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 just what he was, but maybe French Cree. He's buried under a Cree cross up home, at least."

"Metis," said Riley.

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. The guy 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, several Metis families fled south across the border 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 scrunching 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 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 camps. 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.
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
already
with some terms already set. The Two Medicine country was swept clear
of buffalo and thick with sheep 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 minivan 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 dicky 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 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 the way 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 motorhome 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 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
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 Mariah that if he didn't muster what little sense he had and watch his footing up there, we'd be shipping him home.
to his momma in a matchbox. That was all it took for Mariah to answer with considerable snap:

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

She nearly 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 "Marah 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 was 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.

p. 68C follows
Almost before we could catch our breath about having this self-guided
cchild, 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 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 job of taking

p. 68D follows
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 at the two of them for letting themselves wallow around the countryside together this way and half by the other half provoked 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
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 touristed around like everybody else, in and out of shacky 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 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 set 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 Nugget for a drink before supper, Riley rashly offering to buy. 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 [crossed out] 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

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 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 had studied the bottles behind

the bar for about an eon and eventually asked the bartender there what
he sold the most seldom of. "Water," the St. Ignatian cracked, but then he 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 touristing 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 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. "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 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 over it:

Watch This Space--Mariah

p. 7hA follows
and Riley Will Eventually Think of Something."

That plunged them both into a deep brood. 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 subtle."

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, 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. "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 shepherders 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. 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 which throned 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 thoughtful, 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 son of a gun 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 jolly 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 lopped 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. Be it that as if by way, 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 Marijah's head sharply around.

I thought the new mode of bartender blinked at Riley a little quizzically
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 lifetime 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 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 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 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
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 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 story lands in there and no picture with it?"
Mariah gave him a world record growl. 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 out to me, "Jick, could you come hold this?"

I gingerly went over to the action area. Mariah thrust 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
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.
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. Now he noticed me and frowned. "Something on your mini 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. 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 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-Kim recipe but Stanley Meixell and Velma Simms.
Velma in that long-ago time had been Gros Ventre's divorce champion,
thurice married in an era that believed once ought to be 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, 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
The woozy distortion puffed Kimi's cheeks out like a squirrel loaded for winter, made her teeth enormous, and squinched her eyes resembled together. She 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 twines!"

Conspicuously ignoring the 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."
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 1917. In its streets and its wallets and its caskets, Butte was its own kind of example of how a copperwired society works.

p. 96A follows
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."

Damnéd with faint praise or praised with a faint damn or wherever it was Mariah's backhanded defense had left him, Riley only snorted fiercely and concentrated 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 littler the seven of hearts and three even littler 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 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 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 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 miners 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
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 that past could find no reason to swoosh out all over me, my mind 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 turmoil 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
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 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 scored kept. One wooden match to Mariah for the jick I'd sluffed her, two to myself--besides 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 would drop off to 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. Hnnng. 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 restless 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 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 groused 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 beep beep beepybeepbeep 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 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. 

*beepitybeepbeep*

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.

called back

"Just a flat," I 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 love 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 Express bunch, 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 road sign and pointed out, "If a highway cop comes along and finds this congregation, he'll write tickets on you characters all night."
"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."

The 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
"By the God, now I know you! That harder 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-dare-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.

"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 riders.

"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 comp as Mariah nudged him urgently 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 when 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 expressers 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 scurried 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 Baloney Expressers 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 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 Expressers hearts simultaneously. Away the 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