

loud that we had better get to getting toward the day's labor--by now

I had it worked out in my head that I'd campend the sheepherder, fix

any downed fence while I was up there, then ~~come~~^{swing} home by way of upper

Noon Creek to attack the beaver^{dam} problem; I knew it would take Kenny

three separate trips to achieve the same--when Kenny crossed his arms

and put his hands on his shoulders as if hugging himself and brought out:

"Uhhmm, Jick, I met up with Shaun Finletter along the east fence

there a couple days ago and he said to tell you he'd like to talk to you about the place."

And here it was, yet and again. The missing. The first peep of it, anyway. Because, the fact was that though Shaun Finletter's tongue would do that talking, the throat under the words was TriGram Resources.

The everloving goddamn TriGramites. Not twenty minutes after that corporation bought the big Double W ranch from Wendell Williamson's California heirs--as a tax writeoff, naturally--some guy in a tie was here to make me an offer for this ranch. Other TriGramites had tried me regularly the past half dozen years, and now that Shaun was their manager of the Double W, I evidently was in his job description too: buy out the old ~~farm~~^{pooter} at the head of the creek. I have to say, in a

way I missed Wendell Williamson, whom I despised heartily when he was alive. At least with Wendell you knew directly who was trying to gobble you; not some distant multi-bunch who saw you as a scrap of acreage they could make tax arithmetic out of.

"Did he," I at last remarked as neutrally as possible about ~~Kenny's~~

Kenny's relay from Shaun and brought my coffee cup to the ready position
 one more that
 for a refill I did not ~~really~~ want. But at the stove Darleen was waiting
 for my real answer before she would lift the coffee pot, as if my words
 might make the load too much to handle; and Kenny still was in his
 self-hug. Both of them watching me so closely it was as bad as being
 in Mariah's strongest lens. They had reason. For if I sold, this ranch
 would be folded into the Double W holdings as one more cow pasture,
 the way every other ranch along Noon Creek had been. TriGram Resources
 saw no need for the Kennys and Darleens of this world.

Brrk brrk.

Kenny sprang to the phone on the wall. "Hullo? You bet, he's
 right here." Before I could gather myself, Mariah's voice was in my
 ear:

"Hi. You know what? You don't have to come back to Helena for us."

"I don't?"

"See what a terrific daughter I can be when I half try? Riley

← and I can't tell yet when we'll be done here today, so

we'll rent a car and come up to the Two whenever we are--we need to get going on that part of the state next anyway. Think you can keep yourself occupied without us a little while? Gas up the Bago. Bye."

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It was midmorning by the time the grocery boxes and I made our escape from the Gros Ventre Mercantile and Joe Prentiss's opinion of Darleen, and headed west out of town toward the sheep camp.

Remarkable how quiet and thought-bringing a pastime it is to drive along without a photographer blazing away beside you and a ~~wordhawk~~ ^{wordwright} whanging his laptop behind you. This road I knew like the back of my hand and so I simply had to hold the motorhome away from the slidey gravel edges of the roadbank and let my mind do whatever solo it wanted, this cream-of-summer morning. Everywhere ahead the mountains, the jagged rim where the Two Medicine country joins onto the sky, ^{today} were clear and

near today. A last few desperate patches of snow still showed bright among the topmost clefts of Roman Reef's wall of rock, but their destiny was evaporation in another week or so. The benchlands on either side of the valley road already were beveled pastures of crisp grass; summer in the Two country always takes on a tan by August. Against the slope of the high ridge south of town, the big G V outline in rocks painted white by the Gros Ventre high school freshmen each fall was by now like a fading set of initials chalked onto leather.

Yet the land still was green where it counted: beside me as I drove, the column of tall old cottonwood trees extending west alongside the county road, through hay meadow after hay meadow until at last thinning into a pair of willow lines that curved down out of the mountains--English Creek, its main channel and north and south forks like a handle and ~~times~~ ^{tines} uncovering my beginnings to me.

There is nothing left standing of my father's English Creek ranger station. I in~~e~~^scapably know that, and could not help but see so, yet again, as the Bago topped the rise of the county road and started down

the long slow slant of grade to the forks of the creek. But the absence always registers hard on me. The station. The house behind it where we lived from my fourth year of life through my fifteenth. Barn, corral, sheds, flagpole. Not a stick of any of those is left. In one way of looking at things this is appropriate, really. The U.S. Forest Service extinguished that site from our lives in the winter of 1939 when it directed my father, over his loudest kicks against the policy, to move his district office of the Two Medicine National Forest into town in Gros Ventre, and so the facade of that earlier English Creek time may as well have taken its leave.

Its thoughts, though, do not go.

"Mac, if headquarters doesn't send us out some new oilcloth one of these years, they are going to get A Piece Of My Mind." My mother, Lisabeth Reese when she began life and Beth McCaskill from her nineteenth year to her eighty-fifth and final one, had a certain tone of voice that signalled in high letters Watch Out. My father, officially Varick McCaskill but Mac to all who knew him in his lifetime of rangering, listened when he had to and otherwise went his way of simply loving her

beyond all the limits. They stand in my memory at English Creek as if they were the highest two of those sky-supporting mountains. Her reminding him for the fourth time in as many days that his ranger diary for the week thus far was a perfect blank, lifting her black eyebrows significantly as she half-turned from the cookstove and supper-in-the-making to inquire, "Are you trying for a new record, Mac?" Him angling forward in his long-boned way as he peered out the west window, restless under any roof, declaring of the perpetual paperwork, "I tell you, Bet, USFS stands for just what it sounds like, Us Fuss. If there's an outfit with more fussing around to it than the Forest Service, I'd like to know where."

And the other echo. The one that clangs like iron against iron in my remembering. That never-ended argument from an English Creek suppertime.

"You're done running my life," my brother flinging behind him as he stomped from that vanished house.

"Nobody's running it, including you," my father hurling after him.

The issue was warm and blond, her name Leona Tracy. A blouseful of blossom, seventeen years old and already eternal. She and Alec vowed they were going to get married, they would find a way of existence different from the college and career that my Depression-haunted parents were urging onto Alec, they would show the world what fireproof love was like. None of it turned out that way. By that autumn of 1939 Alec and Leona were split. Her life found its course away from the Two Medicine country. And Alec's--

"Goddamn Riley anyhow," I heard declared in an angry voice. Mine. A lot was working on me. It always did, here along English Creek. But right now Riley somehow represented the whole business, Alec and Leona and my amazed grief as a not-quite-fifteen-year-old watching them cut themselves off from my parents and me, every nick of that past like scars across my own skin. Why ~~the hell~~^y is a centennial supposed to be such potent arithmetic, will somebody just tell me that? I mean, you think about it, it always is a hundred years since one damn thing or another happened; the invention of the dental drill or the founding of junk mail or some such. But the half centuries, the fifty-year wedges that take

most of our own lifetimes, those are the truly lethal pieces of calendar. Instead of chasing off after olden topics, what about those closer truths? Maybe I was not such a hotshot at history as Riley Wright was, but this I knew deep as the springs of my blood: in spite of ourselves, or because of ourselves--I still cannot judge which--the family we McCaskills had been here at the English Creek ranger station never truly recovered from the ruction between my parents and my brother when Alec declared himself against ~~college~~ and the future they hoped for him, and in favor of linkage with Leona, that summer of fifty years ago.

Yet--there always seemed to be a yet where the goddamn guy was involved--the one person on this green earth to whom I'd shown my feelings about our McCaskill family fracture was Riley.

He did not know the ~~entirety~~ ^{entirety,} of course. Not nearly. But its topmost raw residue in me, he knew. Four, five years ago, that English Creek evening of Riley and myself? Whenever, it was back before his and Mariah's marriage went off the rails, when during one of their weekend visits to the ranch at Noon Creek he mentioned that he'd been

going around to cemeteries, seeing what he could gather for a column on tombstone inscriptions sometime, and did I suppose the Gros Ventre cemetery would have anything worthwhile? "Oh hell yeah," I assured him, ever helpful me, and so before sundown I found myself there amid the graves with Riley. Just we two, as Marcella and Mariah had let us know a cemetery visit was not their idea of entertainment.

The lawned mound of the Gros Ventre cemetery stands above the edge of town and the treeline of English Creek as if the land has bubbled green there; one single tinged knoll against the eastward grainfield plains and the tan benchlands stretching west like platforms to the mountains. I am never there without thinking of the care that the first people of Gros Ventre put into choosing this endsite.

Riley took to the headstones in the old part of the cemetery like a bee to red clover. He immediately was down on one knee, dabbing inscriptions into his notebook, looking close, looking around. I could tell when a person was involved with his job, so I told him I'd wait for him up in the area where people were being buried currently. The active part of the cemetery, so to say.

There I knelt and did a little maintenance against weeds on my father's grave. Beside him the earth on my mother's was still fresh and distinct. While I weeded, other more desperate upkeep was occurring nearby where a sprinkler went whisha whisha as it tried to give the ground enough of a drink after the summer day's hours and hours of sun.

Riley read his way along the headstones toward me, every now and then stopping to jot furiously. I noticed him pausing to copy the old-country commemoration off one particular lichen-darkened tombstone:

Lucas Barclay

born August 16, 1852

Nethermuir, Scotland

died June 3, 1917

Gros Ventre, Montana

In the green bed 'tis a long sleep

Alone with your past, mounded deep.

Then I was back into my own thoughts and lost track of Riley until he was almost to me, lingering at the grave just the other side of my parents'.

center

"Who's this one, Jick, an uncle of yours?"

"No." I got up and went slowly over to where Riley was, in front of the stone that read simply:

center

Alexander Stanley McCaskill

"Mariah's uncle. My brother."

Riley gave me a sharp glance of surprise. "I never knew you even had one."

There's just a whole hell of a lot you don't know, I had the surging urge to cry out to him, but that was the pain of this place, these gone people, wanting to find a target. # I hunkered down to work on the chickweed on Alec's grave and managed to answer Riley only:

"No, I don't guess you had any way of knowing. Alec was killed in

the war. Although by now I suppose a person has to specify which one.

The Second World War." The desert in Tunisia in 1943, the German plane slipping out of the low suppertime sun on its strafing run. The bodies, this one among them, in the darkening sand.

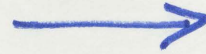
Whisha, the lawn sprinkler slung its arc of water down the cemetery knoll below us, then an arc back up the slope, whisha. After a minute

p. 191A follows →

I glanced at Riley; rare for him to be wordless that long. He was looking at me like a cat who'd just been given a bath. Which surprised me until I remembered: Riley had his own turn ^{at}~~in~~ war. Not that he ever would say much about it, but the once I had outright asked him what it had been like in Vietnam, he answered almost conversationally:

"Nam was a fucking mess. But what else would anybody expect it to be?"

So it must have been the cumulative total of war, wars, that had him gazing into me and beyond to my destroyed brother.



"How old was he when--" Riley indicated with a nod of his head Alec's grave.

"Twenty-two, a little short of twenty-three." Riley himself I knew was born in 1950; how distant must seem a life that ended seven years before his began, yet even now I thought of Alec as only newly dead.

Riley faintly tapped his notebook with his pen. He appeared to be thinking it over, whether to go on with the topic of Alec. Being Riley, he of course did. "You named Lexa after him."

"Kind of, yeah. That 'Alexander' has been in the family ever since they crossed the water from Scotland, and I guess maybe before. So Marce and I figured we'd pass it on through one of the girls. You got it right, though--Lexa's full name is Alexandra."

Riley was listening in that sponge way he had, as if every word was a droplet he wanted to sop up. His eyes, though, never left Alec's headstone.

"His stone," he said after a little. "It's--different."

By that he ~~of course~~ meant what was missing. No epitaph, no pair of years summing the sudden span of life. As though even the tombstone

carver wasn't sure Alec's story was over with.

"Yeah, well, I guess maybe the folks"--I indicated the side by side graves of my mother and father--"didn't feel they were entitled to any particular last word on Alec. What happened was, there was a family ruckus between them and him. Alec, see, was brighter than he knew what to do with. My folks figured he had a real career ahead of him, maybe as an engineer, once he got out of his cowboy mode. But then he came down with a bad case of what he thought was love and they considered infatuation. In any event, Alec was determined to give up his chance at college and whatever else for it." (My mother bursting out at ~~the news that he was staying on as a rider for the Double W:~~ his news of impending marriage and Alec, you will End Up as Nothing More Than a Gimped-Up Saddle Stiff, and I for one Will Not--) "The girl"--I swallowed hard, thinking of smiling lovely Leona and grinning breakneck Alec, the couple too pretty to last in a hard-edged world--"the girl changed her mind, so all the commotion was over nothing, really. But by then it was too late, too much had been said." (Alec at the other end of the phone line when I tried, beseeched, a summer-end mending between him and our parents:

Jicker, it's--it's all complicated. But I got to go on with what I'm
doing. I can't--Alec's voice there veering from what he was really
saying, I can't give in.) Riley was watching me a lot more intently
than I was comfortable with as I concluded both the weeding of the grave
and the remembrance of Alec. "It was just one of those situations that
turned out bad for everybody concerned, is all."

"Including you, from the sound of it."

"That is true." Unexpectedly the poisoned truth was rising out
out of me in flood, to Riley of all people. "I was only a shavetail kid
at the time, trying to be on everybody's side and nobody's. But Alec
and I somehow got crosswise with each other before that summer was over.

It sure as hell wasn't anything I intended, and I think him neither.

But it happened. So our last words ever to each other were an argument.

By goddamn telephone, no less. The war came, off Alec went, then I

did too. And then--" I indicated the tombstone and had to swallow

hard to finish. "I have always hated how this turned out--us ending

p. 193B follows →

as brothers with bad feelings between. Over somebody. . .something
that didn't amount to all that much."

still
I could feel Riley silently watching me. I cleared my throat and
looked off to the sharp outline of the mountains against the dusk sky.

"Getting dark. You got the epitaphs you wanted?"

Riley glanced at the remainder of unread headstones, then at me.

"Enough," he said.

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The Bago rumbled across the plank bridge of English Creek and I steered off the county road to head up the North Fork, past the distinctive knob overlooking that smaller valley.

In front of me now stood Breed Butte, whose slow arc of rise divides the watersheds of English Creek and Noon Creek beyond. I concentrated on creeping the motorhome along the rough road track, all the while watching and watching the grassy shoulders of Breed Butte and other hillsides for any sign of the North Fork's current residents, my sheep. I can probably never justify it in dollars, but midway through the ungodly dry summer of '85 I bought this North Fork land so as not to overgraze the short grass crop of my Noon Creek pastureland. As the drought hung on, every year perilous until finally this good green one, the North Fork became my ranch's summer salvation. This handful of valley with its twining line of creek had its moment during the homesteading era, when the North Fork was known as Scotch Heaven because of all the families--McCaskills, Barclays, Duffs, Frews, Findlaters, others--who alit in here like thistledrift from the old country, but the land had lain all but empty since. Empty but echoing. As I knew

now from those letters in Helena, one of these Scotch Heaven homesteads harbored a silent struggle within it--the matter is, Angus was in love with my Anna all the years of our marriage. My grandfather Angus and

the loved Anna he never attained. My grandmother Adair, ^{in exile from} ~~exile of~~ Scotland and her own marriage as well. The first McCaskill battleground of the heart.

No sheep either. The only telltale splotch of light color was the herder's canvas-roofed sheepwagon high on the nearest shoulder of Breed Butte and so I veered the Bago from the creekside route to the sidetrack leading up to there, really no more than twin lines of ruts made long ago. Geared down, the Bago steadily growled its way up the slope, the dark



timbered summit of the butte above to the west. The sheepwagon ^{stood} ~~was~~
~~in~~ amid the buildings, what was left of them now that roofs had caved
 in and century-old log corners were rotting out, of Walter Kyle's old
 place. I guess more truly the Rob Barclay place, as my father had
 always called it, for the original homesteader here--a nephew or some
 such of the Lucas Barclay with the grandly proclaiming tombstone.

This Barclay must have been a stubborn cuss, to cockleburrr himself
 so high and alone on Breed Butte for the sake of its lordly view. ^{though,}
^{Like him my} ~~My~~
 current herder preferred to have

the wagon up here even though it meant hauling water from the North
 Fork; a dusty reservoir about a quarter of a mile west of the falling-down
 buildings testified that there'd once been a spring there but it long
 since had dried up. ~~Anyway the view from this high dry site was~~
 unquestionably wide and wonderful--from Grizzly Reef at the south end
 of the giant line of mountains to the Sweetgrass Hills far on the
 eastern horizon of the plains--and if that's what it took to make a
~~herder happy, so be it.~~ I unloaded the groceries in the wagon and
 climbed back into the Winnebago to resume the search for the sheep
 and their keeper.

On impulse I drove to the brow of the slope above the buildings

instead of back down to the creek road immediately. As a rancher trying to make a living from this country I subscribe to the reminder that view is particularly hard to get a fork into yet I somehow didn't want to pass up this divideline chance to sightsee. Onward east from where I was parked on Breed Butte now, a

kind of veranda of land runs parallel between English Creek and Noon Creek, a low square-edged plateau keeping their valleys apart until they at last flow into the Two Medicine River. In boyhood Julys, I rode horseback across that benchland at dawn to help with the haying on Noon Creek. When the sun rose out of the Sweetgrass Hills and caught my horse and me, our combined shadow shot a couple of hundred feet across the grassland, a stretched version of us as if the earth and life had instantly wildly expanded.

But for once my main attention was ahead instead of back. ~~Odd,~~ →

~~how sudden the boundaries are in a country where you can see until~~ ↺

~~the miles blue away into far distance. To the north where the Two Medicine River carves its canyon through the prairie of the Blackfeet Reservation, flat tops of benchlands stood out as if drawn fresh onto~~

Between the benchlands of the Blackfeet Reservation in the distance and
my vantage point there on Breed Butte the

broad valley of Noon Creek could be seen, the willowed stream winding

through hay meadows and past swales of pasture, ^{majority} ~~virtually all~~ of it

the Double W's holdings. ^g ~~But~~ of that entire north face of the Two

Medicine country I was zeroed in on the corner of land directly below

toward the mountains, my ranch. The old Reese house that was now the

cookhouse. The new house, all possible windows to the west and the

mountains, that Marcella and I had built. The line of lombardy poplars

marking our driveway in from the Noon Creek road. The lambing shed.

Even the upstream bend of hayfield where Kenry and Darleen were baling.

Every bit of it could be enumerated from here.

Enumerating is ^{it all} one thing and making ^{it all} add up is a hell of another.

Oh, I had tried. I'd even had the ranch put through a computer earlier

this year. A Bozeman outfit in the land analysis business programmed

it all for me and what printed out was that, no, the place couldn't be

converted into a dude ranch because with the existing Choteau duality

colonies in one direction and Glacier National Park in ^{the other,} ~~another,~~ Noon

Creek was not "destination-specific" enough to compete; that maybe a little money could be made by selling hay from the ranch's irrigated meadows, if the drought cycle continued and if I wanted to try to live on other people's misfortune; that, yes, when you came right down to it, this land and locale were best fitted to support Animal Units, economic lingo for cattle or the band of sheep I already had on the place (wherever the hell they were at the moment). In short, the wisdom of the microchips amounted to pretty much the local knowledge I already possessed. That to make a go of the ranch, you had to hard-learn its daily elements. Pace your body through one piece of work after another, ~~paying heed~~ ^{paying heed} ~~main attention~~ always to the living components--the sheep, the grass, the hay--but the gravitational wear and tear on fences and sheds and roads and equipment also somehow attended to, so that you are able to reliably tell yourself at nightfall, that was as much of a day as I can do. Then get up and do it again 364 tomorrows in a row. Sitting there seeing the ranch in its every detail, knowing every ounce of work it required, Jesus ^{but} ~~how~~ I right then wished for fifteen years off my age. I'd have settled for five. Yet truth knows every way to nag. Even if I had seen that many fewer calendars, would it do any good in terms of the ranch ultimately? Maybe people from now on are going to exist on bean sprouts and wear

195D

polyester all over themselves, and lamb and wool belong behind glass in a museum. Maybe what I have known how to do in life, which is ranching, simply does not register any more.

#

It took considerable driving and squinting, back down to the creek road and on up the North Fork toward the ^{opposite} ~~other~~ shoulder of Breed Butte, before I spotted the sheep fluffed out across a slope. Against the skyline on the ridge above them was the thin, almost gaunt figure of my herder, patchwork black and white dog alongside.

The sight of the sheep sent my spirits up and up as I drove nearer. In a nice scatter along the saddleback ridge between Breed Butte and the foothills, their noses down in the business of grazing, the ewes were a thousand daubs of soft gray against the tan grass and beside them their lambs were their smaller disorderly shadows. As much as ever I looked forward to moseying over and slowly sifting through the band, estimating the

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P. 195E follows →

195E

lambs' gain and listening to the clonking sound of the bell wether's
bell, always pleasure. But the iron etiquette between camp tender and
sheepherder dictated that I must go visit with the herder first. I
climbed out of the Bago and started up the slope to her.



Helen Ramplinger was my herder this summer and the past two.

Tall for a woman, gawky really; somewhere well into her thirties, with not a bad face but strands of her long hair constantly ^{blowing} ~~blew~~ across it

like random lines of a web. I was somewhat bothered about having so

skinny a sheepherder, for fear people would blame it on the way I fed.

But I honestly did provide ^{Helen} ~~her~~ whatever groceries she ordered; ~~it~~ ^{was}

just that ^{she} ~~Helen~~ was a strict vegetarian. She had come into the Two

country to join up with some back-to-the-earth health-foody types;

granolas, as they were locally known; ^{out} ~~out~~ of a background of drugs and

who knew what else. I admit, it stopped me in my tracks when Helen

^{learned} ~~heard~~ I needed a herder and came and asked for the job. Marcella, too;

as she said, she ^{figured} ~~thought~~ that as Dode Withrow's daughter she'd listened

to every issue involving sheepherders that was possible; but now here

was gender. It ended up that Marce and I agreed that although Helen's

past of drugs had turned her into a bit of a space case, she seemed an

earnest soul and maybe was ^{only} ~~just~~ drifts enough to be in tune with the

sheep. So it had proved out, and I was feeling retroactively clever now

as I drew near enough to begin conversation with her.

"Jick, I'm quitting," Helen greeted me.

I blanched, inside as well as out. Across the years I had been met with that pronouncement from shepherders frequently, and a significant proportion of the time they meant it. If they burned supper or got a pebble in their shoe or the sky wasn't blue enough to suit them, by shepherd logic it was automatically the boss's fault, and I as boss had tried to talk sweetness to sour herders on more occasions than I cared to count. Here and now, I most definitely did not want to lose this one. With herders scarcer than hen's teeth these days and ~~with~~ and Darleen ~~Kenny~~ tied up in haying ~~and the other ranch work~~ and with me kiting around the state with Mariah and Riley, what in the name of Christ was I going to do with this band of sheep if Helen walked off the job?

"Aw, hell, Helen. You don't want to do that. Let's talk this over, what do you say." I made myself swallow away the usual alphabet of shepherd negotiation--fancier food, a pair of binoculars, a new dog--and go directly to Z: "If it's a matter of wages, times are awful tough right now, but I guess maybe I could--"

"Hey, I didn't mean now." Helen gave me an offended look. "I

mean next summer. I've had some time"--she gestured vaguely around us, as if the minutes and hours of her thinking season were here in a herd like the sheep--"to get my head straight, and I've decided I'm not going to be a herder any more. I'll miss it, though," she assured me.

Momentarily relieved but still apprehensive, I asked: "What is it you're going to do, then?"

"Work with rocks."

"Huh?"

"Sure, you know--rocks. These." She reached down between the bunchgrass and picked up a speckled specimen the size of a grapefruit. The ^{dog}~~dog~~ looked on with interest. "Don't you ever wonder what's in them, Jick? Their colors and stuff? You can polish them up and really have something, you know." Helen peered at me through flying threads of her hair. "Gemology," she stated. "That's what I want to do. Get a job as a rock person, polishing them up and fitting them into rings and belt buckles and bolo ties. I heard about a business out in Oregon where they do that. So I'm gonna go there. Not until after we ship the lambs this fall, though."

Helen gently put the young boulder down on the ground between the
 inquisitive ~~dog~~^{dog} and me, straightened to her full height, then gazed
 around in wistful fashion, down into the valley of the North Fork,
 and north toward Noon Creek, and up toward the dark-timbered climb of
 Breed Butte ~~that divided~~^{between} the two drainages, and at last around to me
 again. "This is real good country for rocks, Jick," she said hopefully.

It was my turn to gesture grandly. "Helen, any rocks in my
 possession"--and on the land we stood on I had millions of them--"you
 are absolutely welcome to."

#

My sheepherder's change of career to rocks had not left my mind
 by that evening, but it did have to stand in line with everything else.

Kenny and Darleen and I were just done with supper when something
 about the size of a red breadbox buzzed into the yard and parked in the
 shadow of the Bago. Some dry-fly fisherman wanting to see how Noon
 Creek trout react to pieces of fuzz on the end of a line, was our

unanimous guess, but huh uh. Doors of the squarish little red toy opened and out of it unfolded Mariah and Riley.

"It's a Yugo," Mariah informed us before I could even open my trap to ask, once she'd pecked me a kiss and said hi to Kenny and Darleen and they'd had the dubious pleasure of meeting Riley. "As close as the Montanian's budget will ever come to Riley's dream of renting a Buick convertible."

"She just has no concept of what ^{an} ~~an~~ expense account is for," Riley confided to Kenny and Darleen as if they were his lifelong co-conspirators. "I could have done arithmetic camouflage on that Buick so easy."

"Oh, sure, I can see it now--'pencils and paper, \$97.50 a day,'" Mariah mocked him right back but with most of a grin. "Send the BB a signed confession while you're at it, why don't you."

Well, well, well. Positively sunny, were they both, after their Helena delving. That was one thing about Mariah--putting herself to work always improved her mood. Apparently the same was true of goddamn Riley. They seemed to have found their writing and picture-taking legs, ~~so to speak~~. Until one of them next delivered the other a kick with

a frozen overshoe again, anyway.

"Darleen, don't you think travel agrees with him?" my newly zippy daughter turned her commentary onto me. "Except for his facial grooming."

It was something, how Mariah could be bossy and persuasive at the same time. Yet I didn't even bristle at that, appreciably, because I was too busy noticing how much she looked in her element here. In this kitchen, this house--this ranch--where she had grown up. She moved as if the air recognized her and sped her into grooves it had been saving for her, as she crossed the kitchen and planted her fanny against the sink counter in the perfect comfortable lean to be found there, reaching without needing to look into the silverware drawer for forks for Riley and her when Darleen tried to negotiate supper into them and they compromised with her on monstrous pieces of rhubarb pie. Every motion, as smooth as if she knew it blindfolded. Then it struck me.

Mariah was the element here. The grin as she kept kidding with Darleen and Kenny and Riley was her mother's grin, Marcella's quick wit glinting in this kitchen once again. The erectness, the well-defined collarbones that stated that life was about to be firmly breasted through--those

were my mother's, definitive Beth McCaskill who had been born on this ranch as a Reese. Born of Anna Ramsay Reese, ever her own pilot through life, is my Anna. And on the Scotch Heaven side, the McCaskill side, Adair odd in her ways but persevering for as long as there was anything to persevere for. Mariah: as daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter, the timespun sum of them all? Yet her own distinct version as well ^o the lanky grace that begins right there in her face and flows down the longish but accomplished geometries of her body, the turn of mind that takes her into the cave of her camera, those are her own, Mariah rara. ^{cg}

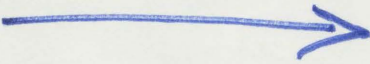
And couple Riley with her, the set of shoulders that had shrugged off my offer of this ranch. Right now he was as electric as that commotion of hair of his, regaling Kenny and Darleen with the time he'd written in his column that some of the Governor's notions are vast and some are half-vast and the BB didn't get it until the Guv's press secretary angrily called and suggested he try reading it out loud. I had to grant, there was a mind clicking behind that wiseacre face. There were a lot of places in the world where they would licence ^s Riley's

head as a dangerous weapon. I eyed him relentlessly while the general chitchat was going on, wanting to see some sign of regret or other bother show up in him here on the ranch he had rejected, here across the kitchen from the woman he could have made that future with. I might as well have wished for him to register earthquakes in China.

~~[while I was at it.]~~

"I gotta see what's under the hood of that Hugo," Kenny soon ^{exclaimed,} ~~said,~~ squirming up out of his chair ~~onto his feet.~~ "You want to come take a look, Darleen?"

"Thanks just the same," demurred Darleen placidly. "Don't look too long, hon. We've got to get to Choteau. My folks' anniversary," she explained to the rest of us. "We hate like anything to miss the centennial shindig in town"



tonight, but you can tell us all about it in the morning, Jick."

This caused me to ponder Darleen and whether there was some kind of secret sisterhood by which she had become an ally of Althea Frew, but I ultimately dismissed the suspicion. Darleen isn't your ally type. Anyway I now had to tell Mariah what my centennial involvement was all about--Riley had his ears hanging out too--and transmit the request for her to take some commemorative pictures ^{for Gros Ventre posterity.} She rolled her eyes at the mention of Althea, but concluded as I did that we might as well go in tonight and get it over with.

"Mind if I tag along?" Riley asked in a supersweet way.

"Yeah," I confirmed. "But I imagine you will anyway, huh?"

"No problem," he asserted, which had become a major part of his vocabulary since we met up with the Baloney Expressers. "I'll be next thing to invisible."

—————

The sun was flattening down behind Roman Reef for the night as the three of us left for town. Behind us the peaks and crags of the Rocky Mountain Front were standing their jagged tallest there at the deepening of evening, while the Two Medicine country around us rested

in soft shadows unrolling under that sunset outline of the mountains.

This may be my own private theory about such summer evenings but it has always seemed to me that lulls of this sort are how a person heals from the other weather of this land, for the light calmly going takes with it the grievances that the Two is a country where the wind wears away at you on a daily basis, where drought is never far from happening, where the valley bottoms now in the perfect shirtsleeve climate of summer dusk were thirty-five degrees below zero in the nights of February.

The Bago kept pace with that pretty time between day and night as the road swung up onto the benchland between Noon Creek and English Creek. Until, of course, Riley set things off. Maybe a genealogist could trace whether his talent for aggravation ran in the family for hundreds of generations or whether the knack was a spontaneous cosmic outbreak with him like, say, sunspots. Either way, there on the road into town he apparently did not even need to try, to succeed in ruffling my feathers. Merely gawked ahead at the strategic moment ~~at it~~ and declared, "I'll be damned. Ye Olde Wild West comes to Noon Creek, hmm?"

"Aw, that bastardly thing," I murmured in disgust. "If they want

something weird hung, they ought to hang themselves up by their--"

But he'd roused Mariah and her camera. In the passenger seat she suddenly spoke up. "No, wait, Riley's right." Since when? The next was inevitable. "Pull over," she directed, "and let me get some shots of that against those clouds."

The summer sky, with a couple of hours of evening light yet to be eked out, was streaked with high goldenish strands, the decorative dehydrated kind called mare's tail. Clouds are one matter and what's reluctantly under them is another. Beside us where I had halted the motorhome stood the main gate into the Double W. A high frame made of a crosspiece supported by posts big as telephone poles and almost as tall, it had loomed in the middle of that benchland for as long as I could remember. Until not so many years ago the sign hanging from the ~~center of the~~ crosspiece had proclaimed the Williamsons as owners of everything that was being looked at. Now it read:

WW ranch


Another TriGram Enterprise

More than that, though. Just under the sign, a steer skull swung

center

in the breeze where it was hung on a cable between the gateposts.

Weather-bleached white as mica, short curved Hereford horns pointing,
eye sockets endlessly staring.

That skull locket against the Double W sky was the idea of one
of the managers TriGram sent up from California before Shaun Finletter
was installed in the job a year or so ago. Goddamn such people. I drove
past that dangling skull whenever I went to or from town and it got my
goat every single time.  That skull, I knew, was from a

boneyard in a coulee near my east fenceline with the Double W, where
there were the carcasses of hundreds of head of Double W cattle that
piled up and died in the blizzard of 1979. Even the Williamsons, who
always had more cattle than they had country for and took winter die-offs
as part of their way of business, never used the skulls as trinkets.

"Guess what, I need somebody in the foreground for scale," Mariah
called over from where she was absorbedly sighting through her camera.
"Somebody real Western. Jick, how about if you and your Stetson
~~if you'd~~ come stand there under the--"

"I will not."

The flat snap of refusal, in my tone of voice as much as my words--

hell, in me--startled her. She whirled around to me, her hair swinging, with an odd guilty look.

"Sorry," Mariah offered, rare enough for her, too. "But it's a shot ^{ought to} ~~I should~~ take. The way it looms there over everything, it makes a statement."

"I know what it makes."

In my mind's eye I saw how I would like to do the deed. Wait until dark. Nothing but blackness on either side of this benchland road until the Double W gateframe comes into the headlights. I flip onto bright, for all possible illumination for this, and stop the Bago about seventy-five feet from the gateway, its sign and the skull under swaying slightly in the night breeze that ^{coasts} ~~comes~~ down along Noon Creek. I reach to the passenger seat where the shotgun is riding, step out of the motorhome and go in front of the headlights to load both barrels of the weapon. Bringing the butt of the shotgun to my shoulder I sight upward. Do I imagine, or does the steer skull seem to sway less, quiet itself in the breeze, as I aim? I fire both barrels at once, shards and chunks

of the skull spraying away into the night. One eyesocket and horn dangle from the wire. Close enough. I climb back in the Bago and head toward a particularly remote sinkhole I know of to dispose of the shotgun.

I brought myself back from that wishdream, to Mariah, to what we were saying to each other. "Take a picture of the goddamn thing if you think you have to," I finished to her, "but it's going to be without me in it."

All was as silent as the suspended clouds for a long moment. Then Riley came climbing over the gearbox hump of the Bago past me and out the passenger door. Without a word he strode across the road and centered himself in the gateway for my daughter.

—

One whole hell of a promising evening, then, by the time we hit Gros Ventre and were heading into the Medicine Lodge Bar. Bar and Cafe, I'd better get used to saying, for the enterprise took on a split personality when Fred Musgreave bought it a few years ago. The vital part, the bar, was pretty much the same as ever, a dark oaken span polished to a ~~celestial~~ ^{sacred} shine by generations of elbows, its long mirror and shelves of bottles and glasses a reflective backdrop for contemplation. But the other half of the ~~rambling~~ ^{wide} old wooden building, where there likely

were poker tables in the early days and in more recent memory a lineup of maroon booths which were rarely patronized, Fred had closed off with a divider and turned that outlying portion into an eatery. ("Can't hurt," his economic reasoning ran. "Could help.") By this time of evening, though, tourists sped on through to Glacier Park for the night and anybody local who was going to eat supper out would have done so a couple of hours ago, and thus Fred didn't mind providing the Medicine Lodge's dining side as the meeting place on centennial committee nights.

He must have had his moments of wishing ~~all~~ these were paying customers, however. Through the cafe window we could see the place was pretty well jammed. Ranchers and farmers in there jawing at each other about crops and livestock prices, all trademarked with summertanned faces and pale foreheads as if bearing instructions fit ~~cap~~ or hat on at this line. Of the women, a dressy few were in oldfangled centennial raiment but most had restrained themselves. Beside me as we headed in I heard Mariah already grappling camera gear out of her appaloosa bag.

The three of us stopped instantly inside the cafe door. We had to.

Our feet were in a tangle of power cords, as if we'd gotten ensnared in some kind of ankle-high electrification project.

"Aw, crud," Riley uttered, grimacing up from the mess we'd stepped in to its source just inside the entryway. "Tonsil Vapor Purvis."

"There goes the neighborhood," agreed Mariah grimly.

Actually the television camera and tripod and lights and other gear were being marshaled by a pair of guys, but I did not have to be much of a guesser to pick out the one Riley and Mariah were moaning about. An expensive head of hair that was trying to be brown and red at the same time--Riley ultimately identified the shade for me as Koppeltone--^{sg} atop not nearly that boyish a face atop a robin's egg blue sport jacket; below the torso portion that fit on a television screen, bluejeans and jogging shoes.

"Well!" the figure let out in a whinnying way that turned the word into weh-heh-heh-hell! "Rileyboy!"

"And you managed to say that without a cue card," Riley answered in mock admiration. Tonsil Vapor Purvis didn't seem to know Mariah or even to care to, but his cameraman and her exchanged frosty nods.

"I haven't noticed you at any of the official centennial events,"

Tonsil Vapor informed Riley in a voice that rolled out on ball bearings.

"Where are you keeping yourself?"

"Working," Riley stated as if that was a neighborhood the televisioneer naturally wouldn't be anywhere around.

"Isn't this centennial fantastic though?" declared Tonsil Vapor.

"Have you had a chance to watch my Countdown 100 series?" When Riley shook his head, Tonsil Vapor rotated toward me. When I shook my head, he turned toward Mariah but she already had slid away and was taking pictures of people, cajoling and kidding with them as you can only when you've known them all your life.

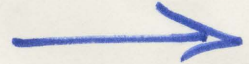
"One hundred nightly segments on the centennial," Tonsil Vapor enunciated to the remaining captive pair of us to make sure we grasped the arithmetic.

"No kidding," Riley responded, gazing at Tonsil Vapor with extreme attention as if the centennial was the newest of news and then jotting something down. When he turned the notepad so I could see it, it read:

A \$25 haircut on a 25¢ head.

p. 210A follows →

"Builders of Montana, this week," the TVster was spelling out for us next. "We"--the royal We from the sound of it; the cameraman was showing no proprietary interest whatsoever--"are interviewing people about their occupational contribution to our great state. It occurred to me that an occasion like this, with old-timers on hand," he sent me



a bright smile, damn his blow-dried soul, "would turn up a fascinating livelihood of some kind."

"I don't have a paying occupation," I hastened to head off any interest in me as a specimen, "I'm a rancher."

"What do these epics of yours run, a minute and ten seconds worth?" asked Riley drily.

"No, no, the station is going all out on this. I'm doing two-and-a-half minute segments, would you believe."

Riley let out a little cluck as if that was pretty unbelievable, all right, then sardonically excused himself to go get to work lest television leave him even farther back in the dust. Still leery of being a candidate for oldtimer of the ~~day~~^{night,} I closely tagged off after Riley. We left Tonsil Vapor Purvis fussing to his cameraman, "This doesn't make it for my opening stand-up. Let's set up over there instead."

"Fucking human gumball machine," Riley was muttering as we rounded the partition between the cafe counter and the dining area in back.

"Fucking television has the attention span of a--"

He halted so abruptly I smacked into his back. Riley, though,

never even seemed to notice, in the stock-still way he was staring toward the rear of the cafe.

"What is that?" his eventual question piped out in a three-note tune.

Golden as the light of the dawn sun, the cloth creation emblazoned the entire back wall of the cafe and then some. That is, the roomwide cascade of fabric flowed down from where it was tacked on lath along the top of the wall and surged up like a cresting molten wave at the and quilting frames worktables where stitchery was being performed on it, then spilled forward onto the floor in flaxen pools of yet to be sewn material.

Add in all the people bent over sewing machines or plucking away with needles or just hovering around admiring and gabbing, and I suppose you could think, as Riley obviously did, that the town of Gros Ventre had gone on a binge and decided to tent itself over.

"Just what it looks like," I enlightened the scribbler. ~~him.~~ "Our centennial flag."

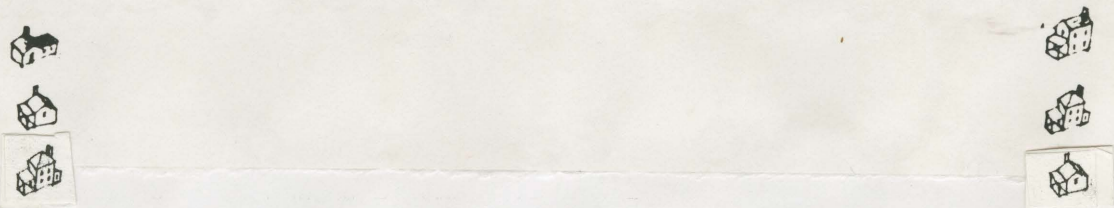
Mariah whizzed past us lugging her camera bag. # "Looks like they're getting ready to declare independence, doesn't it," she appraised the room-swallowing flag and kept right on going to zero in on ~~toward~~ the sewing battalion.

Riley still stood there gawking like a moron trying to read an
 although ~~though~~ the flag didn't seem to me ~~all that tough~~ ~~terribly tough~~ to decipher.

Plain as anything, the line of designs spaced across its top like a
 border pattern was livestock:

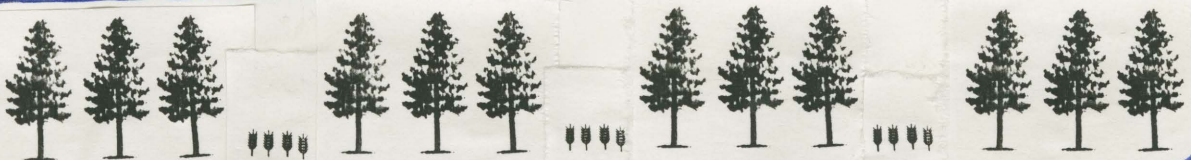


And down the sides the motifs were homestead cabins and ranch houses:



And although the sewing brigade had a way to go to get there, it only
 took the least imagination to see that the bottom border needed to be

forest and ~~rain~~ ^{stream}:



In extenuation of Riley, it was true that the flag's full effect

would not register until all the other elements were in place on it.

The project the Heart Butte schoolkids were doing, for instance, of a

Blackfeet chief's headdress in black and white cloth to resemble eagle

feathers--rampant, as is said in flag lingo. And the combined contribution

David
Lindroth
artwork
to come?

of the English Creek and Noon Creek ranch families, one entire cloth panel--the flag was so big it was being done ^{lengthwise} in sections, which were then quilted together--which was going to be a sawtooth ^{pattern} ~~swatch~~ of purple-blue embroidery all the way across, signifying the mountains across the Two country's western skyline. Then at the hem of the mountains would come a cluster of buildings, being sewn away at by several townspeople ^{even as} ~~right~~ Riley and I watched, ~~now~~ to represent Gros Ventre: the spiked helmet outline of the Sedgwick House hotel, the sharp church steeples, the oldstyle square front of the Medicine Lodge itself, and so on. ~~Finally,~~ ^{Finally,} to top it all off, so to speak, for actually this constituted the very center of the whole flag scheme: the sun. Atop a dark seam of horizon the molten arc of it, spiffily done in reddish orange fabric that even looked hot, just beginning to claim the sky for the day. And over, under, and around ^{the} ~~the~~ sun, in mighty letters of black, the message:

The Two Medicine Country

1889

1989

Greet's The Dawn of Montana

Riley at last managed to show some vital signs. He wondered out loud, plenty loud:

"Who thought up this sucker?"

That particular question I was not keen to deal with because, when you traced right back to it, the party who brought up the flag idea in the first place was more or less me. History's jukebox, John Angus McCaskill. It had been last fall when our steering committee was flummoxing around for some event worthy of marking Montana's centennial with, when Althea Frew pined what a shame it was that we didn't know what had gone on in Gros Ventre that epic day of statehood a hundred years ago. All the cue needed, of course, for me to spout off what I'd so long ago heard from Toussaint Rennie, that the 1889 citizenry of Gros Ventre-- such as there was of it back then--took it into their collective head to be the very first to fly the ^{revised} American flag when Montana came onto it as the forty-first star and so got up early enough to do that municipal flag-hoisting at the exact crack of day. Which inspired some other member of our committee to suggest that we simply emulate our forebears by raising a forty-one-starred flag at dawn on centennial day. But

that was objected to as a backward step, nine of them in fact, in stars-and-stripes history. Okay, somebody else proposed, then let's put up a present-day American flag but a monumentally big one. But somebody yet again made the point that there were already in existence flags damn near as big as America itself--weren't we seeing Bush practically camped out in front of a whopper of one during the presidential election campaign?--and we didn't have a prayer of competing in size. You might know it would be Althea who hatched the plan of making our own flag. Contrive our version ¹ as big as we could without smothering ourselves in it, sure, but the whole thing ¹ most of all, design and fabricate ~~it~~ ourselves and hoist the Two Medicine country and Gros Ventre's own heralding banner at dawn on the centennial.

"It just kind of occurred," I summarized in answer to Riley and moved on into the needlery scene, tagged after by him. Primarily the women were getting things accomplished there at the sewing machines and worktables while the men mostly were standing around looking wise, both sets being duly chronicled by Mariah and her camera. Being greeted by the dozens and greeting back in equal number, I wound my way through the assemblage until I reached the quilting frame which held the panel our English Creek-Noon Creek mountain panorama was being embroidered on.

Lifelong familiar outlines met me there. Roman Reef's great bow of rimrock. The tall slopes of Phantom Woman Mountain. The Flume Gulch canyonline where Noon Creek has its source, and opposite that the comblike outcropping of Rooster Mountain. Really quite beautiful, how all the high skyline of the Two Medicine was transposed there onto the flag in heaviest blue-black yarn. ~~rather, all except the finale.~~ All, that is, The northmost mountain form, Jericho Reef's unmistakable wall-like silhouette, was sketched in pencil on the golden cloth for the next seamstress to follow.

Seamer, rather, for on the Jericho sketch was a pink paper stick-on with Althea's loopy but firm handwriting, which read:

← Jick McCaskill--please stitch here!

So if Jericho was going to get sewn it was up to me, and there was no time like the present. "Got any socks you want darned, you should have brought them," I notified Riley and seated myself to perform fancywork.

"You know how to do that?" he asked skeptically as I plucked up the waiting needle and started trying to match the kind of stitches on the other thread mountains.

"Close enough," I said. "I've sewed shut more woolsacks than you

can count."

Whether it was my example of industry or not, Riley suddenly snapped out of his tourist mode. "This night might actually turn into something. Hold the fort, Jick,
I'm going out to the Bago for my listening gear."

Nature never likes a vacuum. No sooner was I shed of Riley than Howard Stonesifer happened by and stopped to spectate my labors. Which probably was good for my stitching because it lent a little feeling of scrutiny by posterity, Howard being the undertaker.

"Where you been keeping yourself?" Howard asked.

"Out and around," I summarized. "How's the burying business?"

"Mortally slow," he answered as he always did. ~~"Isn't that~~

Riley Wright I just bumped into?"

"I'm sorry to report, it is."

"Mariah and him are back together, eh?"

"They are not. They're just doing a bunch of these centennial stories togeth--with each other, is all. I'm traveling around with them while they do."


He studied down at me. "All three of you are together?"

"Well, yeah, together but not together. Thrown in with one another, more like. Howard, it's kind of complicated."

"I imagine it is," Howard said and departed.

My next visitor was none other than Mariah, who by now had cut her photographic swath across the room to those of us at the sewing frames and tables.

"I bet you never knew Betsy Ross had a beard," I addressed to her, jabbing my needle elegantly into the flagcloth as she neared.



It didn't even register on her. She wore a puzzled frown and even more uncharacteristically had dropped the camera from her eye and was drilling a snake-killing gaze across the room.

I leaned out and saw for myself what was bugging her. Our centennial bunch was not exactly a youth group and wherever there was a Gros Ventrian wearing glasses, which was to say virtually everywhere, bright points of light glittered ~~steadily~~ off both lenses. Or if a person ^{happened to be} ~~was~~ anywhere near a wall, his or her skin was paled out and huge shadows were flung up behind the wan spectre. Any shot by Mariah was going to look like fireflies flitting through a convalescent ward.

Perfectly unconcerned about dazzling the populace, Tonsil Vapor had decided our centennial flag was a backdrop worthy of him and was having his cameraman move the lightstands here and there in front of the sewing tables. What astounded me was that everybody was pretending to be unaware they were being immersed in a pool of television light. Squint and bear it, was the code of the televised.

Not with Mariah. Under the pressure of her glower, the TV cameraman

roused himself enough to shrug and indicate with a jerk of his head that Tonsil Vapor was the impresario here. Tonsil Vapor meanwhile was holding his sport-jacket sleeve against the wall of flag to make sure robin's egg blue went well with golden.

Mariah marched on him.

"Hey, I'm getting bounce from your lights in every shot I try. How about please holding off for a couple of minutes until I'm done back here?"

"We're setting up for my opening stand-up," Tonsil Vapor informed her.

"I can tell you are. How-about-turning-off-your-lights-for-two-minutes-while-I-finish-shooting-here."

"Television has every right to be here," Tonsil Vapor huffed.

"This is a public event."

"That's the whole fucking point," Mariah elucidated. "It's not yours to hog."

"Let's do the ~~stand-up,~~ ~~opener,~~" Tonsil Vapor directed past her to his cameraman and focused his concern on whether his tie was hanging straight.

"Whoa," Mariah told the TV pair. "If you're so determined to

shoot, we'll all shoot." # She reached in her gear bag and pulled out a fresh camera, aiming it into the pleasantly surprised visage of Tonsil Vapor. I was more than surprised: it was the motorized one she'd used to take the rapid-fire photographs of the marauding buffalo bull at Moiese. ~~running antelope.~~ Tonsil Vapor Purvis didn't look to me like he was that much of a mobile target.

With the bright wash of light on him, he fingered the knot of his tie. Brought his microphone up. Aimed his chin toward the lens of the TV camera. "Ready?" he asked his cameraman, although with a little peek out the corner of his eye at Mariah to make sure she was set to shoot, too. The TV cameraman echoed "Ready" flatly back.

"This is Paul whingwhingwhing Purvis, bringing you another Countdown 100 whingwhingwhing moment from here in whingwhing--"

"Cut!" yelled the cameraman, pulling the earphones out away from his ears. Mariah quit firing the motorized shutter and the ricochet sounds stopped.

Tonsil Vapor swiveled his head toward her. "Your camera. We're picking up the noise."

"That's okay, no charge," Mariah answered calmly, keeping the

offending camera zeroed into Tonsil Vapor's face. "You've been donating all kinds of light into my photography."

"Seriously, here," Tonsil Vapor said, a bit pouty. "We have ~~opening stand-up~~
~~an opener~~ to do."

"Up you and your ~~stand-up~~
~~opener~~ both," Mariah told him. "This is a public event and my gear has every right to be here."

Tonsil Vapor stared at her. Uncertainly he edged the microphone ~~triggered~~
up toward his mouth. Mariah ~~fired~~ off a couple of whings and he jerked the mike back down.

With a scowl, Tonsil Vapor swiveled his head the other direction and addressed his cameraman. "Can ~~we~~
~~you~~ edit out her noise?" The cameraman gave him the French salute, shrugging his shoulders and raising the palms of his hands at the same time.

Tonsil Vapor visibly thought over the matter. Mariah did not bring the commotional camera down from her eye until he announced, "Actually, the bar is a more picturesque spot to do my opening stand-up."

Riley, prince of oblivion, sashayed back in from the Bago with his tape recorder as TVdom was withdrawing to the bar and Mariah was setting

to work again on the sewing scene at the far end of the flag. He made a beeline to me.

"Quite a turnout, Jick," he observed brilliantly.

"Mmmmm," I replied and sewed onward.

"Lots of folks," he said as if having tabulated.

"Quite a bunch," I confirmed.

"I was wondering if you could kind of sort them out to me, so I can figure out good ones to talk to," he admitted, indicating to the tape recorder as if this was the machine's idea rather than his. "You know more about everybody here than they do about themselves."

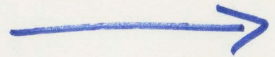
"Gee, Riley, I wouldn't know where to start," I did ^{a couple} ~~two~~ more stitches before adding: "Everybody in the Two country is equally unique."

Had I wanted, I indeed could have been Riley's accomplice on almost anyone in that filled room, for the Two Medicine country was out in force tonight. These are not the best of times for towns like Gros Ventre or the rural neighborhoods they are tied to. The young go away, the discount stores draw shopping dollars off to bigger places, the land that has always been the hope of such areas is thinner and thinner of people and

promise. Yet, maybe because the human animal cannot think trouble all the time, anybody with a foot or wheel to get here had come tonight to advance the ^{community's} centennial rite. All the couples from the ranches along English Creek: Harold and Melody Busby, Bob and Janie Rozier, Olaf and Sonia Florin. From up the South Fork, Tricia and Gib Hahn, who ran the old Withrow and Hahn ranches combined. My longtime Noon Creek neighbor Tobe Egan, retired to town now. A number of the farm families from out east of town, Walsinghams and Priddys and Van Der Wendes, Tebbetses and Kerzes and Joneses. Townspeople by battalions: Joe and Myrna Prentiss from the Merc, the Muldauers who ran the Coast-to-Coast hardware store, Jo Ann and Vern Cooder from the Rexall drugstore. Riley's infinite faith in me to the contrary, one pair I didn't know the names of yet--the young couple who had opened a video parlor where The Toggery clothing store used to be. The bank manager Norman Peyser and his wife Barbara. Flo and Sam Vissert from the Pastime Bar three doors down the street. Others and others--not least, the new Gros Ventrian whom I addressed now as he bustled past Riley and me carrying a coffee urn ~~virtually~~ as big as he was. "Nguyen, how you doing?"

"Doing just right!" Nguyen Trang Hoc and his wife Kieu and their three kids were being sponsored by a couple of the churches there in town--they were boat people, had come out of Vietnam in one of those hell voyages. Nguyen worked as a waiter here in the Medicine Lodge cafe, already speaking English sentences of utmost enthusiasm: "Here is your menu! I will let you look! Then we will talk some more!"

Naturally Riley was scanning the night's civic outpouring in his own cockeyed way. "Who's the resurrection of Buffalo Bill over there?" he



asked, blinking inquisitively toward the figure hobbling ever so slowly through the front door.

"Aw," I began, "that's just--" and then the brainstorm caught up with me. ⁴ I identified the individual to Riley with conspicuous enthusiasm.

"Been here in the Two country since its footings were poured. You might find him highly interesting to talk to. Garland's kind of a shy type, but I bet if you tell him you're from the newspaper that would encourage him a little."

"History on the hoof, hmm?" Riley perked right up and headed toward the front. "You're starting to show real talent for this centennial stuff, Jick."

While it is true I was the full length of the cafe away from Riley's hearing what followed. introduction to the arrivee, there was no lack of volume to ~~the~~ ^{the}

"Newspaper! Just the guy I want to see! Young fellow, what you ought to be writing a story about is me! You know, I was born with the goshdamn century!"

Eyes rolled in all of us who were within earshot, which was to say everybody in the Medicine Lodge. Multiply the crowd of us by the

total of times we had each heard the nativity scene of Good Help Hebner and you had a long number. Riley didn't seem grateful to be the first fresh listener of this eon, either. The look he sent me still had sting in it after traveling the length of the cafe. I concentrated on needlework and maintaining a straight face. "By now half this country is Hebners, young fellow! And I started every one of them out of the chute!"

Riley had no way of knowing it but that particular procreatorial brag was as close to the truth as Good Help was ever likely to come. Which made me shake my head all the more at the fact that it had taken ^{the old so-and-so} ~~him~~ until his eighty-ninth year to start looking paternal, let alone patriarchal. For as long as I could remember, Good Help--need I say, that nickname implied the exact opposite--had lazed through life under about a week's grayish grizzle of whiskers; never enough to count as an intentional beard, never so little as to signify he had bothered to shave within recent memory. But now ^g for the centennial ^g he somehow had blossomed forth in creamy mustache and goatee. To me it still was a matter of close opinion whether ^{Good Help} ~~he~~ more resembled Buffalo Bill or a billy goat, but definitely his new facial adornment was eyecatching.

"You got to go do what, young fellow? Speak up, I'm getting so deaf

I can't hear myself fart!" I couldn't actually hear either the excuse

Riley was employing to extricate himself, but Good Help provided everybody

in town the gist of it: "Got to go see a man about a dog, huh? You

know what they say, stand up close to the trough, the next fellow

might be barefoot!"

While Riley now tried to make an invisible voyage to the men's room

in the bar half of the Medicine Lodge, chuckled and checked on Mariah's doings.

Easily enough done. She was wearing the turquoise shirt she'd had on

at the Fourth of July rodeo and you could see her from here to Sunday.

As she gravitated through the crowd, ever scouting for the next camera

moment, it struck me what a picture she made herself.

"Oh, Jick, I'm so relieved to see you here," Althea Frew pounced

in on me out of nowhere. In her centennial getup of a floor-length

gingham dress with a poke bonnet, she looked as if she'd just trundled

in by prairie schooner. "We were afraid you'd given up on the committee."

"Would I do that?" I denied, right then wishing I had.

"It's nice to see you back in the swim of things," she assured me and patted my arm. Althea was the kind of person full of pats. "Can't I bring you a cup of coffee?" she offered avidly.

Only if it is big enough for me to torpedo you in, I thought to myself. Dave Frew had died of emphysema a year or so ago and all too evidently Althea had formed the notion that because she was a widow and I now was a widower, we were going to be an ordained pair at gatherings such as this. My own notion was, like hell we were. Already I had dodged her on card parties and square dancing at the Senior Citizens' Center. Althea seemed to regard me as an island just waiting to have her airdropped onto it. Let her land and there'd be an instant new civilization, activities for all my waking hours.

Christamighty, I more than anybody knew that I needed refurbishing of some kind from my grief for Marcella. But to put myself up for adoption by Althea. . .

"You take it with just a dab of cream, don't you?" Uh oh. She'd already