started to catalogue me. I knew where that would go. If she inkled out the dosage in my coffee, as the night follows the day it would lead to how crisp I like my fish fried and from there onward to my favorite piece of music, on and on until she would know my underwear size.

"Black," I lied. "Don't bother, I'll get myself a cup, I was about to head that direction anyhow."

As I recessed from my sewing and tried to tactically retreat to the coffee urn, Althea fell in step as if I'd invited her along.

Wasn't this just ducky, now.

She had us in motion in tandem in public, a hearts-and-flowers advertisement for the whole town to see. I craned around for Mariah's reaction to this. For once I was thankful to have her immersed in her picture-taking, across the room with her back to Althea and me as she immortalized Janie Rozier zinging a seam of the flag through her sewing machine.

I will swear on any Bible, I did not have anything major against Althea Frew. But I had nothing for her, either. True, Marcella and I had known her and Dave ever since we were young ranch couples starting
out. Neighbors, friends, people who partnered each other a few times a night at dances, but not more than that. You cannot love everyone you know. Love isn't a game of tag, now you're it, now she's it.

I sipped at the plastic cup of coffee Althea bestowed on me and tried not to wince at its bitter taste. For that matter, I had no illusions that Althea was after me for my irresistible romantic allure. Simply put, pickings were slim in the Two Medicine country for women who outlived their husbands, as most of them showed every sign of doing. Here tonight for instance, Howard Stonesifer was one of those mother-smothered bachelors; Althea knew that even if old lady Stonesifer ever passed on, there was no denting Howard's set of habits. Tobe Egan over in the corner was a widower but his health was shot, and why should Althea take on another ill case after the years she had spent with Dave's emphysema? Go through this entire community and the actuarial tables were pretty damn bare for Althea's brand of husband-looking.

Which was why yours truly was about to be the recipient of a whopping piece of the Happy Birthday, Montana cake Althea was now adoringly cutting.
Right then Riley re-emerged from the direction of the men's room, cautiously checking around for the whereabouts of Good Help Hebner.

I was not keen on fending with him just then, particularly if he was going to notice the close company Althea was keeping me, but it turned out Riley was pointedly ignoring my existence and instead migrated directly to Mariah. Whatever he said to her, for once it seemed to be in earnest. She listened to him warily, but listened. Then came her speaking turn, and he nodded and nodded as if he couldn't agree more.

It dawned on me that they must be conferring about whether to do a piece about tonight. I willed Mariah to tell him to go straight to hell, that their mutual woe of ending up in marriage had started here when she shot and he wrote that earlier Gros Ventre centennial shindig. Instead she studied him with care, then turned and pondered the careful of people as if taking inventory. While Althea yattered at me and I took solace in cake, Mariah led Riley over near us where Nan Hill, snow-haired and tiny with age, was sitting sewing.
"Nan, this man would like to talk to you for a story in the newspaper. How about telling him about doing the washing at Fort Peck while I take a picture, would you mind?" As Riley moved in with his tape recorder and a smile that would make you want to take him home and give him a bed by the fire, Mariah checked her light meter, then stood back, biting her lower lip as she held the camera up under her neck, lens pointing up, waiting. Waiting. Then ahead of the moment but somehow having seen it on its way, she swiftly but unobtrusively shifted the camera over to her eye as the old woman warmed into the telling.

Age is humped on her small back. It began to descend there in 1935 in daily hours over a washboard, scrubbing at the Missouri-muddled clothing of the men at labor on the biggest earthen dam in the world, Fort Peck. "We went there with just nothing and J.L. got on as a roustabout. I wanted to find some way of earning, too, so I put up a sign Laundry Done Here. I charged 15¢ for shirts-- and that was washed, ironed, mended and loose buttons sewed on-- and 10¢ for a pair of shorts, another 10¢ for an undershirt, 5¢ for a handkerchief, and 10¢ for a pair of socks. Any kind of pants
was 25¢ for washing and pressing. I had the business, don't think I didn't. Those three years at Fort Peck, I always had six lines of clothes hanging in the yard."

The waltz of the camera, Riley following, led on from Nan to the Hoc family, Mariah poising in that long-legged crouch of hers while focusing on the little Hoc girl, her left hand under the camera cupping it upward in an offering way, right hand delicately fingering the lens setting, her shoulderlong flow of hair behind the camera like an extravagant version of the hood a photographer of old would hide his head under, and her voice going through a repertoire of coaxes until one brought out on the little Hoc girl what was not quite a smile but an expression more beautiful than that, Mariah telling her as if they had triumphed together, "Thaat's what I want to see."

They are Asian delta people, newly come to American mountain headwaters. Their immense journey pivots on the children, especially on the lithe daughter made solemnly older by the presence of two cultures within her. Driver's license, income tax, television,
food budget, rock music, all the reckless spill of America must come to her family through the careful funnel of this ten-year-old woman who is now the mother of words to her own parents.

Althea was saying in my ear now, "It's so nice to see Riley back in your family. He and Mariah make such a wonderful couple."

"They are not--"

"People their age, they should take happiness while they can, don't you think?"

What I thought was that people any age shouldn't be trying to fool one another. That I should be able to say straight out to Althea, "Look, terms have not changed between us even though our lives have. I am not second-husband material for you, so kindly just put the pattern away, please."

But that was blunter than can be spoken in a room crowded with everyone who knew us. Even so, Althea didn't take the chance that I might blurt the impolite truth. "Oh foo, look what time it's gotten to
be already. I'd better go look over the agenda for our meeting. It'll seem so much more like a committee now that you're back, Jick," she left me with, but not before a last fond assault on my arm, pat pat.

My ears got the next unwelcome traffic, a mimicking voice approaching fast: "He's kind of a shy type, but I bet if you tell him you're from the newspaper..."

Innocence seemed the best tack to take with Riley right then. "Get a lot of fascinating stuff out of Good Help, did you?"

"Gobs and gobs," he replied sardonically. "I figured I'd write that he's as intrinsically American as the Mississippi River."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. A mile wide at the mouth."

"Gee," I said, genuinely interested in the prospect, "if you say that in the newspaper about a guy, won't he sue your nuts off?"

"Put your mind at ease," Riley told me. "Jick, damn you, you know that old codger could talk for a week and only ever tell the truth by accident. Even the BB would recognize it as the rankest kind of bullshit."
Riley's bright blue gaze left me and went to the wall of fabric behind me. "The real story here is that humongous flag. If you characters ever manage to get it in the air." Riley scanned the room as if in search of anyone capable of that feat. He got as far as Althea, busy in her bonnet, and inquired: "By the way, who's your ladyfriend?"

"She is not--"

"Bashful never won the bushelfull," he trilled out, goddamn him. "Don't worry, I won't snitch to Mariah that you're busy girling behind her back. So, what's next in this festive evening?"

Barbecuing a fatmouthed newspaper guy over a slow fire, was what I wished could be next on the agenda. But instead I told Riley I had my needlework to tend to, in a tone that let him know it was a pursuit preferable to conversation with him, and headed myself from the coffee urn toward the Two Medicine mountainline panel of the flag.

I wasn't much more than in motion before a voice called out:

"Talk to you a minute can I, Jick?"

I was beginning to wonder: was there a procession all the way out into the street of people lined up to take aim on me?
This voice was that of Shaun Finletter from the Double W and so I at least knew what the sought minute of talk was going to be about. I turned around to Shaun's face full of blondish fuzz—some of these beardgrowers were maybe going to need a deadline extension to Montana's bicentennial—and responded as civilly as I could manage: "How's tricks?"

"Oh, not bad, Jick. Yourself?"

"Just trying to stay level."

Shaun then plunged right down to business, which was the way Finletters were. "Jick, I been hearing from headquarters. They're still real interested in making you an offer on your place."

"Are they." I felt like adding, are you sure that was headquarters making itself heard instead of headquarters? But Shaun was a neighbor, even if I did with his TriGram bosses would take a long walk off a short balcony.

Shaun rattled it off to me. "...It's nothing against you, Jick... just a matter of big-scale economics... better able to put maximum animal units on that land..." The Double Dub had a great history of that, all right. Running more cattle than it had country for. The
original Williamson, Warren, had practically invented overgrazing,
and his son Wendell got in on buying up bankrupt smaller ranches during
the Depression and really sandwiched cattle along Noon Creek from hell
to breakfast, and now TriGram computers doubtless were unitizing cows
and calves onto every last spear of grass.

Yet it was their business and none of my own, how the Williamsons
or the TriGramites comported themselves on WW land they had title to.

The patch of earth I held title to was the matter here, and Shaun
now stated the dollars per acre, a damn impressive sum of them, that
TriGram would pay to take the ranch off my hands. "You know that's
top dollar, the way things are, Jick."

Shaun was a nice enough human being. Someone who would look you
square in the eye, as he was now while I scanned back at him and noticed
he was growing beefier, a little more face, a bit more belly, than since
I'd last seen him. Actually just a year or so older than Mariah, he
and she had gone together a while in high school. My God, the way things
click or don't. If that had worked out into marriage instead of her
going on to photography and him to an ag econ degree at Bozeman,
Shaun might well have been the answer to run my ranch; might have
become the one to perpetually tell the Williamsons and TriGrams of the
world to go to hell, instead of being their errand boy to me.

If I had pounds more of brains I might be smarter, too. I struggled
to get myself back on the necessary train of thought. How to reply
to the dollar sign. It wasn't as if I hadn't had practice closing one
or both eyes to money. The first TriGram guy, who'd acted as if he
already owned my ranch and me as well, I'd told to stick his offer
where the sun doesn't shine. All the others since, one or two every
year, I'd just told nothing doing. But now here I was being perfectly
polite with Shaun because even though he was the current TriGram
factotum, I had known his family and him from when he was a waggy pup.
Even I had to admit I seemed to be trending away from that original
stick-it stance.
Shaun gave a little jump as if he'd been goosed. For once I didn't even mind that Mariah included me in her picture ambush; it was worth it to see the caught-while-sucking-eggs expression on Shaun.

"Don't let me interrupt Noon Creek man talk," Mariah put forth coolly with the camera still up to her eye. This was a different one than I'd yet seen her use tonight. Did she possibly have a calibre for every occasion?

"It'll keep," said Shaun, wincing at the next click. Maybe it had been purely coincidental but after splitting up with Mariah he all but instantly married Amber, who notably stayed home and raised kids. "Think the proposition over and let me know, Jick. Mariah, it's always an event to see you," and he headed rapidly off out of pointblank range.

"He always was about halfway to being a dork," Mariah mentioned as we watched Shaun retreat. "He even necked like he was doing math."

"Yeah, well, he's maybe getting better at his calculations," I let her know. "You sure you don't want a ranch?"
"You saw how far I've gotten from the place," Mariah answered after a moment. "On the way into town."

It took me a moment, too, to discard that incident at the Double W gate. "I guess when you get to my age you're a little touchy about skulls."

"Quit that," she directed quickly. "You're much too young to be as old as you are."

Didn't I wish. But I let that pass and instead took Mariah by the elbow and turned her around to the golden flood of flag cloth. "Something I need you to do." I indicated to the panel where I'd sewn Jericho Reef halfway to completion; the panel for the McCaskills to have their stitches ride the wind on. "Sit down there and immortalize yourself."

"You promise I won't get a reputation for domesticity?" she kidded, but I could see she was tickled pink to be included in the centennial stitchwork.

"Probably not much danger," I said, and we laughed together as we hadn't for a long time.

So Mariah sat and had at it, the needle disappearing and then tugging through another dark dash of the mountainline above the ranch earth where
we were both born. "It's like putting ourselves on a quilt, isn't it,"
her similar thought came out quietly.

"Kind of, yeah." I stood and watched her neat intense work with
the needle. "But the next hundred years don't look that
simple."

She knew I meant the ranch and whether to sell now or stagger on.

"How are you leaning?"

"Both directions. Any advice from somebody redhead would be
a whole lot welcome."

Mariah crinkled a little face and I thought she'd stuck herself

but it was the topic that was sharp.

"You know I couldn't wait to get off the place when I was growing
up," she mused. "Away to college. Away to--where I've been. I got
over that and before I knew it I was fond of the place again. The ranch
meant, well, it meant you and Mother, in a way. As if it was part of
you--some member of the family you and she made out of the land." Now
Mariah addressed downward as if reasoning to the sliver of metal passing
in and out of the cloth. "But it'll never be part of me in that same
way. It hurts to say, but I'm just a visitor at the ranch any more. Lexa and I dealt ourselves out of it by going off to our own lives. That's what happens. You and Mother maybe didn't know you were raising an Alaskan and a Missoulian, but that's how we turned out. So it has to be up to you what to do with the place, Dad. It's yours. Not ours in any way that we should have a say."

"You want me to walk over there and tell Shaun TriGram's got itself a deal, is that it?"

Mariah swallowed, but both the tug of her needle and the look she sent me stayed steady. "It's up to you," she stood by.

Maybe I would have made that journey across the room to Shaun, right then and there, if Mariah had not abruptly put down her needle in exchange for her camera, twirled a lens on, and aimed in sudden contemplation of something occurring behind me. In curiosity, not to mention self-defense, I shifted half-around to see.

Riley at work. He had sixed his tape recorder onto the lawyer Don Germain, who for once had the quite unlawyerly look that he wasn't sure how he got into this but
didn't know how to get out either. Without being able to hear the words of either, I could tell by the carefully innocent way Riley asked his questions and Don's pursed lips as he cogitated his answers that the topic must be something fundamental.

How and when should we lift our own roots? Or as we more usually ask it in this spacious nation, how many times? His were temporarily shifted for him from Rhode Island after law school, when his military stint put him at Malmstrom Air Force base in Great Falls. Malmstrom made him a galvanized Westerner.

Montana, the shirts with pearlescent snap buttons and the brass belt buckle proclaiming The buckaroo stops here on his outside but original element underneath, so he chose a place (Gros Ventre, but it could have been any of a hundred Montana others) to try this trafficless wide-sky life. He himself tells the joke that the town is too small for one lawyer but big enough for two. Readily enough, too, he reveals his snug fit into his generation's statistics: a second wife, two children, considerable tonnage of vehicles—TVs-VCR-snowmobile-gas barbecue-power tools— satellite dish. It is his wife, though, who teasingly tells
that he has been struggling with the decision of whether to keep
his centennial contest beard or not, because of the gray showing
up in it.

So, he meets middle age in the mirror these mornings and
they debate. "I've really liked living here, don't get me
wrong. Cathy and I both would hate to leave Montana. But
the money is better almost anywhere else you can name. Sure,
this has been a good place to raise the kids. But whether
to spend the rest of my life here..."

Ever so casually I said to Mariah, "I see you and Riley are
piecing up a storm."

"We're managing to," she said, and picked up where she had left off
in her stitching.

While Mariah completed Jericho Reef, I decided I had better seize
that opportunity to heed a certain call of nature--damn Althea and her
loveydovey cups of coffee anyway--and headed myself into the bar toward
the men's room.
And popped around the corner into light so extreme it set me back on my heels. Tonsil Vapor and accomplice had Good Help Hebner sitting there posed against the dark oaken bar.

Not even a TV guy would voluntarily go near Good Help if he knew what he was getting himself into, would he? During my business in the men's room I worked out what must have taken place: after his opener Tonsil Vapor had poked his head back into the supper club, discerned Riley getting both ears loaded by Good Help, and figured there was his ripe interview subject.

When I emerged, Fred Musgreave was behind the near end of the bar, ever so slowly wiping the wood with a dish towel as he watched the million-watt spectacle. Fred by nature was so untalkative it was said of him that he was an absentee owner even when he was here on the premises of the Medicine Lodge, so I merely walked my fingers along the bar top.
to indicate to him that this was a night that needed some Johnny and
propped myself there to spectate, on the chance that television might
be more interesting outside the box than in.

Poised beside Good Help, Tonsil Vapor gave a royal nod, the camera's
red light lit up, and he intoned into his microphone: "Here with us now
is tonight's builder of Montana, Gros Ventre's own Garland Hebner--
born, as he likes to say, with the century. Mr. Hebner, first off let
me ask you, what was your line of work?"

"I have did it all," our new TV star airily assured his interlocutor.

"I'm sure you have," emitted Tonsil Vapor with a chuckle that
trifle sounded a little forced. "But what I meant was, what did you do for
a living?"

"I was what you call self-employed."

Self-unemployed was more like it. Garland Hebner's only known
activity had been the one that produces children, and as soon as they
were big enough to be sent out to herd lamb bunches in the spring or
drive a stacker team in haying, Hebner child after Hebner child brought
home the only wages that tatterdemalion household ever saw.
"Cut," called out Tonsil Vapor, looking nonplussed. "But Mr. Hebner, this is an interview about how you helped to build Montana. Isn't there some **interesting** job you held, sometime or another?"

This did stump Good Help. He sat there blinking as if each of his 89 years was being projected one after another onto the inside of his eyelids. Until:

"By the Jesus, I remember now! Sure, I had a job! Goshdamn interesting one, too! What it was, I--"

"No, no, wait until we roll and tell me then. Spontaneity is the lifeblood of television, Mr. Hebner. Now, then. Ready?" The cameraman minimally indicated he was, and Good Help appeared to be absolutely primed and cocked. The instant the line-of-work question had been recited again, Good Help got hold of Tonsil Vapor's mike hand, drew the instrument almost into his mouth and pronounced in a kind of quavery roar:

"I was the pigfucker! One entire summer! Ought to been the summer of 19-and 18, no, was it 19-and--"

"Cut!" squawked Tonsil Vapor as if he just had been.
The TV maestro stepped back a large pace, his mouth twice as far open as it had been yet tonight. Holding the microphone protectively against his sport jacket, he took stock of Good Help. Eventually he managed, "Mr. Hebner, I'm afraid you misheard my question. What I asked you was what you did for a living, not--"

"I just was telling you! Don't you hear good? I was the pigfucker! Over across the mountains in that Kootenai country, in them big woods! Best goshdamn job I ever--"

While Tonsil Vapor expelled in a rapidly rising voice, "But we can't let you say that on the air!" I took a contemplative sip of my scotch ditch. Riley and Mariah's story on the red-light duchesses of Helena and now Good Help's unexpected occupation; kind of a rough day for history.

"He's trying to tell you the truth for once," I called down the bar. Good Help glared my way while Tonsil Vapor's coiffure rotated toward me. My own startlement had not been at the nature of Good Help's
job but that he'd ever held one at all. 1918, though, explained it:
enlistment into employment rather than the war in Europe.

Tonsil Vapor approached me, trailed by his electronic Siamese twin. He wore an expression as concerned as his cameraman's was languid. Leaning close, Tonsil Vapor asked me in a hushed tone:

"You mean to tell me that your town's historic citizen had sexual congress with--" and here he twirled his index finger in the corkscrew pattern of a pig's tail.

"Well, I can't testify one way or the other on that," I hedged.

"But what he's trying to tell you about here is something else. One of the jobs on those logging crews over west of the mountains was, uh, like he says."

Tonsil Vapor peered at me in even more perplexity.

"Pigfucker," I clarified. "See, in those days when they'd go to skid logs out of the woods they'd string them together and to end with eyebolt hitches, sort of like links of sausage. And the last log they'd hitch on was a hollowed-out one called the pig. After all the other logs were snaked out of the woods, then the eyebolts and tools
and anything else got thrown in the pig--I guess that's maybe why they called it that, you could toss anything into it--and it'd be skidded back into the timber for the next string of logs, same again. Anyway, the guy, usually he was just a punk of a kid," although it was at least as hard to think of Good Help Hebner young as it was to imagine him employed, "who threw the stuff into the pig was called the--"

"Pigfucker," intoned Tonsil Vapor, gazing down the bar to where Good Help was passing the time by grooming his goatee with his fingers. "But wasn't that job ever called anything nicer?"

I shrugged. "Not that I ever heard of. Lumberjacks tend not to be dainty talkers."

The bored cameraman shifted his feet as if settling down for another wait, and he and Fred and I watched Tonsil Vapor chew the inside of his mouth as he continued staring down the bar at Good Help.

At length the cameraman suggested, "Let's just bleep the mothering word."

"Shit, that just emphasizes it," Tonsil Vapor let out peevishly. "No,
we've got to get our historic citizen to talk about the job without...

Wait, I know!" His face lit up as if the camera and lights were on him.

"I'll just say, 'Mr. Pigner, I--'"

"Hebner," I prompted.

"Mr. Hebner, I understand you once worked in a logging crew, quite a number of years ago in this Montana of ours. Would you please share with our viewing audience what you did in that job?" That way, he won't need to say--"

"Pigfucker," Good Help recited before the TVing was to commence again, "is what I ain't supposed to say on the television but just tell what that job with the pig was?" He squinted anxiously up at Tonsil Vapor, wanting to make sure he had the new ground rules straight.

"Perfect!" Tonsil Vapor pronounced. He turned to the cameraman one more time, got one more bored nod, aimed his chin into the lens and the bright lights came on again.

The Here-with-us-now part and so on was going along fine, and I had to admit, Good Help Hebner ensconced there with the carved dark oak
of the Medicine Lodge's ancient bar behind him looked amply historical.

And I could tell by his squint of concentration that he had Tonsil Vapor's cue about his logging job clamped carefully in mind.

"--share with our viewing audience that experience in the woods?"

Tonsil Vapor got there as smooth as salve from a new tube and held the microphone in front of Good Help's venerable lips.

Good Help craned forward and carefully brayed:

"What I done was, I fucked the pig! One entire summer! Best goshdamn job--"

I left the TV perpetrator staring in despair at Good Help and took my restored good humor back into the café. Only to be met by Althea shooing the crowd into chairs. "Oh, Jick, you're just in time, we're about to have the committee meeting."

Riley already had gone over and propped himself along the wall where he could study sideways into either the audience or our committee, dutiful nuisance that he was. Mariah meanwhile was signifying by pointing
urgently to my chair at the pushed-together cafe tables where the committee members were supposed to sit that she wanted me up there for a group picture. No rest for the civic.

On my way to my seat, though, I paused at the end of the committee table to say brightly to Amber Finletter, who had been a wonderful neighbor to us when Marcella fell sick, "How you doing, Amber?" And wordlessly got back the merest little picklepuss acknowledgment.

Oh, horse pucky. Amber had her nose out of joint, McCaskillwise, because she figured Mariah was making a play for Shaun during that picture-taking of him and me. Jealousy has more lives than Methuselah's cat.

Then no sooner was I sat than I was afflicted with Arlee Zane. Arlee and I have known each other our entire lives and disliked each other that same amount of time.

Leaning over from his chair next to mine, Arlee now hung his fat face almost into mine and slanted his eyes in the direction of Althea
at her speaking stand. Grinning like a jackass eating thistles he
semi-whispered, "Jick, old son, are you getting any?"

I cast a glance of my own across the room toward Arlee's wife
Phoebe and asked in turn, "Why? Have you noticed some missing?"

That settled the Arlee situation for a while, and I was able to
direct my attention to Howard Stonesifer seated on the other side of me.
"Catch me up on what's been happening here, Howard."

"Shaun Finletter and Mike Sisti rounded up a flagpole," he
reported. "They went all the way across the mountains to Coram for the
tree, to get one big enough to take this flag. Other than that, everybody's
just sewing"—he cast a look at my chin shrubbery—"or growing."

With a soft raprap raprap raprap of her gavel—would you believe,
even her hammering sounded like pats—Althea was commencing to officiate.

"The meeting will please come to order, everybody, including you,
Garland Hebner." Good Help had spied Riley at his listening post there
along the wall and doubtless was creaking his way over to deliver an hour or
two of autobiographical afterthought, but Althea's injunction halted
the old boy as if he'd been caught slinking into the hen house.
"It's so wonderful to see so many of you being so public spirited here tonight," Althea proceeded on. "I won't have to go door to door around town handing out pushbrooms after all." She smiled sweetly in saying that, but testimony could have been elicited in that audience from any number of persons who were choosing to put up with an evening of committee crap rather than risk Althea putting them in the wake of our centennial parade's horse version.

Under Althea's generalship we whipped right through Howard's minutes of the last meeting and Vanella's treasurer's report, and when we got to the first order of business, guess whose it was.

"We need to give some thought to our flag-raising ceremony," Althea informed all and sundry. "It would be nicest, wouldn't it, if we could re-enact that dawn just the way it happened a hundred years ago, when our Gros Ventre forebears flew Montana's very first flag of statehood. But of course we don't know what was said on that wonderful occasion."

The funny thing was, I did know. To the very word, I possessed the scene that ensued that exact morning of a century ago. I had heard it from Toussaint Rennie, who inevitably was on hand at the occasion.
The gospel according to Toussaint was that Lila Sedgwick had officiated.
Strange to think of her, a mind-clouded old woman wandering the streets
of Gros Ventre conversing with the cottonwood trees when I was a youngster,
as ever having been vital and civic. But there in her young years Lila and
the handful of others this community was composed of in 1889 had mustered
and made what ceremony they could. "Way before dawn," Toussaint's purling
voice began to recite in me again now, there, at that committee table.
"Out to the flagpole, everybody. It was still dark as cats, but--"

I had an awful moment before I could be sure Toussaint's words
streaming weren't coming out through my mouth. Another spasm of the past, and
this one as public as hell. It was one thing to have my memory broadcast
out loud around Mariah and Riley and totally another to blab out here
in front of everybody who knew me. I tried to fix an ever so interested
stare on Althea as she continued to preside out loud and meanwhile clenched
my own lips together so

...tightly I must have looked like a shut purse. But these cyclones out
of yestertime into me: what was I going to do about them? I mean,
when you come right down to it, just where is the dividing line between
reciting what the past wants you to and speaking gibberish? Was I going to be traipsing around blabbering to the cottonwoods next?

"A ceremony isn't really a ceremony unless it has a speech, now is it?" Althea asked and answered simultaneously. "So, before our wonderful flag is hoisted Centennial morning, we really should have someone say a few words, don't you all agree?"

I wholly expected her to go into full spiel about what the speech ought to be about, and then somebody, quite possibly even me, could stick a hand up and suggest that she spout all of it again on Centennial morning and that would constitute the speech, but no, oh hell no. All Althea trilled forth next was:

"I nominate Jick McCaskill as our speaker."

From the various compass points of the committee table, hearty voice and Arlee's malicious voice and vindictive voice chorused: "I second the motion."

"Whoa, hold on a minute here," I tried to get in, "I'm not your guy to---" but do you think Althea would hear of it?
"Oh foo, Jick, you're entirely too modest. If you're stuck for
what to say I'll be more than glad to help out, you always know where
to find me. Now then, all in favor of Jick McCaskill..."

"Tell me, Ms. McCaskill," goddamn Riley started in, doing a syrup
voice like that of TV Purvis, on our way home to the ranch. "when did
you first realize your father is in the same oratorical league with Lincoln,
Churchill, and Phil Donahue?"

"Oh, I always knew he was destined for public speaking because of
how he practiced on the sheep," Mariah ever so merrily got into the spirit
with a Baby Snooksy tone of her own. "He just has this wonderful talent
for talking to sheep"—here she expertly made with her tongue the prrrrr
prrrrr prrrrr call, half-purr, half-coo, that I had taught her to coax
sheep with almost as soon as she could toddle—"and so people are probably
easy for him."

"Up yours, both of you," I stated wearily.
Maybe it was the prospect of chronic aid from Althea, from then until I had to get up in front of everyone on centennial dawn and insert my foot into my mouth. Maybe it was that I did not see my presence could cure the ranch situation any, just then; Kenny and Darleen and Helen were going to keep on being Kenny and Darleen and Helen, whether or not I hovered over them, and so I might as well wait until they had the hay up and the lambs fattened for shipping before I faced what to do with the place. Maybe it was hunch. Or its cousin curiosity, after Mariah and I emerged from the house the next morning and encountered Riley, daisyfresh from solitary sleep in the motorhome, who told her he'd already been to the cookhouse and made the phone call and it was all set, and she in turn gazed at him and then for some reason at me, before saying solemnly, "Heavy piece, Riley."

So, yes, the three of us applied ourselves to the road again. Mariah and I in the Bago trailed Riley and the rental Yugo to town to turn the thing in at Tilton's garage, then I pointed the motorhome toward Choteau, as the Montanian pair had informed me that this next piece of work of theirs awaited there in the Teton River country.
The Teton country is quite the geography. Gravelroading straight west as the Bago now was, we had in front of us the rough great wall of the Rockies where gate-like canyons on either side of Indian Head Rock let forth the twin forks of the Teton River. The floorlike plain that leads to the foot of the mountains is wet and spongy in some places, in others bone-dry, in still others common prairie. And even though I usually only remark it from a distance when I'm driving past on a Great Falls trip, Pine Butte itself seems like a neighbor to me, so to speak.

It and its kindred promontories make a line of landmarks between the mountains and the eastward horizon of plains—Heart Butte north near the Two Medicine River, Bread Butte of course between Noon Creek and English Creek, Pine Butte presiding here over the Teton country like a surprising pine-topped mesa, Haystack Butte south near Augusta. Somehow
they remind me of lighthouses, spaced as they are along the edge of that tumult of rock that builds into the Continental Divide. Lone sentinel forms the eye seeks.

We drove in sunny silence until I said something about how surprising it was to have a swamp out on a prairie, causing Riley to get learned and inform me that the Pine Butte swamp actually was underlain with so much bog it qualified as a fen.

"That what you're going to do here, some kind of an ecology piece?" I asked.

"Sort of," Mariah said.

"Sounds real good to me," I endorsed, gandering out at the companionable outline of Pine Butte drawing ever nearer and the boggy bottomland--in Montana you don't see a fen just every day--and the summits of the Rockies gray as eternity meeting the blue August sky. This area a little bit reminded me of the Moiese buffalo range where we'd started out, nice natural country set aside, even though I knew the Pine Butte preserve wasn't that elaborate kind of government refuge but simply a ranch before the land was passed on to the Conservancy outfit,
which must have decided to be defender of the fen. I couldn't help but be heartened, too, that the news duo at least had progressed from getting us butted by buffalo to moseying through a sweet forenoon such as this.

"Great day for the race," I chirped, even. Oh, I knew full well Mariah had heard that one a jillion times from me, but I figured maybe Riley would fall for it by asking "What race?" and then I'd get him by saying "The human race"—but huh uh, no such luck. Instead Riley busied up behind me and announced, "Okay, gang, we've got to start watching along the brush for the state outfit. Should be easy enough to see, there's a crane on the truck they use to hoist the--"

"I'll watch out this side," Mariah broke in on him and proceeded to peer out her window as if she'd just discovered glass is transparent.

Dumb me. Even then I didn't catch on until another mile or so down the road when I happened to think out loud that even though we were going to be with ecology guys we'd all need to watch a little bit out in country like this, because the Pine Butte area is the last prairie habitat of--
The stiffening back of that daughter of mine abruptly told it.

"Grizzlies?" I concluded in a bleat. "Has this got to do with grizzlies?"

"Just one," said Mariah, super-earnestly gazing off across the countryside away from my stare.

"That's way too damn many! This isn't going to be what I'm afraid it is, is it? Tell me it isn't."

Of course neither of this pair of story-chasing maniacs would tell me any such thing and so the nasty hunch that had been crawling up the back of my neck pounded.

"Bear moving!" I slammed on the brakes and right there in the middle of the county road I swung around in my seat, as mad as I was scared—which is saying a lot—to goggle first at Mariah who ought to have known better than this and then at Riley whose goddamn phone call this morning all too clearly led into this. "Jesus H. Christ, you two! Anybody with a lick of sense doesn't want to be within fifty miles of moving a grizzly!"
"I reckon that's why the job falls to us," Riley couldn't resist
rumbling in one of his mock hero voices. "What's got you in an uproar,
Jick? The good news is you don't have to chauffeur the bear in the
Bago--the state Fish and Game guys load him into a culvert trap."

I didn't give a hoot if they had portable San Quentin to haul a
grizzly in, I wanted no part of it and I then and there let Mariah and
Riley know exactly that. Didn't they even read their own newspaper,
for Christ's sake? Only days ago a hiking couple in Glacier Park had
encountered a sow grizzly and her two cubs, and survived the mauling only
because they had the extreme guts and good sense to drop to the ground
and play dead. And not all that far from where we right now sat, several--
several--grizzlies lately kept getting into the geese and ducks at
the Rockport Hutterite Colony until the Hutterites managed to run them
off with a big tractor. The Bago, I emphasized, was no tractor.

Which did me about as much good with those two as if I'd said it
all down a gopher hole.

Riley was mostly the one who worked on me--Mariah knew good and
well how ticked off I was at her for this--and of course argument might
as well have been his middle name. "The bear is already caught in a steel cable snare, the state guys will conk him out with a tranquilizer gun, and then they'll haul him in a chunk of culvert made of high tensile aluminum he'd have to go nuclear to get out of. Where's the problem?" he concluded, seeming genuinely puzzled.

The rancher portion of me almost said back to him, the problem is the grizzly, you Missoula ninny.

Instead, in spite of myself, my eyes took over from my tongue. They scrutinized the brush-lined creek as if counting up its willows like a tally with wooden matchsticks, they probed each shadowed dip of the Pine Butte fen, they leapt to every ruffle of breeze in the grass. Seeking and seeking the great furry form.

All the while, Riley's bewilderment was stacking up against the silent bounds of me and Mariah, who was keeping ostentatiously occupied with her camera gear. "Gang, I don't know what the deal is here," the scribbler owned, "but we can't just sit in the middle of this road watching the seasons change."
"Are you two going to this bear whether or not I'm along?" I managed to ask.

Say for Riley that he did have marginally enough sense to let Mariah do the answering on that one.

"Yes," she said, still without quite ever looking at me. "The Fish and Game guys are waiting for us."

I jammed the Bago into gear and we went on down the road for, oh, maybe as much as a quarter of a mile before Riley's bursting curiosity propelled out the remark, "Well, just speaking for myself, this is going to be something to remember, getting a free look at a grizzly, hmm?"

When neither of us in the cab of the motorhome responded, he resorted to: "You, ah, you ever seen one before, Jick?"

"Yeah."

"But up close?"

"Close enough." I glanced over at Mariah. Her face carefully showed nothing, but I knew she was replaying the memory, seeing it all again. Who could not? "I killed one once."
"The hell!" from Riley in his patented well-then-tell-me-all-about-it tone. "There on Noon Creek, you mean?"

"In the mountains back of the ranch, yeah." As sudden as that, the site near Flume Gulch was in my mind, as if the earth had jumped a click in its rotation and flung the fire-scarred slope, the survivor pine tree with its claw-torn bark, in through my eyes.

Greatly as I wished he would not, Riley naturally persisted with the topic. "You run across him by accident or track him down?"

"Neither."

"Then how'd you get together with Brother Griz?"

"I baited him."

Strong silence from behind me.

At last Riley said: "Did you. My dad did some of that, too, whenever he'd lose a calf. But black bear, those were. We didn't have grizzlies in the Crazy Mountains any more." Those last two words of
his said the whole issue. Originally the West had been absolutely loaded with grizzly bears, but by now they were on the endangered species list.

"I'm not one of those Three S guys, if that's what you're thinking," I told Riley stonily. Law on the side of the grizzly notwithstanding, there still were some ranchers along these mountains who practiced the policy of shoot, shovel and shut up. Better a buried bear who'd be no threat to livestock or the leasing of oil rights than a living exemplification of wilderness, ran that reasoning.

"Riley never said you were," Mariah put in her two bits' worth.

Actually, except for her contribution being on his behalf it was just as well she did ante herself into this discussion, for my ultimate say on the grizzly issue needed to be to her rather than to some scribbler. I spoke it now, slowly and carefully:

"I don't believe in things going extinct. But that includes me, too."

I knew Riley was grinning his sly grin. "A grizzly couldn't have said it any better, Jick," issued from him. I didn't care. From the tight crinkle that had taken over her expression I could see that my words had hit home in Mariah, complicating what she had been
remembering, what we both were remembering, of that time of the grizzly twenty-five years before.

It started with a paw mark in the pan of the slop milk Mariah had given the chickens.

Why that pan caught her eye so soon again after she'd done her poultry flock, morning chore of feeding the chickens, I do not know. Maybe even at ten years old as she was then, Mariah simply was determined to notice everything. When she came down to the lambing shed to find me I was surprised she and Lexa hadn't left yet for school, but nowhere near so surprised as when she told me, "You'd better come see the bear track."

I dropped to one knee there in the filth of the chicken yard, mindful only of that pale outline in the pan. My own hand was not as steady as I would have liked when I measured the bear's print with it.

The width of the palmlike pad was well over six inches, half again wider than my hand. That and the five clawmarks noticeably off the toes distinguished what kind of bear this was. Not just a grizzly but a sizable one.
Considerations of all kinds swarmed in behind that pawprint. No sheep rancher has any reason to welcome a grizzly, that I know of. A grizzly bear in a band of sheep can be dynamite. So my mind flew automatically to the bunches of ewes and lambs scattered across the ranch—late April this was, the tail end of lambing season—like clusters of targets. But before that thought was fully done, the feel of invasion of our family was filling me. The creature that slurped the chickens' milk and tromped through the still-damp pan had been here astride the daily paths of our lives. Marcella merely on her way out to the clothesline, Mariah simply on her way to the chickenhouse, Lexa kiting all over the place in her afterschool scampers—their random goings surely crisscrossed whatever route brought the grizzly, coming out of hibernation hungry and irritable, in to the ranch buildings. Nor was I personally keen to be out on some chore and afterward all they'd ever find of me would be my belt buckle in a grizzly turd.

So when I phoned to the government trapper and his wife said he was covering a couple of other counties for the rest of the week, I did not feel I could wait.
It was the work of all that day to pick and prepare the trap site. Up toward Flume Gulch I was able to find the grizzly's tracks in the mud of the creek crossing, and on the trail along the old burn area of the 1939 forest fire I came across what in every likelihood was the same bear's fresh dropping, a black pile you'd step in to the top of your ankle. I chose the stoutest survivor pine there at the edge of the old burn and used the winch of the power wagon to snake a long heavy bullpine log in beside the base of the tree. Around the tree I built a rough pen of smaller logs to keep any stray livestock from blundering in, and even though the other blundersome species wasn't likely to come sashaying past I nonetheless nailed up a sign painted in red sheep paint to tell people: LOOK OUT--BEAR TRAP HERE. Then I bolted the chain of the trap to the bullpine log and set the trap, ever so carefully using screw-down clamps to cock its wicked steel jaws open, in the middle of the pen and covered it with pine swags. Finally, from the tree limb directly over the trap I hung the bait, a can of bacon grease.

One thing I had not calculated on. The next day was Saturday, and I got up that next morning to two schoolless daughters who had caught