Ride With Me, Mariah Montana

by Ivan Doig
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-swag. 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.

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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."

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
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 jampacked grandstand crowd across the arena. Involuntarily I found myself seeing the surroundings in the same bit by bit way she was doing. 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 Stetson's glasses and their best hats. 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 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 sound there in Mariah, while any other of the species that I'd ever encountered was always plain _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 doorstop 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
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. 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

Over and over again. I had to wonder what they thought about that gaptoothed brag across the river where the other newspaper, the Missoulian, 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.

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 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 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:
center song material throughout,
with poetry-like "staggered" lines as indicated

"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 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, 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 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 did him in. 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 Travis, 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 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 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.

p. 18A follows
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 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. 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. 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 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." 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 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 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 breastbone. 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 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 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 insisted on bargained for, that long-ago error 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, 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."
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 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 soothe soaped me. "Don't you want the history of the 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 his 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, hmm?" 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."

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 headload of hair. They even looked like an armed showdown, Mariah with the slings of cameras around her neck and across her shadowplain blouse, Riley with one of those telephone beepers holstered on his belt and a fanny pack 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: "Still hanging onto the ranch, hmm, Jick?" To think that he would even bring that subject up. "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 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 gaze squarely and gave the ranch answer I'd heard Marcella's 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 goddamnit 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.
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 accordian 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 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
Mariagh 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 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 blurtly 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 cam 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
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. Whingwhingwhingwhingwhingwhingwhingwhing 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 \textit{Bam!}

"Shit oh dear!" Riley expressed 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 squallled next, mesmerically watching the buffalo back off with \underline{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-in
dent 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
Montahian 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."
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,
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 steeped 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 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

his 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 down 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 tended fields of the miniature Jocko River valley could be seen, and immediately
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 the planet.

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 deedeede: 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 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.

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 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 heatedly informed her. "You do your 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.

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 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.

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. 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 unsoberest 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, gazing over the tableau of Tim and the 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.
Riley was, in the family. An honorary McCaskill, so to speak. In his own right a 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 but winter coat 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—
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
recovery 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 sat 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, 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 talked 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.
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. 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.

 eyed me severely

Mariah looked over at me from the passenger seat as if about to say something, thought better of it, then resumed 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 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."