached about another round of drinks, and after those were deposited by the handlebar bartender I tackled Riley again. "Just tell me this then. What kind of stuff is it you're looking for to write about, exactly?"

In what seemed to be all seriousness, <sup>he</sup> ~~Riley~~ replied: "Life inside the turtle."

"Riley," I said, "How do you say that in American?"

"It takes a joke to explain it, Jick. So here you go, you lucky man." Riley was relishing this so much it all but puddled on the floor. "The world's greatest expert on the solar system was giving a talk, see. He tells his audience about the planets being in orbit around the sun, how the force of gravity works, and all of that. So then afterwards a little old lady comes up"--Riley caught a feminist glint from Mariah-- "uhmm, a big young lady comes up to him and says, 'Professor, that was real interesting, but you're dead wrong. Your theory of gravity just doesn't make a lick of sense. The earth isn't a ball hanging out in thin air at all. What it is is a great big turtle and all of us live on top of its back, don't you see?'"



"The scientist figures he's got her, right there. He says,

'Oh, really, madam? Then what holds the turtle up?'

"She tells him, 'It's standing on the back of a bigger turtle, what did you think?'

"He says, 'Very well, madam.' Now he knows he's got her nailed.

He kind of rocks back on his heels and asks her: 'Then what can that second turtle possibly be standing on?'

look that tells him how pitiful he is.

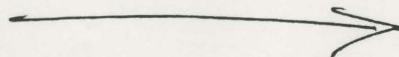
"She gives him a ~~pitying look~~. 'Another even bigger turtle, of course.'

"The scientist can't believe his ears. 'What!? Another turtle?'

"'Naturally,' she tells him. 'It's turtles all the way down.'"

So, okay, I laughed in appreciation of Riley's rendition and Mariah surfaced out of her deep think enough to chuckle at the back of her throat, too.

But Riley was just getting wound up. Now he crossed his arms on the table and leaned intently at me from that propped position, his shoulders square as the corners of a door, his voice suddenly impassioned. <sup>4</sup>"See, Jick, that's the way something like this centennial usually gets looked at. Turtles all the way down.



Hell, it starts right here in Virginia City--the turtle of brave pioneers, like the vigilantes here making windchimes out of outlaws. And next the cattle kingdom turtle." Riley put his hands side by side on the table and pretended to type with his eyes shut: "Montana as the last grass heaven, end of the longhorn trail. It takes a little more effort with shearherders than it does with cowboys--no offense intended, Jick--but there can be the sheep empire turtle too, woollies on every sidehill from hell to breakfast. And don't forget the Depression turtle, hard times on good people. Come all the way to today and there's the dying little town turtle. Or the suffering farmer turtle. Or the"--my distinct hunch is that he was about to say something like "the obsolete rancher turtle" but caught himself in time--"the scenic turtle, Montana all perfect sky and mountains and plains, still the best place to lay your eyes on even after a hundred years of hard use."

Riley finally seemed to be turtled out, and in fact declared: "I am just goddamn good and tired of stacking up turtles, in what I write.

"It's time, for me anyway"--here





he laid a gaze on Mariah, who received it with narrowed eyes but stayed silent--"to junk the old usual stuff I do. If my stories in this series are going to be anything, I want them to be about what goes on inside that usual stuff. Inside the goddamn turtle shell."

For me, this required some wrinkling inside the head. Granted that Riley's writing intentions were pure, which is a major grant from someone as skeptical toward him as I was, how the dickens was he going to go about this inside-the-turtle approach? Just for instance, I still was perturbed that the Big Hole haying, say, had been bypassed. To Riley and evidently Mariah as well, the Big Hole as an oldfangled hay qualified as kingdom ~~was~~ usual stuff, known like a catechism from one end of Montana to the other. Yet not nearly a worn-out topic to me, who first heard of it before either of them was ever born. My first wages in life were earned as a scatter raker for my uncle Pete Reese, in the hayfields of the ranch I now owned. Those summers, when I was fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, daydreams rode the rake with me. The most ~~A~~ persistent one was of traveling to the storied Big Hole, hiring on to a haying crew there, spending a bunkhouse summer in that temporary nation of hayhands

and workhorses. Quite possibly take a summer name for myself--even there in Pete's little Noon Creek crew you might put up hay with a guy called Moxie or Raw Bacon Slim or Candy Sam all season, then when he was paid off find out that the name on his paycheck was Milton Huttleby or some such. Sure as hell take a different summer age for myself, older than my actual years--although it is hard now to remember that seething youngster urge for more age--and then do my utmost to live up to the job of Big Hole scatter raker there in the mighty fields ribbed to the horizon with windrows, hay the universe around me and even under me as the stuffing in the gunny sack cushion <sup>which throned</sup> ~~throning~~ my rake seat, the leather reins in my hands like great kite lines to the pair of rhythmically tugging horse outlines in front of me.

As I say, the Big Hole and its storied haying was a dream, in the sense that a world war and other matters claimed the summers when I might have gone and done. But that dream was a seed of who I am, too, for imagination does not sprout of nothing.

My haydream reverie was abruptly ended when I heard a bump behind me as someone stumbled into a chair and then a corresponding bump a little farther away, evidently a couple of customers finding their way to the table



next to ours.

"It's even darker in here than it looks, Henry. How do they do that?" a female whisper inquired.

"They must use trick lighting somehow," came the male reply in an undervoice.

Meanwhile Mariah was staying cooped up with whatever was on her picture-taking mind while Riley was gandering off into the domain of the bartender behind her and me. Unusually thankful, for a guy as wired up as him.

It didn't seem to me silence was normal for either of these two, so I was about to try and jog Mariah by asking if her thinking about photographs was the same as Riley's about words, internal turtle work, when suddenly Riley's face announced inspiration. Quick as that, the sonofagun looked as if he had the world on a downhill pull.

"I see the piece!" he divulged.

Mariah sat up as if she'd just been shaken awake and peered at him through the bar gloom. "Where?"

"Here." He whomped his hand on the table. "This."

I squinted at the shellacked surface. "What, you're going to write about this table?"

"Gentleman and lady, you mistake me," Riley let us know in the bartender's Shakespeare tone of voice. "Not this table. This bar, and its innumerable ancestors the width and breadth, nay, the very depth, of our parched state. A piece about bars and bartenders--what do you say to that, Mariah Montana?"

Mariah took the last swig of her Calvert as if to strengthen herself, then studied Riley. What she said to it was, "This place? Get real."

He only mm-hmmed and rubbernecked past us to the bartender's domain as if trying to read the small print on the bottles. I could see Mariah gathering to jump him some more about this bar brainstorm of his, demand to know how the hell she was supposed to take a picture in here that wouldn't look like midnight in a coal bin. Myself, I thought Riley had finally hatched a halfway decent idea. There is just no denying that bars seem as natural to a lot of Montanans as caves to bears.

"Why don't we have another round of ~~jelly sandwiches~~," Riley was all sweet persuasion to Mariah now, "and talk it over," meaning his



piece notion. Figuring that anything which might conceivably steer the two of them back on the track of their series was all to the good, I swung around in my chair to signal for the further round of drinks.

The bartender had changed sex.

That is to say, the handlebar specimen was gone and the 'tender now was a young woman--I say young; they all look young to me any more-- in a low-cut red velvet outfit and brunette hair that ~~was~~ <sup>lopped</sup> down on both sides long and crinkly like the ears of a spaniel and with a smile you could see from an airplane.

Need I say, it was a short hop to the conclusion that Riley's story idea about bars and their 'tenders had been fostered with the change of shifts which brought this female version onto the ~~scene~~ <sup>Goldpanner</sup> ~~stage~~ <sup>target</sup>. Be that as ~~if~~ <sup>it</sup> may, the velvet smiler was in charge of our liquid. I held up an indicative glass and called over, "We'll have another round of jelly sandwiches here, please, Miss," a word which brought Mari<sup>a</sup>h's head sharply around.

I thought the new mode of bartender blinked at Riley a ~~little~~ <sup>little</sup> quizzically

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when he beamed up at her and specified another G-ball, but maybe she was just that way, because when she brought the drinks her comment came out, "There you go?" and when she stated the damages, that too had a question curl on the end of it: "That'll be seven dollars and fifty cents?"

I don't know, is it possible that the more teeth there are in your smile, the less of anything you have higher up in your head? Watching Riley and this young lady exchange dental gleams, the theory did occur to me.

No sooner had Miss Bliss departed from us than Riley was onto





his feet, saying: "Actually, maybe I better go talk to her while she's not busy and find out how she goes about it." He gave Mariah a look of scrubbed innocence. "Bartending, that is."

"Riley," Mariah said too quietly, "you can go spread yourself on her like apple butter for all I care. I had my life time share of your behavior when we were married."

"Behavior?" Surprise and worse now furrowed the brow under his curly dance of hair. "What the hell is that supposed to mean, behavior? You never had any cause to complain about other women during our marriage."

"Oh, right," she said caustically. "What about that blond in Classifieds?"

"That doesn't count!" he answered, highly offended. "You and I were already separated then!"

With deadly evenness Mariah told him, "It all counts."

Riley seemed honestly baffled as he stared down at her. "What's got you on the prod? If it bothers you to see me have a"--he gave a quick glimpse my direction--"social life, then look the other way."

"It wouldn't work," she levied on him next. "I'd just see you circling around to your next candidate to fuck."

Right there on the ef word my daughter's voice changed from anger to pain. And as if that kind of anguish is catching, Riley's tone sounded as afflicted as hers when he responded:

"Goddamn it, Mariah, you know I never played around while we were married. You know that." Silence was the best he could get from her on that. "What I do now is my own aff--business."

Mariah rattled the ice in her glass like a castanet. "Not if it interferes with the series. We were going to talk over your <sup>piece</sup>~~story~~ idea, you said."

"All right, let's talk and get it over with."

"Not with you standing there hot to trot."

Riley abruptly sat.

"You're rushing into this stupid bartender idea," Mariah began.

"My bartender idea is the best ~~story~~ shot we've got," Riley began simultaneously.



"I think they're having a fight," the next-table woman whispered.

"I think you're right," the male undertone subscribed.

I would have refereed if I had known where to start. Riley, though, wasn't going to sit still for Mariah to pull his inspiration out from under him. "All righty right, you stay here and stew," he left her with as he scraped his chair back from the table. "I'll be over there doing the piece." With that he was away, taking up residence at the cash register end of the bar where the brunette item of contention had stationed herself. The solar increase of her smile showed that she didn't at all mind being Riley's topic.

I was beginning to see why Mariah had wanted me along as an ally against this guy. A paratroop battalion was about what it would take to jump on Riley adequately.

"Mariah, petunia," I tried to assuage, "that mophead is not worth--"

"It's okay, it's okay," she said in that too quiet way again.

A sipping silence was all that followed that, from either of us. Spark patterns of light from the tiny bulbs trembled on the dim walls. Twinkle, twinkle, little bar. I watched Mariah watch Riley. He was right in one

conducted his life

respect, she ought not to care how he ~~behaved~~ now that they were split.

All too plainly, she cared with her every fiber. I don't know. Maybe a person simply cannot help getting the willies about what might have been.

Riley's sugared conversation with his story topic was going on and on and on. At last, though, here he came sashaying back to our table and in a not very good imitation of a matter of fact voice, wanted to know: "What about a picture?"

Mariah eyed him as if he had slithered up through a crack in the floor. "What about one, cradle robber?"

"Come on, Mariah, don't be that way. Honest to Christ, I was going to do a bartender <sup>piece</sup> ~~story~~ even before Kimi just happened to come on shift."

"Kimi!?" Mariah voiced disbelievingly. "Riley, the only taste you've got is in your mouth."

Riley rolled his eyes and stared at the barroom ceiling as if the letters p-a-t-i-e-n-c-e were inscribed up there. "Just out of curiosity, Flash, what're you going to tell the BB when my <sup>written part</sup> ~~story~~ lands in there and no picture with it?"



Mariah gave him a world record glower. Then she all but leapt out of the chair, tornadoed over to the end of the bar, began exhuming electrical cords and small spotlights out of her camera baggage, and proceeded to clamp and aim into the targeted area of the bartending brunette. Next she pulled out what looked alarmingly like a quiver for arrows, but proved to be full of small white reflecting umbrellas which she positioned various whichways to throw more light on Kimi. Prang prang prang, Mariah yanked the legs of her tripod into extension.

"Henry, look at those people now!" from the lead whisperer.

"Isn't this something?" murmured its chorister.

"Kimi, sweetie, give us your biggest smile, if you know which one that is," Mariah directed in a kind of gritted tone as she aimed her light meter pistola at the bar maiden. Riley was hanging around right there handy, but she called ~~over~~<sup>out</sup> to me, "Jick, could you come hold this?"

I gingerly went over to the action area. Mariah ~~handed~~<sup>thrust</sup> me an empty beer glass. "Hold it steady right there," she decreed, positioning the glass about nose-high out in the air in front of me and then stepping

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back behind the tripod and sighting her camera through the glass at Kimi.

Being in the shine of all the lights was making Kimi positively incandescent. Through her smile she emitted, "This is totally, like, exciting?"

Click, and a few more triggerings of the shutter, and Mariah was icily informing Riley the picture of the piece was achieved and the rest was up to him, then unplugged and unclamped the lights and the rest of the paraphernalia in about a second and a half and rampaged back to





our table and her Calvert and water.

I joined her, but of course Riley stayed hovering at the bar.

I will say, he was laying it on thicker with his tongue than I could have with a trowel. He would mouth something sparkling, ~~and then~~ Kimi would mouth something, he would laugh, ~~and then~~ she would laugh--after a bit, Mariah declared: "If I have to watch any more of this I'll turn diabetic." Out she went to the Winnebago.

I am not naturally nocturnal. Not enough to sit around in a tourist bar into the wee hours while watching Riley lay siege to Kimi, at least. I drained the last of my drink and headed to the bar.

As I approached, Kimi was wanting to know where he got such a wild pair of contact lenses--"You can, like, color each eye different, I mean?"--and with a straight face Riley drawled that they were a hard-to-find kind called aw, natural. Then he was inquiring of her in a confidential way, "Okay now, Kimi, serious question. If I just came in here from Mars and asked for a drink, what would you give me?" Granted, he did have the notebook open in front of him. Maybe he was mixing business with pleasure, a little.

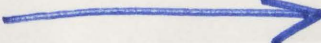
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Kimi smiled a mile and said, "Oh, wow, I guess maybe a slow comfortable screw?"

Riley looked as if his ears could not believe their good fortune.

My God, I thought to myself, does it just jump into his lap this way?

Kimi kept the smile beamed on him as she asked, "You know what that is, don't you?" Before Riley could muster an answer--which would have been highly interesting to hear--she was explaining: "It's sloe gin, Southern Comfort, and orange juice, like in a screwdriver? Get it? A Sloe Comfortable--"





"Got it," Riley vouched, trying not to look crestfallen. He  
 downed a long restorative drag of his G-ball, evidently thinking  
 furiously about how to get past that smile of Kimi's. <sup>Now</sup> ~~Then~~ he noticed  
 me and frowned. "Something on your mind besides your hat, Jick?"

Something was, yes. A couple of somethings. How Riley and Mariah  
 behaved toward each other wasn't any of my business, <sup>theoretically.</sup> Yet if you don't  
 feel strongly enough about it to take sides with your own offspring,  
 what in the hell did you spend the years raising the kid for? So on  
 Mariah's behalf my intention had been to deliver some snappy comment  
 to Riley that would let him know what a general louse he was being.  
 But instead I seemed to be seeing myself, from  
 the outside--I know that sounds freaky; it was freaky--standing there  
 in a remembered way. As if I had stepped into a moment where I'd  
 already been once: a waiting man beside me, his arm on the bar, a  
 woman equally near: myself somehow suspended in the polar pull between  
 them. Or was I imagining. Three ~~about~~ scotch and waters will start the

imagination going, I suppose. Whatever it swam in, the strange is-  
 this-then-or-now remembering suddenly became not this bar but the Medicine  
 Lodge, not this Riley-Kimi recipe but Stanley Meixell and Velma Simms.  
 Velma in that long-ago time had been Gros Ventre's divorce champion,  
 thrice married in an era that believed once ought to be <sup>plenty</sup> ~~enough~~ for anybody.  
 That Fourth of July and others of the Depression years, she in her slacks  
 of magical tightness served as timekeeper at the Gros Ventre rodeo, in  
 charge of the whistle that signaled time's up during bronc rides; as  
 one of the yearning hangers-on around the bucking chutes pointed out,  
 "Think of all the pucker practice she's had." Stanley was...Stanley.  
 The original forest ranger of the Two Medicine National Forest, who  
 forfeited that million-acre job when his oldest friend, my father,  
 turned him in for his hopeless drinking. Stanley who came back out of  
 nowhere into our lives that summer of 1939 and freed our family of as  
 much pain as he could. Who perched on that Medicine Lodge bar stool  
 timelessly, the back of his neck lined and creased as if he'd been  
 sleeping on chicken wire but the front of him durable enough to draw  
 Velma Simms snuggling onto the bar stool close beside him. And there



in the heat field between that woman and that man after I had popped in innocent as a day-old colt to discuss a matter with Stanley, I was the neutral element. The spectating zero rendered neutral by circumstances. Circumstantial youth, in that fifteenth summer of my life. Circumstantial widowerhood now.

"Jick?" Riley was asking. "Jick, are you okay?"

"Uh, you bet," I answered although I could feel that the backs of my hands were sweating as they do when my nerves are most upset.

~~Spooky,~~  
~~Strange,~~ how utter and complete, how faithful, that spasm of memory had seemed. As if there were furrows behind my brow, interior wrinkles to match the tracks of age across my forehead, and that memory out of nowhere clicked exactly into those grooves. I drew a breath and managed, "As good as a square guy can be in a round world, anyway. Just wanted to tell you, I'm calling it a night."

Riley  
"Good idea," ~~he~~ said.

"Going on out to the Winnebago," I said.

"Yeah, fine," he said.

"Mariah's already out there," I said.

"Is she," he said.

"Morning will be here before we know it," I said.

Riley, still considerably furrowed up <sup>himself,</sup> studied me. Then he glanced at Kimi, who was giving us both a smile we could almost see our reflections in. When Riley turned back to me, his frown was severe. But to my surprise, he closed up his notebook, said a regretful thanks to Kimi for her inspiration, and accompanied me out into the night and the Winnebago.

# —

Sure enough, readers of the Montanian were treated to Riley's dissertation about bartenders, that their wares were as integral to a citizenry such as ours as food and water, and that ever since the first saloons of Virginia City and the other goldstrike towns, a considerable portion of Montana's history could be measured the way irrigation is, by the liquid acre-foot. And of course: These nights, if you hold your mouth right, the moisture of mercy may be dispensed to you by a Kimi Wyszynski.... At least a Sloe Comfortable You Know What was nowhere in it.

Mariah's picture had caught the smiling countenance of Kimi in the beer glass where the top portion begins to bulge out of the slender



base. The woozy distortion puffed Kimi's cheeks out like a squirrel loaded for winter, made her teeth enormous, and squinched her eyes together. She <sup>resembled</sup> ~~looked like~~ a nearsighted beaver looking at itself in a crazyhouse mirror.

We were camped that night on the Jefferson River just out of Silver Star, bracing for Butte the next day. Riley was in the shower at the back of the Bago, singing over and over: "Oh, the moon still shines, on the moonshine stills, in the hills where the lupine twiines!" Conspicuously ignoring the <sup>melody</sup> ~~sound~~ of Riley, Mariah was across the kitchen nook table from me fussing with one camera after another, whisking invisible dust off their lenses with the daintiest brush I'd ever seen.

I again studied the newsprint version of Kimi spread in front of me. I had to ask. "Mariah, is the newspaper really going to keep paying you and Riley for going around the state doing stuff like this?"

Without looking up she said, "We'll find out."

#

Riley newspaper piece--indent

# They named the place Butte, in the way that the night sky's  
button of light acquired the round sound of moon or the wind  
took to itself its inner sigh of vowel. Butte was echoingly  
what it was: an abrupt upshoot of earth, with the namesake city  
climbing out of its slopes.

# Beneath Butte's rind of sagebrush and rock lay copper ore.

# That red earth of Butte held industrial magic: telephone lines,  
radio innards, the wire ganglia of stoves and refrigerators,  
everything that made America electric began there in copper.

# The red copper earth drew other red to it. Bloody Butte, with  
its copper corpuscles. A dozen miners died underground in 1887,  
the early days of more muscle than machinery. In 1916, as the  
machine drill and the steam-hoisted shaft cage pressed the implacable  
power of technology against flesh and bone, Butte's underground  
toll for the year was 65 miners. The next year, a fire in the  
Speculator Mine killed 164. All the while, the greater killer  
quietly destroyed men's lungs: silicosis, 675 dead of it between  
1907 and 1913.



# On its earth and its people of the mines, then, Butte's history  
of scars. Badges of honor, too, as scars sometimes are? It depends  
how much blood you mind having in your copper. Maybe less arguable  
is Butte's history of chafe. "This beautiful copper collar, that  
the company gave to me" became Butte's--Montana's--wry anthem of  
life under the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, a.k.a. William  
Rockefeller and Henry Rogers and others of Wall Street. The Butte  
miner was consistently the best paid workman in Montana. The ACM  
Company also saw to it that he was the most harnessed. Strikebreakers  
and Company police. The Company-imposed "rustling card" you had  
to carry to rustle up a job in the mines. The Montana National  
Guard stationed in the streets of Butte after dynamite punctuated  
the labor struggle in 1914. In its streets and its wallets and  
its caskets, Butte was its own kind of example of how a copperwired  
society works.

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Enormous above Riley's words, Mariah's Butte photo was of the Berkeley Pit, the almost unbelievable open-pit mine which took the copper role from the played-out mineshafts everywhere under the streets of the city: a bulldozed crater a mile wide and deeper than the Empire State Building is tall. Ex-mine, it too now was, having been abandoned in favor of cheaper digging in South America.

#





"Quite the Butte story," I observed to the newspaper hotshots shortly after perusing it in that day's Montanian. "Who'd going to deal?"

"I will," stated Mariah, plucking up the deck of cards and shuffling them with a fluent riffle which drew her a glance from Riley. We had pulled in at the Missouri Headwaters RV Park in Three Forks for the night. By now it had been most of a week since the Virginia City situation got so drastically Kimied, but

conversation between Mariah and Riley still was only on the scale of "pass the ketchup, would you" and "here, take it." Thus an evening of playing pitch was my bright idea for cheering up Bago life. Of course I'd had to bribe Riley into it by letting him off the dishwashing for the next three nights, but well worth it.

"The Butte piece was just a thumbsucker," Riley took care to let me know as Mariah whizzed out six cards apiece to us.

I can put up with a lot while playing pitch, which to my way of thinking is the only card game worth sitting up to, and so I responded to Riley's latest codegram: "How do you mean? What's a thumbsucker?"

"A think piece. When a writer sticks a thumb in his mouth and thinks he's on the tit of wisdom," Riley said moodily.

"No way was that Butte story of his a thumbsucker," Mariah informed me past Riley as if he was not at the table with us. "He wrote what needed saying. Now he's just having one of those oh-my-God-I-shot-my-wad spasms writers get."

Damned with faint praise or praised with a faint damn or wherever it was Mariah's backhanded defense had left him, Riley only snorted and concentrated <sup>fiercely</sup> on the cards in his hand.

Mariah fanned her own cards out, gave them a quick pinched appraisal and asked, "Who dealt this mess?"

"You did, butterfly," I informed her.

"Oh. Then it's up to you to bid first."

"I know. I am. Give a person time." I mulled what I held, primarily the king and jack of diamonds and then a bunch of junk like the seven of hearts and three even <sup>littler</sup> ~~little~~ clubs. "I'll say two."

"Three," Riley grandly upped.

Mariah passed, and Riley led out with the queen of hearts, which she unhappily had to top with her king, and now it was my play. This is what's nice about pitch: the strategy needed right from the first card. By making hearts trump, Riley transformed my jack of diamonds



into the jick, which is to say, the off card of the same color as the jack of trump. That, incidentally, is where my nickname springs from, the pronouncement by a family friend back when my folks were trying to fit the solemn given name John and then the equally unright Jack onto the child me that "He looks to me more like the jick of this family." Nomenclature aside, though, the rule in pitch is that jack takes jick but jick takes joker, and so here I could either mandatorily follow suit, hearts, with my seven and hope to take some later trick and maybe even somebody's joker or tenspot with my jick, or, since Mariah's king was taking this trick, I could forthwith sluff the jick to her so she would gain the point instead of the bidder, Riley. See what I mean about what a strategic marvel pitch is?

I sluffed my jick, drawing me a grin from Mariah and a dirty look from Riley. Which got another load of topsoil added to it after he trumped in on the next trick to regain the lead, led back with his invincible ace of hearts and instead of capturing a jack or joker or even a tenspot to count toward game, received an out-of-trump spade from Mariah and my seven of hearts, equally worthless to him.

Of his three bid, Riley so far only had one, that unlosable trump ace he'd just played. He <sup>now</sup> was pondering so deep you could almost hear his brain throb. His choices were perfectly clear, really--lead with his next strongest card and try to clean us out of any none-trump face cards or tens that would count toward game, or lead something weak and keep back his strong card to capture any of our face ones etcetera on the final trick--and so I helped him employ his time by asking him, "Well, then, Wordsworth, what kind of a Butte story would you rather have done than the one you did?"

"You saw those faces in the M & M yesterday," Mariah enlightened me as Riley tried to glower at each of us and study his cards at the same time. "What the scribbler wants is for those old Butte guys to read his stuff and fall off their barstools backwards and kick their legs in the air while they shout, 'That's me! Riley Wright told my whole life in that <sup>piece</sup> ~~story~~ of his!'"

Riley clutched his cards rigidly and asked her with heat, "What the fuck's wrong with that?"

"Not a thing," she told him as if surprised at his utter density.

"Don't you know a fucking compliment when you get one?"



Yesterday's Butte faces, yes. We'd begun on Butte by stopping in the old uptown area for lunch at the M & M, an enterprise which is hard to characterize but basically includes a fry kitchen and counter on one side and a serious bar along the other and sporting paraphernalia such as electronic poker machines in the entire back half of the building, and within it all a grizzled clientele who appeared to have undergone most of life's afflictions, plus a few younger people evidently in the process of undergoing that same set of travails. All my life until actually coming there with the newspaper pair I had been leery of Butte. Of its mole-like livelihood, as mining seemed to us surface-of-the-earth types. Of

*sm caps*  
The Company, as the Anaconda

Copper Mining Company was known in big letters in the Montana of my younger days, because Butte and its ore wealth were why The Company took the trouble to run everything it could think of in the state. Of, yes, younger incarnations of the rugged clientele around the three of us at that moment, for in its heyday of nine thousand <sup>miners</sup> ~~thousand~~ Butte was famously a drinking whoring fistfighting place; when you met up with someone apt to give you trouble from his knuckles, the automatic evaluation was "too much Butte in him." But now with the M & M as a kind of comfortable

*eg, no commas*

warehouse of so much that had been Butte, and replete with the highly delicious lunch--a pork chop sandwich and a side dish of boiled cabbage with apricot pie for dessert had done nicely for me--I'd been quite taken with the hard-used old city. Until I happened to glance at the latest case of thirst coming in the door of the M & M, and it was the ghost of Ed Heaney nodding hello to me.

Bald as glass, with middle age living up to its name by accumulating on his middle, Ed was owner of the lumber yard in Gros Ventre and the father of my best friend in my growing-up years. An untalkative man whose habits were grooves of behavior the town could have told time by, nonetheless he had pieces of life that spoke fascination to me--his own boyhood in unimaginable Butte, his medals from Belleau Wood and other battles of the First World War tucked away in a dresser drawer. As I stared across the M & M at Ed's reincarnation, there where I'd ~~been sure~~ <sup>that the</sup> past could find no reason to swoosh out all over me, my mind ~~was~~ split again. The everyday part knowing full well that Ed Heaney was many years gone to the grave and that probably half of male Butte resembled Ed. The remembering remnant of me, though, abruptly



seeing a front lawn at dusk, during a town trip when I had swung by  
to quick-visit my

friend Ray, and as we gab there on the grass the front porch screen door  
swings open and Ed Heaney stands in its surprise frame of light, as his  
lookalike did now in this Butte doorway, the radio news a murmur steady  
as a rumor behind Ed. "Ray, Mary Ellen," Ed calling out into the  
yard to his son and small daughter that first evening of September of  
1939, "you better come in the house now. They've started another war  
in Europe."

The whap of Riley's finally chosen card on the table brought me  
back from Butte and beyond. He'd decided to lead an inconsequential  
five of clubs, which Mariah nonchalantly stayed under with the trey,  
so I ended up taking the trick with my mere six of clubs. I at once  
led back with my ace of diamonds, which sent Riley into ponder again.

Mariah decided to employ this waiting period by working on me.  
"You know, you'd have plenty of time to shave before Riverboat Wright  
here plays his next card."

Before I could come up with a dignified reply, Riley surprised me

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by rapping out to her on my behalf: "What the hell, the beard gives him a hobby where there's not much danger he'll saw his fingers off."

I knew, though, he wasn't so much sticking up for me and my whisker project as he was jabbing it to Mariah. He could have chosen a better time to do it; when he finally played he still didn't use his strong card, whatever it was, and merely followed suit on my ace with a lowly diamond. Mariah immediately gave him a wicked grin and sluffed me the ten of spades. Hoo hoo. Riley was <sup>a</sup> screwed monkey, and by now even he knew it. Sure enough, for the final trick he'd been saving the jack of hearts, the highest trump card left, but all





it earned him was my deuce of clubs and Mariah's eight of spades,  
neither worth anything.

I cheerfully scorekept. One wooden match to Mariah for the jick  
I'd sluffed her, two to myself--besides <sup>my</sup> having the highest count for  
game, courtesy of the tenspot she'd sluffed me, my seven of hearts proved  
to be the low of trump--and three broken-backed matches to Riley to  
indicate he'd gone set and now was three points in the hole.

"My God!" he uttered when the game concluded several hands later  
with me at twenty-one, Mariah hot behind me at nineteen, and him still  
~~three~~ in the hole. "Playing pitch with you two is like trying to eat  
a hamburger in the middle of a wolfpack."

Nor, despite being called a quitter every way Mariah and I could  
think of--and between us, that was quite a few--would Riley risk his  
neck any further in more pitch that evening. He took his mood off  
to bed at the back of the Bago, and while he got himself installed there  
I ~~helped~~ Mariah make up her couch bed per usual. Per usual she gave  
me a goodnight-in-spite-of-the-stickery-on-your-face kiss. Per usual  
I headed back to scrunch into bed beside Riley and speculate.

Nights with Riley were an ordeal. He <sup>dropped</sup> ~~could drop~~ off to <sup>dreamville</sup> ~~sleep~~

the moment he was horizontal, but before long the commotion would begin.

There alongside of me he'd start to shimmy in his sleep, little jerky

motions of his shoulders and arms and spasmy tiny kicks of his legs

and ungodly noises from his throat. Hnng. Nnhnng. Nnguhh! Actually

it was kind of fascinating in a way, like watching a spirited dog

napping beside a stove, whimpering and twitching as he runs a dream

rabbit. But as Riley's bed fuss went on and on I'd need eventually

to whisper sharply, "hey, come out of it!" Mmm, he would acknowledge,

almost agreeably, and I would try to rush to sleep before his next

eruption.

I do my dreaming awake, and so the uproar going on in Riley in

his zoo of sleep I could not really savvy. Was he writing, his mind <sup>restlessly</sup>

sorting words there in the dark? Or yearning, his body at least, for

the Kimies of the world...or remembering when Mariah's was the warm

form beside him? Or was this merely something like an electrical storm

in the night of the brain? Whatever was occurring, Riley evidently

paid for his days in the quivering of his nights.

# —————



Lewis and Clark had preceded Riley and Mariah a bit to this part of Montana, discovering there in 1805 that a trio of rivers came together to make the source of the Missouri. Grandly christening every trickle of water they encountered all the way across the Dakotas and Montana, those original explorers nonetheless were smart enough to save up the names of their bosses, Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin, for these main tributaries, which I thought was more than passingly ~~highly~~ interesting. It didn't register so with the subsequent newspaper pair, however, and after a fruitless day of traipsing around the Three Forks area they decided they wanted to go on to Helena for the night--but by backtracking through Butte instead of the only-half-as-long route through Townsend.

"Butte? Hold on a minute here. You did Butte."

"Our Lady of the Rockies," explained Mariah abstractedly.

"Who's she?"

"Jesus's mom," Riley put in with equal unhelpfulness.

"Riddle me no newspaper lingo riddles, you two. All I want to know is--"

"The Mary statue," Riley intoned with awful patience. "Up on the

Divide, over Butte. Ninety feet tall, shiny white. Maybe you happened to notice it?"

"Oh. That Lady of the Rockies."

But even the Madonna, giant robed figure who seemed to have popped over the mountaintop and stopped short in surprise as the sight of Butte, didn't provide any miracle for these two. Or as they of course put it to one another: "Doesn't work."

Thus we were finally Helena-bound on the freeway, just getting rolling atop the rise north of Butte,





when the steering wheel wobbled significantly in my hands. I gave the news, "We've got ourselves a flat," and pulled the Winnebago off onto the shoulder of the freeway.

"At least this goes real nice with the rest of the day," Riley grouched as we all three climbed forth into the dusk and I went to get the spare tire out. "Stuff it, Riley," Mariah told him, and from her tone she quite possibly meant the spare tire.

"Do you suppose you two could manage to lay off long enough to--" I began, but was interrupted by a car horn's merry beep beepitybeepbeep beep beep!

Shave and a haircut, six bits, my rosy rear end. I irritatedly waved the approaching car past us but no, here it gaily pulled off onto the side of the road ~~just~~<sup>9</sup> in front of us, an '84 ketchup-red Corvette driven by an old guy wearing a ball cap. As I was about to yell to him that ~~we~~ had the situation under control, thanks anyway, there came the winding-down sound of another slowing car, and an '81 white Buick LeSabre, another ball-capped grayhead at the wheel, beeped past and ground to



a stop on the shoulder gravel in front of the Corvette.

Riley and Mariah and I turned our heads to the highway behind us as if we were on one swivel.

A cavalcade of cars was approaching, every one of them slowing. <sup>beepitybeepbeep</sup>  
Already we were being given the ~~beep~~ by the next about-to-pull-over vehicle, an elderly purple Cadillac.

Funeral procession, maybe? No, I'd never seen a funeral procession where everybody was wearing a ball cap. By now the first of what seemed to be geezerville on wheels, the Corvette pilot, was gimping his way along the barrow pit to us. "Got some trouble?" he called out cheerfully.

"We do now," muttered Riley. Click, I heard Mariah's camera capture our Corvette samaritan.

"Just a flat," I <sup>called back</sup> ~~said~~ as the line of pulled-over vehicles built and built in front of us. "We appreciate your stopping and all. But honest, we can handle--"

"Aw hell, no problem," I was assured by Corvette, "we're plenty glad to help."

"Gives us somethin' to do," sang out LeSabre coming up at a stiff but hurried pace behind him.



"Yeah," I said slowly, looking at the long file of parked cars, each with its trouble blinkers winking on and off, like a line of Christmas lights. As if in rhythm with the trouble lights, Mariah's camera was clicking quick and often. Old men were hobbling out of the dusk toward us, two here, three there--they seemed to be a total of seven.

A long-haul truck thundered past, its transcontinental hurry accentuating the reposeful roadside caravan. "What are you guys," I felt the need to ask, "some kind of car club?"

"We're the Baloney Express riders," the Corvettier answered with a grin that transmitted wrinkles throughout his face.

"The who?"

"What happens, see, is that we ride around taking used cars where dealers need them," the explanation arrived. "Say for instance a used-car lot in Great Falls has got more vehicles than it wants, but a dealer down in Butte or over in Billings or somewheres ain't got enough. Well, see, the bunch of us drive a batch of cars down to the one who's short of them, and then go back home to the Falls in the van there." Sure enough, a windowed van such as is used for a small bus had ended up at the head of the parked procession. "Or like now," my tutor

continued, "it's the other way around--the Butte guy got too many cars on hand and so he called up for us to come down and ~~fetch~~ these back to the Falls. The idea is, it's cheaper for the car dealers than hiring trucks to pack these cars around and besides it gives us"-- he jerked his head to indicate the further half dozen oldtimers now clustering around us like cattle at a salt lick--"a way to pass some time. Oh sure, we maybe like to gab a little, too, riding together in the van--one of our wives says the Pony Express had nothing on us, we're the Baloney Express. But see, we're all retired. If we wasn't doing this, we'd just be setting around being ornery."

Mariah was working her camera and Riley was staring at the ball caps, all of which read I ♥ bowling. Where else can you get a pair of shoes so cheap? and so the conversational role seemed to be up to me. "Quite the deal," I more or less congratuled the assemblage on their roadlife-in-retirement. Now that I had a closer look, at these geezers, most of them, although stove-up and workworn, didn't appear as ancient as I'd originally thought; somewhere into their seventies. Which meant that these retired specimens weren't that much older than me,



I had to admit with a pang. The one exception was a stooped long-faced fellow, about half-familiar to me, who either was a lot farther along in years than the others or had led a more imaginative life. He in fact spoke up now.

"Only thing wrong with this car setup we got is that the speed limit needs an adjustment. What we figure, there ought to be a law that a person can't drive faster than what age he is. If you're nineteen, say, you could only go nineteen miles an hour. That'd give us a little leeway to try out our speedometers."

I chuckled and admitted the plan sounded highly logical. Meanwhile a sub-delegation of Baloney Expressers was curiously inspecting the caved-in nose of the Bago where the Moiese buffalo had butted it. "What happened to your grill, you hit a helluva big deer?"

"Uh, not exactly."

"As much as I hate to break up this soiree," Riley announced in a contrary tone, "that tire still needs changing. Against my better judgment, I'll even pitch in. Jick, where's the jack?"

"Right there in the side compartment. The lug wrench is there too," I tacked on as a hint.

Riley gave me a barbed look, then one at the motionless <sup>Baloney</sup> ~~Toothless~~ Express bunch, ~~Perries~~, and off he stalked. The next sound out of him was as he began grunting away at loosening the lug nuts of the flat tire.

Throughout that effort and then as he undertook to jack up the motorhome so the tire could come off, Riley's every move was watched by our clot of visitors, the whole bunch of them bent over intently with hands on knees like a superannuated football huddle. They in turn were watched by Mariah through her camera as she moved in behind them, sighted, frowned at the line of hunched-over backs, dropped to one knee, grinned and shot.

Evidently irked by his silent jury, none of whom yet had done a tap of work in the changing of the tire, Riley now indicated a nearby NO STOPPING roadsign and pointed out, "If a highway cop comes along and finds this congregation, he'll write tickets on you characters all night."

p. 112A follows



112A

"No problem," Riley was assured by '83 Ford Fairlane, a scrawny guy  
about shoulder high to the rest of us. "My nephew's the highway patrol  
along this stretch of road. If he comes along we'll just have him turn  
his siren



on and make things official."

~~Baloney Expressers~~  
The ~~Football Expressers~~ all considered that a hilarious prospect,

and a number of them gandered up and down the highway in hope of Fairlane's lawman nephew.

I have to say, I was beginning to enjoy this myself, Riley doing all the work and these guys providing me sevenfold company. My original partner in conversation introduced himself, Jerome Walker, and cited among the spectators one who resembled him--"My brother Julius; he's older and smarter but I got the good looks"--and then the scrawny guy--"Another thing we call ourselves is The Magnificent Six And A Half, on account of Bill here"--and I handshook my way on down the line.

The final guy Roger Tate, the stooped elderly-looking one, thought I looked as familiar as I thought he did. In Montana you only have to talk to a person for two minutes before you find you know them some way or another. But I wasn't able to place Roger, nor he me, until we both admitted lifetimes in the sheep business. Then he broke out with:

p. 113A follows



113A

"By the God, now I know you! That herder I found up under Roman  
Reef that time, he was yours! What was his name again?"



Pat Hoy. Pat the pastor of pasture, Pat the supreme pilot of sheep, unfazed by mountain timber and bear and coyotes and July snowstorms, who in a dozen years of herding for me always grazed his band in the exact same slowgoing scatter-them-twice-as-wide-as-you-think-you-<sup>dare</sup>~~ought~~-to style which he enunciated as: "Sheep don't eat with their feet, so running will never fatten them." I had inherited him, so to speak, from my father-in-law Dode Withrow when Dode at last declared himself too old for the sheepraising life. Thus I acquired not only a matchless herder but Pat's twice a year migrations into spree as well. How many times I made that journey to First Avenue South in Great Falls and fetched Pat out of one saloon or another, flat-broke and shakily winding down from his two-week binge of at first whiskey and then beer and at last cheap wine. But for all the aggravation his semiannual thirsts provided, how much I would give to wipe out the day when I arrived to tend his camp and saw that Pat's sheepdog was there at the wagon but Pat and sheep were nowhere in sight. That sent an instant icicle through me, dog but no herder, and while I found the sheep scattered over half of Roman Reef, there still was no sign of Pat. The next day a Forest Service



crew and ranchers from English Creek and Noon Creek and the Teton country helped me to search, and so it came to be Roger Tate of the Teton contingent who rode onto the scene of Pat's corpse near a big lone rock outcropping, the kind that draws down lightning. The lightning bolt had struck Pat in the head and followed the zipper of his coat down the body, searing as it went.

I remembered staring down at Pat before we loaded him onto the packhorse. Since the time of my boyhood, lightning has always been one of my dreads, and here was what it looked like.

29  
"Right you are. Pat Boyd. That was the fellow," Roger Tate was saying over Riley's lug wrench grunts. "Sure was a terrible thing. But it happens."

What also happens, I realized, is a second obliteration, the slower kind that was occurring now. Pat Hoy had been as good at what he did as any of us ever can be. But Dode Withrow, who knew that and joyously testified to it at the drop of a hat in his countless yarns about Pat-- Dode too was dead. Pat's favorite denizens of First Avenue South, Bouncing Betty and Million Volt Millie and other companions of his sprees

and megaphones of his reputation betweentimes, were gone to time now too. Even Roger here, original witness of Pat passing into the past, by now was losing grasp of that struck-down sheepherder's name; and Roger's remaining years as a memory carrier of any sort could not be many. It hit me out of nowhere, that I very nearly was the last who knew anything of the wonders of Pat Hoy.

"How about yourself?" one of the group in the barrow pit asked me. I blinked at that until I managed to backtrack and savvy that he meant what was the purpose of my own travels in the motorhome here.

"Just, uh, out seeing the country." All I'd need would be to tell these guys what Riley and Mariah were up to, and there'd doubtless be a long choirsing from them about what was wrong with newspapers these days. Mariah by now had moved off into the sagebrush and was shooting shots of the whole blinking fleet of vehicles. "My daughter there likes to take pictures. And the other one"--how was I going to put this? that Riley was her ex-husband but still tagging around with her?--"is a guy in the paper business we been letting ride with us. Kind of a glorified hitchhiker."



Riley by now had the spare tire on and the Bago jacked back down.

All that remained was for him to take the lug wrench and reef down hard

in a final tighten of the lug nuts, but his audience showed no sign

of dispersing until the performance was utterly over. Mariah materialized

at my side, camera still busy, just as the voice of Roger the van driver

resumed what must have been a perpetual conversation among the ~~toothless~~ <sup>Baloney Express</sup> riders.


~~Parries.~~ "By the God, you just never know about these cars. Back in

1958 I paid a guy to haul away five Model T's just to get them off the

place--paid the guy! And now what the hell wouldn't they be worth,

the way people are fixing old cars up and using them in these centennial

parades and all."



Riley did a final contortion over a lug nut, then headed stormily over to Mariah and me. "Okay, the goddamn tire's changed," he muttered, "let's abandon the Grandpa Club and--" then he went oomp as Mariah nudged him ungently in the ribs with her elbow. "Mariah, what the f--"

"Riley," she half-whispered ~~urgently~~, "will you shut your face long enough to look at what we've got here?"

"So you figure we just better hang onto these clunkers instead of turning them over to the dealer, do you, Rog?" one of the others was responding to the saga of the lost treasure of Model Ts. "Make rich guys out of ourselves at the next centennial, huh?"

"Sounds good to me," chimed in another voice. "A hundred years from now, I'll still only be 39 by then."

A round of laughter, which multiplied <sup>w</sup>hen somebody else put in on him, "Nick, we're talking age here, not IQ."

By now Riley had his notebook out. "Five hundred years' worth of geezers in one bunch," his mutter changed to murmur. "Could work," he acknowledged, almost as much to himself as to Mariah. He turned to her, doubtless to ask if she had a decent picture for the piece, thought better of it from the expression on her face, and headed over to talk the



Baloney Expressers into more talking.

They listened silent as fenceposts as Riley told them who he and Mariah were and what they were up to, Mariah backing him with an encouraging encompassing grin. Then the seven <sup>oldsters</sup> ~~peezers~~ cast glances at each other without a word. Incipient fame seemed to have taken their tongues.

Finally one of them broached: "You gonna put all of us in the paper? It wouldn't be too good if just some of us was in and not others, if you see what we mean."

"Every mother's child," Riley grandly assured them of inclusion.

"Now here's how we're going to have to do this." He scooted off into the Bago and was back immediately with his mini tape recorder. I was wondering myself how Riley was going to conduct a sevenway interview.

We couldn't stay

on the shoulder of the highway forever; every couple of minutes now a pickup or car was pulling in at the head of the line of ferried cars and a voice calling down the barrow pit in the dusk, "Everything okay there?" and one or the other of the <sup>Baloney Expressers</sup> ~~Toothless Ferries~~ would cup his hands to his mouth and cheerfully shout back, "No problem."

Riley's program turned out to be as simple as leapfrog. He would ride with the first driver at the head of the cavalcade for ten minutes, then that car would pull over and he would hop back to the second car, which in turn would become the lead car and interviewee for ten minutes, and on back through the seven drivers that way by the time we all reached Helena. "You guys are going to have to tell fast," Riley warned as he set the beeper on his wristwatch. "No room for hooey." The ~~Expressers~~ <sup>Baloney</sup> ~~Expressers~~ looked collectively offended at that word, but the tagteam storytelling plainly appealed to them. They didn't budge yet, though, all standing trying to look innocently hopeful in regard to a certain red-headed young woman.

"Ride with me, Mariah, would you?" I asked, breaking seven geezer hearts simultaneously. Away the ~~Expressers~~ <sup>Expressers</sup> ~~Expressers~~ gimped to their vehicles, Riley heading for the lead van with its driver.

They have seen the majority of Montana's century, each of these seven men old in everything but their restlessness, and as their carefully strewn line of taillights burns a route into



the night their stories ember through the decades.

41 "I'm Roger Tate. I seem to be the oldest of this gang,

if the truth be told. Maybe that's why they let me drive the van.

Or maybe it's the fact that it's my van. Anyway, what I'd tell

you about is my dad and those Model T's. We raised sheep out

a hell of a ways from town, west from Choteau there, and when my

dad bought his first Model T around about 1920 he figured it was

a wonderful advance, you know. Any time he wanted now he could

scoot in to town and get lit up. Only thing was, every time he

came home from a spree like that he'd never bother to open a gate.

Drive right through all the barbwire gates between town and our

place, <sup>four</sup>~~eight~~ of them. I was misfortunate enough to be the only

boy in the family, so the next day he'd send me out to fix those

doggone gates. I must have mended those <sup>four</sup>~~eight~~ gates <sup>forty</sup>~~fifty~~ times apiece.

That habit of his was kind of hard on cars, too, which was how

we ended up with five Model T's. Eventually my dad gave out before

the world supply of whiskey did, and it fell to me to build the

ranch back up. But I've often thought, you know, thank the Lord

that the old boy had gone into sheep instead of anything else.

Not even he could entirely drink up the wool money each year

before the lamb money came."

This spell of driving time alone with Mariah I figured I had better make use of. I started off conversationally, "These pictures you're breaking your fanny on, petunia--what is it you're trying to do in them, that inside-the-turtle kind of stuff Riley was talking about?"

From the corner of my eye I saw her give that little toss of head, her hair surging back over her shoulder. "Something like, I suppose.

But the way I think of it is that I'm trying to do cave paintings."

I nodded and mmhmed. She'd taken the next summer after she and Riley split up, and gone to Europe to get over him. When her mother and I asked what she'd seen, her answer was caves. In France and Spain she had crouched





and crawled through tunnel after tunnel into the past to see those deep walls with their paintings of bison and horses and so on from Stone Age times. Maybe ten thousand years, she said, those bison had been grazing and those horses running there in the stone dark.

# The warning wink of brake lights. Like a flexible creature of the night, the chain of cars compresses itself to a halt on the shoulder of the freeway, then moves on.

# "Bill Bradley, I am. Not the long tall basketball senator, as you maybe already noticed. I guess I would want to tell about the grasshoppers. My folks and I was farming over towards Malta there in the Depression and just when we figured things couldn't get any worse, here came those 'hoppers and cleaned us out of our crop worse than any hail storm ever could of. An absolute cloud of grasshoppers--you just can't believe how those buggers were. They sounded bad enough in the air, that sort of whirring noise the way sage chickens make when they take off, only a thousand times louder. But on the ground was worse. You could actually hear those things eating. Millions of grasshoppers and every last one

of them chewing through a stem of wheat. I left my coat hanging  
on the door handle of the pickup and they even ate that to shreds.  
It still makes me about half sick to remember the sound of those  
grasshoppers eating, eating, eating.

"Lascaux and Altamira," she spoke the cave names as if talking  
of friends we both knew. "That's what I want my work to be like."  
Her voice came low and lovely, remembered tone of another woman I had  
loved, her mother.

"Do you see what I mean, Jick?" This next part she seemed to want  
me to particularly understand. "Something people can look back at,  
whenever, and get a grasp of our time. Another hundred years from now,  
or a hundred thousand--the amount of time between shouldn't make any  
difference. If my pictures are done right, people whenever ought to  
be able to say, 'oh, that's what was on their minds then.'"

And I think I did savvy what she was getting at, that in a way--  
the waiting, the watching, the arrowing moment--she with her camera  
was in that cavewall lineage of portrait-painting hunters as patient  
as stone.



Down the long slope ahead of us, the car at the front of the  
cavalcade delivered its brakelight signal of stopping, blink  
blinketyblinkblink blink blink.

4 "My name is ~~Tony~~<sup>Nick</sup> Russo. I came into this country after the  
Second World War. Oh, I'd been west before, kind of. See, when  
I went into the Civilian Conservation Corps in '34, just a punk kid  
from an alley in Philadelphia, the next thing I knew I was on  
~~a~~<sup>the</sup> fireline in that big Selway forest fire in Idaho. Then I went  
from the CCC straight into the Army, so I was already a sergeant  
when the war hit. I saw Montana from a troop train and that was  
it for me. Little towns with all that land and sky around them.  
Right there I told myself that when my military time was in--if  
I lived to get my time in--I'd come out here and see if I could  
make something of myself."

Mariah

On our minds. I could agree with ~~her~~ there. We wear what has happened to us like a helmet soldered on.

Off the freeway to our right, the lights of the town of Boulder, which signaled the caravan's next stop and swap of Riley.

# The used cars, a used man in each, move on.

# " My name is Bud Aronson and I was a packer until I got too  
stove up to do it any more. What you maybe want to hear from me  
happened when I was pretty much in the prime of life, back about  
1955, and figured I could handle just about anything that came  
along, until this did. That ~~fall~~ <sup>hunting season</sup> I was running a pack string  
into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, so when there was a plane crash  
way back in there, I was the guy the search party sent for to bring  
the two bodies out. The plane had slammed into a mountain, pretty  
high up, and so the first thing I did was wrap the bodies in a  
manti apiece just as they were and then we slid them on the snow



down the mountain to the trailhead where we had to camp that night.

See, my intention was to fold each body face-down across a pack

saddle the next morning. But that night turned clear and cold,

and in the morning we could not get those bodies to bend. Of all the

packing I had ever done, this was a new one on me, how to fit those

stiff bodies onto packhorses. What I finally did was take the

biggest packhorse I had and tie both bodies on it, one lengthwise

along each side for balance. But that was the worst I ever handled,

balancing that cargo of what had been men."



On a straight stretch where the Bago's headlights steadily fed the freeway into our wheels, I cast another quick glance over at Mariah.

The interiors of the two of us inside this chamber of vehicle; caves within the cave of night. What does it take to see the right colors of life? Whether or not that was on her mind as on mine, Mariah too was intent. She sat staring straight ahead through the windshield as though she could pierce the night to that frontmost car where Riley was listening and recording.

The night flew by the motorhome's windows as I thought over whether to say the turbulence in me or to keep on trying not to.

# "I'm Julius Walker. This is tough to tell. But if you want to know the big things about each of our lives, this has got to be mine. Quite a number of people lost a son over there in Vietnam. But my wife and I lost our daughter Sharon. All through high school in Dutton, what she ~~most~~ wanted was to be a nurse.

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no pp. 129-30




pick up from p. 128

She went on and took the nursing course at Columbus Hospital  
there in Great Falls and then figured she'd get to see some of  
the world by going into the Army. I kick myself every day of my  
life since, that I didn't try to talk her out of that. She ended  
up at the evacuation hospital at a place called Cu Chi. Sharon  
was killed right there on the base, in a mortar attack. They  
eventually found out there were tunnels everywhere under Cu Chi.  
The Americans were right on top of a whole nest of Viet Cong.  
Good God Almighty, what were those sonsabitches Johnson and Nixon  
thinking about, getting us into something like that?

"Mariah," it broke out of me, "I don't think I can go on with this."


In the dimness of the Bago's cab her face whitely swung around to  
me, surprise there I more could feel than see. <sup>41</sup> A minute of nothing said.

The pale glow of the dashlights seemed a kind of visible silence  
between us.



Then she asked, her eyes still steady on me: "What brought this on?"

Here was opportunity served up under parsley, wasn't it. Why, then, didn't I speak the answer that would have included her situation with Riley and my own with the memory flood unloosed by the sight of Shirley in Missoula, the sound of Toussaint's voice ventriloquizing in me at the buffalo range, the war report of bald ghost warrior Ed Heaney, the return of Big Hole longings across fifty years, the ambush of Pat Hoy's lonesome death, the poised-beside-the-bar sensation again of Stanley Meixell and Velma Simms and the mystery of man and woman; the answer, simply but totally, "All this monkeying around with the past."





Instead I said, "I'm not sure I'm cut out for this rambling life, is all. With you newspaper people, it's long days and short nights."

"There's more to it than that, though, isn't there," she stated.

"Okay, so there is," I admitted, wondering how to go on with the confession that I was being spooked silly by things out of the past.

"It's--"

"--the ranch, isn't it," she helpfully spliced on for me. "You



worry about the place like you were a mother cat and it was your only kitten."

"Well, yeah, sure," I acknowledged. "I can't help but have the place on my mind some."

# The caravan resumes speed, into a curve of the highway,  
another bend toward the past.

# "And I'm Jerome Walker. If there's one thing in my life  
that surprises me, it's that I've ended up in a city. Yeah, yeah,  
I know Great Falls isn't Los Angeles or New York. But pretty damn  
near, compared to how Julius and I grew up out in the hills between  
Cascade and Augusta on our folks' cow outfit. The home place there  
had been our grandfather's homestead, and I suppose I grew up  
thinking the Walkers were as natural to that country as the  
jackrabbits. But I turned out to be the one who cashed it all in,  
back in 1976, when the wife and I moved in to the Falls to live on  
our rocking chair money. I suppose in earlier times we'd have just  
moved to town, Cascade or Augusta either one--a lot of towns in  
those days had streets of retired ranchers they'd call something



like Horse Thief Row, you know. But our kids were already in the  
Falls, in their jobs there, and naturally the grandkids were an  
attraction. So we went in, too. It's still kind of like being in  
another country. I about fell over, the first time I went downtown  
in the Falls and heard a grown man in a suit and tie say, 'Bye bye.'"

"I'll make you a deal," Mariah resorted to. "If you want to check  
 on the place so bad, we'll all three go on up to the ranch after we're  
 done in Helena ~~tomorrow~~. Riley and I have got to do some <sup>pieces</sup> ~~stories~~ along  
 the High Line anyway, and there's no real reason why we can't go through  
 the Two country getting there. How's that sound?"

~~Sweet enough to whistle to.~~  
~~Too sweet to whistle to.~~ I kept my eyes on the dark unfolding  
 road while I asked: "And then?"

"Then you decide. After you've looked things over at the ranch,  
 if you still think you'd rather be on your lonesome than..." she let  
 the rest drift.

I sat up straighter behind the steering wheel. Maybe I was  
 going to be able to disengage from this traveling ruckus fairly simply  
 after all. "You got yourself a deal," I told Mariah with fresh heartiness.

Ahead of us the signal of blinks danced out of the night one more time. As the entire series of cars pulled over to stop again, Roger Tate's van now had become the last in line in front of us. In our headlights the sticker on Roger's rear bumper declared: Dirty Old Man, Hell--I'm a Sexy Senior Citizen.

Mariah mused, "We ought to get a bumper sticker of some kind for the Bago."

# Driver seven, the last who has become first.

# "My name is Dale <sup>Starr</sup> ~~Sopenhever~~. What I want to talk about is, am I losing my g.d. mind or are things repeating themselves?

I've tried to do a little thinking about it. The way all the bad

I've seen in my lifetime and figured we'd put behind us seems to

be coming around again now. People losing their farms and ranches.

Stores out of business. All the country's money being thrown around

on Wall Street. How come we can't ever learn to do better than that?

Of course we know the weather has got some kind of a more or less

basis of repeating itself. Nature does have its son-of-a-bitch side



too, doesn't<sup>it.</sup> Like the big thirty-year winters, 1886 and 1919  
 and 1948 and 1978. And the drought just after the first world  
 war and again in the Thirties and again these past years now.

But I guess what I keep wondering is, shouldn't human beings have  
 a little more control over themselves than the weather does over  
 itself?"

# As he finished, into view glow the lights of Helena, thousands  
 of gemmed fires, each a beacon of some life young or old.

# —

Dawn is when I have always liked life most, the forming hour or so  
 before true day, and that next morning at the Prickly Pear Valley RV Park,

→

with Mariah up extra early to develop her shots of the Baloney Express contingent, I went out to sit on a picnic table and watch Helena softly show off its civic ornaments in the daybreak light. The dark copper dome of the state capitol. The Catholic Cathedral's set of identical twin steeples. The pale Arabian-like spire of the Civic Center. My favorite, though, stood perched on the high side of Last Chance Gulch, above the historic buildings downtown; the old fire watchtower up on four long legs of strutwork. Like a belltower carefully brought to where it could sound alarm into every street when needed. What a daystarting view it must be from there, out over the spread city and this broad shallow bowl of cultivated valley and the clasping ring of mountains all around.

In what seemed just another minute, the sun was up. That's the trouble with dawn, it doesn't last.

A joggedy-joggedy sound came into the quiet morning. Riley was out for his run. Mariah had already done her Jane exercises on the floor of the Bago. These two kept everything about themselves toned up except their heads. I watched as Riley rounded the endmost motorhome and cantered along the loop road toward the Bago and myself. He ran in



a quick pussyfoot style, up on his toes as if dancing across hot coals.

"Feel better?" I greeted him as he trudged into our site, gulping air into his heaving chest.

"There's nothing like it," he panted, "except maybe chasing cars."

For a change, I didn't feel on the outright warpath against the guy, pacified as I was with the prospect of getting home to Noon Creek later today and not budging from there when Mariah and him set out to invade the rest of Montana. Let history whistle through their ears all it wanted. Mine were ready for a rest. So it was without actual malice, just kind of clinically, that I pointed out the bare wheelhub where the hubcap had flown off after Riley's tire-changing job of last night, and he gave a wheezing sigh and a promise to add a new hubcap onto the expense account along with the buffalohead dent in the hood. He'd regained some oxygen by now and started to take himself into the Bago for a shower.

"Whup, off limits yet," I warned. "Mariah's souping <sup>film."</sup> ~~X~~

Riley nodded to save precious breath. As he dragged over and draped onto the picnic table beside me to wait, I <sup>couldn't help but notice,</sup> ~~studied~~ his running costume.

Skintight and shiny, it <sup>d</sup>make him look like he'd had a coat of black paint

P. 139A follows →

applied from the waist down to just above his knees. I let my curiosity ask: "What 's that Spandex stuff made of?"

"Melted money," Riley formulated. "It'd be a whole lot cheaper to just do a Colter, I do admit."

As John Colter was the mountain man who was stripped naked and barefoot by the Blackfeet and given a few hundred yards headstart before they began chasing him with murderous intent for a couple of days--talk about a marathon--I pleasantly enough passed the time imagining Riley in nude version hotfooting it across this valley going oo! ow! on the prickly pear cactuses.

But shortly the side door of the Bago opened and Mariah poked her head out and gave the all clear. She studied Riley in his running getup. "Good morning, Thunder Thighs."

In actual fairness, Riley's legs were not truly scrawny; but sectioned as they were into the top portion of pore-hugging black fabric and the elongation of contrasting skinwhite below, they did kind of remind a person of the telescoped-out legs on Mariah's tripod. But she'd said what she said with a grin, and although Riley gave her a considerable look,

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he decided not to go into combat over his lower extremities and instead asked, "How'd your geezer shots come out?"

"Show you after breakfast," she said, and somewhat to my surprise they both kept to their best behavior through that meal. Oh, still several tastes short of being sweet to each other, but civil, ever so carefully civil. Who knows, maybe it was only the temporary influence of my cheffing of venison sausage patties and baking powder biscuits swimming in milk gravy, or that Riley still was feeling sunny due to his epic of the Baloney Expressers, but in any event he perused Mariah's exactly apt photographic print of those seven bent-over elderly behinds judiciously clustered around the flat tire, seats of wisdom if there ever were, then he actually said: "Helluva picture, shooter. How good are you going to get?"

The little toss of her head, which stayed cocked slightly sideways as she eyed back at him. "How good is there?"

I honestly figured I was contributing to the general civility with my question. True, there was the consideration that the sooner

P. 139 C follows →

I could get these two budged from Helena, the quicker we could motate to the ranch and I could see what that situation was. In any case, I asked: "So what kind of piece are you two going to do here today?"

Mariah looked brightly across at Riley. "We were just about to talk about that, weren't we."

"Ready when you are," Mister Geniality confirmed.

Her gaze at him stayed determinedly unclouded. "Mmm hmmm. Well, I wondered if you had anything for here squirreled away in your notes."

"Actually, I did jot down one idea," he granted, spearing another biscuit.





"Trot it on out."

"I just absolutely think it captures the essence of early Helena."

"Sounds good. What is it?"

"You maybe won't be real keen on it."

"Why won't I? Come on, let's hear it."

"Promise not to get sore?"

"Riley, will you quit dinking around and just tell me what the fuck it is? I promise I'm not going to get sore, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die, will that do? Now then. What's this great Helena idea of yours?"

"Whores."

"What?"

"See, you're sore. I knew you would be."

Mariah expended a breath that should have swayed the trees outside.

"I. Am. Not. Sore. But here we need some humongous idea for Helena and you come up with--"

"Pioneer businesswomen. Is that better?"

"Not hardly," she spoke the words like two cubes of ice. "Riley,

take a reality check on yourself,  
~~get real,~~ will you? I am not going to do any picture for that old  
 half-assed male fantasy of prostitutes who just happen to be selling  
 their bodies so they can save up to go to ballet school."

"That's just it. The wh--prostitutes here in Helena weren't. They  
 were hard-headed real estate investors."

without mercy,  
 Mariah eyed Riley ~~hard,~~ trying to see if he was on the level.

I have got to say, from the expression on his face his motive seemed  
 purely horizontal. After a long moment she told him: "Say more."

Boiled down, Riley's discourse was about how, for a while back  
 in the last century, the really quite extensive red-light district of  
 Helena generated the funds for its, uhmm, practitioners to buy their  
 own places of enterprise and that, whether you approved of their  
 profession or not, their sense of local investment made them civic  
 mothers just as much as any downtown mercantilist was a civic father.

It of course didn't last, he said; that self-owned tenderloin trade  
 went the way of other small frontier capitalists, done in by bigger  
 market forces. But why shouldn't he and Mariah tell the story of

p. 141A follows →




those women, who'd tried to hold onto some financial independence in their desperate lives, just as readily as they would the one of some pioneer conniver who'd made his pile selling dry goods? I had to admit, it was something to think about--who qualifies when it comes to history. Mariah too seemed to be mulling pretty hard by the time Riley got done dissertating.

From some distance off came the sound of someone opening the side door of a rig and announcing, "Going to be another hot one today, Hazel."

# —————



Mariah at last granted that Riley's idea was maybe worth a try  
but-he'd-better-know-what-he's-talking-about-and-not-make-this-just-  
some-dippy-piece-about-whores-with-hearts-of-gold etcetera and when  
the newspaper aces  
went up to the state historical society to search out old photos of that  
domestically-owned red-light district, I decided to tag along. # I ought to have  
known better than to hope that the two of them would get their photographic  
digging over with in a hurry and we could head to the Two country while  
the day was yet young, though. After some hours of killing time in  
the historical society I had all  
but memorized the countless exhibits about Montana's past. I had squinted  
at every everloving piece of the cowboy art of Charley Russell, reminded  
all the while of what Riley had said in one of his most notorious columns--





that Montanans were as proud of the guy as if he had been Bertrand or Jane. By then my feet were like walking on a pair of toothaches and so I ~~went~~<sup>trudged</sup> upstairs one more time to check in the place's library, where Mariah and Riley had said they'd meet me as soon as they surfaced from the photograph archives. Naturally, no trace of either of them. But this time I decided I would just find a place to sit until they eventually presented themselves.

Yet sitting doing nothing is not my best pastime either. Particularly not in a library, for it brought to mind Marcella, the winter we started going together when she was the librarian in Gros Ventre and I was conspicuously her most frequent patron.

No, I told myself, don't let it happen, don't get yourself swept up in one of those memory storms. My mind determinedly in neutral, I watched the library traffic, so to speak. Over behind the librarian's desk was a distinguished guy wearing ~~a man with~~ a tie and a mustache both, and though he was no Marcella he ~~at least~~ looked more or less civil. People came up to ask him various things, but I could hear that about every second one of them was pursuing genealogy.

Which set me to thinking. Family tree is nothing it ever occurred to me to skinny up very far, but with time to spend anyhow, why shouldn't I? Maybe that was the way: see what our past looked like in an official place such as this, instead of letting it ambush me barehanded as it kept doing. Of course, not even try to trace back more than the two generations to the other side of the Atlantic, that risky hidden territory of distant ancestors; just to see what I could find of the Montana McCaskills and my mother's side of the family, the Reeses, by the time Mariah and Riley ever showed up.

I stepped over to the librarian, and in gentlemanly fashion he gave me what must have been his patented short course in ancestor-seeking, which card catalogue to use when looking for what, and so on.

"Any luck?" the library man asked on his next errand past me.

None. I told him I guessed I wasn't really surprised, as we're not particularly a famous family. Actually it is somewhat spooky to learn that so far as the world at large knows, your people are nonexistent.

"You might try over here." He ushered me to what he called the Small Collections shelf. "To be honest with you, this is stray material



we don't quite know what else to do with. Reminiscences people have written for their grandkids, and odd batches of letters, and so on."

It makes you wonder, whether you really want to find anything about your family in the stray stuff. But I plucked out the thick <sup>name index</sup> binder labeled Ma through Me and took a look. The volume listed a world of Mc's, but no McCaskills. Which again didn't overly surprise me. As far as I knew, the only real skein of writing either of my parents did was my father's forest ranger diary, and a lot of that I did for him, when I rode with him as a boy on our sheep-counting trips into the mountains of his Two Medicine National Forest. Now that would have been something: nose around here in search of the past and find my own words coming out at me.

R had a binder all its own and half a dozen Reeses had pages in it, all right, but none of them my mother's parents Isaac and Anna. So much for--

Then it came to me. The old family story of the immigration officer who decided to do some instant Americanizing on my Danish grandfather when he stepped off the boat. <sup>4</sup> I thumbed a little deeper into the Rs and just past Rigsby, would you believe, there was my mother's father in his original form, Riis, Isak.

"Noon Creek, Montana, rancher and horse dealer," the entry stated.

"Letters to his sister in Denmark, Karen Riis Jorgensen, 1886-1930.

the Danish Folklore Archives,  
Originals at University of Copenhagen; translation by Centennial

Ethnicity Study Project, with funding from Montana Committee for the

Humanities. 27 items."

And so. When the library man brought the long thin box of them to me, the letters were the farthest thing from what I had expected.

Kaereste Søster Karen--

America og Montana er altid en spændende Oplevelse. . . . The

handwriting on the photocopied pages was slanting but smooth, no hesitation

to it. Isaac's penmanship in Danish, though, was not the real surprise.

The typed translation. The man of these words was the only one of my

grandparents I held any memory of, him sitting gray-mustached and bent

but still looking thoroughly entertained by life, there at the head of

*plush left*

if possible,  
set "ae" in  
Kaereste and  
spændende as  
in this Danish  
example--

kræsen

and the slashed  
o in Søster like  
this:

JØRGENSEN



our table some long ago Sunday dinner when I could barely peek over that table. Old Isaac's family fame was for chewing his way through English as if it was gristle. My father always told of the time Isaac was asked which of his roan saddlehorses was for sale, the one out in the pasture with a herd of other ponies or the one alone in the corral, and the old boy answered, "De vun in a bunch by hisself."

But the Isaac of these letters my eyes listened to in amazement, if it can be said that way.

# 8 November 1889

Dearest sister Karen--

America and Montana are ever an adventure. Today I journeyed

into the community of Gros Ventre for provisions and found there a proud  
new municipal adornment--beside the dirt of the village's main and  
only street, a flagpole of peeled pine with a fresh American flag  
bucking in the wind. Pole and flag were but hours old, as was the  
news that Montana has advanced from a type of colonial governance to  
become a fully equal state of the United States. In all truth, the  
celebratory merriment of Gros Ventre this day was so infectious it could  
not be resisted; but your Montanian brother nonetheless was truly moved

do not indent  
 this and  
 subsequent  
 letter  
 excerpts, to  
 differentiate  
 from Riley's  
 newspaper  
 pieces

by this fledging of his adopted land. D.V., Montana and we in it shall  
ride the future as staunchly as that flag in the wind. . . .

#                     

12 June 1892

...The time is not far, my Karen, when I will have crews of teamsters  
at earnful labor throughout this Two Medicine country, and, D.V., I  
shall be able to stand about with my hands on my back, looking on like  
a baron. Streets, roads, reservoirs, all are to be built here in  
young Montana and the demand for my workhorses is constant....

I carried these first few of the translated letters over to show  
 the librarian. "This D.V. he sticks in every so often--do you happen  
 to know where that comes from?"

"Deo Volente, that'd be," he provided at once.

My high school Latin was quite a ways behind me. Oh, sure, like  
 anybody I could dope out Deo as meaning God, deity, all that. But the  
 other word. . .

"'God willing,' it means," the librarian rescued me. "You find it  
 a lot in letters of people who had some education back then."



Huh. Another surprise out of my horsetrading grandfather: I hadn't known there was an ounce of religion anywhere in our family line.

I went back to the table and resumed reading.

#

30 September 1897

. . . No doubt, dearest sister, you will notice a shine in the ink of these words, for I write to you as a freshly married man. Before she took mine, her name was Anna Ramsay--a lovely, lively woman, Scotland-born, who arrived here last spring as the new teacher at our Noon Creek school. . . .

After that sunburst of marriage Isaac's pages breathed to life our much wished for child, Lisabeth--my mother, born in 1900 on the first of April, and although we kidded her about it nobody was ever less of an April fool--and a few years later her brother Peter, a fine squalling boy who seems determined to visit the neighbors all along Noon Creek with his voice. The early ups and downs of the ranch I now owned were traced here. The doings of neighbors were everlastingly colored in ink. The steady pen brought the familiar snow of Two Medicine winter, and transformed it into the green of spring. Letter

after letter I read as if old Isaac, strangled by spoken language  
 but soliloquizing with the best of them here on paper, somehow had  
 singled me out for these relived times.

# —

25 June 1914

. . . I write you this from amid scenery that would put

Switzerland in the shade. Our work camp this summer is at St. Mary  
Lake while my teamsters are building roads of the new Glacier National  
Park. Towering over us are mountains like castles of gray and blue, as  
if kings had come down from the sky to live even more royally at the  
top of the earth. Quite to my surprise, I was visited here this past  
week by Anna and the children; she took the impulse to come by wagon  
even though it is a tedious three-day journey from Noon Creek. Ever  
her own pilot through life, is my Anna....

You want not to count on history staying pleasant or even civil,  
 though.

I have been so numb with grief, dearest Karen, that not until now  
have I had the heart to write about... Anna. About her death, ten days  
before, in the influenza epidemic of 1918.



I pinched the bridge of my nose and swallowed hard to go on from that aching message of the loss of a wife. Isaac's Anna. My Marcella. The longest epidemic of all, loss.

Isaac too now seemed to falter, the letters foreshortened after that, even the one the next year telling of the wedding of my mother and father there at the Noon Creek ranch. Nor were there any more invocations of D.V.

I was thumbing through the final little batch of translated pages, about to admit that Isaac and I both seemed to be out of steam for this correspondence, when my eye caught on the McC at the start of a name.

In the valley next over from this one, Lisabeth's father-in-law Angus McCaskill has died. The report is that he was fixing a fence after supper when his heart gave out. Such a passing I find less than surprising, for Angus was a man whose hands were full of work from daylight to last light. Still, although we know that all things find their end, it is sobering to me that he has gone from life at an age very like my own, neither a young man nor an old.

His leaving of life has brought various matters to the front of  
my mind. At the funeral of Angus, when I went to speak consolation  
to his wife and now widow Adair, I was much startled to learn that she  
is removing herself to Scotland. "To visit, you surely mean." "No,  
to stay," she had me know. She will wait to see Varick and Lisabeth's  
child, soon due, into the world. But after greeting that grandchild  
with her eyes, then she will go. I was, and am, deeply baffled that  
a person would take such a step. You know that Denmark will never  
leave my tongue, but this has become the land of my heart. Not so,  
however, for Adair McCaskill. She has a singular fashion of referring  
to herself by name, and thus her requiem for the life she is choosing  
to depart from was spoken as: "Adair and Montana have never fitted  
together."

Those two paragraphs held me. I re-read and re-reread. My rightful name is John Angus McCaskill. Christened so for this other grandfather who abruptly was appearing out of the pen of my grandfather Isaac. My father's father, so long gone, I had never really given any thought



to. A shadow in other time. My main information on him was the remark one or the other of my parents made every so often when Mariah was growing up, that her rich head of hair came from her great<sup>7</sup>grandfather Angus, of the deep shade the Scotch claim is the color of their fighting blood. Yet here in ink Angus McCaskill suddenly was, right out of nowhere, or at least the portion of him that echoes in my own birth certificate. And with him, but evidently on her own terms<sup>3</sup> was my grandmother I knew even less of. So scant was any mention of Adair McCaskill by my parents that I sensed she and my mother had been in-laws at odds, but that was all. I'd always assumed the North Fork homestead claimed her as it did Angus. Willing reversal to Scotland was new lore to me.

I read on.



Until now I have forborne from any mention of Angus McCaskill  
to you in my letters, dearest sister, because I believed the time would  
come when I would need to tell you the all. You will see that while  
my pen was quiet about Angus my mind rarely was, for his life made a  
crossroad with my own almost from the first of our days here in the Two  
Medicine country, some 35 years ago. He too was but young, new and  
green to this America, this Montana, when I sold him the first substantial  
horse he ever owned, a fine tall gelding of dark brown with the lively  
name of Scorpion. In the years that came, Angus cut an admired figure  
in the community, not only as an industrious homesteader and sheepman  
but also as teacher at the South Fork school--a man with poetry on his  
tongue and decent intentions in his heart, was Angus. The word "neighbor"  
has no better definition than the life he led. To me, however, Angus  
was more than simply a neighbor, more than a familiar face atop a strong  
horse which I had provided him. Greatly more, for the matter is, Angus  
was in love with my Anna all the years of our marriage.

He manfully tried not to show his ardor for my wife, and never did  
I have cause to believe anything improper took place between the two



of them. But his glances from across the room at her during our

schoolhouse dances and other gatherings--how many glances that adds up

21

to in ~~22~~ years!--told me louder than words that he loved her from afar

in a helpless way. What must have been even worse a burden on the heart

of Angus was that he won Anna's affections before I did, or so he had

every cause to believe. He was the first to ask her to marry; Anna

being Anna, she delayed answer until after the ensuing summer; and that

was the summer of 1897 when I hired her to cook for my crew during the

plowing of fireguards along the Great Northern railway and her life and

mine were joined. After we were married that autumn, I tried never

to show Angus that I knew of Anna's spurning of him, believing that

when she chose me over him the bargain was struck and we all three

could but live by it. Yet, even after his own marriage, I could not

help but feel pity for Angus, unable to have Anna in his life.

Yet again--only now, dearest sister, and only to you on this

unjudging paper, can I bring myself to say this--I know with all that

is in me that if Anna had lived, she would have left me for Angus

McCaskill. I could see it coming in her. She had a nature all her

own, did my Anna--as measured as a judge in making her mind up, but  
passionate in her decision once she had done so. And so the moment  
merely waited, somewhere ahead in time, when Anna would have decided  
that she and I had had all of life together we could, and then she  
would have turned to Angus. I believe she was nearing that moment just  
before she died--Lisabeth was grown by then, Peter nearly so; consequences  
of ending our marriage no longer would fall directly on our children--  
and I have spent endless nights wondering what would have ensued.  
Surely, if her mother had gone with Angus, Lisabeth would not then have  
married a McCaskill; strong-minded as she is, she would have spoken  
her vow to the Devil first. From that it follows that Lisabeth and  
Varick's little boy Alec, and the other child on the way, those existences  
come undone, do they not? As the saying is, all the wool in the world  
can be raveled sooner than the skein of a single life.

As for myself, my debate in the hours of night is whether it is  
more bearable to have become a widower than a rejected husband. It  
is a question, I am discovering, that does not want to answer itself.



By the time I was done reading this the first time, the backs of my hands were pouring sweat. Jesus H. Christ, what we don't know about how things were before they got to us.

Over and over I read that letter, but the meaning did not change in any way, the words would not budge from Isaac Reese's unsparing rendering of them. My father's father had been in love with my mother's mother. And she more or less with him. In love but married to others.

And not just that. August 12, 1924, the date on this letter in which Isaac told all; the other child on the way, less than a month from being born, the one whose existence would have been erased if Anna ~~Ramsay~~ Reese had not died before she could take her future to waiting Angus McCaskill. That child was precisely me.

As if that child was suddenly six years old and yearning for the teacher to call rest period so that he could put his head down on his school desk into the privacy of closed eyes, I right then laid forward into my arms on the library table and cradled my head. I did not know the tears were coming until I felt the ~~wet~~ seep off them at my eyelids, the wet paths being traced over my cheekbones.

That quiet crying: who did I weep for? For Anna Reese? Did that woman have to die for me to happen? Become in death my grandmother, as she never would have in life? Alec and I, and by way of me, Mariah and Lexa; we were freed into life when the epidemic took her, were we? Or were my tears Isaac's, for his having lost a wife? Or for Angus McCaskill for twice having lost love, once at the altar and once at the grave? Or for Adair McCaskill, second-choice wife in a land, too, that was never her own? Or was this again my grief for Marcella, my tears the tide of her passing into the past with the rest of these?

I wept for them all, us all.

A hand cupped my shoulder. "Sir? Are you all right?" The library ~~man~~<sup>man</sup> was squatting down beside me, trying to peer in through my pillow of arms.

I lifted my head and wiped my eyes with both hands. Gaggles of genealogists around the room had put aside their volumes to watch me. "Uhm. I forgot. . . forgot where I was." Blew my nose. Tried to clear my throat. "Some things kind of got pent up in me. The stuff in these. . ."

I indicated Isaac's letters.

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157A

"At least they mean something to you," the librarian said <sup>gently</sup>~~softly~~.

"Yeah. Yeah, they do."

# —————



librarian

The ~~library man~~ having assured me that he'd tell my daughter and any tall yayhoo with her that I'd meet them outside, I snuffled my way out into the sunshine. Into noon hour for the state workers, for across the street from the Historical Society the capitol's copper dome was like a hive for busy humanity below, men and women in groups and pairs as they hurried off to restaurants or chose shaded spots on the capitol lawn for bag lunch on the ground.

I plugged along slowly through the blanketing heat toward the Bago, trying not to look like a guy who had just made a public spectacle of himself. Talk about self-pandemonium. This trip was doing it to me, something fierce. How the hell to ward it off, though? The past has a mind of its own, I was finding out. Maybe my weepy spell was over but I still felt flooded with those torrents of Isaac's ink.


"Hi, did you manage to keep yourself entertained this morning?"  
Mariah's voice caught up with me from behind. Before I could manage a response to that, she was alongside me with her arm merrily hooked with mine and already was skipping on to "Ready for lunch, do I even need to ask?"



"Where's your partner in crime?" I inquired, glancing around for Riley.

"He's calling the BB to make sure our geezer piece got there okay. I missed a bet when we divorced--I should have sued the telephone for alienation of affection."

She, at least, seemed in an improved mood, which I verified by asking her how the red-light real estate piece was coming. "I think it's going to work," she conceded. "You never quite know with Riley when he reaches into that pantry of a brain of his. But his idea this time looks real zammo." Nor could you predict this newspaper pair. Less than twenty-four hours ago they could barely tolerate each other and here all of a sudden they were on their best productive behavior.



At the motorhome Mariah and I flung open all the doors and windows to let the heat out, but sultry as the weather was maybe a hotter amount flowed in. We moved off into the shade of a tree on the capitol lawn while waiting for Riley. Right next to us was a big oblong flowerbed in a blossom pattern forming the word Centennial; my God, ~~they were~~ even spelling it out in marigolds now.

The sky, though, had turned milky, soiled-looking. "What the hell's happened to our day?" I asked Mariah.

"Smog," she said, <sup>critically</sup> squinting at the murk; only the very nearest mountains around the city could be seen through the damn stuff. "Smoke from the forest fires in Idaho, I guess, and when it's this humid. . ."

Smog? Shit, what next. Even the air was getting me down now. I wished to Christ the scribbler would haul his butt out here and we could head for--

"Here you go," I heard next out of Mariah. The camera lifted to her eye and pointed at me. "A chance to pose with a general." Behind me stood the statue of General Meagher on horseback with sword uplifted

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like he was having it out with the pigeons. After the Civil War he'd been made territorial governor of Montana, but disappeared off a Missouri River steamboat during a night of drinking blackberry wine.

I suppose they couldn't show that in a statue so they put him horseback.

"Speaking of general," I tried on this daughter of <sup>mine</sup> ~~time~~ without real hope, "these pictures you perpetually want to take of me are a general nuisance, do you know that?"

"Thaaat's my guy, just be your natural self if you can stand to," she launched into her picture-taking spiel behind that damn camera, "and you--"

For once she brought the camera down without a click. "You look kind of under the weather, Jick." Mariah's gray eyes took stock of me. "Are you okay?"

"I been better," I admitted. The morning in the unexpected company of our own sources was more major than I could put into words for her right then. Nor were the tears very far behind my eyes. "Must be the

smog, is all." I tried to move my mind from the past toward some speck of the future. "So. We can hit on toward the ranch this afternoon, huh? Leave right after lunch and we ought to be able to get there by about--"

"Mmm, not quite," Mariah disposed of that hope in nothing flat. "We're going to have to hang on here until tomorrow. Riley and I still have a load of old pictures to go through in there. This has got to be the most photographed red-light district anywhere, you wonder if they were putting it on postcards."

Right then Riley emerged from the Historical Society building, a frown on him you could have plowed a field with.

"The BB wants to see us," he told Mariah of the phone call without any fooling around at all. "Right now. If not sooner."

What, a detour all the hell way back west to Missoula? At this rate the only chance I had of making a trip home to the ranch was to keep going in the opposite direction until I circled the globe to it.



"Why's he want to see us?" Mariah was asking warily.

"He wouldn't say," Riley reported. "He sounded like he was too busy concentrating on being mad."

"Oh, horse pucky," Mariah said in a ~~kind of~~<sup>9</sup> betrayed tone. She drew herself up even more erect than usual, as if having put on an armor breastplate to do battle. "Riley, you swore to me, you absofuckinglutely swore to me you weren't going to diddle around with the expense account this time! You know how pissed off--"

"Goddamn it, I haven't been!" Riley defended.

"--the BB gets when--" She halted and looked at him differently.

"You haven't been?"

"No, I have not," he maintained, pawing furiously at his cookie duster. "This whole frigging trip, the only invented arithmetic is going to be for those goddamn Bago repairs eventually. If the BB has been sniffing around in our expense account so far, all it'll tell him is that it's cheaper keeping us on the road than it is having us cause trouble around the office. Huh uh. It's got to be something else ~~that~~ on his tiny mind."

# —

The office of Baxter Bolitho was in that turret of the Montanian building, with a spiffy outlook across the nice wide Clark Fork River to pleasant tree-lined Missoula streets.

The decoration of that round room, though, I would have done something drastic about. Currently the motif consisted of stuffed animal heads. They formed a staring circle around the room, their taxidermed eyes aimed inward at Mariah and Riley and me as we entered--an eight-point buck deer and an elk with antlers like tree limbs and a surprised-looking ~~antelope~~ and a moose and a bear and a bobcat and a number of African creatures I couldn't begin to name and, my God, even a buffalo.

Many bars in Montana used to have head collections on their walls and at first I figured the BB simply had bought one of those zoos of the dead when a bar was turned into a fern cafe. But then I noticed there was a gold nameplate under each head, such as:

□ Bull Elk □

□ shot by Baxter Bolitho □

□ in the Castle Mountains □

□ October 25, 1986 □



He was a pale ordinary enough guy sitting there behind a broad desk, but evidently he did his own killing.

As the three of us walked in, Bolitho plainly wondered who the dickens I was. Riley had just made that same point as we parked the Winnebago in the Montanian lot and I remarked that I'd be kind of interested to meet this famous boss of theirs. "Oh, just great," he'd grumbled, "your general enthusiasm will help us a whole fucking lot in handling the BB." But when Mariah introduced me, the editor automatically hopped up, gave me a pump-handle handshake--I suppose a person in his position gets paid by the handshake--and instructed, "Call me Bax."

Riley and Mariah both sat down looking exceedingly leery, as if the seats might be those joke cushions that go pththbfft! when sat on. I found a chair too and did what I could to make myself less than conspicuous.

--Bax--  
The BB sat with his hands folded atop a stack of letters on the desk in front of him and stared expressionlessly at Mariah and Riley for what he must have thought was the prescribed amount of bossly time. Then he intoned in a voice so deep it was almost subterranean:

"Let me put it this way. There has been a very interesting response

to your centennial series. A record number of letters to the editor.

For instance." He plucked the top letter off the stack and held it

straight out to Mariah and Riley as if toasting a marshmallow on the

end of a stick. The two of them reached for the sheet of paper simultaneously





and ended up each holding a corner. I leaned over to peek along as they silently read:

Your so-called series on the centennial is downright disgusting.  
If Riley Wright, whose name by rights ought to be Riley Wrong, can't  
find anything better about Montana than the guff he has been handing us,  
he should be put to writing about softball instead.

Also, the pictures in your paper are getting weird. Since when  
is the Berkeley Pit art? I can go out to the nearest gravel pit with  
my Instamatic and do just as good.

PO'd on Mullan Road

Mariah started to say something, which I knew would be relevant to the letter writer's photographic judgment and general ancestry, but then caught herself and just gritted. For his part, Riley was grinning down at the letter as if he'd just been awarded the world prize for smart aleckry. Eventually, though, he became aware of the BB's solid stare.

"Yeah, I see your point here, Bax," Riley announced thoughtfully, too thoughtfully it seemed to me. "Before you can print this one"-- he flapped the letter in a fond way--"we've got to solve the PO'd

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style question, don't we. Grammatically speaking, PO'd has to stand for Piss Offed. So you'd think Pissed Off ought to be P'd O, now wouldn't you? But nobody ever says it that way, so do we go with PO'd as common usage? Shame to lose that nice rhyme, too, 'PO'd on Mullan Road.'" Riley brightened like a kid remembering what 9 times 8 equals. "Here we go. If the guy would move across town to Idaho Street, we'd have it made--'P'd O on Idaho!' What do you think, Bax? You figure we can get him to agree to move if we promise to publish his dumbfuck letter?"

"Riley," Bolitho said in his deepest voice yet, "what are you talking about?"

Riley never got the chance to retort anything further smart, because Bolitho now started giving him and Mariah undiluted hell. How come Riley's pieces were all about slaughtered buffalo and coppered-out miners and, it was incredible but the fact of the matter was inescapable, the angelic qualities of bartenders? And where was Mariah getting picture ideas like the fannies of geezers and, it was incredible but the fact of the matter was inescapable again, Kimi the bartender seen woozily through the beer glass?



Wow, I thought to myself, and he doesn't even know yet about  
the hardheaded whores of Helena.



Bolitho paused long enough in his bill of particulars to slap a hand down onto the stack of letters, thwap. Then he announced: "In other words, the two of you are outraging our readers."

~~tried to point~~  
 Mariah ~~pointed~~ out, "Bax, in Missoula people will write a sackful of letters to the editor if they think a stoplight is a couple of seconds slow."

The BB was less than persuaded. "This is very serious," he stated in a funeral tone and proceeded to elaborate all over again on how the expectations of the Montanian's readers, not to mention his own extreme forbearance, were being very abused by the way the pair of them were going about the centennial series.

I do have to admit, my feelings were radically more mixed than I expected, sitting there listening to Bolitho ream out Riley and Mariah. ~~was as gratified as I ought to have been~~  
 Oh sure, I ~~ought to have been gratified~~ by the perfectly evident oncoming fact that Bolitho was working around to the extermination of the centennial series and our Bago sojourn. And any time Riley got a tromping, it suited me fine. But I hated to see Mariah catch hell along with him. Then there was the, well, what might be called ~~this~~ <sup>this</sup> matter of office justice.



Put it this way: it ~~just~~ really kind of peed me off, too, that this yoyo of a BB could sit here in his round office and prescribe to Mariah, or for that matter even Riley, what they were supposed to be seeing, when they were the ones out there in the daylong world trying to do the actual work.

The beleaguered pair of them now were attempting to stick up for their series while Bolitho went on lambasting it and them. So while the three of them squawked at each other, I gandered around at the BB'S stuffed trophies. Massive moose. Small bobcat. African something or other. That big elk. Dead heads, I could just hear Mariah steaming to herself, symbolic.

"Excuse my asking, Bax," I broke in on the general ruckus, "but where's your mountain goat?"

Everything stopped.

Then Bolitho eyeballed me as steadily as if a taxidermist had worked on him too, while Riley, damn his hide, started gawking ostentatiously around the room as if the mentioned goat might be hiding behind a chair. For her part, Mariah was shaking her head a millimeter back and forth and imperatively mouthing No, not now! at me.

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Bolitho set to answering me in a frosty way, "If you do any hunting yourself, Jack--"

"Jick," I corrected generously.

"Whatever. If you do any hunting yourself--"





I shrugged and put in, "Not quite fifty years' worth yet."

The BB blinked a number of times, then amended his tone considerably.

"Then you will know it is very hard to achieve a mountain goat. I have never been privileged to shoot one."

"The hell!" I exclaimed as if he'd confessed he'd never tasted chocolate ice cream. "Christamighty, I got them hanging like flies on the mountains up behind my place."

"Your place?"

"My ranch, up along the Rocky Mountain Front. Yeah, I can sit in my living room with a half-decent pair of binoculars and watch goats till I get sick of them."

Bolitho steepled his fingers and peered at me over his half-prayerfulness. "That is very interesting, ah, Jick. But I would imagine that getting within range of them is another matter."

"No problem. Anybody who's serious about his hunting"--I nodded to the dead heads along the walls--"and I can see you definitely are, I usually let them onto the place, maybe even take them up one of the trails to those goats myself. Tell you what, whyn't you put in ~~for a~~ <sup>to draw for a</sup>

permit, then come on up this fall and we'll find you a goat?" I gave the BB a look overflowing with nimrod enthusiasm. What fault was it of mine if the mountain goats in west of my ranch actually were unreachable on the other side of the sheer walls of Gut Plunge Canyon? The BB had only asked me whether it was possible to get within range of them, not whether it was feasible to fire off a shot.

I figured I'd better land him before my enthusiasm played out. "In fact, Bax, how about you coming on up to go goating right after these two"--I indicated Riley and Mariah with the same kind of nod I'd given the stuffed trophies--"get done with this centennial stuff of theirs in November?"

Bolitho kept gazing at me from behind his finger steeple for a while. Then he gazed a further while at Mariah and Riley. All three of us could see him working on the choice. Sacrificial sheep or mountain goat.

At last Baxter Bolitho announced, "That is a very, very interesting offer, Jick. I am going to take you up on that." He turned toward the other two. "Riley, as I was getting to, there has been some marked



reaction among our readers to your centennial pieces. Of course, one way of viewing it is that you are provoking people's attention. The exact same can be said of your photos, Mariah. So, speaking as your editor, I will tell you what." We waited for what. "As you continue the centennial series, I would expect that your topics will become somewhat more, shall we say, traditional. Perhaps I should phrase it this way: tone things down." The BB sent a final gaze around to Mariah, then to Riley, and even to me. He concluded: "Anyway, I thought you would want to know you are being read, out there in readerland."

I give Mariah and Riley due credit, they both managed not to look mock astonished that newspaper readers were reading newspapers. ~~#~~ No, instead Riley said in a hurry "You can't know what an inspiration that is to us, Bax," and stood, and Mariah was already up and saying brightly "Well, we'll go hit the road again then, Bax," and even I found my feet and joined the exodus while the BB shuffled the letters to the editor together, squaring them into a neat pile which he put in his OUT basket.

end of ch. 1

## MOTATING THE HIGH LINE

Centennialitis will break out in Gros Ventre again on Thursday  
night. A combined work party and meeting of the Dawn of Montana  
steering committee will be held at the Medicine Lodge, beginning  
at 8:30 p.m. "Everybody better come or they're going onto my  
sweep-up-the-parade-route-after-the-horses list," stated committee  
chairperson Althea Frew. Other members of the steering committee  
are <sup>Amber</sup> ~~Janelle~~ Finletter, J.A. "Jick" McCaskill, Howard Stonesifer,  
and Arlee Zane.

--Gros Ventre Weekly Gleaner, August 1, 1989



Brrk brrk.

My waking thought was that the guy who invented the telephone ought to have been publicly boiled in his own brainwater. Outside the bedroom window, dawn was just barely making headway against dark. If manufactured noise at such an hour isn't an offense against human nature, I don't know what is.

Brrk brrk.

Christamighty, Mariah already, was my next realization. When I'd deposited her and Riley back in Helena the afternoon before to put the finishing touches on their masterpiece of mattress capitalism, that daughter

of mine had told me she'd call me at the ranch today and let me know what time to come back and get her and her haywire companion. But this time of day, before there even <sup>properly</sup> was a day yet?

Brrk brrk.

Maybe I would do that getting and maybe I just wouldn't. Late as I'd gotten in after the drive from Helena to Noon Creek, I hadn't even had a chance yet to see Kenny and Darleen and gather any report on the ranch. And even in so milky a start of the day, I couldn't help but wonder what order of fool I was for turning the BB around with goat bait the way I had. What got into me, there in Missoula, not to let His Exterminatorship go ahead and kill off the centennial series and my unwanted part in it?

Brrk br--

I helloed and braced.

"Oh, Jick, I'm so glad I caught you before you got out and around, I know what an early bird you are," a woman's voice arrived at full gallop. Never Mariah, expending words wholesale like that.



I elbow-propped myself a little higher in bed. "Uh, who--"

"Oh, you're funning me, aren't you, pretending not to know this is Althea. Next thing, you'll be claiming you forgot all about tonight."

"Forgot what?"

"Jick, our centennial committee meets tonight," <sup>phone</sup> the voice perceptibly stiffened into that of Althea Frew, chairperson. "We've missed you at the meetings lately."

"Yeah, well, I been away. Unavoidably so." And it mystified me as much as ever, how she and undoubtedly the whole Two Medicine country knew that in the dark of last night I had come back. Did bunny-slipper telegraph even need the existence of the telephone or did they simply emanate bulletins out through the connecting air?

"All the nicer to have you home with us again, just in time for tonight," she informed me with conspicuous enthusiasm. "We have an agenda that I know you'll be interest--"

"Althea, I'm not real sure I'm going to be able to stick around until tonight. I--"

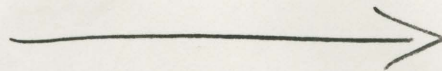
"You're turning into quite a goer, Jick. But I'm sure you can make time for one eensy committee meeting. Oh, and would you ask Mariah if she can come take pictures for our centennial album <sup>sometime?</sup> See you tonight," and Althea toodled off the line.

The <sup>burden</sup> ~~load~~ of conversation with Althea thus lifted, I sat up in the big double bed and by habit took a meteorological look out the window to the west. A moon new as an egg rested in the weatherless sky above the mountains. So far so good on that front, anyway.

I was at least out of bed and had my pants halfway on before the phone rang again. Typical Mariah. I grabbed the instrument up, doubly PO'd at her for calling before I even had any breakfast in me and for not calling before Althea did her crowbar work on me.

"Damn it, petunia, do you have some kind of sixth sense about doing things at exactly the wrong time?"

Silence, until eventually:





"Uhhh, Jick, was you going to line us out on haying the Ramsay place, before Darleen and me head up there?"

Kenny's voice, across the hundred feet between the old house and my and Marce's. Jesus, the day was getting away from me. Ordinarily I'd be over there by the time my hired couple finished up breakfast. Hurriedly I told Kenny, "Must've looked at the wrong side of the clock this morning. I'll be right over."

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

"Sometimes you eat the bear,

sometimes the bear eats you.

Sometimes you drink the flood,

sometimes you sip the dew.

Sometimes you both are one,

sometimes you break in two."

When I got there, Kenny was walking jerky little circles behind Darleen while she did the dishes, neither of them looking anywhere near

song  
excerpt -  
center &  
tagger lines

at the other and the radio Roadkill bunch yowling right along with them.

I know there is no one style for mating, but the fact that these two ended up with each other still confounded me. While Kenny was forever performing his conversational perambulation or bringing a hand up to rub the back of his neck or swinging his arms or craning a look out the nearest window to get his eyes fidgeting along with the rest of him, Darleen sloped along with no excess motion, and often no motion at all. Or was theirs what was meant by an average marriage, the way they so radically averaged each other out.

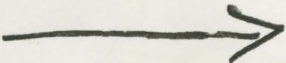
Right off I noticed that Kenny now sported muttonchop sideburns-- they made him look like a shampooed lynx--for Gros Ventre's centennial beard contest. But the moment I stepped in the kitchen, it was my countenance that received a startled going-over from Kenny and Darleen both. I ~~uneasily~~ wondered what secret from myself was showing there, until I remembered my own accumulating snowy whiskers.

The two of them gave each other a side glance. Then Kenny felt



the abrupt need to know, "Jick, how you doing this morning?" while  
Darleen matter of factly chipped in, "You must've seen a helluva ~~swath~~ ~~patch~~  
of Montana by now."

"Okay" and "yeah" I recited to those and while we were getting  
coffeed up for the day, Kenny filled me in on ranch matters. Rather,  
he told me as much as he could think of and Darleen filled him in on  
all he forgot to tell. Haying was



about a week behind because of breakdowns, but on the other hand Kenny did the repairing himself and avoided mechanics at multiple dollars per hour. For the first time in several summers Noon Creek was flowing a good head of water, but on the other hand the ~~upstream~~ beavers were gaily working overtime on damming. A considerable stretch of fence line had been mended, but on one more hand, the roof portions that blew off the lambing shed in the Alaskan Express storm of February hadn't been. ~~one~~ <sup>A</sup> last prodding glance from Darleen further reminded Kenny that, uhmm, well, actually he hadn't got around to tending the shepherd yet this week, either. All in all, things were not really any worse than I expected, ~~nor~~ a damn bit better.

Now came Darleen's turn, to give a cook's-eye view of how grocery prices were rocketing. As she recited a blow-by-blow of her latest bout with Joe Prentiss at his cash register in the Gros Ventre Mercantile, I nursed away at a second cup of Darleen's muscular coffee and tried to ponder how long I could operate this ranch by remote control through Kenny and her. How long did I want to keep trying? You can't get decent help any more, ran any rancher's chronic plaint; probably it



went back to Abel's last recorded remark about Cain. But actually the pair here in this kitchen were as decent as I had any right to expect.

Take Darleen, yakking away at a rate that had me thankful I wasn't paying her by the word. She was made of tough stuff, I always had to grant her that. When a foot of heavy wet snow hit on Memorial Day of this year, wonderful moisture for the grass but hell on young lambs and spring-shorn ewes, Darleen slaved side by side with Kenny and me through all that terrible day of fighting weakening sheep to shelter. And Kenny, although he couldn't manage his time even if you hung a clock on his nose, would whale away at any given task until he eventually subdued it; all you could ask of a person on the wages a rancher can pay, really. No, another Kenny, a different Darleen, would not inch my ranch situation toward solution.

"...Joe Prentiss goes, 'What do you want me to do, give this stuff away?' " <sup>at last was wrapping up</sup> ~~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. Kenny squirmed into a new configuration in his chair. Darleen appeared to have plenty more to say but instead was silently watching Kenny contort. I took sipping refuge behind my coffee cup and watched them both. What the hell now? Something was missing

from this morning's session about the ranchwork, something that wanted saying but was being held back, and the other two knew it just as well as I did. Whatever it was I was about to cover it over by supposing out





loud that we had better get to getting toward the day's labor--by now

I had it worked out in my head that I'd campend the sheepherder, fix

any downed fence while I was up there, then ~~come~~<sup>swing</sup> home by way of upper

Noon Creek to attack the beaver<sup>dam</sup> problem; I knew it would take Kenny

three separate trips to achieve the same--when Kenny crossed his arms

and put his hands on his shoulders as if hugging himself and brought out:

"Uhhmm, Jick, I met up with Shaun Finletter along the east fence

there a couple days ago and he said to tell you he'd like to talk to you about the place."

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 that talking, the throat under the words was TriGram Resources.

The everloving goddamn TriGramites. Not twenty minutes after 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 evidently was in his job description too:

buy out the old ~~farm~~<sup>pooter</sup> 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 distant multi-bunch who saw you as a scrap of acreage they could make tax arithmetic out of.

"Did he," I at last remarked as neutrally as possible about ~~Kenny's~~

Kenny's relay from Shaun and brought my coffee cup to the ready position  
 one more that  
 for a refill I did not ~~really~~ want. But at the stove Darleen was waiting  
 for my real answer before she would lift the coffee pot, 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 Mariah's strongest lens. They had reason. For if I sold, this ranch  
 would 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.

Brrk brrk.

Kenny sprang to the phone on the wall. "Hullo? You bet, he's  
 right here." Before I could gather myself, Mariah's voice was in my  
 ear:



"Hi. You know what? You don't have to come back to Helena for us."

"I don't?"

"See what a terrific daughter I can be when I half try? Riley

← and I can't tell yet when we'll be done here today, so

we'll rent a car and come up to the Two whenever we are--we need to get going on that part of the state next anyway. Think you can keep yourself occupied without us a little while? Gas up the Bago. Bye."

# —————

It was midmorning by the time the grocery boxes and I made our escape from the Gros Ventre Mercantile and Joe Prentiss's opinion of Darleen, and headed west out of town toward the sheep camp.

Remarkable how quiet and thought-bringing a pastime it is to drive along without a photographer blazing away beside you and a ~~wordhawk~~<sup>wordwright</sup> whanging his laptop behind you. This road I knew like the back of my hand and so I simply had to hold the motorhome away from the slidey gravel edges of the roadbank and let my mind do whatever solo it wanted, this cream-of-summer morning. Everywhere ahead the mountains, the jagged rim where the Two Medicine country joins onto the sky, <sup>today</sup> were clear and

near today. A last few desperate patches of snow still showed bright among the topmost clefts of Roman Reef's wall of rock, but their destiny was evaporation in another week or so. The benchlands on either side of the valley road already were beveled pastures of crisp grass; summer in the Two country always takes on a tan by August. Against the slope of the high ridge south of town, the big G V outline in rocks painted white by the Gros Ventre high school freshmen each fall was by now like a fading set of initials chalked onto leather.

Yet the land still was green where it counted: beside me as I drove, the column of tall old cottonwood trees extending west alongside the county road, through hay meadow after hay meadow until at last thinning into a pair of willow lines that curved down out of the mountains--English Creek, its main channel and north and south forks like a handle and ~~times~~ <sup>tines</sup> uncovering my beginnings to me.

There is nothing left standing of my father's English Creek ranger station. I in~~e~~<sup>s</sup>capably know that, and could not help but see so, yet again, as the Bago topped the rise of the county road and started down



the long slow slant of grade to the forks of the creek. But the absence always registers hard on me. The station. The house behind it where we lived from my fourth year of life through my fifteenth. Barn, corral, sheds, flagpole. Not a stick of any of those is left. In one way of looking at things this is appropriate, really. The U.S. Forest Service extinguished that site from our lives in the winter of 1939 when it directed my father, over his loudest kicks against the policy, to move his district office of the Two Medicine National Forest into town in Gros Ventre, and so the facade of that earlier English Creek time may as well have taken its leave.

Its thoughts, though, do not go.

"Mac, if headquarters doesn't send us out some new oilcloth one of these years, they are going to get A Piece Of My Mind." My mother, Lisabeth Reese when she began life and Beth McCaskill from her nineteenth year to her eighty-fifth and final one, had a certain tone of voice that signalled in high letters Watch Out. My father, officially Varick McCaskill but Mac to all who knew him in his lifetime of rangering, listened when he had to and otherwise went his way of simply loving her

beyond all the limits. They stand in my memory at English Creek as if they were the highest two of those sky-supporting mountains. Her reminding him for the fourth time in as many days that his ranger diary for the week thus far was a perfect blank, lifting her black eyebrows significantly as she half-turned from the cookstove and supper-in-the-making to inquire, "Are you trying for a new record, Mac?" Him angling forward in his long-boned way as he peered out the west window, restless under any roof, declaring of the perpetual paperwork, "I tell you, Bet, USFS stands for just what it sounds like, Us Fuss. If there's an outfit with more fussing around to it than the Forest Service, I'd like to know where."

And the other echo. The one that clangs like iron against iron in my remembering. That never-ended argument from an English Creek suppertime.

"You're done running my life," my brother flinging behind him as he stomped from that vanished house.

"Nobody's running it, including you," my father hurling after him.



The issue was warm and blond, her name Leona Tracy. A blouseful of blossom, seventeen years old and already eternal. She and Alec vowed they were going to get married, they would find a way of existence different from the college and career that my Depression-haunted parents were urging onto Alec, they would show the world what fireproof love was like. None of it turned out that way. By that autumn of 1939 Alec and Leona were split. Her life found its course away from the Two Medicine country. And Alec's--

"Goddamn Riley anyhow," I heard declared in an angry voice. Mine. A lot was working on me. It always did, here along English Creek. But right now Riley somehow represented the whole business, Alec and Leona and my amazed grief as a not-quite-fifteen-year-old watching them cut themselves off from my parents and me, every nick of that past like scars across my own skin. Why ~~the hell~~ is a centennial supposed to be such potent arithmetic, will somebody just tell me that? I mean, you think about it, it always is a hundred years since one damn thing or another happened; the invention of the dental drill or the founding of junk mail or some such. But the half centuries, the fifty-year wedges that take

most of our own lifetimes, those are the truly lethal pieces of calendar. Instead of chasing off after olden topics, what about those closer truths? Maybe I was not such a hotshot at history as Riley Wright was, but this I knew deep as the springs of my blood: in spite of ourselves, or because of ourselves--I still cannot judge which--the family we McCaskills had been here at the English Creek ranger station never truly recovered from the ruction between my parents and my brother when Alec declared himself against ~~colleges~~ and the future they hoped for him, and in favor of linkage with Leona, that summer of fifty years ago.

Yet--there always seemed to be a yet where the goddamn guy was involved--the one person on this green earth to whom I'd shown my feelings about our McCaskill family fracture was Riley.

He did not know the ~~entirety~~ <sup>entirety</sup>, of course. Not nearly. But its topmost raw residue in me, he knew. Four, five years ago, that English Creek evening of Riley and myself? Whenever, it was back before his and Mariah's marriage went off the rails, when during one of their weekend visits to the ranch at Noon Creek he mentioned that he'd been



going around to cemeteries, seeing what he could gather for a column on tombstone inscriptions sometime, and did I suppose the Gros Ventre cemetery would have anything worthwhile? "Oh hell yeah," I assured him, ever helpful me, and so before sundown I found myself there amid the graves with Riley. Just we two, as Marcella and Mariah had let us know a cemetery visit was not their idea of entertainment.

The lawned mound of the Gros Ventre cemetery stands above the edge of town and the treeline of English Creek as if the land has bubbled green there; one single tinged knoll against the eastward grainfield plains and the tan benchlands stretching west like platforms to the mountains. I am never there without thinking of the care that the first people of Gros Ventre put into choosing this endsite.

Riley took to the headstones in the old part of the cemetery like a bee to red clover. He immediately was down on one knee, dabbing inscriptions into his notebook, looking close, looking around. I could tell when a person was involved with his job, so I told him I'd wait for him up in the area where people were being buried currently. The active part of the cemetery, so to say.

There I knelt and did a little maintenance against weeds on my father's grave. Beside him the earth on my mother's was still fresh and distinct. While I weeded, other more desperate upkeep was occurring nearby where a sprinkler went whisha whisha as it tried to give the ground enough of a drink after the summer day's hours and hours of sun.

Riley read his way along the headstones toward me, every now and then stopping to jot furiously. I noticed him pausing to copy the old-country commemoration off one particular lichen-darkened tombstone:

Lucas Barclay

born August 16, 1852

Nethermuir, Scotland

died June 3, 1917

Gros Ventre, Montana

In the green bed 'tis a long sleep

Alone with your past, mounded deep.

Then I was back into my own thoughts and lost track of Riley until he was almost to me, lingering at the grave just the other side of my parents'.

center



"Who's this one, Jick, an uncle of yours?"

"No." I got up and went slowly over to where Riley was, in front of the stone that read simply:

center

Alexander Stanley McCaskill

"Mariah's uncle. My brother."

Riley gave me a sharp glance of surprise. "I never knew you even had one."

There's just a whole hell of a lot you don't know, I had the surging urge to cry out to him, but that was the pain of this place, these gone people, wanting to find a target. # I hunkered down to work on the chickweed on Alec's grave and managed to answer Riley only:

"No, I don't guess you had any way of knowing. Alec was killed in the war. Although by now I suppose a person has to specify which one. The Second World War." The desert in Tunisia in 1943, the German plane slipping out of the low suppertime sun on its strafing run. The bodies, this one among them, in the darkening sand.

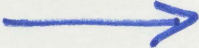
Whisha, the lawn sprinkler slung its arc of water down the cemetery knoll below us, then an arc back up the slope, whisha. After a minute

p. 191A follows →

I glanced at Riley; rare for him to be wordless that long. He was looking at me like a cat who'd just been given a bath. Which surprised me until I remembered: Riley had his own turn <sup>at</sup>~~in~~ war. Not that he ever would say much about it, but the once I had outright asked him what it had been like in Vietnam, he answered almost conversationally:

"Nam was a fucking mess. But what else would anybody expect it to be?"

So it must have been the cumulative total of war, wars, that had him gazing into me and beyond to my destroyed brother.





"How old was he when--" Riley indicated with a nod of his head Alec's grave.

"Twenty-two, a little short of twenty-three." Riley himself I knew was born in 1950; how distant must seem a life that ended seven years before his began, yet even now I thought of Alec as only newly dead.

Riley faintly tapped his notebook with his pen. He appeared to be thinking it over, whether to go on with the topic of Alec. Being Riley, he of course did. "You named Lexa after him."

"Kind of, yeah. That 'Alexander' has been in the family ever since they crossed the water from Scotland, and I guess maybe before. So Marce and I figured we'd pass it on through one of the girls. You got it right, though--Lexa's full name is Alexandra."

Riley was listening in that sponge way he had, as if every word was a droplet he wanted to sop up. His eyes, though, never left Alec's headstone.

"His stone," he said after a little. "It's--different."

By that he ~~of course~~ meant what was missing. No epitaph, no pair of years summing the sudden span of life. As though even the tombstone

carver wasn't sure Alec's story was over with.

"Yeah, well, I guess maybe the folks"--I indicated the side by side graves of my mother and father--"didn't feel they were entitled to any particular last word on Alec. What happened was, there was a family ruckus between them and him. Alec, see, was brighter than he knew what to do with. My folks figured he had a real career ahead of him, maybe as an engineer, once he got out of his cowboy mode. But then he came down with a bad case of what he thought was love and they considered infatuation. In any event, Alec was determined to give up his chance at college and whatever else for it." (My mother bursting out at ~~the news that he was staying on as a rider for the Double W:~~ his news of impending marriage and Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle Stiff, and I for one Will Not--) "The girl"--I swallowed hard, thinking of smiling lovely Leona and grinning breakneck Alec, the couple too pretty to last in a hard-edged world--"the girl changed her mind, so all the commotion was over nothing, really. But by then it was too late, too much had been said." (Alec at the other end of the phone line when I tried, beseeched, a summer-end mending between him and our parents:



Jicker, it's--it's all complicated. But I got to go on with what I'm  
doing. I can't--Alec's voice there veering from what he was really  
saying, I can't give in.) Riley was watching me a lot more intently  
than I was comfortable with as I concluded both the weeding of the grave  
and the remembrance of Alec. "It was just one of those situations that  
turned out bad for everybody concerned, is all."

"Including you, from the sound of it."

"That is true." Unexpectedly the poisoned truth was rising out  
out of me in flood, to Riley of all people. "I was only a shavetail kid  
at the time, trying to be on everybody's side and nobody's. But Alec  
and I somehow got crosswise with each other before that summer was over.

It sure as hell wasn't anything I intended, and I think him neither.

But it happened. So our last words ever to each other were an argument.

By goddamn telephone, no less. The war came, off Alec went, then I

did too. And then--" I indicated the tombstone and had to swallow

hard to finish. "I have always hated how this turned out--us ending

p. 193B follows →

as brothers with bad feelings between. Over somebody. . .something  
that didn't amount to all that much."

still  
I could feel Riley silently watching me. I cleared my throat and  
looked off to the sharp outline of the mountains against the dusk sky.

"Getting dark. You got the epitaphs you wanted?"

Riley glanced at the remainder of unread headstones, then at me.

"Enough," he said.

# —————





The Bago rumbled across the plank bridge of English Creek and I steered off the county road to head up the North Fork, past the distinctive knob overlooking that smaller valley.

In front of me now stood Breed Butte, whose slow arc of rise divides the watersheds of English Creek and Noon Creek beyond. I concentrated on creeping the motorhome along the rough roadtrack, all the while watching and watching the grassy shoulders of Breed Butte and other hillsides for any sign of the North Fork's current residents, my sheep. I can probably never justify it in dollars, but midway through the ungodly dry summer of '85 I bought this North Fork land so as not to overgraze the short grass crop of my Noon Creek pastureland. As the drought hung on, every year perilous until finally this good green one, the North Fork became my ranch's summer salvation. This handful of valley with its twining line of creek had its moment during the homesteading era, when the North Fork was known as Scotch Heaven because of all the families--McCaskills, Barclays, Duffs, Frews, Findlaters, others--who alit in here like thistledrift from the old country, but the land had lain all but empty since. Empty but echoing. As I knew

now from those letters in Helena, one of these Scotch Heaven homesteads harbored a silent struggle within it--the matter is, Angus was in love with my Anna all the years of our marriage. My grandfather Angus and the loved Anna he never attained. My grandmother Adair, <sup>in exile from</sup> ~~exile of~~ Scotland and her own marriage as well. The first McCaskill battleground of the heart.

No sheep either. The only telltale splotch of light color was the herder's canvas-roofed sheepwagon high on the nearest shoulder of Breed Butte and so I veered the Bago from the creekside route to the sidetrack leading up to there, really no more than twin lines of ruts made long ago. Geared down, the Bago steadily growled its way up the slope, the dark





timbered summit of the butte above to the west. The sheepwagon <sup>stood</sup> ~~was~~  
~~in~~ amid the buildings, what was left of them now that roofs had caved  
 in and century-old log corners were rotting out, of Walter Kyle's old  
 place. I guess more truly the Rob Barclay place, as my father had  
 always called it, for the original homesteader here--a nephew or some  
 such of the Lucas Barclay with the grandly proclaiming tombstone.

This Barclay must have been a stubborn cuss, to cockleburrr himself  
 so high and alone on Breed Butte for the sake of its lordly view. <sup>though,</sup>  
<sup>Like him my</sup> ~~My~~  
 current herder preferred to have

the wagon up here even though it meant hauling water from the North  
 Fork; a dusty reservoir about a quarter of a mile west of the falling-down  
 buildings testified that there'd once been a spring there but it long  
 since had dried up. ~~Anyway the view from this high dry site was~~  
 unquestionably wide and wonderful--from Grizzly Reef at the south end  
 of the giant line of mountains to the Sweetgrass Hills far on the  
 eastern horizon of the plains--and if that's what it took to make a  
~~herder happy, so be it.~~ I unloaded the groceries in the wagon and  
 climbed back into the Winnebago to resume the search for the sheep  
 and their keeper.

On impulse I drove to the brow of the slope above the buildings

instead of back down to the creek road immediately. As a rancher trying to make a living from this country I subscribe to the reminder that view is particularly hard to get a fork into yet I somehow didn't want to pass up this divideline chance to sightsee. Onward east from where I was parked on Breed Butte now, a

kind of veranda of land runs parallel between English Creek and Noon Creek, a low square-edged plateau keeping their valleys apart until they at last flow into the Two Medicine River. In boyhood Julys, I rode horseback across that benchland at dawn to help with the haying on Noon Creek. When the sun rose out of the Sweetgrass Hills and caught my horse and me, our combined shadow shot a couple of hundred feet across the grassland, a stretched version of us as if the earth and life had instantly wildly expanded.

But for once my main attention was ahead instead of back. ~~Odd,~~ →

~~how sudden the boundaries are in a country where you can see until~~ ↺

~~the miles blue away into far distance. To the north where the Two Medicine River carves its canyon through the prairie of the Blackfeet Reservation, flat tops of benchlands stood out as if drawn fresh onto~~



Between the benchlands of the Blackfeet Reservation in the distance and  
my vantage point there on Breed Butte the

broad valley of Noon Creek could be seen, the willowed stream winding

through hay meadows and past swales of pasture, <sup>majority</sup> ~~virtually all~~ of it

the Double W's holdings. <sup>9</sup> ~~But~~ <sub>in</sub> of that entire north face of the Two

Medicine country I was zeroed in on the corner of land directly below

toward the mountains, my ranch. The old Reese house that was now the

cookhouse. The new house, all possible windows to the west and the

mountains, that Marcella and I had built. The line of lombardy poplars

marking our driveway in from the Noon Creek road. The lambing shed.

Even the upstream bend of hayfield where Kenny and Darleen were baling.

Every bit of it could be enumerated from here.

Enumerating is one thing and making <sup>it all</sup> ~~add~~ up is a hell of another.

Oh, I had tried. I'd even had the ranch put through a computer earlier

this year. A Bozeman outfit in the land analysis business programmed

it all for me and what printed out was that, no, the place couldn't be

converted into a dude ranch because with the existing Choteau duality

colonies in one direction and Glacier National Park in <sup>the other,</sup> ~~another,~~ Noon

195C

Creek was not "destination-specific" enough to compete; that maybe a little money could be made by selling hay from the ranch's irrigated meadows, if the drought cycle continued and if I wanted to try to live on other people's misfortune; that, yes, when you came right down to it, this land and locale were best fitted to support Animal Units, economic lingo for cattle or the band of sheep I already had on the place (wherever the hell they were at the moment). In short, the wisdom of the microchips amounted to pretty much the local knowledge I already possessed. That to make a go of the ranch, you had to hard-learn its daily elements. Pace your body through one piece of work after another, ~~paying heed~~ <sup>paying heed</sup> ~~main attention~~ always to the living components--the sheep, the grass, the hay--but the gravitational wear and tear on fences and sheds and roads and equipment also somehow attended to, so that you are able to reliably tell yourself at nightfall, that was as much of a day as I can do. Then get up and do it again 364 tomorrows in a row. Sitting there seeing the ranch in its every detail, knowing every ounce of work it required, Jesus <sup>but</sup> ~~how~~ I right then wished for fifteen years off my age. I'd have settled for five. Yet truth knows every way to nag. Even if I had seen that many fewer calendars, would it do any good in terms of the ranch ultimately? Maybe people from now on are going to exist on bean sprouts and wear

p. 195D follows →



195D

polyester all over themselves, and lamb and wool belong behind glass in a museum. Maybe what I have known how to do in life, which is ranching, simply does not register any more.

# —

It took considerable driving and squinting, back down to the creek road and on up the North Fork toward the <sup>opposite</sup> ~~other~~ shoulder of Breed Butte, before I spotted the sheep fluffed out across a slope. Against the skyline on the ridge above them was the thin, almost gaunt figure of my herder, patchwork black and white dog alongside.

The sight of the sheep sent my spirits up and up as I drove nearer. In a nice scatter along the saddleback ridge between Breed Butte and the foothills, their noses down in the business of grazing, the ewes were a thousand daubs of soft gray against the tan grass and beside them their lambs were their smaller disorderly shadows. As much as ever I looked forward to moseying over and slowly sifting through the band, estimating the

→  
P. 195E follows →

195E

lambs' gain and listening to the clonking sound of the bell wether's  
bell, always pleasure. But the iron etiquette between camp tender and  
sheepherder dictated that I must go visit with the herder first. I  
climbed out of the Bago and started up the slope to her.





Helen Ramplinger was my herder this summer and the past two.

Tall for a woman, gawky really; somewhere well into her thirties, with not a bad face but strands of her long hair constantly <sup>blowing</sup> ~~blew~~ across it like random lines of a web. I was somewhat bothered about having so skinny a sheepherder, for fear people would blame it on the way I fed.

But I honestly did provide <sup>Helen</sup> ~~her~~ whatever groceries she ordered; ~~it~~ <sup>she</sup> was just that ~~Helen~~ was a strict vegetarian. She had come into the Two country to join up with some back-to-the-earth health-foody types, granolas, as they were locally known <sup>out</sup> of a background of drugs and who knew what else. I admit, it stopped me in my tracks when Helen ~~learned~~ <sup>heard</sup> I needed a herder and came and asked for the job. Marcella, too; as she said, she <sup>figured</sup> ~~thought~~ that as Dode Withrow's daughter she'd listened to every issue involving sheepherders that was possible, but now here was gender. It ended up that Marce and I agreed that although Helen's past of drugs had turned her into a bit of a space case, she seemed an <sup>only</sup> earnest soul and maybe was ~~just~~ drifts enough to be in tune with the sheep. So it had proved out, and I was feeling retroactively clever now as I drew near enough to begin conversation with her.

"Jick, I'm quitting," Helen greeted me.

I blanched, inside as well as out. Across the years I had been met with that pronouncement from sheepherders frequently, and a significant proportion of the time they meant it. If they burned supper or got a pebble in their shoe or the sky wasn't blue enough to suit them, by sheepherder logic it was automatically the boss's fault, and I as boss had tried to talk sweetness to sour herders on more occasions than I cared to count. Here and now, I most definitely did not want to lose this one. With herders scarcer than hen's teeth these days and with and Darleen ~~Kenny~~ tied up in haying ~~and the other ranch work~~ and with me kiting around the state with Mariah and Riley, what in the name of Christ was I going to do with this band of sheep if Helen walked off the job?

"Aw, hell, Helen. You don't want to do that. Let's talk this over, what do you say." I made myself swallow away the usual alphabet of sheepherder negotiation--fancier food, a pair of binoculars, a new dog--and go directly to Z: "If it's a matter of wages, times are awful tough right now, but I guess maybe I could--"

"Hey, I didn't mean now." Helen gave me an offended look. "I



mean next summer. I've had some time"--she gestured vaguely around us, as if the minutes and hours of her thinking season were here in a herd like the sheep--"to get my head straight, and I've decided I'm not going to be a herder any more. I'll miss it, though," she assured me.

Momentarily relieved but still apprehensive, I asked: "What is it you're going to do, then?"

"Work with rocks."

"Huh?"

"Sure, you know--rocks. These." She reached down between the bunchgrass and picked up a speckled specimen the size of a grapefruit. The <sup>dog</sup>~~dog~~ looked on with interest. "Don't you ever wonder what's in them, Jick? Their colors and stuff? You can polish them up and really have something, you know." Helen peered at me through flying threads of her hair. "Gemology," she stated. "That's what I want to do. Get a job as a rock person, polishing them up and fitting them into rings and belt buckles and bolo ties. I heard about a business out in Oregon where they do that. So I'm gonna go there. Not until after we ship the lambs this fall, though."

Helen gently put the young boulder down on the ground between the  
 inquisitive ~~dog~~<sup>dog</sup> and me, straightened to her full height, then gazed  
 around in wistful fashion, down into the valley of the North Fork,  
 and north toward Noon Creek, and up toward the dark-timbered climb of  
 Breed Butte ~~that divided~~<sup>between</sup> the two drainages, and at last around to me  
 again. "This is real good country for rocks, Jick," she said hopefully.

It was my turn to gesture grandly. "Helen, any rocks in my  
 possession"--and on the land we stood on I had millions of them--"you  
 are absolutely welcome to."

#

—

My sheepherder's change of career to rocks had not left my mind  
 by that evening, but it did have to stand in line with everything else.

Kenny and Darleen and I were just done with supper when something  
 about the size of a red breadbox buzzed into the yard and parked in the  
 shadow of the Bago. Some dry-fly fisherman wanting to see how Noon  
 Creek trout react to pieces of fuzz on the end of a line, was our



unanimous guess, but huh uh. Doors of the squarish little red toy opened and out of it unfolded Mariah and Riley.

"It's a Yugo," Mariah informed us before I could even open my trap to ask, once she'd pecked me a kiss and said hi to Kenny and Darleen and they'd had the dubious pleasure of meeting Riley. "As close as the Montanian's budget will ever come to Riley's dream of renting a Buick convertible."

"She just has no concept of what <sup>an</sup> ~~an~~ expense account is for," Riley confided to Kenny and Darleen as if they were his lifelong co-conspirators. "I could have done arithmetic camouflage on that Buick so easy."

"Oh, sure, I can see it now--'pencils and paper, \$97.50 a day,'" Mariah mocked him right back but with most of a grin. "Send the BB a signed confession while you're at it, why don't you."

Well, well, well. Positively sunny, were they both, after their Helena delving. That was one thing about Mariah--putting herself to work always improved her mood. Apparently the same was true of goddamn Riley. They seemed to have found their writing and picture-taking legs, ~~so to speak~~. Until one of them next delivered the other a kick with

a frozen overshoe again, anyway.

"Darleen, don't you think travel agrees with him?" my newly zippy daughter turned her commentary onto me. "Except for his facial grooming."

It was something, how Mariah could be bossy and persuasive at the same time. Yet I didn't even bristle at that, appreciably, because I was too busy noticing how much she looked in her element here. In this kitchen, this house--this ranch--where she had grown up. She moved as if the air recognized her and sped her into grooves it had been saving for her, as she crossed the kitchen and planted her fanny against the sink counter in the perfect comfortable lean to be found there, reaching without needing to look into the silverware drawer for forks for Riley and her when Darleen tried to negotiate supper into them and they compromised with her on monstrous pieces of rhubarb pie. Every motion, as smooth as if she knew it blindfolded. Then it struck me.

Mariah was the element here. The grin as she kept kidding with Darleen and Kenny and Riley was her mother's grin, Marcella's quick wit glinting in this kitchen once again. The erectness, the well-defined collarbones that stated that life was about to be firmly breasted through--those



were my mother's, definitive Beth McCaskill who had been born on this ranch as a Reese. Born of Anna Ramsay Reese, ever her own pilot through life, is my Anna. And on the Scotch Heaven side, the McCaskill side, Adair odd in her ways but persevering for as long as there was anything to persevere for. Mariah: as daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, the timespun sum of them all? Yet her own distinct version as well <sup>o</sup> the lanky grace that begins right there in her face and flows down the longish but accomplished geometries of her body, the turn of mind that takes her into the cave of her camera, those are her own, Mariah rara. <sup>cg</sup>


And couple Riley with her, the set of shoulders that had shrugged off my offer of this ranch. Right now he was as electric as that commotion of hair of his, regaling Kenny and Darleen with the time he'd written in his column that some of the Governor's notions are vast and some are half-vast and the BB didn't get it until the Gov's press secretary angrily called and suggested he try reading it out loud. I had to grant, there was a mind clicking behind that wiseacre face. There were a lot of places in the world where they would licence Riley's

head as a dangerous weapon. I eyed him relentlessly while the general chitchat was going on, wanting to see some sign of regret or other bother show up in him here on the ranch he had rejected, here across the kitchen from the woman he could have made that future with. I might as well have wished for him to register earthquakes in China.

~~[while I was at it.]~~

"I gotta see what's under the hood of that Hugo," Kenny soon <sup>exclaimed,</sup> ~~said,~~ squirming up out of his chair ~~onto his feet.~~ "You want to come take a look, Darleen?"

"Thanks just the same," demurred Darleen placidly. "Don't look too long, hon. We've got to get to Choteau. My folks' anniversary," she explained to the rest of us. "We hate like anything to miss the centennial shindig in town"





tonight, but you can tell us all about it in the morning, Jick."

This caused me to ponder Darleen and whether there was some kind of secret sisterhood by which she had become an ally of Althea Frew, but I ultimately dismissed the suspicion. Darleen isn't your ally type. Anyway I now had to tell Mariah what my centennial involvement was all about--Riley had his ears hanging out too--and transmit the request for her to take some commemorative pictures for Gros Ventre posterity. She rolled her eyes at the mention of Althea, but concluded as I did that we might as well go in tonight and get it over with.

"Mind if I tag along?" Riley asked in a supersweet way.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "But I imagine you will anyway, huh?"

"No problem," he asserted, which had become a major part of his vocabulary since we met up with the Baloney Expressers. "I'll be next thing to invisible."

# —————

The sun was flattening down behind Roman Reef for the night as the three of us left for town. Behind us the peaks and crags of the Rocky Mountain Front were standing their ~~jagged~~ <sup>g</sup> tallest there at the deepening of evening, while the Two Medicine country around us rested

in soft shadows unrolling under that sunset outline of the mountains.

This may be my own private theory about such summer evenings but it has always seemed to me that lulls of this sort are how a person heals from the other weather of this land, for the light calmly going takes with it the grievances that the Two is a country where the wind wears away at you on a daily basis, where drought is never far from happening, where the valley bottoms now in the perfect shirtsleeve climate of summer dusk were thirty-five degrees below zero in the nights of February.

The Bago kept pace with that pretty time between day and night as the road swung up onto the benchland between Noon Creek and English Creek. Until, of course, Riley set things off. Maybe a genealogist could trace whether his talent for aggravation ran in the family for hundreds of generations or whether the knack was a spontaneous cosmic outbreak with him like, say, sunspots. Either way, there on the road into town he apparently did not even need to try, to succeed in ruffling my feathers. Merely gawked ahead at the strategic moment ~~at it~~ and declared, "I'll be damned. Ye Olde Wild West comes to Noon Creek, hmm?"

"Aw, that bastardly thing," I murmured in disgust. "If they want



something weird hung, they ought to hang themselves up by their--"

But he'd roused Mariah and her camera. In the passenger seat she suddenly spoke up. "No, wait, Riley's right." Since when? The next was inevitable. "Pull over," she directed, "and let me get some shots of that against those clouds."

The summer sky, with a couple of hours of evening light yet to be eked out, was streaked with high goldenish strands, the decorative dehydrated kind called mare's tail. Clouds are one matter and what's reluctantly under them is another. Beside us where I had halted the motorhome stood the main gate into the Double W. A high frame made of a crosspiece supported by posts big as telephone poles and almost as tall, it had loomed in the middle of that benchland for as long as I could remember. Until not so many years ago the sign hanging from the ~~center of the~~ crosspiece had proclaimed the Williamsons as owners of everything that was being looked at. Now it read:

WW ranch


Another TriGram Enterprise

More than that, though. Just under the sign, a steer skull swung

center

in the breeze where it was hung on a cable between the gateposts.

Weather-bleached white as mica, short curved Hereford horns pointing,  
eye sockets endlessly staring.

That skull locket against the Double W sky was the idea of one  
of the managers TriGram sent up from California before Shaun Finletter  
was installed in the job a year or so ago. Goddamn such people. I drove  
past that dangling skull whenever I went to or from town and it got my  
goat every single time.  That skull, I knew, was from a

boneyard in a coulee near my east fenceline with the Double W, where  
there were the carcasses of hundreds of head of Double W cattle that  
piled up and died in the blizzard of 1979. Even the Williamsons, who  
always had more cattle than they had country for and took winter die-offs  
as part of their way of business, never used the skulls as trinkets.

"Guess what, I need somebody in the foreground for scale," Mariah  
called over from where she was absorbedly sighting through her camera.  
"Somebody real Western. Jick, how about if you and your Stetson  
~~if you'd~~ come stand there under the--"

"I will not."

The flat snap of refusal, in my tone of voice as much as my words--



hell, in me--startled her. She whirled around to me, her hair swinging, with an odd guilty look.

"Sorry," Mariah offered, rare enough for her, too. "But it's a shot <sup>ought to</sup> ~~I should~~ take. The way it looms there over everything, it makes a statement."

"I know what it makes."

In my mind's eye I saw how I would like to do the deed. Wait until dark. Nothing but blackness on either side of this benchland road until the Double W gateframe comes into the headlights. I flip onto bright, for all possible illumination for this, and stop the Bago about seventy-five feet from the gateway, its sign and the skull under swaying slightly in the night breeze that <sup>coasts</sup> ~~comes~~ down along Noon Creek. I reach to the passenger seat where the shotgun is riding, step out of the motorhome and go in front of the headlights to load both barrels of the weapon. Bringing the butt of the shotgun to my shoulder I sight upward. Do I imagine, or does the steer skull seem to sway less, quiet itself in the breeze, as I aim? I fire both barrels at once, shards and chunks

of the skull spraying away into the night. One eyesocket and horn dangle from the wire. Close enough. I climb back in the Bago and head toward a particularly remote sinkhole I know of to dispose of the shotgun.

I brought myself back from that wishdream, to Mariah, to what we were saying to each other. "Take a picture of the goddamn thing if you think you have to," I finished to her, "but it's going to be without me in it."

All was as silent as the suspended clouds for a long moment. Then Riley came climbing over the gearbox hump of the Bago past me and out the passenger door. Without a word he strode across the road and centered himself in the gateway for my daughter.

# —

One whole hell of a promising evening, then, by the time we hit Gros Ventre and were heading into the Medicine Lodge Bar. Bar and Cafe, I'd better get used to saying, for the enterprise took on a split personality when Fred Musgreave bought it a few years ago. The vital part, the bar, was pretty much the same as ever, a dark oaken span polished to a ~~celestial~~ <sup>sacred</sup> shine by generations of elbows, its long mirror and shelves of bottles and glasses a reflective backdrop for contemplation. But the other half of the ~~rambling~~ <sup>wide</sup> old wooden building, where there likely



were poker tables in the early days and in more recent memory a lineup of maroon booths which were rarely patronized, Fred had closed off with a divider and turned that outlying portion into an eatery. ("Can't hurt," his economic reasoning ran. "Could help.") By this time of evening, though, tourists sped on through to Glacier Park for the night and anybody local who was going to eat supper out would have done so a couple of hours ago, and thus Fred didn't mind providing the Medicine Lodge's dining side as the meeting place on centennial committee nights.

He must have had his moments of wishing ~~all~~ these were paying customers, however. Through the cafe window we could see the place was pretty well jammed. Ranchers and farmers in there jawing at each other about crops and livestock prices, all trademarked with summertanned faces and pale foreheads as if bearing instructions fit cap or hat on at this line. Of the women, a dressy few were in oldfangled centennial raiment but most had restrained themselves. Beside me as we headed in I heard Mariah already grappling camera gear out of her appaloosa bag.

The three of us stopped instantly inside the cafe door. We had to.

Our feet were in a tangle of power cords, as if we'd gotten ensnared in some kind of ankle-high electrification project.

"Aw, crud," Riley uttered, grimacing up from the mess we'd stepped in to its source just inside the entryway. "Tonsil Vapor Purvis."

"There goes the neighborhood," agreed Mariah grimly.

Actually the television camera and tripod and lights and other gear were being marshaled by a pair of guys, but I did not have to be much of a guesser to pick out the one Riley and Mariah were moaning about. An expensive head of hair that was trying to be brown and red at the same time--Riley ultimately identified the shade for me as Koppeltone--<sup>sg</sup> atop not nearly that boyish a face atop a robin's egg blue sport jacket; below the torso portion that fit on a television screen, bluejeans and jogging shoes.

"Well!" the figure let out in a whinnying way that turned the word into weh-heh-heh-hell! "Rileyboy!"

"And you managed to say that without a cue card," Riley answered in mock admiration. Tonsil Vapor Purvis didn't seem to know Mariah or even to care to, but his cameraman and her exchanged frosty nods.



"I haven't noticed you at any of the official centennial events,"

Tonsil Vapor informed Riley in a voice that rolled out on ball bearings.

"Where are you keeping yourself?"

"Working," Riley stated as if that was a neighborhood the televisioneer naturally wouldn't be anywhere around.

"Isn't this centennial fantastic though?" declared Tonsil Vapor.

"Have you had a chance to watch my Countdown 100 series?" When Riley

shook his head, Tonsil Vapor rotated toward me. When I shook my head,

he turned toward Mariah but she already had slid away and was taking

pictures of people, cajoling and kidding with them as you can only when you've known them all your life.

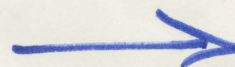
"One hundred nightly segments on the centennial," Tonsil Vapor enunciated to the remaining captive pair of us to make sure we grasped the arithmetic.

"No kidding," Riley responded, gazing at Tonsil Vapor with extreme attention as if the centennial was the newest of news and then jotting something down. When he turned the notepad so I could see it, it read:

A \$25 haircut on a 25¢ head.

p. 210A follows →

"Builders of Montana, this week," the TVster was spelling out for us next. "We"--the royal We from the sound of it; the cameraman was showing no proprietary interest whatsoever--"are interviewing people about their occupational contribution to our great state. It occurred to me that an occasion like this, with old-timers on hand," he sent me





a bright smile, damn his blow-dried soul, "would turn up a fascinating livelihood of some kind."

"I don't have a paying occupation," I hastened to head off any interest in me as a specimen, "I'm a rancher."

"What do these epics of yours run, a minute and ten seconds worth?" asked Riley drily.

"No, no, the station is going all out on this. I'm doing two-and-a-half minute segments, would you believe."

Riley let out a little cluck as if that was pretty unbelievable, all right, then sardonically excused himself to go get to work lest television leave him even farther back in the dust. Still leery of being a candidate for oldtimer of the ~~day~~<sup>night,</sup> I closely tagged off after Riley. We left Tonsil Vapor Purvis fussing to his cameraman, "This doesn't make it for my opening stand-up. Let's set up over there instead."

"Fucking human gumball machine," Riley was muttering as we rounded the partition between the cafe counter and the dining area in back.

"Fucking television has the attention span of a--"

He halted so abruptly I smacked into his back. Riley, though,

never even seemed to notice, in the stock-still way he was staring toward the rear of the cafe.

"What is that?" his eventual question piped out in a three-note tune.

Golden as the light of the dawn sun, the cloth creation emblazoned the entire back wall of the cafe and then some. That is, the roomwide cascade of fabric flowed down from where it was tacked on lath along the top of the wall and surged up like a cresting molten wave at the and quilting frames woktables where stitchery was being performed on it, then spilled forward onto the floor in flaxen pools of yet to be sewn material.

Add in all the people bent over sewing machines or plucking away with needles or just hovering around admiring and gabbing, and I suppose you could think, as Riley obviously did, that the town of Gros Ventre had gone on a binge and decided to tent itself over.

"Just what it looks like," I enlightened him the scribbler. "Our centennial flag."

Mariah whizzed past us lugging her camera bag. # "Looks like they're getting ready to declare independence, doesn't it," she appraised the room-swallowing flag and kept right on going to zero in on toward the sewing battalion.



Riley still stood there gawking like a moron trying to read an  
 although ~~though~~ the flag didn't seem to me ~~all that tough~~ ~~terribly tough~~ to decipher.

Plain as anything, the line of designs spaced across its top like a  
 border pattern was livestock:



And down the sides the motifs were homestead cabins and ranch houses:



And although the sewing brigade had a way to go to get there, it only  
 took the least imagination to see that the bottom border needed to be

forest and <sup>stream</sup> ~~rain~~:



In extenuation of Riley, it was true that the flag's full effect

would not register until all the other elements were in place on it.

The project the Heart Butte schoolkids were doing, for instance, of a

Blackfeet chief's headdress in black and white cloth to resemble eagle

feathers--rampant, as is said in flag lingo. And the combined contribution

David  
Lindroth  
artwork  
to come?



of the English Creek and Noon Creek ranch families, one entire cloth panel--the flag was so big it was being done <sup>lengthwise</sup> in sections, which were then quilted together--which was going to be a sawtooth <sup>pattern</sup> ~~swatch~~ of purple-blue embroidery all the way across, signifying the mountains across the Two country's western skyline. Then at the hem of the mountains would come a cluster of buildings, being sewn away at by several townspeople <sup>even as</sup> ~~right~~ Riley and I watched, ~~now~~ to represent Gros Ventre: the spiked helmet outline of the Sedgwick House hotel, the sharp church steeples, the oldstyle square front of the Medicine Lodge itself, and so on. ~~Finally,~~ <sup>Finally,</sup> to top it all off, so to speak, for actually this constituted the very center of the whole flag scheme: the sun. Atop a dark seam of horizon the molten arc of it, spiffily done in reddish orange fabric that even looked hot, just beginning to claim the sky for the day. And over, under, and around <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ sun, in mighty letters of black, the message:

The Two Medicine Country

1889

1989

Greet's The Dawn of Montana



Riley at last managed to show some vital signs. He wondered out loud, plenty loud:

"Who thought up this sucker?"

That particular question I was not keen to deal with because, when you traced right back to it, the party who brought up the flag idea in the first place was more or less me. History's jukebox, John Angus McCaskill. It had been last fall when our steering committee was flummoxing around for some event worthy of marking Montana's centennial with, when Althea Frew pined what a shame it was that we didn't know what had gone on in Gros Ventre that epic day of statehood a hundred years ago. All the cue needed, of course, for me to spout off what I'd so long ago heard from Toussaint Rennie, that the 1889 citizenry of Gros Ventre--such as there was of it back then--took it into their collective head to be the very first to fly the <sup>revised</sup> American flag when Montana came onto it as the forty-first star and so got up early enough to do that municipal flag-hoisting at the exact crack of day. Which inspired some other member of our committee to suggest that we simply emulate our forebears by raising a forty-one-starred flag at dawn on centennial day. But

that was objected to as a backward step, nine of them in fact, in stars-and-stripes history. Okay, somebody else proposed, then let's put up a present-day American flag but a monumentally big one. But somebody yet again made the point that there were already in existence flags damn near as big as America itself--weren't we seeing Bush practically camped out in front of a whopper of one during the presidential election campaign?--and we didn't have a prayer of competing in size. You might know it would be Althea who hatched the plan of making our own flag. Contrive our version <sup>1</sup> as big as we could without smothering ourselves in it, sure, but the whole thing <sup>1</sup> most of all, design and fabricate ~~it~~ ourselves and hoist the Two Medicine country and Gros Ventre's own heralding banner at dawn on the centennial.

"It just kind of occurred," I summarized in answer to Riley and moved on into the needlery scene, tagged after by him. Primarily the women were getting things accomplished there at the sewing machines and worktables while the men mostly were standing around looking wise, both sets being duly chronicled by Mariah and her camera. Being greeted by the dozens and greeting back in equal number, I wound my way through the assemblage until I reached the quilting frame which held the panel our English Creek-Noon Creek mountain panorama was being embroidered on.



Lifelong familiar outlines met me there. Roman Reef's great bow of rimrock. The tall slopes of Phantom Woman Mountain. The Flume Gulch canyonline where Noon Creek has its source, and opposite that the comblike outcropping of Rooster Mountain. Really quite beautiful, how all the high skyline of the Two Medicine was transposed there onto the flag in heaviest blue-black yarn. ~~All, that is, rather, all except the finale.~~ The northmost mountain form, Jericho Reef's unmistakable wall-like silhouette, was sketched in pencil on the golden cloth for the next seamstress to follow.

Seamer, rather, for on the Jericho sketch was a pink paper stick-on with Althea's loopy but firm handwriting, which read:

← Jick McCaskill--please stitch here!

So if Jericho was going to get sewn it was up to me, and there was no time like the present. "Got any socks you want darned, you should have brought them," I notified Riley and seated myself to perform fancywork.

"You know how to do that?" he asked skeptically as I plucked up the waiting needle and started trying to match the kind of stitches on the other thread mountains.

"Close enough," I said. "I've sewed shut more woolsacks than you

can count."

Whether it was my example of industry or not, Riley suddenly snapped out of his tourist mode. "This night might actually turn into something. Hold the fort, Jick,  
I'm going out to the Bago for my listening gear."

Nature never likes a vacuum. No sooner was I shed of Riley than Howard Stonesifer happened by and stopped to spectate my labors. Which probably was good for my stitching because it lent a little feeling of scrutiny by posterity, Howard being the undertaker.

"Where you been keeping yourself?" Howard asked.

"Out and around," I summarized. "How's the burying business?"

"Mortally slow," he answered as he always did. ~~"Isn't that"~~

Riley Wright I just bumped into?"

"I'm sorry to report, it is."

"Mariah and him are back together, eh?"

"They are not. They're just doing a bunch of these centennial stories togeth--with each other, is all. I'm traveling around with them while they do."




He studied down at me. "All three of you are together?"

"Well, yeah, together but not together. Thrown in with one another, more like. Howard, it's kind of complicated."

"I imagine it is," Howard said and departed.

My next visitor was none other than Mariah, who by now had cut her photographic swath across the room to those of us at the sewing frames and tables.

"I bet you never knew Betsy Ross had a beard," I addressed to her, jabbing my needle elegantly into the flagcloth as she neared.



It didn't even register on her. She wore a puzzled frown and even more uncharacteristically had dropped the camera from her eye and was drilling a snake-killing gaze across the room.

I leaned out and saw for myself what was bugging her. Our centennial bunch was not exactly a youth group and wherever there was a Gros Ventrian wearing glasses, which was to say virtually everywhere, bright points of light glittered ~~steadily~~ off both lenses. Or if a person <sup>happened to be</sup> ~~was~~ anywhere near a wall, his or her skin was paled out and huge shadows were flung up behind the wan spectre. Any shot by Mariah was going to look like fireflies flitting through a convalescent ward.

Perfectly unconcerned about dazzling the populace, Tonsil Vapor had decided our centennial flag was a backdrop worthy of him and was having his cameraman move the lightstands here and there in front of the sewing tables. What astounded me was that everybody was pretending to be unaware they were being immersed in a pool of television light. Squint and bear it, was the code of the televised.

Not with Mariah. Under the pressure of her glower, the TV cameraman



roused himself enough to shrug and indicate with a jerk of his head that Tonsil Vapor was the impresario here. Tonsil Vapor meanwhile was holding his sport-jacket sleeve against the wall of flag to make sure robin's egg blue went well with golden.

Mariah marched on him.

"Hey, I'm getting bounce from your lights in every shot I try. How about please holding off for a couple of minutes until I'm done back here?"

"We're setting up for my opening stand-up," Tonsil Vapor informed her.

"I can tell you are. How-about-turning-off-your-lights-for-two-minutes-while-I-finish-shooting-here."

"Television has every right to be here," Tonsil Vapor huffed.

"This is a public event."

"That's the whole fucking point," Mariah elucidated. "It's not yours to hog."

"Let's do the ~~stand-up,~~ ~~opener,~~" Tonsil Vapor directed past her to his cameraman and focused his concern on whether his tie was hanging straight.

"Whoa," Mariah told the TV pair. "If you're so determined to

shoot, we'll all shoot." # She reached in her gear bag and pulled out a fresh camera, aiming it into the pleasantly surprised visage of Tonsil Vapor. I was more than surprised: it was the motorized one she'd used to take the rapid-fire photographs of the marauding buffalo bull at Moiese. ~~running antelope.~~ Tonsil Vapor Purvis didn't look to me like he was that much of a mobile target.

With the bright wash of light on him, he fingered the knot of his tie. Brought his microphone up. Aimed his chin toward the lens of the TV camera. "Ready?" he asked his cameraman, although with a little peek out the corner of his eye at Mariah to make sure she was set to shoot, too. The TV cameraman echoed "Ready" flatly back.

"This is Paul whingwhingwhing Purvis, bringing you another Countdown 100 whingwhingwhing moment from here in whingwhing--"

"Cut!" yelped the cameraman, pulling the earphones out away from his ears. Mariah quit firing the motorized shutter and the ricochet sounds stopped.

Tonsil Vapor swiveled his head toward her. "Your camera. We're picking up the noise."

"That's okay, no charge," Mariah answered calmly, keeping the



offending camera zeroed into Tonsil Vapor's face. "You've been donating all kinds of light into my photography."

"Seriously, here," Tonsil Vapor said, a bit pouty. "We have ~~opening stand-up~~  
~~an opener~~ to do."

"Up you and your ~~stand-up~~  
~~opener~~ both," Mariah told him. "This is a public event and my gear has every right to be here."

Tonsil Vapor stared at her. Uncertainly he edged the microphone ~~triggered~~  
~~up~~ toward his mouth. Mariah ~~fired~~ off a couple of whings and he jerked the mike back down.

With a scowl, Tonsil Vapor swiveled his head the other direction and addressed his cameraman. "Can ~~we~~  
~~you~~ edit out her noise?" The cameraman gave him the French salute, shrugging his shoulders and raising the palms of his hands at the same time.

Tonsil Vapor visibly thought over the matter. Mariah did not bring the commotional camera down from her eye until he announced, "Actually, the bar is a more picturesque spot to do my opening stand-up."

Riley, prince of oblivion, sashayed back in from the Bago with his tape recorder as TVdom was withdrawing to the bar and Mariah was setting

to work again on the sewing scene at the far end of the flag. He made a beeline to me.

"Quite a turnout, Jick," he observed brilliantly.

"Mmmmm," I replied and sewed onward.

"Lots of folks," he said as if having tabulated.

"Quite a bunch," I confirmed.

"I was wondering if you could kind of sort them out to me, so I can figure out good ones to talk to," he admitted, indicating to the tape recorder as if this was the machine's idea rather than his. "You know more about everybody here than they do about themselves."

"Gee, Riley, I wouldn't know where to start," I did <sup>a couple</sup> ~~two~~ more stitches before adding: "Everybody in the Two country is equally unique."

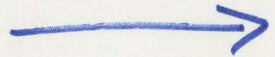
Had I wanted, I indeed could have been Riley's accomplice on almost anyone in that filled room, for the Two Medicine country was out in force tonight. These are not the best of times for towns like Gros Ventre or the rural neighborhoods they are tied to. The young go away, the discount stores draw shopping dollars off to bigger places, the land that has always been the hope of such areas is thinner and thinner of people and



promise. Yet, maybe because the human animal cannot think trouble all the time, anybody with a foot or wheel to get here had come tonight to advance the <sup>community's</sup> centennial rite. All the couples from the ranches along English Creek: Harold and Melody Busby, Bob and Janie Rozier, Olaf and Sonia Florin. From up the South Fork, Tricia and Gib Hahn, who ran the old Withrow and Hahn ranches combined. My longtime Noon Creek neighbor Tobe Egan, retired to town now. A number of the farm families from out east of town, Walsinghams and Priddys and Van Der Wendes, Tebbetses and Kerzes and Joneses. Townspeople by battalions: Joe and Myrna Prentiss from the Merc, the Muldauers who ran the Coast-to-Coast hardware store, Jo Ann and Vern Cooder from the Rexall drugstore. Riley's infinite faith in me to the contrary, one pair I didn't know the names of yet--the young couple who had opened a video parlor where The Toggery clothing store used to be. The bank manager Norman Peyser and his wife Barbara. Flo and Sam Vissert from the Pastime Bar three doors down the street. Others and others--not least, the new Gros Ventrian whom I addressed now as he hustled past Riley and me carrying a coffee urn ~~virtually~~ as big as he was. "Nguyen, how you doing?"

"Doing just right!" Nguyen Trang Hoc and his wife Kieu and their three kids were being sponsored by a couple of the churches there in town--they were boat people, had come out of Vietnam in one of those hell voyages. Nguyen worked as a waiter here in the Medicine Lodge cafe, already speaking English sentences of utmost enthusiasm: "Here is your menu! I will let you look! Then we will talk some more!"

Naturally Riley was scanning the night's civic outpouring in his own cockeyed way. "Who's the resurrection of Buffalo Bill over there?" he





asked, blinking inquisitively toward the figure hobbling ever so slowly through the front door.

"Aw," I began, "that's just--" and then the brainstorm caught up with me. ~~I~~ I identified the individual to Riley with conspicuous enthusiasm.

"Been here in the Two country since its footings were poured. You might find him highly interesting to talk to. Garland's kind of a shy type, but I bet if you tell him you're from the newspaper that would encourage him a little."

"History on the hoof, hmm?" Riley perked right up and headed toward the front. "You're starting to show real talent for this centennial stuff, Jick."

While it is true I was the full length of the cafe away from Riley's hearing what followed. introduction to the arrivee, there was no lack of volume to ~~the~~ ~~the~~

"Newspaper! Just the guy I want to see! Young fellow, what you ought to be writing a story about is me! You know, I was born with the goshdamn century!"

Eyes rolled in all of us who were within earshot, which was to say everybody in the Medicine Lodge. Multiply the crowd of us by the

total of times we had each heard the nativity scene of Good Help Hebner and you had a long number. Riley didn't seem grateful to be the first fresh listener of this eon, either. The look he sent me still had sting in it after traveling the length of the cafe. I concentrated on needlework and maintaining a straight face. "By now half this country is Hebners, young fellow! And I started every one of them out of the chute!"

Riley had no way of knowing it but that particular procreatorial brag was as close to the truth as Good Help was ever likely to come. Which made me shake my head all the more at the fact that it had taken <sup>the old so-and-so</sup> ~~him~~ until his eighty-ninth year to start looking paternal, let alone patriarchal. For as long as I could remember, Good Help--need I say, that nickname implied the exact opposite--had lazed through life under about a week's grayish grizzle of whiskers; never enough to count as an intentional beard, never so little as to signify he had bothered to shave within recent memory. But now <sup>g</sup> for the centennial <sup>g</sup> he somehow had blossomed forth in creamy mustache and goatee. To me it still was a matter of close opinion whether <sup>Good Help</sup> ~~he~~ more resembled Buffalo Bill or a billy goat, but definitely his new facial adornment was eyecatching.



"You got to go do what, young fellow? Speak up, I'm getting so deaf

I can't hear myself fart!" I couldn't actually hear either the excuse

Riley was employing to extricate himself, but Good Help provided everybody

in town the gist of it: "Got to go see a man about a dog, huh? You

know what they say, stand up close to the trough, the next fellow

might be barefoot!"

While Riley now tried to make an invisible voyage to the men's room

in the bar half of the Medicine Lodge, chuckled and checked on Mariah's doings.

Easily enough done. She was wearing the turquoise shirt she'd had on

at the Fourth of July rodeo and you could see her from here to Sunday.

As she gravitated through the crowd, ever scouting for the next camera

moment, it struck me what a picture she made herself.

"Oh, Jick, I'm so relieved to see you here," Althea Frew pounced

in on me out of nowhere. In her centennial getup of a floor-length

gingham dress with a poke bonnet, she looked as if she'd just trundled

in by prairie schooner. "We were afraid you'd given up on the committee."

"Would I do that?" I denied, right then wishing I had.

"It's nice to see you back in the swim of things," she assured me and patted my arm. Althea was the kind of person full of pats. "Can't I bring you a cup of coffee?" she offered avidly.

Only if it is big enough for me to torpedo you in, I thought to myself. Dave Frew had died of emphysema a year or so ago and all too evidently Althea had formed the notion that because she was a widow and I now was a widower, we were going to be an ordained pair at gatherings such as this. My own notion was, like hell we were. Already I had dodged her on card parties and square dancing at the Senior Citizens' Center. Althea seemed to regard me as an island just waiting to have her airdropped onto it. Let her land and there'd be an instant new civilization, activities for all my waking hours.

Christamighty, I more than anybody knew that I needed refurbishing of some kind from my grief for Marcella. But to put myself up for adoption by Althea. . .

"You take it with just a dab of cream, don't you?" Uh oh. She'd already



started to catalogue me. I knew where that would go. If she inkled out the dosage in my coffee, as the night follows the day it would lead to how crisp I like my fish fried and from there onward to my favorite piece of music, on and on until she would know my underwear size.

"Black," I lied. "Don't bother, I'll get myself a cup, I was about to head that direction anyhow."

As I recessed from my sewing and tried to tactically retreat to the coffee urn, Althea fell in step as if I'd invited her along.

Wasn't this just ducky, now.

She had us in motion in tandem in public, a hearts-and-flowers advertisement for the whole town to see. I craned around for Mariah's reaction to this. For once I was thankful to have her immersed in her picture-taking, across the room with her back to Althea and me as she immortalized Janie Rozier zinging a seam of the flag through her sewing machine.

I will swear on any Bible, I did not have anything major against Althea Frew. But I had nothing for her, either. True, Marcella and I had known her and Dave ever since we were young ranch couples starting

out. Neighbors, friends, people who partnered each other a few times a night at dances, but not more than that. You cannot love everyone you know. Love isn't a game of tag, now you're it, now she's it.

I sipped at the plastic cup of coffee Althea bestowed on me and tried not to wince at its bitter taste. For that matter, I had no illusions that Althea was after me for my irresistible romantic allure. Simply put, pickings were slim in the Two Medicine country for women who outlived their husbands, as most of them showed every sign of doing. Here tonight for instance, Howard Stonesifer was one of those mother-smothered bachelors; Althea knew that even if old lady Stonesifer ever passed on, there was no denting Howard's set of habits. Tobe Egan over in the corner was a widower but his health was shot, and why should Althea take on another ill case after the years she had spent with Dave's emphysema? Go through this entire community and the actuarial tables were pretty damn bare for Althea's brand of husband-looking. Which was why yours truly was about to be the recipient of a whopping piece of the Happy Birthday, Montana! cake Althea was now adoringly cutting.



Right then Riley re-emerged from the direction of the men's room, cautiously checking around for the whereabouts of Good Help Hebner.

I was not keen on fending with him just then, particularly if he was going to notice the close company Althea was keeping me, but it turned out Riley was pointedly ignoring my existence and instead migrated directly to Mariah. <sup>was saying</sup> ~~Whatever he said~~ to her, for once it seemed to be in earnest. She listened to him warily, but listened. Then came her speaking turn, and he nodded and nodded as if he couldn't agree more.

It dawned on me that they must be conferring about whether to do a piece about tonight. I willed Mariah to tell him to go straight to hell, that their mutual woe of ending up in marriage had started here when she shot and he wrote that earlier Gros Ventre centennial shindig. Instead she studied him with care, then turned and pondered the careful of people as if taking inventory. While Althea yattered at me and I took solace in cake, Mariah led Riley over near us where Nan Hill, snow-haired and tiny with age, was sitting sewing.

"Nan, this man would like to talk to you for a story in the newspaper. How about telling him about doing the washing at Fort Peck while I take a picture, would you mind?" As Riley moved in with his tape recorder and a smile that would make you want to take him home and give him a bed by the fire, Mariah checked her light meter, then stood back, biting her lower lip as she held the camera up under her neck, lens pointing up, waiting. Waiting. Then ahead of the moment but somehow having seen it on its way, she swiftly but unobtrusively shifted the camera over to her eye as the old woman warmed into the telling.

4/ Age is humped on her small back. It began to descend there  
in 1935 in daily hours over a washboard, scrubbing at the Missouri-  
mudded clothing of the men at labor on the biggest earthen dam in  
the world, Fort Peck. "We went there with just nothing and J.L.  
got on as a roustabout. I wanted to find some way of earning, too,  
so I put up a sign Laundry Done Here. I charged 15¢ for shirts--  
and that was washed, ironed, mended and loose buttons sewed on--  
and 10¢ for a pair of shorts, another 10¢ for an undervest, 5¢  
for a handkerchief, and 10¢ for a pair of socks. Any kind of pants



was 25¢ for washing and pressing. I had the business, don't think  
I didn't. Those three years at Fort Peck, I always had six lines  
of clothes hanging in the yard."

The waltz of the camera, Riley following, led on from Nan to the Hoc family, Mariah poising in that long-legged crouch of hers while focusing on the little Hoc girl, her left hand under the camera cupping it upward in an offering way, right hand delicately fingering the lens setting, her shoulderlong flow of hair behind the camera like an extravagant version of the hood a photographer of old would hide his head under, and her voice going through a repertoire of coaxes until one brought out on the little Hoc girl what was not quite a smile but an expression more beautiful than that, Mariah telling her as if they had triumphed together, "Thaaat's what I want to see."

*incident* # They are Asian delta people, newly come to American mountain  
headwaters. Their immense journey pivots on the children, especially  
on the lithe daughter made solemnly older by the presence of two  
cultures within her. Driver's license, income tax, television,

food budget, rock music, all the reckless spill of America must  
come to her family through the careful funnel of this ten-year-old  
woman who is now the mother of words to her own parents.

Althea was saying in my ear now, "It's so nice to see Riley  
back in your family. He and Mariah make such a wonderful couple."

"They are not--"

"People their age, they should take happiness while they can,  
don't you think?"

What I thought was that people any age shouldn't be trying to fool  
one another. That I should be able to say <sup>flat</sup> ~~straight~~ out to Althea, "Look,  
terms have not changed between us even though our lives have. I am not  
second-husband material for you, so kindly just put the pattern away,  
please."

But that was blunter than can be spoken in a room crowded with  
everyone who knew us. Even so, Althea didn't take the chance that I  
might blurt the impolite truth. "Oh foo, look what time it's gotten to



be already. I'd better go look over the agenda for our meeting. It'll seem so much more like a committee now that you're back, Jick," she left me with, but not before a last fond assault on my arm, pat pat.

My ears got the next unwelcome traffic, a mimicking voice approaching fast: "He's kind of a shy type, but I bet if you tell him you're from the newspaper. . ."

Innocence seemed the best tack to take with Riley right then.

"Get a lot of fascinating stuff out of Good Help, did you?"

"Gobs and gobs," he replied sardonically. "I figured I'd write that he's as intrinsically American as the Mississippi River."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. A mile wide at the mouth."

"Gee," I said, genuinely interested in the prospect, "if you say that in the newspaper about a guy, won't he sue your nuts off?"

"Put your mind at ease," Riley told me. "Jick, damn you, you know that old codger could talk for a week and only ever tell the truth by accident. Even the BB would recognize it as the rankest kind of bullshit."

two-toned  
Riley's ~~bright blue~~ gaze left me and went to the wall of fabric behind me.

"The real story here is that humongous flag. If you characters ever manage to get it in the air." Riley scanned the room as if in search of anyone capable of that feat. He got as far as Althea, busy in her bonnet, and inquired: "By the way, who's your ladyfriend?"

"She is not--"

"Bashful never won the bushelfull," he trilled out, goddamn him.

"Don't worry, I won't snitch to Mariah that you're busy girling behind her back. So, what's next in this festive evening?"

Barbecuing a fatmouthed newspaper guy over a slow fire, was what I wished could be next on the agenda. But instead I told Riley I had my needlework to tend to, in a tone that let him know it was a pursuit preferable to conversation with him, and headed myself from the coffee urn toward the Two Medicine mountainline panel of the flag.

I wasn't much more than in motion before a voice called out:

"Talk to you a minute can I, Jick?"

I was beginning to wonder: was there a procession all the way out into the street of people lined up to take aim on me?



This voice was that of Shaun Finletter from the Double W and so I at least knew what the sought minute of talk was going to be about. I turned around to Shaun's facefull of blondish fuzz--some of these beardgrowers were maybe going to need a deadline extension to Montana's bicentennial--and responded as civilly as I could manage: "How's tricks?"

"Oh, not bad, Jick. Yourself?"

"Just trying to stay level."

Shaun then plunged right down to business, which was the way Finletters were. # "Jick, I been hearing from headquarters. They're still real interested in making you an offer on your place."

"Are they." I felt like adding, are you sure that was headquarters making itself heard instead of hindquarters? But Shaun was a neighbor, even if I did with his TriGram bosses would take a long walk off a short balcony.

Shaun rattled it off to me. ". . .It's nothing against you, <sup>at all,</sup> Jick. . . just a matter of big-scale economics. . .better able to put maximum animal units on that land. . ." The Double Dub had a great history of that, all right. Running more cattle than it had country for. The

original Williamson, Warren, had practically invented overgrazing, and his son Wendell got in on buying up bankrupt smaller ranches during the Depression and really sandwiched cattle along Noon Creek from hell to breakfast, and now TriGram computers doubtless were unitizing cows and calves onto every last spear of grass.

Yet it <sup>was</sup> their business and none of my own, how the Williamsons or the TriGramites comported themselves on WW land they had title to.

The patch of earth I held title to was the matter here, and Shaun now stated the dollars per acre, a damn impressive sum of them, that TriGram would pay to take the ranch off my hands. "You know that's top dollar, the way things are, Jick."

Shaun was a nice enough human being. Someone who would look you square in the eye, as he was now while I scanned back at him and noticed he was growing beefier, a little more face, a bit more belly, than since I'd last seen him. Actually just a year or so older than Mariah, he and she had gone together a while in high school. My God, the way things click or don't. If that had worked out into marriage instead of her



going on to photography and him to an ag econ degree at Bozeman, Shaun might well have been the answer to run my ranch; might have become the one to perpetually tell the Williamsons and TriGrams of the world to go to hell, instead of being their errand boy to me.

If I had pounds more of brains I might be smarter, too. I struggled to get myself back on the necessary train of thought. How to reply to the dollar sign. It wasn't as if I hadn't had practice closing one or both eyes to money. The first TriGram guy, who'd acted as if he already owned my ranch and me as well, I'd told to stick his offer where the sun doesn't shine. All the others since, one or two every year, I'd just told nothing doing. But now here I was being perfectly polite with Shaun because even though he was the current TriGram factotum, I had known his family and him from when he was a waggy pup. Even I had to admit, *g* I seemed to be trending away from that original stick-it stance.

Click.

Shaun gave a little jump as if he'd been goosed. For once I didn't even mind that Mariah included me in her picture ambush it was worth it to see the caught-while-sucking-eggs expression on Shaun.

"Don't let me interrupt Noon Creek man talk," Mariah put forth coolly with the camera still up to her eye. This was a different one than I'd yet seen her use tonight. Did she possibly have a calibre for every occasion?

"It'll keep," said Shaun, wincing at the next click. Maybe it had been purely coincidental but after splitting up with Mariah he all but instantly married Amber, who notably stayed home and raised kids. "Think the proposition over and let me know, Jick. Mariah, it's always an event to see you," and he headed rapidly off out of pointblank range.

"He always was about halfway to being a dork," Mariah mentioned as we watched Shaun retreat. "He even necked like he was doing math."

"Yeah, well, he's maybe getting better at his calculations," I let her know. "You sure you don't want a ranch?"



"You saw how far I've gotten from the place," Mariah answered after a moment. "On the way into town."

It took me a moment, too, to discard that incident at the Double W gate. "I guess when you get to my age you're a little touchy about skulls."

"Quit that," she directed quickly. "You're much too young to be as old as you are."

Didn't I wish. But I let that pass and instead took Mariah by the elbow and turned her around to the golden flood of flag cloth. "Something I need you to do." I indicated to the panel where I'd sewn Jericho Reef halfway to completion; the panel for the McCaskills to have their stitches ride the wind on. "Sit down there and immortalize yourself."

"You promise I won't get a reputation for domesticity?" she kidded, but I could see she was tickled pink to be included in the centennial stitchwork.

"Probably not much danger," I said, and we laughed together as we hadn't for a long time.

So Mariah sat and had at it, the needle disappearing and then tugging through another dark dash of the mountainline above the ranch earth where

we were both born. "It's like putting ourselves on a quilt, isn't it," her similar thought came out quietly.

"Kind of, yeah." I stood and watched her neat intense work with the needle. "But the next hundred years ~~of the ranch~~ don't look that simple."

She knew I meant the ranch and whether to sell now or stagger on. "How are you leaning?"

"Both directions. Any advice from somebody redheaded would be a whole lot welcome."

Mariah crinkled a little face and I thought she'd stuck herself <sup>turned out to be</sup> but it ~~was~~ the topic that was sharp.

"You know I couldn't wait to get off the place when I was growing up," she mused. "Away to college. Away to--where I've been. I got over that and before I knew it I was fond of the place again. The ranch meant, well, it meant you and Mother, in a way. As if it was part of you--some member of the family you and she made out of the land." Now Mariah addressed downward as if reasoning to the sliver of metal passing in and out of the cloth. "But it'll never be part of me in that same



way. It hurts to say, but I'm just a visitor at the ranch any more.

Lexa and I dealt ourselves out of it by going off to our own lives.

That's what happens. You and Mother maybe didn't know you were raising

an Alaskan and a Missoulain, but that's how we turned out, <sup>didn't we.</sup> So it has

to be up to you what to do with the place, Dad. It's yours. Not ours

in any way that we should have a say."

"You want me to walk over there and tell Shaun TriGram's got itself  
a deal, is that it?"

Mariah swallowed, but both the tug of her needle and the look she  
sent me stayed steady. "It's up to you," she stood by.

Maybe I would have made that journey across the room to Shaun,  
right then and there, if Mariah had not abruptly put down her needle in  
exchange for her camera, twirled a lens on, and aimed in sudden contemplation  
of something occurring behind me. In curiosity, not to mention self-defense,  
I shifted half-around to see.

Riley at work. He had sicced his tape recorder onto the lawyer  
Don Germain, who for once had the quite unlaywerly look that he wasn't  
sure how he got into this but



didn't know how to get out either. Without being able to hear the words of either, I could tell by the carefully innocent way Riley asked his questions and Don's pursed lips as he cogitated his answers that the <sup>interview</sup> topic must be something fundamental.

moq

How and when should we lift our own roots? Or as we more

usually ask it in this spacious nation, how many times? His

were temporarily shifted for him from Rhode Island after

law school, when his military stint put him at Malmstrom

Air Force base in Great Falls. Malmstrom made him a galvanized  
Westerner,

~~Montanan,~~ the shirts with pearlescent snap buttons and the brass

belt buckle proclaiming <sup>small caps</sup> The buckaroo stops here on his outside

the but original element underneath, so he chose a place (Gros

Ventre, but it could have been any of a <sup>thousand</sup> ~~hundred Montana~~ others)

to try this trafficless wide-sky life. He himself tells the joke

that the town is too small for one lawyer but big enough for

two. Readily enough, too, he reveals his snug fit into his

generation's statistics: a second wife, two children, considerable

tonnage of vehicles-TVs-VCR-snowmobile-gas barbecue-power tools-

satellite dish. It is his wife, though, who teasingly tells



that he has been struggling with the decision of whether to keep  
his centennial contest beard or not, because of the gray showing  
up in it.

# So, he meets middle age in the mirror these mornings and

they debate. "I've really liked living here, don't get me

wrong. <sup>Cathy</sup> ~~Jack~~ and I both would hate to leave Montana. But

the money is better almost anywhere else you can name. Sure,

this has been a good place to raise the kids. But whether

to spend the rest of my life here..."

Ever so casually I said to Mariah, "I see you and Riley are <sup>piecing</sup> ~~storying~~

up a storm."

"We're managing to," she said, and picked up where she had left off  
 in her stitching.

# —————

While Mariah completed Jericho Reef, I decided I had better seize  
 that opportunity to heed a certain call of nature--damn Althea and her  
 loveydovery cups of coffee anyway--and headed myself into the bar toward  
 the men's room.

And popped around the corner into light so extreme it set me back on my heels. Tonsil Vapor and accomplice had Good Help Hebner sitting there posed against the dark oaken bar.

Not even a TV guy would voluntarily go near Good Help if he knew what he was getting himself into, would he? During my business in the men's room I worked out what must have taken place: after his <sup>opening stand-up</sup> ~~opener~~

Tonsil Vapor had poked his head back into the supper club, discerned Riley getting both ears loaded by Good Help, and figured there was his ripe interview subject.

When I emerged, Fred Musgreave was behind the near end of the bar, ever so slowly wiping the wood with a dish towel as he <sup>eyed</sup> ~~watched~~ the million-watt spectacle. Fred by nature was so untalkative it was said of him that he was an absentee owner even when he was here on the premises of the Medicine Lodge, so I merely walked my fingers along the bar top



to indicate to him that this was a night that needed some Johnny and propped myself there to spectate, on the chance that television might be more interesting outside the box than in.

Poised beside Good Help, Tonsil Vapor gave a royal nod, the camera's red light lit up, and he intoned into his microphone: "Here with us now is tonight's builder of Montana, Gros Ventre's own Garland Hebner-- born, as he likes to say, with the century. Mr. Hebner, first off let me ask you, what was your line of work?"

"I have did it all," our new TV star airily assured his interlocutor.

"I'm sure you have," emitted Tonsil Vapor with a chuckle that sounded a <sup>trifle</sup> ~~little~~ forced. "But what I meant was, what did you do for a living?"

"I was what you call self-employed."

Self-unemployed was more like it. Garland Hebner's only known activity had been <sup>that</sup> ~~the~~ one that produces children, and as soon as they were big enough to be sent out to herd lamb bunches in the spring or drive a stacker team in haying, Hebner child after Hebner child brought home the only wages that tatterdemalion household ever saw.

"Cut," called out Tonsil Vapor, looking nonplussed. "But Mr. Hebner, this is an interview about how you helped to build Montana. Isn't there some interesting job you held, sometime or another?"

This did stump Good Help. He sat there blinking as if each of his 89 years was being projected one after another onto the inside of his eyelids. Until:

"By the Jesus, I remember now! Sure, I had a job! Goshdamn interesting one, too! What it was, I--"

"No, no, wait until we roll and tell me then. Spontaneity is the lifeblood of television, Mr. Hebner. Now, then. Ready?" The cameraman minimally indicated he was, and Good Help appeared to be absolutely primed and cocked. The instant the line-of-work question had been recited again, Good Help got hold of Tonsil Vapor's mike hand, drew the instrument almost into his mouth and pronounced in a kind of quavery roar:

"I was the pigfucker! One entire summer! Ought to been the summer of 19-and-18, no, was it 19-and--"

"Cut!" squawked Tonsil Vapor as if he just had been.



The TV maestro stepped back a large pace, his mouth twice as far open as it had been yet tonight. Holding the microphone protectively against his sport jacket, he took stock of Good Help. # Eventually he managed, "Mr. Hebner, I'm afraid you misheard my question. What I asked you was what you did for a living, not --"

"I just was telling you! Don't you hear good? I was the pigfucker! Over across the mountains in that Kootenai country, in them big woods! Best goshdamn job I ever --"

While Tonsil Vapor <sup>expelled</sup> ~~said~~ in a rapidly rising voice, "But we can't let you say that on the <sup>AIR!"</sup> ~~air~~ I took a contemplative sip of my scotch ditch. Riley and Mariah's story on the red-light duchesses of Helena and now Good Help's unexpected occupation; kind of a rough day for history.

"He's trying to tell you the truth for once," I called down the bar. # <sup>squintily</sup> Good Help glared my way while Tonsil Vapor's coiffure rotated toward me. My own startlement had not been at the nature of Good Help's

job but that he'd ever held one at all. 1918, though, explained it: enlistment into employment rather than the war in Europe.

Tonsil Vapor approached me, trailed by his electronic Siamese twin. He wore an expression as concerned as his cameraman's was languid. Leaning close, Tonsil Vapor asked me in a hushed tone:

"You mean to tell me that your town's historic citizen had sexual congress with--" and ~~here he~~ twirled his index finger in the corkscrew pattern of a pig's tail.

"Well, I can't testify one way or the other on that," I hedged. "But what he's trying to tell you about here is something else. One of the jobs on those logging crews over west of the mountains was, uh, like he says."

Tonsil Vapor peered at me in even more perplexity.

"Pigfucker," I clarified. "See, in those days when they'd go to skid logs out of the woods they'd string them together end to end with eyebolt hitches, sort of like links of sausage. And the last log they'd hitch on was a hollowed-out one called the pig. After all the other logs were snaked out of the woods, then the eyebolts and tools



and anything else got thrown in the pig--I guess that's maybe why they called it that, you could toss anything into it--and it'd be skidded back into the timber for the next string of logs, same again. Anyway, the guy, usually he was just a punk of a kid," although it was at least as hard to think of Good Help Hebner young as it was to imagine him employed, "who threw the stuff into the pig was called the--"

"Pigfucker," intoned Tonsil Vapor, gazing down the bar to where Good Help was passing the time by grooming his goatee with his fingers. "But wasn't that job ever called anything nicer?"

I shrugged. "Not that I ever heard of. Lumberjacks tend not to be dainty talkers."

The bored cameraman shifted his feet as if settling down for another wait, and he and ~~Fred~~ and I watched Tonsil Vapor chew the inside of his mouth as he continued ~~peering~~ <sup>staring</sup> down the bar at Good Help.

At length the cameraman suggested, "Let's just bleep <sup>out</sup> the mothering word."

"Shit, that just emphasizes it," Tonsil Vapor let out peevishly. "No,

we've got to get our historic citizen to talk about the job without. . .

Wait, I know!" His face lit up as if the camera and lights were on him.

"I'll just say, 'Mr. Pigner, I--'"

"Hebner," I prompted.

"'Mr. Hebner, I understand you once worked in a logging crew, quite a number of years ago in this Montana of ours. Would you please share with our viewing audience what you did in that job?' That way, he won't need to say--"

"Pigfucker," Good Help recited before the TVing was to commence again, "is what I ain't supposed to say on the television but just tell what that job with the pig was?" He squinted anxiously up at Tonsil Vapor, wanting to make sure he had the new ground rules straight.

"Perfect!" Tonsil Vapor pronounced. He turned to the cameraman one more time, got one more bored nod, aimed his chin into the lens and the bright lights came on again.

The Here-with-us-now part and so on <sup>went</sup> ~~was going~~ along fine, and I had to admit, Good Help Hebner ensconced there with the carved dark oak



of the Medicine Lodge's ancient bar behind him looked amply historical.

And I could tell by his squint of concentration that he had Tonsil

Vapor's cue about his logging job ~~carefully~~<sup>clamped</sup> in mind.

"--share with our viewing audience that experience in the woods?"

Tonsil Vapor got there as smooth as salve from a new tube and held the microphone in front of Good Help's venerable lips.

Good Help craned forward and carefully brayed:

"What I done was, I fucked the pig! One ~~entire~~<sup>whole</sup> summer! Best  
goshdamn job--"

#

I left the TV perpetrator staring in despair at Good Help and took my restored good humor back into the ~~supper club~~<sup>cafe</sup>. Only to be met by Althea shooing the crowd into chairs. "Oh, Jick, you're just in time, we're about to have the committee meeting."

Riley already had gone over and propped himself along the wall where he could study sideways into either the audience or our committee, dutiful nuisance that he was. Mariah meanwhile was signifying by pointing

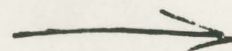
urgently to my chair at the pushed-together cafe tables where the committee members were supposed to sit that she wanted me up there for a group picture. No rest for the civic.

On my way to my seat, though, I paused at the end of the committee table to say brightly to Amber Finletter, who had been a wonderful neighbor to us when Marcella fell sick, "How you doing, Amber?" And wordlessly got back the merest little picklepuss acknowledgment.

Oh, horse pucky. Amber had her nose out of joint, McCaskillwise, because she figured Mariah was making a play for Shaun during that picture-taking of him and me. Jealousy has more lives than Methusaleh's cat.

Then no sooner was I sat than I was afflicted with Arlee Zane. Arlee and I have known each other our entire lives and disliked each other that same amount of time.

Leaning over from his chair next to mine, Arlee now hung his fat face almost into mine and slanted his eyes in the direction of Althea





at her speaking stand. Grinning like a jackass eating thistles he semi-whispered, "Jick, old son, are you getting any?"

I cast a glance of my own across the room toward Arlee's wife Phoebe and asked in turn, "Why? Have you noticed some missing?"

That settled the Arlee situation for a while, and I was able to direct my attention to Howard Stonesifer seated on the other side of me. "Catch me up on what's been happening here, Howard."

"Shaun Finletter and Mike Sisti rounded up a flagpole," ~~Howard~~ he reported. "They went all the way across the mountains to Coram for the tree, to get one big enough to take this flag. Other than that, everybody's just sewing"--he cast a look at my chin shrubbery--"or growing."

With a soft raprap raprap raprap of her gavel--would you believe, even her hammering sounded like pats--Althea was commencing to officiate.

"The meeting will please come to order, everybody, including you, Garland Hebner." Good Help had spied Riley at his listening post there along the wall and doubtless was creaking his way over to deliver an hour or two of autobiographical afterthought, but Althea's injunction halted the old boy as if he'd been caught slinking into the hen house.

"It's so wonderful to see so many of you being so public spirited here tonight," Althea proceeded on. "I won't have to go door to door around town handing out pushbrooms after all." She smiled sweetly in saying that, but testimony could have been elicited in that audience from any number of persons who were choosing to put up with an evening of committee crap rather than risk Althea putting them in the wake of our centennial parade's horse version.

Under Althea's generalship we whipped right through Howard's minutes of the last meeting and ~~Janelle's~~<sup>Amber's</sup> treasurer's report, and when we got to the first order of business, guess whose it was.

"We need to give some thought to our flag-raising ceremony," Althea informed all and sundry. "It would be nicest, wouldn't it, if we could re-enact that dawn just the way it happened a hundred years ago, when our Gros Ventre forebears flew Montana's very first flag of statehood. But of course we don't know what was said on that wonderful occasion."

The funny thing was, I did know. To the very word, I possessed the scene that ensued that exact morning of a century ago. I had heard it from Toussaint Rennie, who inevitably was on hand at the occasion.



The gospel according to Toussaint was that Lila Sedgwick had officiated.

Strange to think of her, a mind-clouded old woman wandering the streets of Gros Ventre conversing with the cottonwood trees when I was a youngster, as ever having been vital and civic. But there in her young years Lila and

the handful of others this community was composed of in 1889 had mustered <sup>themselves</sup>

and made what ceremony they could. "Way before dawn," Toussaint's purring voice began to recite in me again now, there, at that committee table.

"Out to the flagpole, everybody. It was still dark as cats, but--"

I had an awful moment before I could be sure Toussaint's words <sup>streaming</sup> weren't ~~coming~~ out through my mouth. Another spasm of the past, and this one as public as hell. It was one thing to have my memory broadcast out loud around Mariah and Riley and totally another to blab out here in front of everybody who knew me. I tried to fix an ever so interested stare on Althea as she continued to preside out loud and meanwhile clenched my own lips together so,

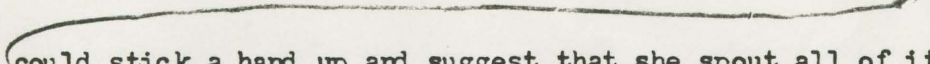
tightly I must have looked like a shut purse. But these cyclones out

of yestertime into me: what was I going to do about them? I mean,

when you come right down to it, just where is the dividing line between

reciting what the past wants you to and speaking gibberish? Was I going to be traipsing around blabbering to the cottonwoods next?

"A ceremony isn't really a ceremony unless it has a speech, now is it?" Althea asked and answered simultaneously. "So, before our wonderful flag is hoisted Centennial morning, we really should have someone say a few words, don't you all agree?"

I wholly expected her to go into full spiel about what the speech ought to be about, and then somebody, quite possibly even me,  could stick a hand up and suggest that she spout all of it again on Centennial morning and that would constitute the speech, but no, oh hell no. All Althea trilled forth next was:

"I nominate Jick McCaskill as our speaker."

From the various compass points of the committee table, <sup>Howard's</sup> ~~Harlow's~~ hearty voice and Arlee's malicious voice and <sup>Amber's</sup> ~~Amber's~~ vindictive voice chorused: "I second the motion."

"Whoa, hold on a minute here," I tried to get in, "I'm not your guy to--" but do you think Althea would hear of it?



"Oh foo, Jick, you're entirely too modest. If you're stuck for what to say I'll be more than glad to help out, you always know where to find me. Now then, all in favor of Jick McCaskill..."

#

"Tell me, Ms. McCaskill," goddamn Riley started in, doing a syrup voice like that of TV Purvis, on our way home to the ranch, "when did you first realize your father is in the same oratorical league with Lincoln, Churchill, and Phil Donahue?"

"Oh, I always knew he was destined for public speaking because of how he practiced on the sheep," Mariah ever so merrily got into the spirit with a Baby Snooksy tone of her own. "He just has this wonderful talent for talking to sheep"--here she expertly made with her tongue the prrrrr prrrrr prrrrr call, half-purr, half-coo, that I had taught her to coax sheep with almost as soon as she could toddle--"and so people are probably easy for him."

"Up yours, both of you," I stated wearily.

#

Maybe it was the prospect of chronic aid from Althea, from then until I had to get up in front of everyone on centennial dawn and insert my foot into my mouth. Maybe it was that I did not see my presence could cure the ranch situation any, just then; Kenny and Darleen and Helen were going to keep on being Kenny and Darleen and Helen, whether or not I hovered over them, and so I might as well wait until they had the hay up and the lambs fattened for shipping before I faced what to do with the place. Maybe it was hunch. Or its cousin curiosity, after Mariah and I emerged from the house the next morning and encountered Riley, daisyfresh from solitary sleep in the motorhome, who told her he'd already been to the cookhouse and made the phone call and it was all set, and she in turn gazed at him and then for some reason at me, before saying solemnly, "Heavy piece, Riley."

So, yes, the three of us applied ourselves to the road again. Mariah and I in the Bago trailed Riley and the rental Yugo to town to turn the thing in at Tilton's garage, then I pointed the motorhome toward Choteau, as the Montanian pair had informed me that this next piece of work of theirs awaited there in the Teton River country.




## PINE BUTTE SWAMP PRESERVE

established 1978

protected and maintained by

The Nature Conservancy

14 mi. 

The Teton country is quite the geography. Gravelroading straight west as the Bago now was, we had in front of us the rough great wall of the Rockies where gate-like canyons on either side of Indian Head Rock let forth the twin forks of the Teton River. The floorlike plain that leads to the foot of the mountains is wet and spongy in some places, in others bone-dry, in still others common prairie. And even though I usually only remark it from a distance when I'm driving past on a Great Falls trip, Pine Butte itself seems like a neighbor to me, so to speak. It and its kindred promontories make a line of landmarks between the mountains and the eastward horizon of plains--Heart Butte north near the Two Medicine River, Breed Butte of course between Noon Creek and English Creek, Pine Butte presiding here over the Teton country like a surprising pine-topped mesa, Haystack Butte south near Augusta. Somehow

they remind me of lighthouses, spaced as they are along the edge of that tumult of rock that builds into the Continental Divide. Lone sentinel forms the eye seeks.

We drove in sunny silence until I said something about how surprising it was to have a swamp out on a prairie, causing Riley to get learned and inform me that the Pine Butte swamp actually was underlain with so much bog it qualified as a fen.

"That what you're going to do here, some kind of an ecology piece?"

I asked.

"Sort of," Mariah said.

"Sounds real good to me," I endorsed, gandering out at the companionable outline of Pine Butte drawing ever nearer and the boggy bottomland--in Montana you don't see a fen just every day--and the summits of the Rockies gray as eternity meeting the blue August sky. This area a little bit reminded me of the Moiese buffalo range where we'd started out, nice natural country set aside, even though I knew the Pine Butte preserve wasn't that elaborate kind of government refuge but simply a ranch before the land was passed on to the Conservancy outfit,



which must have decided to be defender of the fen. I couldn't help but be heartened, too, that the news duo at least had progressed from getting us butted by buffalo to moseying through a sweet forenoon such as this.

"Great day for the race," I chirped, even. Oh, I knew full well Mariah had heard that one a jillion times from me, but I figured maybe Riley would fall for it by asking "What race?" and then I'd get him by saying "The human race"--but huh, uh, no such luck. Instead Riley busied up behind me and announced, "Okay, gang, we've got to start watching along the brush for the state outfit. Should be easy enough to see, there's a crane on the truck they use to hoist the--"

"I'll watch out this side," Mariah <sup>broke</sup> ~~butted~~ in on him and proceeded to peer out her window as if she'd just discovered glass is transparent.

Dumb me. Even then I didn't catch on until another mile or so down the road when I happened to think out loud that even though we were going to be with ecology guys we'd all need to watch a little bit out in country like this, because the Pine Butte area is the last prairie habitat of--

The stiffening back of that daughter of mine abruptly told it.

"Grizzlies?" I concluded in a bleat. "Has this got to do with  
grizzlies?"

"Just one," said Mariah, super-earnestly gazing off across the  
countryside away from my stare.

"That's way too damn many! This isn't going to be what I'm afraid  
it is, is it? Tell me it isn't."

Of course neither of this pair of story-chasing maniacs would tell  
me any such thing and so the nasty hunch that had been crawling up the  
back of my neck pounded.

"Bear moving!" I slammed on the brakes and right there in the  
middle of the county road I swung around in my seat, as mad as I was  
scared--which is saying a lot--to goggle first at Mariah who ought to  
have known better than this and then at Riley whose goddamn phone call  
this morning all too clearly led into this. "Jesus H. Christ, you two!  
Anybody with a lick of sense doesn't want to be within fifty miles of  
moving a grizzly!"



"I reckon that's why the job falls to us," Riley couldn't resist rumbling in one of his mock hero voices. "What's got you in an uproar, Jick? The good news is you don't have to chauffeur the bear in the Bago--the state Fish and Game guys load him into a culvert trap."

I didn't give a hoot if they had portable San Quentin to haul a grizzly in, I wanted no part of it and I then and there let Mariah and Riley know exactly that. Didn't they even read their own newspaper, for Christ's sake? Only days ago a hiking couple in Glacier Park had encountered a sow grizzly and her two cubs, and survived the mauling only because they had the extreme guts and good sense to drop to the ground and play dead. And not all that far from where we right now sat, several--several--grizzlies lately kept getting into the geese and ducks at the Rockport Hutterite Colony until the Hutterites managed to run them off with a big tractor. The Bago, I emphasized, was no tractor.

Which did me about as much good with those two as if I'd said it all down a gopher hole.

Riley was mostly the one who worked on me--Mariah knew good and well how ticked off I was at her for this--and of course argument might

as well have been his middle name. "The bear is already caught in a steel cable snare, the state guys will conk him out with a tranquilizer gun, and then they'll haul him in a chunk of culvert made of high tensile aluminum he'd have to go nuclear to get out of. Where's the problem?" he concluded, seeming genuinely puzzled.

The rancher portion of me almost said back to him, the problem is the grizzly, you Missoula ninny.

Instead, in spite of myself, my eyes took over from my tongue. They scrutinized the brush-lined creek as if counting up its willows like a tally with wooden matchsticks, they probed each shadowed dip of the Pine Butte fen, they leapt to every ruffle of breeze in the grass. Seeking and seeking the great furry form.

All the while, Riley's bewilderment was stacking up against the silent bounds of me and Mariah, who was keeping ostentatiously occupied with her camera gear. "Gang, I don't know what the deal is here," the scribbler owned, "but we can't just sit in the middle of this road watching the seasons change."



"Are you two going to this bear whether or not I'm along?" I managed to ask.

Say for Riley that he did have marginally ~~enough~~<sup>enough</sup> sense to let Mariah do the answering on that one.

"Yes," she said, still without quite ever looking at me. "The Fish and Game guys are waiting for us."

I jammed the Bago into gear and we went on down the road for, oh, maybe as much as a quarter of a mile before Riley's bursting curiosity propelled out the remark, "Well, just speaking for myself, this ~~is~~<sup>is</sup> going to be something to remember, getting a free look at a grizzly, hrm?"

When neither of us in the cab of the motorhome responded, he resorted to: "You, ah, you ever seen one before, Jick?"

"Yeah."

"But up close?"

"Close enough." I glanced over at Mariah. Her face carefully showed nothing, but I knew she was replaying the memory, seeing it all again. Who could not? "I killed one once."

"The hell!" from Riley in his patented well-then-tell-me-all-about-it tone. "There on Noon Creek, you mean?"

"In the mountains back of the ranch, yeah." As sudden as that, the site near Flume Gulch was in my mind, as if the earth had jumped a click in its rotation and flung the fire-scarred slope, the survivor pine tree with its claw-torn bark, in through my eyes.

Greatly as I wished he would not, Riley naturally persisted with the topic. "You run across him by accident or track him down?"

"Neither."

"Then how'd you get together with Brother Griz?"

"I baited him."

Strong silence from behind me.

At last Riley said: "Did you. My dad did some of that, too, whenever he'd ~~whenever he'd~~ lose a calf. But black bear, those were. We didn't have grizzlies in the Crazy Mountains any more." Those last two words of





his said the whole issue. Originally the West had been absolutely loaded with grizzly bears, but by now they were on the endangered species list.

"I'm not one of those Three S guys, if that's what you're thinking," I told Riley stonily. Law on the side of the grizzly notwithstanding, there still were some ranchers along these mountains who practiced the policy of shoot, shovel and shut up. Better a buried bear who'd be no threat to livestock or the leasing of oil rights than a living exemplification of wilderness, ran that reasoning.

"Riley never said you were," Mariah put in her two bits' worth.

Actually, except for her contribution being on his behalf it was just as well she did ante herself into this discussion, for my ultimate say on the grizzly issue needed to be to her rather than to some scribbler. I spoke it now, slowly and carefully:

"I don't believe in things going extinct. But that includes me, too."

I knew Riley was grinning his sly grin. "A grizzly couldn't have said it any better, Jick," issued from him. I didn't care. From the tight crinkle that had taken over her expression I could see that my words had hit home in Mariah, complicating what she had been →

remembering, what we both were remembering, of that time of the grizzly twenty-five years before.

It started with a paw mark in the pan of the slop milk Mariah had given the chickens.

Why that pan caught her eye so soon again after she'd done her poultry flock, morning chore of feeding the ~~chickens~~, I do not know. Maybe even at ten years old as she was then, Mariah simply was determined to notice everything. When she came down to the lambing shed to find me I was surprised she and Lexa hadn't left yet for school, but nowhere near so surprised as when she told me, "You'd better come see the bear track."

I dropped to one knee there in the filth of the chicken yard, mindful only of that pale outline in the pan. My own hand was not as steady as I would have liked when I measured the bear's print with it.

The width of the palmlike pad was well over six inches, half again wider than my hand. That and the five clawmarks noticeably off the toes distinguished what kind of bear this was. Not just a grizzly but a sizable one.



Considerations of all kinds swarmed in behind that pawprint. No sheep rancher has any reason to welcome a grizzly, that I know of. A grizzly bear in a band of sheep can be dynamite. So my mind flew automatically to the bunches of ewes and lambs scattered across the ranch--late April this was, the tail end of lambing season--like clusters of targets. But before that thought was fully done, the feel of invasion of our family was filling me. The creature that slurped the chickens' milk and tromped through the still-damp pan had been here astride the daily paths of our lives. Marcella merely on her way out to the clothesline, Mariah simply on her way to the chickenhouse, Lexa kiting all over the place in her afterschool scampers--their random goings surely crisscrossed whatever route brought the grizzly, coming out of hibernation hungry and irritable, in to the ranch buildings. Nor was I personally keen to be out on some chore and afterward all they'd ever find of me would be my belt buckle in a grizzly turd.

So when I phoned to the government trapper and his wife said he was covering a couple of other counties for the rest of the week, I did not feel I could wait.

It was the work of all that day to pick and prepare the trap site.

Up toward Flume Gulch I was able to find the grizzly's tracks in the mud of the creek crossing, and on the trail along the old burn area of the 1939 forest fire I came across what in every likelihood was the same bear's fresh dropping, a black pile you'd step in to the top of your ankle. I chose the stoutest survivor pine there at the edge of the old burn and used the winch of the <sup>Dodge</sup> power wagon to snake a long heavy bullpine log in beside the base of the tree. Around the tree I built a rough pen of smaller logs to keep any stray livestock from blundering in, and even though the other blundersome species wasn't likely to come sashaying past I nonetheless nailed up a sign painted in red sheep paint to tell people: LOOK OUT--BEAR TRAP HERE. Then I bolted the chain of the trap to the bullpine log and set the trap, ever so carefully using screw-down clamps to cock its wicked steel jaws open, in the middle of the pen and covered it with pine swags. Finally, from the tree limb directly over the trap I hung the bait, a can of bacon grease.

One thing I had not calculated on. The next day was Saturday, and I got up that next morning to two schoolless daughters who <sup>overnight</sup> had caught