

the feverish delusion that they were going with me to check the bear trap.

They took my "No" to the court of appeal, but even after their mother had upped the verdict to "You are not going and ~~let's not hear that's that~~ one more word about it," their little hearts continued to break loudly. All through breakfast ~~there were outbreaks~~ there was a series of eight-year-old pouts from Lexa and ten-year-old disputations from Mariah. As the aws and why can't wes poured forth, I was more amused than anything else until the older of these caterwauling daughters cut out her commotion and said in a sudden new voice:

"You'd take us if we were boys."

Mariah should have grown up to be a neurosurgeon; she always could go straight to a nerve. Right then I wanted to swat her precocious butt until she took that back, and simultaneously I knew she had spoken a major truth.

~~"Mariah, that will do!" crackled~~
~~"That'll do, Mariah!"~~ came instantly from her mother, but by Marcella's frozen position across the table from me I knew our daughter's words had hit her as they had me. Mariah still was meeting our parental storm and giving as good as she got, at risk but unafraid. Beside the tense triangle of the other three of us, Lexa's mouth made an exquisite

little O in awe of her sister who scolded grownups.

That next moment of Marcella and I converning our eyes, voting to each other on Mariah's accusation, I can still feel the pierce of. At last I said to my fellow defendant, "I could stand some company up there.

How would you feel about all ofens going?"

"It's beginning to look like we'd better," Marcella agreed. "But you two"--she gave Lexa a warning look and doubled it for Mariah--"are staying in the power wagon with me, understand?"

When we got up to Flume Gulch, we had a bear waiting.

Its fur was a surprisingly light tan, and plenty of it loomed above the trap pen; this grizzly more than lived up to the size of his tracks. The impression the caught animal gave, which shocked me at first, was that it was pacing back and forth in the trap pen, peering over the stacked logs as if watching for our arrival. Then I realized that the bear was so angrily restless it only seemed he was moving freely; in actuality he was anchored to the bullpine log by the chain of the trap and could only maneuver as if on a short tether.

I will tell you, though, that it dried my mouth a little to see how

mobile a grizzly was even with a hind leg in a steel trap biting to its bone.

We must have made quite a family tableau framed in the windshield of the power wagon. Lexa so little she only showed from the eyes up as she craned to see over the dashboard. Mariah as intent as an astronomer in a new galaxy. Their mother and I bolt upright on either side trying not to look as agog as our daughters.

"I better get at it," I said as much to myself as to Marcella.

Something bothered me about how rambunctious the bear was managing to be in the trap. Not that I was any expert on grizzly deportment nor wanted to be. Quickly I climbed out of the power wagon and reached behind the seat for the rifle while Marcella replaced me behind the wheel and kept watch on the grizzly, ready to gun the engine and make a run ^{at} the bear in event of trouble. Mariah craned her neck to catalogue my every move as I jacked a shell into the chamber of the rifle and slipped one into the magazine to replace it and for good measure dropped a handful of the .30-06 ammunition in my shirt pocket. "Daddy will show that bear!" Lexa piped fearlessly. Daddy hoped she was a wise child.

Armed and on the ground I felt somewhat more businesslike about the chore of disposing of the bear. Habits of hunting took over and as if I was skirting up the ridge to stay above a herd of deer below, before no time I had worked my way upslope from the trap tree and the griz, to where my shot would be at a safe angle away from the spectating trio in the power wagon. All the while watching the tan form of trapped anger and being watched by it. Great furry block of a thing, the grizzly was somehow wonderful and awful at the same time. I

I drew a breath and made sure I had jacked that shell into the chamber of the .30-06. All in a day's work if this was the kind of work you were in, I kept telling myself, aim, fire, bingo, bruin goes to a honey cloud. Hell, other ranchers who had grazing allotments farther up in the Two Medicine National Forest, where there was almost regular traffic of grizzlies, probably had shot dozens of them over the years.

Abruptly and powerfully the bear ~~came~~^{surged} upright and lurched toward the standing pine tree, as if to shelter behind it from me and my rifle. The chain on the trap was only long enough for the bear to get to the tree, not around it, but as the animal strained there I saw that only

its toes of the left rear foot were clamped in the jaws of the trap,
not the rear leg itself, which awfully suddenly explained why the bear
seemed so maneuverable in the trap pen.

no #

Next thing to not caught, the trapper Isidor Pronovost

used to say of a weasel or a bobcat toe-trapped that way, barely held

but unable to escape, and such chanciness seemed all the mightier when
gargantuan
the caught creature was as ~~big~~ as this grizzly.

I will swear on all the Bibles there are, I was not intentionally
delaying the bear's execution. Rather, I was settling the barrel of
the .30-06 across a silvered stump for a businesslike heart shot when
instead the grizzly abruptly began climbing the tree. Attacking up the
tree, erupting up the tree, whatever way it can strongest be said,
branches as thick as my arm were cracking off and flying, widowmakers
torn loose by the storm of fur. The dangling bait can sailed off and
clanked against a snag not ten feet from me. The fantastic claws raking
furrows into the wood, the massively exerting hulk of body launching and
launching itself into that tree. The trap dangling from the bear's

rear toes was coursing upward too, tautening the chain fastened into the bull pine log.

Awful turned even worse now. The log lifted at its chained end and began to be dragged to the tree, the bear bellowing out its pain and rage at the strain of that taut pull yet still mauling its way up the tree. I stood stunned at the excruciating tug of war; the arithmetic of hell that was happening, for the log's deadweight on those toes could--

Then I at last realized. The grizzly was trying to tear its toes off to get free.

All prescribed notions of a sure heart shot flew out of me. I fired at the bear simply to hit it, then blazed away at the region of its shoulders again, again, as it slumped and began sliding down the tree trunk, claws slashing bark off as they dragged downward, the rifle in my arms speaking again, again, the last two shots into the animal's neck as it crumpled inside the trap pen.

All those years after, I could understand that Mariah was uneasy about that memory of the toe-caught but doomed grizzly. What the hell,

I was not anywhere near easy about it myself, even though I yet believed with everything in me that that particular bear had to be gotten rid of.

I mean, six-inch-wide pawprints when you go out to feed the chickens?

But I knew that what was bugging Mariah was not just the fate that bear had roamed into on our ranch. No, her bothersome remembering was of us, the McCaskills as we were on that

morning. Of the excitement that danced in all four of us after I

had done the shooting--Marcella with her worldbeating grin, Lexa hopping up and down as she put out her small hand to touch the pale fur,

Mariah stock still but fever-eyed with the thrill of what she'd witnessed,

myself breaking into a wild smile of having survived. Of our family

pride, for in honesty it can be called no less, about the killing of

the grizzly, with never a thought that its carcass was any kind of a

lasting nick out of nature. Late now, though, to try to tack so sizable



an afterthought into that Flume Gulch morning.

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Clearly this day's grizzly already knew that matters had become more complicated. The snared bear stood quiet but watchful in a pen of crisscrossed logs--much like the one I built--under a big cottonwood, a respectful distance between it and the two state men beside their truck when the motorhome and the three of us entered the picture.

Riley forthwith introduced himself and then Mariah and me to the wildlife biologist, and the biologist in turn acquainted us with his bear-management assistant, a big calm sort

who apparently had been hired for both his musclepower and disposition. After we'd all handshook and murmured our hellos, the immediate next sound was Mariah's camera catching the stare of the bear. Inevitably she asked, "How close can I go?"

No sooner was the utterance out of her mouth than the grizzly lunged through the side of the pen, lurching out to the absolute end of the cable it was snared by. That cable was of steel and anchored to the tree and holding the bear ^{tethered} a good fifty yards away from the five of us, but even so. . .

"Right where you are is close enough until we get the tranquilizer in him," the biologist advised. He gave a little cluck of his tongue.

"I've been at this for years and my heart still jumps ^{out} ~~up~~ my throat when the bear does that."

Mine was halfway to Canada by now. I got calmed a little by reminding myself that the assistant bear mover had in hand a .12-gauge semi-automatic shotgun with an extended magazine holding seven slugs, armament I was glad enough to see.

Riley went right on journalizing. With a nod toward the bear he asked, "What have we got here?" I sent him a look. We?

"A sub-adult, probably about a two-year-old," the biologist provided and went on to explain that a young bear like this one was a lot like a kid on the run, no slot in life yet and getting into trouble while it poked around. More than probably it had been one of the assailants on the Hutterites' fowl. Mischief this time was spelled v-e-a-l, a white-faced calf killed in the fence corner of the rancher's

pasture we were now in.

This contest too is tribal. Ignore the incidental details
that one community is four-footed and furred and the other consists
of scantily haired bipeds, and see the question as two tribes in
what is no longer enough space for two. Dominion, oldest of quarrels.
The grizzly brings to the issue its formidable natural aptitude,
imperial talent to live on anything from ants to, as it happens,
livestock. But the furless tribe possesses the evolutionary
equivalent of a nuclear event: the outsize brain that enables them
to fashion weapons that strike beyond the reach of their own bodies.

Riley did a bunch more interviewing of the biologist and the biologist talked of the capture event and the relocation process and other bear management lingo, Mariah meanwhile swooping around with her camera doing her own capturing of the bear moving team and Riley and for whatever damn reason, even me. Even she couldn't help generally glancing at the snared grizzly, as we all kept doing. Yet somehow the bear's single pair of eyes watched us with greater total intensity than our five human pair could manage in monitoring him. And a grizzly's

eyes are not nearly its best equipment, either. Into that black beeper of a nose and those powerful rounded-off ears like tunnels straight into the brain, our smells and sounds must have been like stench and thunder to the animal.

The majority of my own staring went to the rounded crown of fur atop the bear's front quarters, the trademark hump of the grizzly. Not huge, just kind of like an extra bicep up there, an overhead motor of muscle that enabled the grizzly to run bursts of forty-five miles an hour or to break a smaller animal's neck with one swipe. Or to rip off its own trapped toe.

My throat was oddly dry when the question came out of me. "What do you bait with?"

The biologist turned his head ²just enough to study me, then sent Riley an inquiring look. Who, goddamn his knack for aggravation, gave a generous okaying nod ^o just what my mood needed, the Riley Wright seal of approval.

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"Roadkills," the biologist told me. "I collect them--heck of a hobby, isn't it? This one's a deer, good bear menu."

Now that he'd obliged Riley's notebook and Mariah's camera, the biologist said "We'd better get this bear underway. First we dart him off."

With doctor gloves on, he used a syringe to put the tranquilizer dose into a metal dart and then inserted the dart into what looked almost like a .22 rifle. The assistant hefted the shotgun and with their respective armaments the two bear men edged slowly out toward the grizzly, the biologist saying to us in reluctant tone of voice, "This is always a fun part."

When the pair neared to about thirty yards from him the bear really lunged now. At the end of the cable tether it stood and strained. My God, even the fur on the thing looked dangerous; this griz was browner than the tan one I'd shot, and the wind rippled in that restless dark field of hair.

Clicking and more clicking issued from Mariah's camera while the biologist and his guardian eased another ten yards closer to the bear.

Riley alternately jotted in his notebook and restlessly tapped his pen on it. I wonder now how I was able to hear anything over the beating of my heart.

When he was no more than twenty yards from the bear, the biologist raised his cart rifle, leveled it for what seemed a long time, then fired, a compressed air pfoop. The dart hit the grizzly high in the hind quarters. As

the Fish and Game men rapidly walked backwards to where we were, the bear reared up behind, thrashed briefly, then went down, lying there like a breathing statue as the paralyzing drug gripped it.

The bear men stood and waited, the shotgunner never taking his eyes off the bear, the biologist steadily checking his watch and the animal's vital signs.

~~behavior~~ After about ten minutes the biologist said, "Let's try him."

He reached in the back of the truck for a long-handled shovel.

Going over beside the hairy bulk with a careful but steady stride while the helper trailed him, shotgun at the ready, the biologist took a stance and rapped the bear on the near shoulder with the end of the

shovel handle, not real hard but probably plenty to start a fight if the other party is a grizzly.

When the bear just lay there and took that, the biologist announced: "Okay, he's under."

Christamighty, I hadn't known there was even going to be any doubt about it or I for sure would have watched this part of the procedure from inside the metal walls of the motorhome.

There was a surprising amount of business to be done to the ~~sedated~~ ~~drunk~~ bear. Weighing it in a tarp sling and scale that the state pair rigged from the stoutest branch overhead. Checking its breathing rate every few minutes. Fastening a radio collar--surveillance to see whether this was going to be a repeat offender, ~~so to speak~~--around its astonishing circumference of neck. Putting salve into its eyes to ^{keep} ~~clear~~ them from drying out during this immobilization period. And of

course as the biologist said, "the really fun part," loading the thing into the culvert cage. All of us got involved in that except Mariah--

for once I was thankful for her cameramania as she dipped and dove around, snapping away at the two state guys and Riley and me huffing and puffing to insert the three-hundred-pound heap of limp grizzly into the tank-like silver ~~container.~~ ^{trap.} → Every instant of that, remembering the fury exploding up that tree of twenty-five years ago, claws slashing bark into ribbons and broken branches flying, I was devoutly hoping this bear was going to stay tranquil. Sure, you bet, no question but that it was snoozing as thoroughly as drug science could make it do-- yet this ~~grizzly~~ ^{creature} in our hands felt hotblooded and ungodly strong, and all this time its eyes never closed.

Heaven's front gate could never sound more welcome than that clang ~~door of the trap.~~ of the ~~gate~~ dropping closed when we at last had the bear bedded inside. ^Λ

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"Nothing much to this job, hmmm?" the

panting Riley remarked to the biologist.

The state men then employed their crane to lift the cage onto ~~flatbed~~ the truck and soundly secured it with a trucker's large tie-down strap.

"Well, there," I declared, glad to be done with this bear business.

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Almost as one, Mariah and Riley looked at me as if I was getting up from supper just as the meat and potatoes were put on the table.

Good God, how literal could they get, even if they were newspaper people. I mean, the bear movers had the bear all but underway. Did we need to watch every revolution of the truck's wheels, tag along like the Welcome Wagon to the grizzly's new home, to be able to say we'd seen bear moving?

indubitably.
By Mariah and Riley's lights, ~~inevitably so~~ Out our bear caravan proceeded to Highway 89 and then south and west down thinner and thinner roads, to a distant edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. As we went and went, maybe the bear was keeping his bearings but I sure as hell couldn't have automatically found my way back to the Pine Butte country.

4/ Exile is the loser's land. Others set its borders, state

indent



its terms, enforce the diminishment as only the victors know how;

the outcast sniffs the cell of wilderness.

The motorhome had been growling in low gear for what seemed hours, up and up a mountain road which had never heard of a Bago before, until at last the truck ahead swung into a sizable clearing.

"Here's where we tell our passenger adios," the biologist came over to us to confirm that this at last was the release site, sounding several hundred percent more cheerful than he had all day. The idea now, he told Riley and Mariah, was to simply let the bear out of the culvert, ~~page,~~ watch it a little while to be sure the tranquilizer was wearing off okay, and allow it to go its wildwood way, up here far from tempting morsels of calf etcetera.

He could not have been any readier than I was to say goodbye to the grizzly. The back of my neck

was prickling. And though I couldn't see into the culvert ^{trap}~~page,~~ I

somehow utterly knew, maybe the memory of the bear I had killed superimposing itself here, that the ruff of hair on the young grizzly's hump was standing on end, too.

"your vehicle,"

"You folks stay in," the biologist added, somewhat needlessly I thought, before heading back to the truck. The state pair themselves were going to be within for this finale of bear moving, for they could operate the crane from inside the cab of the truck to lift the trap door. Except for rolling her window down farther than I liked, even Mariah showed no great desire to be out there to greet the bear and instead uncapped a long lens and fitted it onto her camera.

The remote control debarkation of the bear began, the state guys peering back through the rear window of the truck cab to start the crane hoisting the culvert door so the bear could vamoose. We waited. And waited.

It was Mariah, scoping over there with her lens, who said it aloud.
"Something's fouled up."

The truck doors opened and the two bear movers stepped out, the helper carefully carrying the shotgun. Reluctantly but I suppose necessarily, I rolled my window down and craned my head out, Riley practically breathing down the back of my neck.

"Equipment," the biologist bitterly called over to us as if it

was his personal malady. "Murphy's Law seems to have caught up with the crane--probably some six-bit part gave out. This won't be as pretty but we can do the release process manually."

The pair of men climbed onto the flatbed of the truck. The shotgun guard stationed himself back by the truck cab while the biologist carefully climbed atop the trap and began the gruntwork of lifting the aluminum door up out of the slotted sides.

From the ^{trap}~~cage~~ there was the sound of great weight shifting as the grizzly adjusted to the fact of freedom out there beyond the mouth of daylight. The big broad head poked into sight, then the shoulders with the furred hump atop them.)

I breathed with relief that we were about to be through with that haunting passenger.

The bear gathered itself to jump down to the ground but at the same time aggressively bit at the edge of the trap door above it. By reflex the biologist's hand holding that edge of the door jerked away.

The grizzly was all but out of the trap when the heavy door slammed down on its ^{tailbone}~~hind end~~.

As instantly as the grizzly hit the ground it whirled against what it took to be attack, snarling, searching. The men on the truck froze, not to give the bear any motion to lunge at.

With suddenness again, the bear reared up on its hind legs to sense the surroundings. It saw the man on top of the culvert trap.

The grizzly dropped and charged, trying to climb the side of the truck to the men.

"Don't, bear!" the biologist cried out.

BWOOMWOOM, the rapid-fire of the shotgun blasted, and within the ringing in my ears I could hear the deep peals of echo diminish out over the mountainside.

4 Both shotgun slugs hit the grizzly in the chest.

Stopping-power, the human tribe calls such large calibre ballistics,
and it stopped the life of the bear the instant the twin bolts
of lead tore into his heart and lungs. The bear slumped sideways,

crumpled, and lay there in the clearing. Above the sudden carcass
the two bear ^{men} ~~nevers~~ stood rooted for a long moment. For one or
maybe both of them, the shotgun had bought life instead of death
by mauling.

Of all of Mariah's pictures of that day, here was the one that
 joined into Riley's words.

But as the shotgunner still held the gun pointing toward the
grizzly, these survivors, too, seemed as lifeless as the furred
victim.

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Normally I do not consider myself easy to spook. But that bear
 episode, close cousin to the outcome of my own grizzly encounter at
 Noon Creek, jittered me considerably. All this that was marching around
 in review in my head and then, kazingo, storming out in fresh form in

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the pieces Mariah and Riley found to do: I couldn't keep the thought from regularly crossing my mind--was I ~~some kind of~~ ^{somehow an} accomplice to occurrences? What was it that had hold of me, to make memory as intense as the experiences themselves? Maybe I was given somebody else's share of imagination on top of my own, yet tell me how to keep matters from entering my mind when they insist on coming in. Don't think I didn't try, day and night. But I could not get over wondering how contagious the past is.

Nor was I the only one with a mind too busy. The first several nights after the grizzly episode, Riley was as restless in bed beside me as if he was on a rotisserie. I laid there next to him as he sloshed around, wondering why I was such a glutton for punishment, until I just could not take it any longer and would give him a poke and call him a choice name, which might settle him down for maybe half a minute. Mariah was the opposite case on her couch at the other end of the Bago; too little movement could be heard from her, no regular breathing or other rhythms of sleep, and so I knew she was stark awake and seeing her photos of that Pine Butte day over and over. And if I was this

well informed on the night patterns of those two I wasn't exactly peacefully slumbering myself, was I.

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The day the Montanian duo decided to try their luck in the High Line country was one of those newmade ones after a night of rain. At the Hill 57

RV Park in Great Falls a lightning storm had crackled through about the night before, 10 o'clock ~~last night~~, white sheets of light followed by a session of stiff windgusts that made me wonder why recreational vehicle parks are always in groves of big old brittle cottonwood trees, then the steady drum of rain on the motorhome roof which at last escorted me, and for all I knew Mariah and Riley as well, off to sleep. Out around us now as we drove north up Interstate 15 were wet grainfields and nervous farmers. After ~~deadly~~ ^{deathly} drought the previous year, they finally had a decent crop and now August was turning so rainy they couldn't get machinery into those fields to do the round dance of harvest.

Maybe the rain~~x~~induced sleep was a tonic, maybe the road hymn of the tires was comfortably taking me over, but I felt a little bolstered

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this morning. Interested in the freeway community of traffic as cars and trucks and other rigs walloped along past the Bago. A venerable Chrysler LeBaron slid by with pots of little cactus in the hothouse sunshine of its rear window. A pickup pulling a horse trailer whipped past, bumper sticker saying Calf ropers do it in front of their horses.

Beyond the Valier turnoff the freeway traffic thinned away and I put our own pedal to the metal. I had the rig rolling right along at a generous 65--which is the spot on the speedometer just beyond 70--when I noticed a speck in the sideview mirror. Steadily and promptly it grew into a motorcycle, one of those sizable chromed-up ones with handlebars like longhorns.

The rider rode leaning back, arms halfspread as if resting his elbows on the wind. That would be highly interesting, I thought, to cross the country that wide-open way, hurtling along directly on top of an engine, like saddling a peal of thunder and letting it whirl you over the land.

~~This~~
~~That~~ skein of thought took my eyes off the sideview mirror longer than I realized, because when I glanced there again the motorcycle was

gone. Vanishimo. Which puzzled me because I couldn't account for any exit where the thunder rider could have left the freeway.

Then there was a knocking on the Bago's door beside me.

I about rocketed up through the roof. In that highly erect new posture, though, I could see that the motorcyclist was right there alongside the front wheel of the Bago, directly under the side mirror.

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Kind of a windmussed guy, as I ^{suppose} ~~guess~~ was to be expected, he had an unlit cigarette in his mouth. Taking one hand off the handlebars he indicated toward the cig with a pointing forefinger.

Mariah had been catnapping in the passenger seat until the knock knock on my door brought her eyes open wide. Riley, dinking around on his laptop back at the nook table where he couldn't see what was happening, assumed the noise was the doing of one of us and figured he was being funny by asking, "Who wants in?"

"Guy on a motorcycle here," I reported, oh so carefully keeping the Bago at a constant speed and not letting it wander sideways into the visiting cyclist. One nudge from the motorhome and he'd be greasing a mile of US 15 with his brains. "I guess maybe he wants a light for his cigarette."

Mariah scrambled out of the passenger seat, camera already up and aimed down across me at the motorcyclist while Riley yelped out, "Holy Christ, Mariah, the photo chance of a lifetime! A guy lighting a match in a 70-mile-an-hour wind--the BB'll be so fucking proud of us he'll put us up for a Pulitzer! Get ready to shoot when I hand this nut a matchbook, okay?!"

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"Riley, get stuffed," Mariah told him but only in an automatic way. She took time out from her clicking--the motorcyclist with his cigarette cocked expectantly was frowning in at us like he wondered what was taking so long--to reach down to the dashboard and shove in the cigarette lighter. "But Jick," Mariah went on as she clapped the camera back up to her eye, "you really ought to tell him it's a bad habit."

Whether she meant the smoking or pulling up companionably alongside rapidly moving large vehicles I am still not clear. Anyway, I rolled down the window and when the lighter popped out ready, I gingerly reached across and then handed it down into the windstream in the direction of the motorcyclist. His fingers clasped it from mine, then in a moment returned it. Satisfactorily lit, he veered away from the side of the Bago, waved thanks, and drew rapidly away down the gray thread of the freeway. As we watched him zoom toward the horizon, Riley said: "Is this a great country, or what."

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Soon we were crossing the clear water of the Marias, literally Mariah's river. Oh, the name Maria's applied by Meriwether Lewis in 1805

to honor a lady of his acquaintance did not have the h on the end but it's said the same, the lovely lilting rye rising there in the middle. Mid-bridge of this lanky ~~leaping~~^g river that gathered water from the snows of the Continental Divide and ~~carried~~^{looped} it across the plains into the Missouri, I sneaked a quick look to the passenger seat and the firehaired daughter there. Whatever Marcella and I expected, our Mariah definitely had a hue all her own.

A quick handful of miles beyond the Marias put us at our ^{noontime} destination. To me the town of Shelby is the start of the High Line country, the land by now leveling eastward after all its geographical stairsteps down from the Divide seventy miles to the west. To look at, Shelby isn't particularly surprising, yet I always think of it as a place with more ambition than its situation warrants. Even now the town is best known for having put up a fat guarantee to lure the heavyweight championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Tommy Gibbons in 1923. Shelby took a bath in red ink but the fight gave it something to talk about ever since. Indeed, when Mariah and Riley and I stashed the Bago and went in the Sweetgrass Cafe for lunch, a lifesize blow-up of Dempsey with his mitts up,

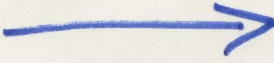
maybe demanding his money, challenged us from the wall.

"There you go," I found myself saying as we awaited our grilled cheese sandwiches. "How about a piece on that fight?"

"Mmm," was all that drew from Mariah.

"Naw," came the instant verdict from Riley, although he did turn and contemplate the businesslike scowl of the pugilist. "The Manassas Mauler or the Molasses Wallower or whatever he was, Dempsey's been written about by the ton."

Mariah and I had the thought at the same instant. Riley must have wondered what sudden phase of the moon had the two of us grinning sappily at each other.



Heritage demanded that the family bywords be said in a woman's voice, and so Mariah tossed the hair out of her eyes and cocked her head around to deliver to Riley: "What about The Other Man."

no ? mark

"The other man?" Riley blinked back and forth between Mariah and me. "Who, Gibbons?" He quit blinking as the idea began to sink in.

"Gibbons. What about him?"

Over lunch Mariah told him the tale just as I had told it to her, just as I had heard it from my mother.

When she'd finished, Riley expelled:

"Jesus H. Christ, that's a better idea for a piece than we've been able to think up all week! Maybe we ought to buy a ouija board and let your grandmother do this whole series."

He glanced from one to the other of us as though deciding whether to say something more. And at last said it, quite quietly. "I wish Granda would have ever let me interview her."

Surprising to hear him speak her nickname within our family, as if he and Mariah still



were married. As if Beth McCaskill still were alive.

Then the two of them headed off to the Toole County Museum to get going on Gibbons.

The morning of the day he had spent his life fighting to get
Tommy
to, ~~Thomas Earl~~ Gibbons disappeared.

He slipped out of the hotel at dawn while his wife and children
still slept and walked up onto the treeless benchland above Shelby.

The town was encased by its land, the rimming benchlands as
straight and parallel as the railroad steel below. But here above
the boomtown splatter of hasty buildings and tents and Pullman cars,
another view awaited: the Sweetgrass Hills, five magical dunes of
earth swooping up out of that ledger-straight northern horizon.

Equally unlikely, the forty-thousand-seat arena of fresh lumber
sprawled below Gibbons as he roamed the ridgeline, trudging and
pausing, trudging and pausing. Shelby was losing its shirt on
promotion of the fight, yet its dreamday of making this oil-
sopped little town known to the world was about to actually happen.

A matter of hours from now Jack Dempsey would arrive on his royal

train from Great Falls. Dempsey had taken the heavyweight
championship of the world four years ago to the day, on another
July 4th, by pounding Willard senseless in three rounds. Two Julys
ago, Dempsey the champion had ~~destroyed~~^{demolished} Carpentier in four rounds
the way a butcher uses a cleaver on a side of beef.

41 Tommy Gibbons was a thirty-two-year-old journeyman boxer.

It had taken him eighty-eight fights to reach today. His distinction
was that he had never been knocked out, never even knocked down.

This afternoon he faced fifteen rounds in that prairie arena
against the hugely favored Dempsey.

41 Gibbons went back down the slope into Shelby. He said something
to his alarmed family and entourage about not being able to sleep
and having just wanted a walk. Then he sat down to breakfast.

She'd have eaten willows, my mother, in preference to being
interviewed by Riley Wright. I'd had to talk like a good fellow even
to get her to let the young new Gros Ventre Gleaner editor do his piece

on her eighty-fourth birthday--the last of her life, it proved to be--
 about the fact that she was born, with utmost inappropriateness, on
 April Fool's Day of 1900. No sooner had the Gleaner man gone out the
 door than she let me know she was chalking him onto the roster of the
 world's fools. She said severely, "I wonder why that young man didn't
 ask me about The Shelby Fight."

"How was he supposed to know to?"

"Jick, anybody with a Lick Of Sense At All knows that fight was
 a big doings. That's why your father and I and Stanley ^{were} ~~were~~ there."
 let out

"You were there?" I ~~said~~ ^{let out} before I thought.

She gave me that look of hers labeled Of Course, You Ninny. "Your
 father or Stanley neither one told you about The Bet?"

My sixty years of close acquaintanceship with my mother still ^{had given} ~~gave~~ no
 guide as to whether silence or daylong interrogation was the wiser
 lubricant to get her to talking. This time I tried a dumb shake of my
 head.

"Well, I'm not surprised. It certainly wasn't anything for the
 two of them to brag about." She unfastened her gaze from me and seemed

to be focusing off into a distance. "We saw the other man that morning just after dawn, you know."

No, I didn't. "Saw who?"

"The man Jack Dempsey was going to fight, of course. He came walking up over the brow of the hill ordinary as anything, right past our tent."

I must have looked as though I'd missed the conversational train by some miles, because she deigned

to circle back and explain. "We camped that night, your father and

Stanley and I, up on the bench there above Shelby. With everybody who'd

come to see the fight, you couldn't get a room in town for love nor money."

She paused ever so briefly, then gave a glint of ^{smile}~~grin~~: "Well, for love,

maybe. Anyway, we'd simply brought a ridgepole tent--a lot of others

did the same, it was a regular tent town there the night before the fight.

Your father and I woke up at dawn, out of habit. Stanley was still

fast asleep out under our Model T--there'd been a dance the night before

and he'd gotten pretty well oiled--and so maybe there was some excuse


for him. But your father saw the man as plain as I did. We both knew

him right away, his picture and Dempsey's had been in every newspaper for months. He went right past our open tent flap and said, "Good morning, quite a morning." We watched him for, oh, most of an hour after that, walking around here and there on top of the bench. Your father figured the man must be worried half to death, to be out wandering around that early on the morning of a fight. I pointed out to him how silly an idea that was--we were up that early every blessed morning of our lives, weren't we?"

"Your father and Stanley," my mother stated conclusively as if citing the last two mysteries of the universe. "How they ever thought Jack Dempsey would knock the other man out, I will never understand."

"Maybe because Dempsey knocked out almost everybody he fought?"

"All your father and Stanley had to do was use their eyes," she



went right on. "Jack Dempsey was like somebody trying to hit a bee with a sledgehammer." To my startlement, she balled up her hands and swung a roundhouse right and then a matching orbit of left haymaker in the air between us. Even at age 84, Beth McCaskill in fists was something to pay notice to.

"Just like that," she emphasized. "Sometimes he missed by only a little, other times by a lot. But he kept missing. Jick, anyone with a brain bigger than a cherry pit could savvy that there were only two possible reasons. Either Jack Dempsey was missing the other man on purpose, or he just could not manage to hit him squarely. Either way, it came to the same."

"But as I heard it, Gibbons was getting the cr--pudding beat out of him all through the whole fight."

"Oh, he was. Especially in the third round. That's when we started The Bet."

Dempsey pounded at Gibbons' body, trying to make him lower
his jaw-guarding gloves. With a dozen rounds to go, Gibbons
already was breathing heavily. Dempsey missed with a whistling

uppercut. He resumed on the body, hitting Gibbons harder and
harder until the bell.

"Your father of course set it all off," my mother declared.

"Can't you just hear him--'Jack Dempsey is eventually going to connect with one of those and knock that guy into the middle of next week, I'd bet anybody.'"

I could hear that, yes, and also the ~~distinct~~ ominous ruffle of what was on its way to my father.

"Naturally," my mother said imperially, "I told him I would bet him a month of my filling the woodbox against a month of his doing the supper dishes, that the other man wouldn't be knocked out." My mother's turn to shake her head, but with incredulity. "Then Stanley had to get into it."

I believe it is not too strong to say that my family loved Stanley Meixell, almost as you are meant to love the person beside you at the altar ^{when} ~~before~~ the bands of gold fasten your lives together. My father was but a redtopped sprig of a homestead boy the day he saw Stanley arrive, a ranger atop a tall horse, sent to create the Two Medicine

National Forest. That day set the course of my father's life. Just as soon as he was big enough he was at the English Creek ranger station in the job of flunky that Stanley contrived for him, and as soon as he entered manhood he emulated Stanley by joining the U.S. Forest Service. By then my mother had come into the picture, and brisk as she was about the shortcomings of the world and particularly its male half, Beth McCaskill adopted that bachelor ranger Stanley Meixell, fussing over him when he shared our supper table as though he were her third small son beside Alec and me. Stanley eventually drank himself into blue ruin, a crash of career and friendship that was to haunt my parents until he righted himself, in their eyes and his own, a full ten years after. But at ~~this~~ ^{that} earlier point he still had the bottle more or less under control and so the fondness was as thick as the exasperation in my mother's voice as she told me of Stanley's Shelby role.

"Aw, Beth, you're letting this sharpster husband take advantage of you," she quoted Stanley's Missouri drawl with deadly precision.

"So of course I bet him too, that I would cook whatever he wanted for

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Sunday dinners for a month, against his bringing me a batch of fish every week for a month." She scanned me as if there must somewhere be an explanation of male gullibility. "They were so sure of that Jack Dempsey."



They sure must have been sure. I recalled that Stanley Meixell actively despised fishing, and dishwater was not my father's natural element.

4 The seventh round ended with Gibbons bleeding from nose and mouth and over an eye. In the eighth, Dempsey staggered him with a punch that found the jaw. The fighters traded jabs and hooks, clinched, sparred again. Dempsey swung again for the jaw but missed, swung with his other hand and missed again, then methodically hit Gibbons over the heart. They clinched until the bell.

"The other man was not a pretty sight, I do have to say," my mother acknowledged. "With the fight only half over, your father was grinning like a kitten in cream. Which must have been what inspired me to up our bet, don't you think?" I nodded ~~astily~~ ^{instantly.} "A month of my taking out the stove ashes," she proclaimed as if the upping was occurring again, "against a month of his washing the parts of the cream separator."

~~I flinched~~ ^{I flinched} for my father. Washing the many discs and fittings of a cream separator was one of the snottiest jobs ever.

"Stanley of course couldn't stand prosperity either," my mother continued, "so I bet him a gallon of chokecherries every week--I pointed out that he could pick them while he was doing all that fishing--against my keeping him in pie and cake for a month."

Gibbons looked like a drowning man clinging to a rock as he
clinched with Dempsey in the twelfth round, taking repeated
punishment in the body. In the thirteenth, Dempsey almost
wrestled him off his feet in a clinch, then threw a hook which
Gibbons blocked with an elbow. At close quarters, Gibbons hit
Dempsey twice, then a swing from Dempsey grazed his chin.
Dempsey aimed for the jaw again, and missed. Gibbons ^{struck} ~~hit~~ him
with one hand and then the other. They backed off and sparred
until the bell.

Did she have it mind from the start, hidden and explosive there in the ante? Or did it arrive to her as pure inspiration, Madame Einstein suddenly divining the square root of the universe? There between rounds thirteen and fourteen, my mother coolly bet those two rubes of hers the task of plucking her fifty spring chickens for canning,

against a pair of handstitched deerhide dress-up gloves she would make for each of them if she lost.

And there my father and Stanley dangled in the noose of their own logic. Dempsey was whaling the ribcage off Gibbons with those body blows. Surely Gibbons' mitts had to drop, inevitably one of Dempsey's smashing tries had to find an open jaw. Not to mention the mutual vision of two forest rangers arriving at community dances with their workday hands princely in soft yellow deerskin, handstitched. But the plucking of fifty chickens...

By then the heat in the Shelby arena was tropical. People had draped handkerchiefs under their hats down the back of their sun-hit heads and necks so that the scene resembled Arabia, remembered my mother. Probably not all the sweat on my father and Stanley Meixell was solar, for now my mother was making philosophical remarks to Shelby at large about the surprising number of pikers in the ranks of the U.S. Forest Service.

Stanley and my father turned to each other.

One gritted out, "In for an inch, in for a mile, I guess, huh?"

The other nodded painfully.

When Gibbons survived the fourteenth round, the crowd threw seat cushions into the ring in exultation. The boxers shook hands as the final round began. # Dempsey crowded Gibbons, Gibbons held onto Dempsey. Dempsey hit Gibbons in the body with each hand, then missed with a punch at the jaw. Gibbons reeled out of range, accepted two blows, and held onto Dempsey. Dempsey pulled back and fired a fist at Gibbons' jaw. It sailed over Gibbons' neck as the final bell rang.

The referee, who was also the only fight judge, raised Dempsey's hand to signal that he was winner and still champion. # Gibbons had the victory of the solitary, of the journeyer alone beyond what he had been--he was not destroyed.

Thus the stew of dishwater and fishline and chokecherries and chicken feathers that my father and Stanley Meixell existed in for the rest of the summer of 1923.

#

"The melodius thunk of Thelonius Monk the razzmatazz of the
snazziest jazz is the tuuune my heart beattts for youuu..."

From Riley's merry uproar in the shower that evening, you'd have
thought he had just ~~been~~^{gone} fifteen rounds in the ring himself cleaning
Jack Dempsey's clock. Mariah too looked almost ready to purr, and
for my part I was glad enough to have been the inspiration, by proxy
of Beth McCaskill, for their "other man" tale. Yet something uneasy
kept tickling at me there after supper ^{there in the Bago} as Mariah and I waited for Sinatra
to finish his shower, so that the three of us could head uptown and see
what was what in Shelby after they turned the night on. Was I imagining,
or did it seem that day by day where she and Riley were concerned, corners
came off a little more? That the way they were managing to merge in
their work was maybe causing them to creep beyond that? That the two
of them had begun showing such civil tendencies toward each other that
if you didn't know there had been a bloodthirsty divorce between them
you would think they were companionably, uhm, merged?

Yet again, Mariah on the other side of the ~~Bago~~^g table nook from
me did not appear particularly smitten with anybody except possibly the

inventor of the camera. She was intent at marking up contact sheets of her day's Shelby photos with a grease pencil,

and simultaneously eating a microwarmed apple turnover for dessert.

With the same hand. Employing the utensil while holding the grease pencil tucked at a writing angle between her index and second fingers looked like there was every risk of forking her contact sheets or crayoning her pastry, but that was Mariah for you.

Conversational me, I waxed: "So, did you get the picture you wanted today?"

"I never do quite get that one," she responded between some slashes of cropping marks and a bite of turnover. "But maybe today's is a little closer to it." That chosen picture when it appeared with Riley's story extended all the way across the newspaper page: the wide, wide tan northern horizon as Gibbons would have seen it on his fight day dawn, absolute rim of the world blade-straight across human eyespan, but on that line of earth the bits of promontory that are the Sweetgrass Hills-- a cone of dune, space, a blunter humped swell, space, another dune. As if saying no brink, even the planet's, stays so severe if taken one strip at a time.

By now Riley was trying the monkey-thunky stanza about the seventeenth different way and still didn't sound to me within hailing distance of ~~the~~^{any} tune. Meanwhile Mariah had polished off both dessert and contact sheets and gone to putting on earrings for the evening, dangly hoops festooned with tiny pewter roses. Doing so, she remarked: "I always have wondered why he never goes on to the rest of a song."

"Yeah, well, this rig doesn't hold enough hot water for him to think his way past the first verse, is my guess." Her raised arms as she fastened the earrings brought up a point. Two points, actually, making themselves known where the tips of her breasts tested the fabric of her green blouse. Mariah had showered before supper and pretty plainly her bra went missing in the aftermath. Be damned, though, if I was going to tell a thirty-five-year-old daughter how to dress herself.

The laundered Riley at last appeared, declaring Mariah and I had kept him waiting long enough. Any social suspicion I had was not borne out by him either, for although he gave Mariah a commendatory glance he passed up the chance to say anything flirty and just ushered us out into the night ~~with~~^{by yapping out} a ring announcer's announcement of round sixteen.

We went north of the railroad tracks to a bar called the Whoop-Up,
on Riley's insistent theory that the places across the tracks are always
more interesting.

More interesting than what, I should have asked him the instant
we set foot inside the sorry-looking enterprise.



Floor that must have been mopped annually whether it needed it or not. Orangish walls. Pool table, its green felt standing out like a desperate sample patch of lawn. Total crowd of three, one of them the bartender pensively hunched over a chess board at the near end of the bar. Nobody was smoking at the moment, but the barroom had enough accumulated tobacco smell to snort directly.

Perhaps symptomatically, bar stools were few and we ended up perched right next to the extant two customers, beer drinkers both, the beef-faced variety who still look like big kids even though they're thirty-some. Riley and me they gave minimum nods, Mariah and her blouse they gave maximum eyeballing. With distinct reluctance the bartender left his chess cogitation long enough to produce my scotch ditch and Mariah's Lord ditch, Riley meantime whistling tunelessly as he did his habitual shopping of the bottles behind the bar. "Lewis and Clark blackberry brandy," he eventually specified. "Always a good year."

The bartender went back to staring at his chess board. The two beer consumers resumed muttering to each other about how life was treating them. The three of us sipped. The most activity was generated by the

clock above the cash register, one of those just barely churning ones that flops a new advertising placard at you about every half minute.

Before long I was forcing myself not to count the number of times the ad for Dead Stock Removal, with a cartoon ^{drawing} of a cow with a halo, 24-Hour Service, flopped into view.

"I'm trying to remember," Riley murmured to Mariah after a spell of this whoopee in the Whoop-Up. "Did we live this nerve-tingling kind of life before we were divorced?"

"Every night was an extravaganza," she assured him with almost a straight face.

Any fitting response to that seemed to elude Riley, and he focused off toward the bartender who was staying as motionless as his chess pieces. Riley of course grew curious. The two at the ~~other~~ ^{near us} end of the bar did not look like chess types. Ever interrogative, Riley put forth to the bartender: "Where's your other player?"

"Sun City, Arizona. Take turns calling each other every fifteen minutes with a move."

That floored even Riley, at least briefly. But sure enough, on the dot when a quarter past came the bartender reached to the phone, punched a bunch of digits, rattled off what sounded like pawn to queen four, and hung up.



Activity picked up too at my ear nearest the beer pair. "Tell you, Ron, I don't know what you got going with Barbara Jo, but don't let her get you in front of no minister. This marriage stuff is really crappy. You take, Jeannie's mom is always on my back about why don't we come over more. But we go over there and the stuff she cooks, she never salts anything or anything, and I don't eat that crap without no salt on it. Last time she called up and asked Jeannie why we weren't coming over, I told Jeannie to tell her I had to lay down and rest. Then there's Jeannie's dad, he just got dried out down at the Deaconess Hospital. Cranky old sonofabitch, I think they ought to let him have a few beers so he wouldn't be so much of a craphead, is what I think. And you know what else, Jeannie's brother and sister-in-law had a Fourth of July picnic and didn't even invite us. That's the kind of people they are. Jeannie and I been talking a lot lately. I told her, I about had it with her crappy family, soon as the first of the year and I get enough money ahead to buy my ^{big bike,} ~~motorcycle,~~ I'm heading out to the coast and go to school somewhere."

"Yeah?" Ron responded. "What in?"

"Social work."

Our sipping ~~in the place~~ went on as if we had glassfuls of molasses, so I admit it was an event out of the contagiously drowsy ordinary when Mariah took herself off to the ladies' room. She had company all

the way, the double sets of bozo eyeballs from beside me. "Divorced, did I hear them say?" the nearer of the two, the Ron one, checked with the other in a muffled tone.

"Yeah, I heard the word," confirmed the other bar stool resident.

"A free woman. Always the best price."

"She looks sweet enough to melt in your mouth, don't she," said the first.

"I'd sure like to give that a try," pined the other.

"Like to, hell. I'm gonna. You just watch."

I had turned and was sending them a glower which should have melted their vocal cords shut, but it is difficult to penetrate that much haze of beer and intrinsic lard. Nor was goddamn Riley any help. "Don't look at me," he murmured. "She was only ever my wife. You're stuck with her as a daughter permanently."

All too soon Mariah was emerging from the ladies' room, to the tune of the under-the-breath emission beside me, "Look at the local motion in that blouse." Ron the Romancer was applying a companionable leer all over her as she came back to the bar. If called into court, his defense could only have been that at no time did his eyeballs actually leave his body.

"Hey you, yayhoo," I began to call him ^{down} on his behavior just as Mariah gave him a look, then a couple of sharper glances. But her admirer continued to spoon her up with his gaze even after she reached the bar and us again. Then, as if in a staring contest with what were standing sentinel in Mariah's blouse, the would-be swain swanked out to her: "That green sure brings out your best points."

I brightly suggested we call it a night.

"Ohhh, not till I finish this," Mariah said, and picked up her drink but didn't sit down with it. Instead she delivered me a little tickle



in the ribs and said, "Trade places with me, how about."

That would put her directly next to the pair of shagnasties, removing me as a barrier of at least age if not dignity. "Uh, actually I'm just real comfortable where I am."

The tickle turned into an informative pincer on my rib. "Riley needs the company," she let me know. I flinched and made the trade.

Sidling onto the stool where I'd been, Mariah remarked to the ~~staring~~ ~~nearest~~ bozo, "You seem pretty interested in what I'm wearing."

He looked like he'd been handed candy. "Yeah, I like what you haven't got on."

"Aw, crud," Riley uttered wearily and began to get off his stool in the direction of combat.

Mariah halted him with a stonewall look and a half-inch of headshake.

Riley considered, shrugged, sat back down.

Turning around to her ~~admirer~~ ^{unremitting} spectator again, who now seemed hypnotized by her earring dealybobs, she said in a way that left spaces in the air where her words had been: "Well then now--what 's on your mind besides what's on my chest?"

He blinked quite a number of times. Then: "I was wondering if you'd, er, want to go out."

Mariah presented him what I recognized as her most dangerous grin. "Now doesn't that sound interesting," she assessed. "I'll bet you're the kind of guy who shows up for a date dressed in your ready-to-go tuxedo."

"Er, I'm not sure I've got--what's a ready-to-go tuxedo?"

Mariah swirled her Calvert and water, took a substantial swig, then delivered in a tone icier than the cubes in her glass:

"A ten-gallon hat and a hard-on."

Into our drinks Riley and I simultaneously snorted aquatic laughs which doubtless would have drawn one or the other of us the wrath of the red-faced bozo, except that his buddy on the other side of him gave out a guffaw that must have been heard in northernmost Canada and then crowed, "He can at least borrow the hat someplace, lady!"

"Screw you, Terry," the still-red shagnasty gritted out, in a 180-degree turn of his attentions. Then he swung around on his stool with his right fist in business, socking Terry in the middle of his hilarity and sending him sailing off backwards.

Terry rebounded off the pool table and with a roar tackled Mariah's suitor off his stool. The locked pair of them swooshed past us in mid-air, landed colossally and then rolled thumpedy-thump-thump across the floor in a clinch, cussing and grunting.

"Maybe I missed a chance there," Mariah reflected as the bartender whipped out a Little League baseball bat and kept it within quick reach while phoning the town marshal. She cast a last glance at the tornado of elbows and boots and oofs and ooghs as it thrashed across the floorboards. "He does seem to be a person who cares a lot."

—————
Leaving the second battle of Shelby behind, ~~the next day~~ we truly began tooling along the High Line, eastward on Highway 2 across that broad brow of Montana.

The Bago purred right along but the other three of us seemed to have caught our mood from the weather, which had turned hazy and dull. No trace whatsoever of the hundred-mile face of the Rockies behind us to the west, and on the northern horizon the Sweetgrass Hills were blue ghosts of themselves. With only the plains everywhere around

I began to feel adrift, and Mariah and Riley too seemed logey and out of their element. As far as we were concerned this highway had been squeezed out of a tube of monotony. I ~~wish~~^g wished the day could be rinsed, to give the High Line country a fairer chance with us.

Soon we were in the wheat sea. Out among the straw-toned fields occasional round ^{metal} ~~steel~~ bins and tall elevators bobbed up, but otherwise the only color other than basic farming was the Burlington Northern's roadbed of lavender gravel, brought in from somewhere far. That railroad built by Jim Hill as the transcontinental Great Northern route--farthest up on the American map and hence its Montanized designation "the high line"--cleaved open this land to settlement in the first years of this century and even yet the trackside towns are the only communities in sight. One after another as you drive Highway 2 they come peeping over the lonely horizon, Dunkirk, Devon, Inverness, Kremlin. . . a person would think he really was somewhere. Which can only have been the railroad's idea in naming these little spots big.

p. 320B follows →

Our destination today was Havre, which didn't reassure me either.

I'd been there a number of times before when livestock business compelled me to and knew it wasn't the kind of place I am geared for, out as the town is like a butter pat in the middle of a gigantic hotcake. So any conversation was something of a relief, even when Mariah caught sight of a jet laying its cloud road, the contrail stitching across a break in the sky's thin murk ahead of us, and said in disgruntled photographer fashion, "The Malmstrom flyboys have got the weather I want, up there."

That roused Riley to poke his head between us and peer through the windshield at the white route of the bomber or fighter or whatever the ~~from the Great Falls air base was.~~
~~plane was.~~ "Another billion-dollar silver bullet from Uncle Sam," he preached in a gold-braid voice. "Take that, you enemy, whoever the hell you are any more."

"Reminds me of your ack-ack career, petunia," I contributed to the aerial motif.

"Mmm, that time." The start of a little grin crept into Mariah's tone.

"Old Earlene." I couldn't help but follow the words with a chuckle.

"Brainpain Zane." Mariah escalated both of us into laughter with that.

Riley had sat back into his nook seat. "I knew I should have brought a translator along when I hooked up with you two."

"This goes back to when I was a freshman in high school," Mariah took over the telling of it to him. "Initiation Day--you remember how dumb-ass those were anyway. This one, the seniors had us all carry brooms and whenever one of them would catch us in the hallway between classes and yell 'Air raid!' we were supposed to flop on our back and aim the broom up like an anti-aircraft gun and go 'ack-ack-ack-ack.'" Cute, huh? Somehow I went along with the program until Earlene Zane, the original brainpain as we called her, caught me walking across the muddy parking lot to the schoolbus and ~~shouted~~^{yelled} out, "Air raid, McCaskill!" Dump your butt in that mud, freshie!" I looked down at that mud and then I looked at Earlene, and the next thing I knew I'd swept the broom through the gloppiest mudhole, right at her. Big gobs flew onto the front of her dress, up into her face, all over her. So I did it a bunch more times."

"Hey, don't leave out the best part," I paternally reminded her as Riley chimed in with our chortling.

p. 320D follows →

"Oh, right," Mariah went on in highest spirit. "Every time I swatted a glob onto old Earlene, I'd go: ack-ack-ack-ack."

By the time we'd laughed ourselves out at that, we were beyond Kremlin, with only another ten minutes or so of hypnotic highway to put us into Havre. I figured we had this High Line day made, whatever the rest of them were going to be like, when abruptly a spot of colors erupted at the far edge of the road.

Like a hurled mass the flying form catapulted up across the highway on collision course with the windshield in front of my face. Before it could register on me that I'd done any of it, I ⁹yelled "Hang on!"

and braked the motorhome and swerved it instinctively toward where the large ringneck had flown up from, trying to veer over

just behind the arc of its flight. The body with its whirring wings, exquisitely long feathered tail, even the red wattle mask of its head and the white circle around the bird's neck, all flashed past me, then sickly thudded against the last of the uppermost corner of the windshield, where the glass meets the chrome fitting, on Mariah's side of the Bago.

She ducked and flung up both arms in a horizontal

p. 320E follows →

fence to protect her face, the way a person automatically desperately will, as the web of cracks crinkled down from the shatterpoint.

By the time any of this was clear to me, the pheasant was a wad of feathers in the barrow pit a hundred yards behind us.

"You all right?" I demanded of Mariah as I got the Bago and myself settled back down into more regular road behavior. "Any glass get you?"

"Huh uh." She was avidly studying the damage pattern zigzagged into the upper corner of the windshield in front of her. "Damn, I I'd wish ~~I could've~~ caught that with the camera."

"How about you, Riley?" I called over my shoulder. "You come through that okay?"

"Yeah," the scribbler answered in an appreciative voice. "Fine and dandy, Jick."

"Good. Then open that notebook of yours to the repairs page."

—

The next morning there in Havre was the fourth of September, which also happened to be Labor Day--always the message that summer is shot and