

winter is at the door--and two full months since Mariah cornered me into the centennial trip. Sure, I thought to myself while easing out of bed onto my tender leg which was feeling the change in weather, why not lump all dubious anniversaries into one damn Monday and frost it with Havre.

Mariah mentioned nothing at breakfast--not even my hotcakes ^{sg} alBago, as in "alfresco"
 doily-size but by the dozens--she and Riley poring over a map spread between ^e them, him listing off towns ahead of us on Highway 2 and jotting them into his notebook with question marks after them while she cogitated out loud about photographic prospects, so I ended the meal fed up in more ways than one. A High Line breeze whined insistently in the overhead vent of the motorhome. Riley's pen tippy-tapped monotonously in his notebook. I peered out to see what kind of weather was in store, but ^{no} luck there either, Havre being down in a hole so much you can't even begin to see to any significant horizon. The day had me disturbed, even I will admit. Try as I did to rein in my mood, I suppose a bit of it worked loose in my general remark:

"Whatever in hell you two eventually manage to come up with, I hope to Christ it's got some mountains somewhere around for a change. This

country where there's nothing to lean your eyes on is getting me down."

Riley's pen quit tapping the notebook, and when I glanced over at the unaccustomed welcome silence, he had the pen angled like a pointer onto a spot on the map. Mariah's index finger was there from the opposite direction. Both their faces were lit up as if they had hit the same socket at the same time.

It was Mariah who gave me a thankful grin and said, "Great minds run on the same track."

"What, me and you two?" I said skeptically.

"Better than that," Riley chimed in. "You and Chief Joseph."

#

On that map, out beyond Havre a backroad dangles lonesomely south from the little town of Chinook. Down it, across miles and miles of grassland being swept by the wind and at last almost into the Bearpaw Mountains, we pulled in at the Chief Joseph Battleground.

The Joseph story, actually the Nez Perce story because he was but one of several chiefs who led their combined bands--not just their fighting men but women, children, their old people, their herd of horses, the whole works--out of the Wallowa Mountains in Oregon in flight from the push of whites on their land, I'd of course read the basics of; that after a dodging route of ~~seventeen~~^{sixteen} hundred miles and several successful battles, the Indians were cornered into surrender here only a few more days' march to sanctuary in Canada.

What I saw now, at history's actual place, was that the Nez Perce in

that autumn of the last century had two more horizons to get over. Up onto the ^{brief} ~~wild~~ rise above this Snake Creek bottomland where they'd pitched camp. Then over the wider rim of skyline ridge to the north and across the boundary into Canada. The small horizon, suddenly deadly with cavalry and infantry, had been the one that doomed them.

Our threesome sat within the protection of the motorhome and studied the ground of battle, across the somehow wicked-looking little creek of wild rose brambles and stunted willows.

After a bit, Riley tested the air with his cocked-to-one-side tone of voice. "Custer was a loser, and he's famous as hell. Chief Joseph fought longer and harder and didn't get his people killed wholesale, and all he's got is that plaque on a rock over there. Why'd it turn out that way?"

Whether or not Riley really expected an answer, I turned and gave him the one that needed no words--simply rubbed the back of my hand, the skin there.

We stepped from the Bago into a wind just short of lethal, Mariah and I stepping right back in and swapping our hats for winter caps and pulling on heaviest coats. But Riley must have been in some kind of writing fever because he braved the wind in just a jacket to hustle over for a look at the Joseph plaque. By the time we joined him at that-- there actually proved to be three memorial markers, a plaque apiece in honor of the U.S. soldiers, the Indians, and the Chinook townsman who'd helped preserve the battlefield; about as democratic as you can get about a combat site, I suppose--gusts were whistling even harder out of the west and Riley had to give up on his polar bear act. Borrowing the Bago keys from me, along with my look that said I hoped he wasn't going to keep diddling around in this fashion in weather like this, he scooted back to the motorhome to don a saner coat while Mariah and I ducked behind a little wall of shelter put up to keep visitors from being spun away like tumbleweeds. ¶ Hunched in out of the gale, she blew on her fingers to get ready for shutter action. I blew on mine simply because they were cold. Both of us scanned the battleground in

front of us across the brambles of Snake Creek. Everywhere out there the dead grass flowed identically in the wind, coulees and brief benchlands merging into each other as just slightest dents and bulges in the grass-color of everything.

"What year was the battle?" I asked above the whoosh of the wind.

"1877," Mariah raised her voice in turn.

"This place still is in a bad mood," I observed.

Mariah said an eloquent nothing. I recognized why. I am not a camera person but even I could see that for her photography purpose, this site was hiding its face.

"Not nice," Riley reported meteorologically as a gust propelled him behind the windbreak wall with us.

"In more ways than one," Mariah shared with him out of her contemplation of the tan smudge of battlefield. "This is going to take some real figuring out to shoot." So saying, she ^{automatically} reached up and re-set her winter cap with the bill backwards now over the neckfall of her hair, to keep the brim out of the way of her camera.

"I sympathize," the scribbler responded. Not in any smartass way,

but as if he might actually mean it, which made me wonder what was getting into Riley Wright lately. "I need to tromp around out there a while myself," he sped on. "The wind just lends a little atmosphere, hrm?"

~~That~~ ^{Atmosphere} was one way of putting it. I expected prickles at a place like this, and they came at once. Spirits hovering in their old neighborhood are not something I can bring myself to believe in. But I do figure there could be sensations left over in us--the visitors, the interlopers--from tribal times, from cave times; maybe our hair roots go deep into that past and it rises up out of us as the prickles at such a site as this battlefield.

Wanting to stay out of the way of Mariah and her lens as she bowed her neck and started stalking the battlefield for any photo chance, I stuck with Riley when he began his own prowling along the little ridge at the south edge of the battle site. Up as we were, I could see that the country here was higher than the Milk River Valley where Chinook lay, these surroundings gradually stairstepping into the rounded small summits of the Bearpaw Mountains. The nicest ranching



country I'd seen yet on the High Line, actually; snowdrifts would last and last in the gullies on these north slopes, and other water surely awaited in springs tucked here and there. For livestock, a promising enough place. For a life-or-death encampment, no. As we tromped around, hunching in that wind, every sense told me what nasty country this was to fight in--the creek bottomland dangerously unsheltered yet all different levels of land around the site like crazy stairs and hideyholes.

Riley had the order of battle, to call it ~~that~~^{that,} down pat from his research while we were driving from Havre. The slightly higher ground we were on was where the Nez Perce had been able to flop down in cover and drive back the white soldiers' first attack. The U.S. troops lost an immediate twenty-two men and two officers in that opening charge against the ridge, and about twice that many wounded. Some of the Nez Perce were killed that night by their own warriors who mistook them for Cheyennes allied with the white soldiers. Both sides dug in and it dragged on into a kind of sniping marathon from trenches and rifle pits--in all, Riley said,

five days of such mauling took place. Near where we stood Chief Looking Glass was the last man killed, picked off by an army scout. Over there, Riley pointed out, the body of Chief Toohoolhoolzote had lain unburied because of the field of fire from the white soldiers. Down here below us, a howitzer shell caved in a shelter pit on a Nez Perce woman and her child.

chilly

In no time at all of that ~~trudging~~ and standing, my achey shin felt like fire. Yet it never crossed my mind to retreat to the Bago.

Even the clouds were askew here--scattered fat cottonwad ones with perfectly flat bottoms as if skidding on the top of the wind. Every so often, a floe of cloudshadow would blot across the battlefield and I would see Mariah frown upward from her camera.

Riley was speling something I had wondered about, how the Indians kept track of their casualties. "Alahoos, an oldlike man who was still strong, made announcement of all incidents and events each day," he read off what he'd copied in his notebook earlier. "All knew him and reported to him who had been wounded or killed in battle, who was missing or had disappeared." ~~The names of all were known throughout the band.~~

I'd stayed silent until something made me ask. "What was the weather like during the fighting here?"

"Cold, rainy, windy, generally shitty," Riley named off. "It ended up snowing about half a foot." This quicksilver battlesite in white, a first sift of snowfall halfway up the long grass, the bald brows of the hills showing through, I could readily see.

Then I recognized this day's weather. As much so as if the wind had put on a uniform and the chilly air assumed a familiar mask of ice.

It was blowing from May 18, 1943. I was ~~nineteen~~^{eighteen} and supposedly a soldier. After enlistment and basic training I was shipped to find my war in a part of the world I had barely even heard of, the Aleutian chain of islands. If you look hard enough at a map they are a line of stepping stones in the North Pacific between Asia and Alaska, and the Japanese were using them in just that way in World War Two. In the fighting on the island of Attu my platoon was sent out hours before daylight the morning of our attack on Cold Mountain. We were to sneak into position where we could work over a Japanese emplacement of heavy machine guns, at least three of the goddamn things. That mountain was cold, all right. Ice on the tundra as we climbed the slope, and the wind trying to swat us off the face of the earth. Just in the

earliest minute or so when it was getting light enough to see, we spotted the first enemy, a sentry about fifty yards away. I ^{guess} ~~suppose~~ he was not the greatest ~~sentry there ever was,~~ ^{of sentries,} because he was standing ^{up there} against the skyline shaking ~~out~~ ^{out} a grass mat. Our lieutenant motioned the rest of us to take cover under a cutbank. Then he laid down in firing-range position with his legs carefully spraddled and shot the sentry. I have wondered ever since if that is pretty much what war is: some ninny stands up when he shouldn't and some other ninny shoots him when he shouldn't. What I do know for definite is that our prescribed plan of attack, to grenade those machine guns, was now defunct before it even started because we were way too far away to throw. Yet, for whatever reason, all at once here came four or five Japanese soldiers and an officer with a sword, kiyi-ing down in a bayonet attack on us. Our BAR man opened up, the Browning Automatic making that kind of regretful tuck tuck tuck sound as it fired, and that took care of the bayonet proposition. While the Japanese were thinking matters over, our lieutenant's next brainstorm was to send some of us out around to a little knoll so we could pinch in on the machine gun position. I was the third guy who ~~we~~ had to scramble across there, running hunched down for



maybe forty feet from the end of the cutbank to the cover of the knoll, and I was only a step from having it made when a bullet whammed into my left leg not far above the ankle. I fell and rolled a long way down the mountainside. Not that I know much about ^{it}, except for the skinned up and bruised places all over my body later, because the pain of that smashed leg made me pass out. The other men of the platoon assured me later that I'd been the deadest-looking guy they ever saw, flopping down the slope like a rag doll.

That was my combat career, quick. Over with except for the piece of my leg where the ache lay under the bullet scar, my Attu tattoo. I-- No. Not over with. Not here, not this day. Peace of mind was splintered too by that bullet of forty-six years ago.

With a gulp I reached down and wildly rubbed my aching shin, trying to scrub away so much more than that boneload of pain. Oh sure, it served me right for traipsing around to these sorrowspots with this duo of Montanologists. Maybe my herder Helen had the right idea: go and live with rocks. Goddamn it all to hell anyway, how long did we have to stay here being augured by the wind? Mariah ⁵ I ⁵ saw had finally sorted her way across the deceptive levels of the battlefield and was at the far side marshaling a picture of the bust



indent

...in a pock in the earth. In a disease scar older than smallpox
or any other.

But craters of war heal over, don't they? Why else the bronze
calm of plaques, the even-handed attestations to both sides who
fought here in the narrow bottomland of Snake Creek in 1877? The
grass has grown back as thick as flame. The brow of the hill to
the east wears strips of farming like a cheerful striped cap.
Sunshine dodges the clouds, uncurls flags of light on the hills.

By now the only echoes at this battlesite are poetry. The
sentences of surrender by Joseph, just the surviving chief of
several who jointly led the Nez Perce almost magically through
sixteen hundred miles of hostile territory and ^{several} battles before
Snake Creek, were conscientiously interpreted by one of General
Howard's staff, duly transcribed by another; scrawled in a report
to the Secretary of War, the surrender speech was merely a knell
for one more band of outgunned Indians. But Joseph's words want
to be more than that.

#

I am tired of fighting.Our chiefs are killed.The old men are all killed.

#

It is cold and we have no blankets.My people have run to the hills,and have no blankets.

#

Perhaps I shall find them among the dead.

#

I am tired: my heart is sick and sad.From where the sun now stands,I will fight no more forever.

#

Combat pits nowadays are greatly deeper in the prairie south of
the Bearpaws, where the Nez Perce ghosted across the center of Montana
on their route to defeat. Concrete burrows, several stories deep
into the ground. Missile silos, we let the Department of Defense
(nee the Department of War, 1789-1947) call these most deliberate

center
poetry-like
stanzas

of Chief Joseph within an iron spike fence. I turned to strongly urge Riley too into finishing up this yawling site.

Riley was gone.

Gone where, gone how, there was no sign whatsoever. # I squinted against the wind and tried to get a grip on why he would up and vanish. My swoon back to the Aleutians surely hadn't taken long enough for him to walk off over any of the ridges or back to the Bago. And I could see along the entire creek and all the battlefield to where Mariah was working. But abruptly only the two of us in this welter of geography. # A new crop of prickles broke out on me. Aggravating as Riley could be with his presence, to have him subtracted this way was uncommonly spooky. As if my Attu memory of brushing against oblivion had brushed Ri--

Not forty feet from me, his tall figure suddenly rose from the ground. Oh, sure, scribbling. Where the hell else would Riley be extant? He had lain down in a little dip, most likely a rifle pit dug by one of the Nez Perce, to belly into that sense of concealment and now here he stood again, telling his everlasting notebook about it all.

of craters, as if what they store is lifegiving. Two hundred
Minuteman missile silos across Montana. More of these fields
of nuclear warheads in the Dakotas and Wyoming, Nebraska and
Colorado and Missouri. Enough gopherholed megatonnage to incinerate
people by the million.



So, no, warpx does not heal. It merely scabs over with the
latest materiel. And so we are still pitted, now with nuclear
 snipers' burrows. Maybe the one nearest you is for Omsk; if
Mutual Assured Destruction has been calibrated cleverly enough,
maybe the one siloed in Omsk is for here. (It is cold and we have
 no blankets.) In any case, the combat pits still are dutifully
manned. On highways crisscrossing the heart of ^{the West} ~~Montana~~ today,
you can meet the next shift-change of missile crews in their Air
Force vans, blue taxis to Armageddon.

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 So time came and went, there along Snake Creek. On Aleutian wind
 agitating battle earth in Montana. Through summer into colder calendar.
 Into Mariah's camera and Riley's notebook and out as scene and story.

In me. In the arithmetic that if you add to an eighteen-year-old
 wounded soldier the years now since his bullet, my birthday--this day--
 was my sixty-fifth.

—————
 "Got it finally," Mariah declared, ruddy from the wind but an

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exultant grin on her, as she coalesced with Riley and me at the footbridge.

She'd earned grinning rights, because what she'd done in her picture to go



with Riley's ~~story~~^{piece} was put that weather to work--the flat-bottomed clouds, each drifting separate against the sky, in the same sad lopped way that the sculpture of Chief Joseph's head seemed based in the air amidst them. Mariah ~~blew on her hands.~~ ^{hugged herself for warmth. "Brrr, let's} "Let's get in out of this."

The wind put up a final struggle as we trudged head-on into it the last couple ^{of} hundred yards to the motorhome, which I forthwith went to unlock. Then remembered. "Oh yeah, I gave the keys to you, Riley."

"Hmm? So you did." He reached a hand into the side pocket of his coat and froze in that position. Next he cast an uh-oh look at Mariah where she was jiggling in place trying to keep warm, then finally one toward me.

"Christamighty!" I yelped. "What'd you go and do now, lose the goddamn keys?"

"No, no, of course not," Riley piped with a swallow. "They're, ah, just in one of my other pockets, is all."

"So dig them out," I urged with vigor. "It's colder than the moon's backside out here."

Riley's gaze at me turned sickly. "The pocket of that jacket,"

he admitted, indicating toward the Bago. The jacket he'd changed for a heavier one. The jacket he'd left in the Bago. The jacket he'd locked in the Bago.

Right then I could have gladly mangled him. Riley Wright Ground Sausage, Handmade on Snake Creek. But Mariah put herself between us and headed me off with multiple adjurations of "Whoa now, that isn't going to get us anywhere!" and eventually I cooled down--in that wind it didn't take all that long--enough to agree we had to do something drastic.

And it is a drastic amount of effort to break out a motorhome's safety-glassed rear side window, above head height, with a rock at the cold blowy end of a miserable day, just as it is an even more aggravating chore to pluck and dig all the shards of glass out of the windowframe, as we stretched and shivered and did until at last the frame was safe for Riley and me to boost Mariah up to shinny through.

After she unlocked the doors and the keys were retrieved and I'd revved the heater up to full blast to start thawing us out, Riley assured me he knew precisely what to do next.

"Do you," I said icily. "Isn't it kind of late in life for you to start in on growing a brain?"

"We'll just ~~go~~^{swing} by the hardware store in Chinook and patch some weather glazing over the window until we can get it fixed," he outlined.

Under my continued stare he added, "Ah, which reminds me," and flipped open his notebook to the page of the buffalo-bashed grill, the AWOL hubcap, the pheasant-cracked windshield and dented chrome, and added ~~the~~^{rear} side window to ~~these~~ Accounts Outstanding.

When we reached Chinook, Riley's bright weatherizing idea proved to have missed only one detail: the hardware store was closed up tight for the holiday.

"Pull in here," Mariah directed before I could start on Riley again, pointing with great definiteness at the IGA foodstore. In she marched while the window assassin and I sat in mutual ~~granite~~^{polar} silence, although the wind howled merrily in through the surprise aperture it found at the rear corner of the Bago, and in a jiffy she

was back with a roll of freezer tape and a box of bags made out of some kind of clear crinkly material, ~~surprisingly~~^{remarkably} stout. Riley and I piled out to help her tape the bags over the window. I can testify there is some justice in life, because he was the one who gave in to curiosity

and asked her, "What are these anyway?"

"Turkey basting bags," Mariah told him.

Then she surprised the daylights out of me. [#] "Your main present is that I held off mentioning what day this is until right now," she addressed to me as soon as we were back inside the bandaged Bago, "knowing how owly you always get about your birthday. And now that we've faced the issue, I'm taking you out to birthday supper. And here's a little something to add to that, even."

Mariah produced out of one of her ditty bags a small package with a major bow on it and delivered it to me with a kiss, without even any daughterly comment about the risk her lips were taking on my whiskers.

This was more like it and I was much touched, sure, but could easily have stood not to have Riley within a hundred miles of our family moment. He too looked as if he wished himself absent, but contributed a semi-gruff "At least you picked a day with enough wind to help you with the candles."

A Western tie, one of those bolo ones that hangs like a large locket, lay in the small box I'd unwrapped. Its centerpiece was a polished oval

of stone set in a brooch-like clasp. The stone was darkest green, so intensely so it approached black, but full of sparks of color, reds, golds, grays; like a night sky of stars of hues never seen before.

"Isn't this nifty," I not much more than whispered, overcome with the star-specked beauty of the gift after this mortally awful day. "Thank you, honey, my God, thank you." I breathed tenderly on the gem and rubbed it on the sleeve of my shirt, brightening the amulet's constellations of sparks even more. "What kind of stone--?"

"It's jasper," Mariah said, her gray eyes bright. "Helen found it for me on the North Fork, in that coulee that leads down to the McCaskill homestead. You really like it?"

"Do I ever."

"Then let's dude you up in it." Mariah came over and slipped the bolo loop over my head and critically slid the oval gem into place at the base of my throat; most painless way in the world ~~to~~^{to} dress up, all right. "There now, look at you."

And for once she even asked. "How much would you mind having your picture taken, just for the occasion?"

"I guess it wouldn't necessarily be fatal," I allowed. "Bang away."

She shot a variety of me in my new neck adornment feeling swave^{eg}
and looking debonure,^{eg} but didn't radically prolong this camera session.

"Okay, you both got your faces set for supper?" she asked with the last
click.

"Why don't you two go ahead," Riley suggested, reason personified
for once. "I'll stay here and write the piece from today, get it on in
to the evil elf."



"If you do that, I have to race back here ~~to develop film~~ and run film ~~it~~ through the Leafax yet tonight," Mariah objected as if Riley had peed in the path of her parade. "What about that back-up piece you sneaked in--what does that need on it, anything I can send in quick?"

Even I admit, Riley was showing the frazzle of the day as much as any of us and obviously could stand a square meal and a night off. He rubbed his eyes one at a time, first the blue one left showing and then the gray, like he was dimming down even as we watched. "Let me think-- yeah, it's just a thumbsucker, any number of your shots of country you've already sent in will go okay with ~~it~~ ^{that one.}"

"Then come on," Mariah urged. "Let's go birthdaying."

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So we were not spared Riley for the occasion, but all else seemed auspicious enough at the moment, Mariah's thoughtfulness, my new jasper dazzler, evening dining ahead along the Milk River. Chinook was a tidy town, some nice logic to it--its block of bars, just for example, was a concentrate of ~~Montana~~ ^{western} oasis nomenclature: Mint, Stockman, Elk, right there door by door by door. Where we headed, though, was out to the edge of town to a blue-painted ramblly enterprise Mariah had singled out

for this birthday shindig of mine. By now the day was losing the last of its light, so the place's high old neon sign out front was like electric paint against the onset of night: a giant long-stemmed glass, in which was seated the representation of a curvy woman in fringed skirt and bandanna and high-heeled boots--she too was long-stemmed, one shapely leg cocked over the edge of the martini glass and the other extended fully into the air--with her head thrown back and her arm up, tossing her cowgirl hat into the sky. When the sign blinked, the leg kicked in frolicsome fashion and the hat sailed high.

The Lass in a Glass, the red-tubed wording underneath I guess not unexpectedly ~~surprisingly~~ said, and spaced beneath that ran the enumeration Bar,

Lounge, Supper Club, Coffee Shop, Bus Depot and Motel. Riley evidently figured he was back in my good graces now that we were amid my birthday celebration--he could not have been more mistaken--and gandering up at those neon announcements he commented: "Wouldn't you think they'd go all the way and add a maternity ward and a funeral parlor?"

As soon as we were inside, Riley did the dutiful and employed the lobby ~~pay~~ phone long enough to coax some functionary in Missoula--despite that

earlier elf crack, the BB naturally was nowhere to be found on the newspaper premises ^{over} ~~during~~ a holiday--into just going with the back-up piece and picking a nice one of Mariah's file photos to illustrate it with, happy fucking Labor Day to him too. The day's wind must have sharpened all our appetites, for without even any debate we then bypassed the bar and lounge and set ourselves for supper.

#

Our exit occurred a considerable while later, the three of us stuffed with soup, salad, fondue and breadsticks, prime rib, baked potato, two or three vegetables, and chocolate cake--when this place said supper club it meant it--but Mariah lighter by quite a few dollars. I thanked her a kabillion for the birthday feast, but if I thought I'd had an eventful enough day to hold me for another sixty-five years, I had another think coming.

Riley of course was the culprit. We were harmlessly on our way out of The Lass in a Glass enterprise, headed for the motorhome ready to tuck in for the night, when he made the uncharacteristic error of trying to be nice.

"Tell you what, Jick. Just to show you my heart's in the right place," patting his rump pocket where his billfold resided, "I'll buy you a birthday drink."

"Naw," I demurred as civilly as I could, "it's been kind of a hefty day. I think I'll turn in early."

Say for Riley, he didn't smart off with anything about somebody my age needing his sleep. Instead, worse, he turned to Mariah and invited, "At least I can keep my reckless generosity in the family. Buy you a round, can I, Mariah Montana?"

"Best offer I've had since Shelby," she responded, surprisingly full of cheer. Then to me: "You don't mind if we hang on in here a little while, do you? We'll let ourselves in the Bago quiet as we can."

"Actually, the night is still a pup, isn't it," I resorted to, letting my gaze rest on Riley. "Where's that drink you're financing?"

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The bar of this Lass in a Glass emporium was an average enough place. A Hamm's clock above the cash register, Budweiser lampshades on the dangling overheads, other beer signs glowing here and there for

general decor. The jukebox had Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings singing to each other about various toots they'd been on. Wherever the Labor Day crowd was, it wasn't here; only a handful of customers in ballcaps and straw Stetsons, plus a wide young woman behind the bar who looked like she could handle any of them with one hand. Remembering the floor warriors of the Whoop-Up in Shelby, I hoped that was the case.

Mariah and I each ordered our usual and Riley put in for his usual unusual, you might say, by summoning up a Harvey Wallbanger.

"Whup, wait a minute here!" I jumped him triumphantly. "You already had one of those on the trip. In Ennis or Dillon or someplace back there."

"Jick, a man never wants to let himself get reliably unpredictable," he told me, whatever that meant.

No sooner were Willie and Waylon done songstering than a color television started droning in the corner. I wonder if someday somebody will invent silence.

It for sure won't be Riley. He started right in yammering to Mariah about what piece they--we, he kept phrasing it with what he must have figured ~~thought~~ was a generously inclusive glance at me--ought to press on to next, Fort Peck dam maybe? I'd for damn sure press him onward, I thought

to myself, right out of the vicinity of the McCaskills if I but could.

Fort Peck I knew a little something about from when I was a kid during the Depression and construction of that earthen dam across the

Missouri River was a relief project which Montanans ^{believed} ~~thought~~ Franklin

Delano Roosevelt had sent from heaven. Enough to inquire innocently,

~~the dam~~ "Doesn't ~~that~~ kind of look like a big ditch bank about four miles long?"

Riley cut me a look, not the inclusive sort this time. "That's

one way of putting it."

"Sounds real photogenic," ^oMariah met that with. "Riley, don't you

know any history that isn't horizontal?" [#] She said it in a way that

could be taken as teasing, though, instead of lighting into him like

I'd hoped she would.)

^{no #} By the time the bar lady brought our fluids, Riley was right back

to being his obstreperously curious self. [#] "That's some sign out front,"

he broached to her. "How'd this place get its name?"

"You don't know the half of it. Everybody here in town calls her"--

the bar lady indicated out into the night where the neon maiden was

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kicking up her heels--"The Lass With Her Ass in a Glass. Story is, the guy who opened this place was from back east somewhere. He liked his martinis and he liked a girl he met out here, so he put them together on his sign."

"Eat your heart out, Statue of Liberty," Riley said over his shoulder eastward after the bar lady trod off.

"Don't ever say they ^{aren't poetic souls} ~~don't know rhyme~~ in this town," Mariah reflected.

"Anyway, on to celebration." She hoisted her glass to me, and I automatically reciprocated with mine, and Riley had to clink in too. My daughter flashed the grin her mother customarily had at so many of my birthdays, but the words of her toast were Mariah's own. "Mark this day with a bright stone."

All in all, then, as we settled into sipping and conversing--most of it back and forth between them, who seemed to have discovered they had a surprising amount to say to each other tonight--my evening of entry into senior citizenship could have been a whole lot worse thus far. I was going to have to cash us in early for the night to keep Mariah and Riley from getting too frisky with one another, and toward that end I yawned

infectiously every so often. But all seemed under control until a funny impression came over me, the feeling that the three of us were about to be joined by somebody else, even though nobody had newly come into the bar. I could have sworn I kept hearing a half-familiar voice. None of the few partakers strung along the bar was anyone I recognized, though, nor did they look like logical discussants of. . .

". . . eating dust and braving the elements," a tone like that of God's older brother resounded in a break in the bar conversation.

Mariah and Riley and I swiveled simultaneous heads toward the corner television. [#] Sure enough, Tonsil Vapor Purvis was in the tube in living color, not to mention a high-crowned cowboy hat.

"This centennial cattle drive ~~from Roundup to Billings~~ ^{Billings} is a true taste of the Old West," Tonsil Vapor was declaiming. "Twenty-seven hundred head of cattle are being driven by twenty-four hundred riders on horseback, while the world watches." The television picture changed from the mob of beeves and drovers to a traffic jam of communications ordnance, rigs with tv uplinks on top and all-terrain vehicles ridden by cameramen and reporters jabbering into cellular telephones. Abruptly the screen

a close-up of rider
 filled with a bandannaed ~~cowboy~~ going hyaah!, either at a recalcitrant
 longhorn
~~steer~~ or Tonsil Vapor. The next instant, though, our news host was back,
 full-face and -hat. "This trail drive means long hours in the saddle for
 these hardy cowpokes, but--"

At least Riley and Mariah's two-member reunion had been put on hold
 while they gawked disbelievingly at Tonsil Vapor in his buckaroo regalia
 and the rest. Indeed, I figured this was a heaven-sent--or at least
 beamed down by satellite--chance to further divert.

"Somebody tell me this," I postulated. "One shepherd can handle
 a thousand sheep easy, but here they got a cowboy for ~~about~~ every cow
 fraction.
 and a ~~half~~. So if they call shepherders dumb, where does that leave
 cowboys?"

"Now, now," Mariah purred as if running over with sympathy for
 television's mounted horde. "Don't be mean to those poor cowpokers."

"Hey, better to be a poker than a pokee," Riley got into the spirit
 by drawling in a croaky trailhand voice.

Mariah returned him a mock sultry grin, or maybe not so mock.

"Oh, I don't know. We pokes figure there's a lot less strain involved
 for us."

Really great job there, Jick, of heading off the flirty-flirty stuff. Curfew seemed the only recourse. I cleared my throat and said, "If you two are done talking nasty, how about we head out to the Bago?"

"Jesus Christ!" Riley let out and sat straight up, gawking at the Hamm's clock and then back at Tonsil Vapor, who was going on and on. "They're giving him half an hour of airtime on this cattle drive! It's the War and Peace of cows' asses!"

"Horses', too," Mariah pointed out with photographic precision as Tonsil Vapor's visage again filled the screen, and I couldn't help but hoot along with my two tablemates.

Then before I could bring up the matter of adjournment again, the bar lady was serving us a reload on the drinks. "Who ordered these?" I inquired at large.

"I did," Mariah flourished a ten-dollar bill. "Anesthesia for watching Tonsil Vapor."

"You know, maybe this actually is a historic event," marveled Riley, critically cocking an ear as Tonsil Vapor intoned over pictures of cows, horseback riders, more cows, more horseback riders. "The biggest herd

of cliches that ever trampled the mind. Bet you a jukebox tune he even manages to get in ridin' 'em hard and puttin' 'em away wet before he's done."

"You're on," Mariah took him up on it quick as that. I ~~couldn't~~ ~~didn't~~

blame her. There wasn't much any of us would put past T.V. Purvis, but

even he would ~~have~~ ^{need} to outdo himself to call what was on the television

screen heated cowboying ~~the~~ ^{the} way the mass of animals was strolling along

through its media coverage, ~~in front of all the media vehicles,~~ the only sweat that could pop out

on the riders' ponies would have to be from stage fright.

So of course we had to watch the whole thing, during which another

round of drinks ~~came~~ ^{evolved} out of the residue of Mariah's ten-dollar bill, and

wouldn't you know, just before the half hour was up and Tonsil Vapor

was due to vanish into a blip, out spieled his observation that these

Big Sky cowhands were ridin' 'em you-know-how and puttin' 'em away you-

know-what.

"Hey, have you been moonlighting scripts for that bozo?" Mariah

demanding of Riley with a nudge, although not as suspiciously as I would have.

"Faith is justified once every hundred years, is all that proves,"

Riley murmured becomingly of his ~~success at~~ ^{powers of} prediction. "Somebody owes

me a serenade, though. Something besides Willin' and Waily for a change, okay?"

Mariah swigged the last of her current Calvert, fished out of her pile of change whatever coin a jukebox takes these days, and started to slide out of the booth to go pay off. But at the edge she paused, as if needing to make sure. "Vocal only?"

Riley blinked. Then said as if it was a new thought: "Doesn't have to be, far as I'm concerned."

I sat right there and watched as Mariah motated across the room to the jukebox and Riley unlimbered out of the booth after her and called over to the bar, "Okay if we dance, is it?"

The wide bar lady shrugged. "A lot worse than that's happened in here."

Mariah punched a button on the jukebox. Steel guitars reported. But after an overture or whatever it was, voice rode equal to the sound of the instruments, a slow song yet urgent, the woman singer of the Roadkill Angels confiding into the world's every ear.

"King's X," you said the last time

we played this lovers' game.

center
of
stagger
song lines

Mariah and Riley fashioned themselves to each other as those who've danced together do, her thumb hooked in a remembered kidding way into one of his rear belt loops, his spread hand in the natural place ^{low} in the narrow of her back.

"Time out," you called just when

I'd chosen you by name.

Both tall, both more lithe-legged than you'd expect of a lanky couple, they circled together in the slow repeating spin of the song.

"No fair," I called out after

you changed the loving rules.

Mariah's shoulder-long hair moved with the action of their bodies, now touching one blade of her back, now the other. Riley held his head in slightly tilted orbit as if accommodating down to hers.

"Don't cheat," you heard the warning,

that's just the game of fools.



What true dancers know is to never forget each other's eyes.

Mariah and Riley read there as if they'd been to the same school for it as they drifted with the music.

Marcella in my arms. Not many years into the past, yet forever ago.

We had just finished whirling the night away, the Labor Day dance at the old Sedgwick House hotel in Gros Ventre. Now we were home after the early a.m. drive to the ranch, the dark already beginning to thin toward dawn. The music or the delicious sense of each other--perhaps it is the same flame--still had hot hold of us, wrapping us to one another as we reached our bedroom. Marcella moved first, as soon as my fingers alit at her top button; snap buttons, they sassily proved to be, her western shirt pulling all the way open click click click click click when my glorious wife laughed and took that single slow essential half-step backward as if dancing yet. Then Marce moved to me again.

This time when we cross our fingers

Let's make it for luck,

Let's break the old hex,

Let's take back those words, "King's X."

With the tune's conclusion, Mariah and Riley separated orderly enough, but there still was a kind of cling between them as they came back to the booth. She startled me with a wink and the avowal, "I promise you the next dance, birthday kid," but established herself in the booth somewhat closer to Riley than she was before. He in the meantime was enthusiastically summoning to the bar for yet another visit by Lord Calvert and Harvey Wallbanger and Johnny Walker.

Talk about wanting to call time out. I'd have crossed all my fingers and toes too if that would have put a King's X of delay into the way this pair was romping. They showed every sign of spending the night on the town, cozier and cozier with each other, and ^{where}~~where~~ that led I didn't even want to--



The bar lady sang out, "Anybody named Wright Riley? Phone call."

"Can't the world let a man enjoy his Wallbanger in peace?" Riley said plaintively, but took himself off to the ~~pay~~^g phone in the ~~lobby~~^{lobby} hallway.

He was back quick, with an odd expression on his face. ~~"It's for~~^{"Actually} you, Jick." ~~Somebody you know."~~

Oh, swell. I figured it had to be Kenny, telling me some catastrophe on the ranch. Even the phone earpiece didn't sound good, full of those frying sounds of distance. Apprehensively I said into the mouth part, "Lo?"

"Hi, Dad. Happy birthday! If you'd stay home once in a while instead of gallivanting around, I'd have sent you a salmon."

"Lexa! Christamighty, petunia, it's good to hear you!" What I could hear of my younger daughter, that is, through all the swooshes and wishes across the miles to Sitka. "How'd you track me down?"

"I figured the newspaper would be keeping an eye on Riley wherever he was. Just where are you, anyway?"

I had to think a moment, which town by now. "In Chinook. In The Lass With Her A--uh, kind of an everything place. Riley broke down and bought

me a birthday drink, would you believe."

Lexa gave a short snort of laughter, the proper response from a McCaskill at any notion of civility in the Wright brigade. Not that the one of us where it counted most, Mariah, was showing any similar sign of recognizing the

ridiculous; from the phone I could see to the booth where she and Riley were paying each other ~~snuggly~~ ^{necky} attention. What differentiates how our children become? Take Lexa at the distant end of this phone line

smaller, built more along her mother's lines than the lankiness of Mariah and me. Her hair more coppery than Mariah's, her face not so slimly intent, her chosen life more snug, moored. Yet those were the idlest of differences between my two daughters, they did not even begin to describe the distinction. I had not seen Lexa since she and Travis flew down for Marcella's funeral in February, yet I knew if she stepped out of that phone mouthpiece right then I would be surer of her actions than I was of any of Mariah's even after spending night and day of the last two months in her immediate vicinity.

"What's it like traveling with those two," Lexa was asking now,
"the Civil War?"

"More like watching a bad dream start itself all over."

Distance hummed to itself while Lexa took in my news. Then she
~~was saying:~~ ^{exclaiming:} "Mariah isn't falling for that mophead again? ~~After the way~~

they tore each other up in that divorce? She can't be."

"Honey, I wish you were right. But she shows every sign of
 doing just that."

"Tell her for me she needs her brain looked at. Tell her to go
 take up with the nearest shepherd instead. I can't believe anybody,
 even that sister of mine, would--" Lexa's incredulity made way for
 a logical suspicion. "Dad, how many of those birthday drinks have
 you had?"

"I'm sober. All too."

And then wordlessness hung on the line between us,
 the audible ache of the miles between Montana and Alaska. Not just
 measurable distance was between us, but Mariah and Riley, the capacity

~~for~~ ^{catastrophe} the two of them represented. I remembered the expression on
 Riley when he said the call was ~~somebody I know~~ ^{for me.} "Lexa, what was it
 you said to Riley when he answered the phone?"

"I just asked if he still was carrying a turkey around under his arm for spare parts."

Why couldn't that skeptical attitude toward Riley Wright be grafted onto Mariah? Judging from the ~~close~~^{ever closer} conversation they were having in the booth, the sooner the better.

"I'm going to have to tackle Mariah in the morning about this Riley situation," I concluded to Lexa. "I'll keep you posted." I remembered that my non-dud son-in-law still was out on the ~~so-called~~ cleanup of last spring's Exxon Valdez oilspill. "How's Travis doing?"

"Sick at heart," Lexa reported in her own pained tone. "The whole wildlife crew at Prince William Sound is. New dead species all the time--the oil is up the food chain into the eagles now."

"I wish that surprised me." Where wouldn't that oilspill spread to, before things were done.

→
P. 367A follows →

"Mm. Know what you get when you cross an ~~ocean~~^{oil} executive and a pig?"

"No, what?"

"Nothing. There are some things a pig won't do."

Her bitter joke wasn't the best note to end on, but I didn't have any better. "Well, this is your nickel. Lexa, thanks for calling. It helps."

"Love you plenty. So long, Dad."



When I got back to the spooning booth, matters had quieted down, I was thankful to find. Mariah's arms were crossed in front of her with one hand up at the throat of her blouse, contemplatively fingering the point of her collar there. Riley was ever so lightly tapping the edge of the table with just the tips of his fingers, as if patting out some rhythm softly enough not to be heard. I had a moment of wondering how far gone they were; they'd each disposed of the drinks they were working on when I went to the phone, yet really neither one looked swacked. Quite the reverse. They both suddenly seemed keyed up and super attentive as I plunked ^{myself} down and passed along a few words of report about the Alaska wing of the family. What do they call a chance like this any more, ~~a~~ ^{right now} window of opportunity? In any case, ~~this~~ appeared to be the propitious opening for herding my birthday partygivers back to the Bago and letting things settle down overnight, and so I drank up fast before another round could happen or more dancing and carrying on, and gave the evening as casual an amen as I could.

"I'm gonna call it a day. You two look like you could stand to turn in, too. Ready?"

The gaping silence answered that before Mariah began to try.

"Jick. You go ahead. We, Riley and I, we're not going to be back at the Bago tonight."

I had a furious flaring instant of wanting to ask her, demand of her, where they were going to be instead; but that was senseless. I all too well knew. It was right out front, up in neon: M-o-t-e-l.

#

Once the desiring begins, all other laws fall. You know that whether you are fifteen or sixty-five or both added together. There in the motorhome the remainder of that night, I tried to fight through to longer thoughts than that first alarm about Mariah's and Riley's craving for each other. Judiciousness. Forbearance. Parental declaration of neutrality. All had hearings with me, chorused their verdict over and over that whosever affair this coupling night was, it was not mine. My stiff exit from the supper club had been correct deportment, giving the pair of them something to think ^{over} ~~about~~ yet not making too much of what I was leaving behind. Definitely those two were adults, not to say veterans of each other. So what, if Riley was horny. All right,

so what if Mariah was in that same condition. This happens and ever will, wherever people grasp enough about one another to fit onto and into.

And as regular as the basting bags taped over the Bago window flapped in the wind, I accepted every iota of their No Tell Motel linkup and still I sorrowed, fretted, all but wept.

Tonight, a single lightning night of them together, was no cause for bonedeeep concern. Tomorrow and its cousins were. Any of the time ahead, the rest of this centennial journey or beyond, when Mariah might paradoxically backslide to Riley; with all the life that ought to be ahead of her, trapping herself into that again. I hoped against hope that what I was picturing was not about to happen. But as searingly clear as the flashes that had been coming to me from the gone years, I could see ahead to her and him failing with each other again. Their mutual season would not last, the solitude in each of them would win out, and they would break apart in anger and grief and worse again.

Some graft of time, I yearned for. Some splint of cognizance by which Mariah, Riley, the both, could be shown how not to repeat defeat. But all that was left of me seemed too used and brittle for any of that.

Sixty-five years before, union between my parents passed existence along to me. On the Aleutian mountain battlefield in 1943, the ~~had~~ ^{poor} aim of an enemy soldier lent me life from then until now. But what next. Or was this already the next. People do end up this way, alone in a mobile home of one sort or another, their remaining self shrunken to fit into a metal box.

I put my face in my hands and as if she could still be reached by such a clasp, I cried out:

"Marcella? Marce, what the hell am I going to do?"

—————
Bread and ink making their morning rounds woke me.

The Eddy's Bakery truck looming in front of the windshield of the Bago took a minute to register on me when I foggily craned up out of bed to see what all the traffic at this campsite was. Everything came back too fast after that, however, ⁱⁿ this campsite the Lass in a Glass parking lot, Mariah and Riley inside between the sheets, the whole mess. By the time the news agent pulled up to replenish the newspaper boxes outside the motel and had let the lids drop, kachunk kachunk kachunk, I had some clothes and a mood on. Such sleep as I'd ^{managed to get} ~~had~~ was ragged,

am
equal
spaces

tossful^o all over I felt bony and bruised, as if I'd been slumbering on a sack of doorknobs. Oldlike. And the main matter still awaited with the daylight which was just starting to find Chinook, planetary capital of romance: how to induce a thirty-five-year-old headstrong daughter to take a reality check on herself.

Even the interior of the Bago seemed foreign this morning. Strange as hell, how a domicile so empty could feel so mussed. I shook my head in a yawn or at least some kind of a groggy gawp and gimped up front to an unbagged window for a peek at the day. If there was any balance at all to things, at least the weather would have to have improved.

The meteorological outlook, though, was not what hooked my gaze.

I did not want it to be what it was. I looked long and hard across the thirty or so feet from the motorhome to the newsboxes. I tried telling myself, huh uh, naw, they wouldn't, must be some other--yet newsprint does not lie, does it, at least not in this fashion.

Slowly I went out and dropped a quarter and a dime in the middle newspaper box. On either side of it the Great Falls Tribune and the

Havre Daily News were reciting developments in Poland. The Montanian

I plucked out hit closer to home than I'd ever dreamed print and picture could.

Centerpage, mighty, in splendid color, the photo of course was Mariah's. Of the Double W gateframe, tall thick poles and crosspiece in angular outline like a doorway slashed into the sky. Under and around the flagrant gateway, the Two Medicine country of that month ago evening on our way ~~into~~^{in to} the centennial committee meeting: the night-rumple of mountains where the sun had just departed, the thin strokes of clouds still glowing above. One mercy^F standing so stark and dark, the gateframe's lettered sign announcing TriGram ownership could not be read. But the steer skull dangling just beneath more than made up for it, declaring there against the Noon Creek sky like a horned ghost.

Twilight of the Rancher? epitaphed the headline beneath.

And beneath that, the words of Riley.

From a life spent under a Stetson, he has his divided mind
written on his forehead--the tanned lower hemisphere where wind
and sun and all other weathers of the ranch have reached and then

above the hatline equator an oddly shy indoor paleness. When he
was younger, that band of pearly forehead made him stand out at
the Saturday night dances, as if a man needed to be bright-marked
at the top to be able to schottische and square dance so nimbly.
When he was that young, the fingers of his children traced there
above his brow in wonder at the border between the ruddy skin
and the protected zone of white. Now worry fits on at that line.

The rancher starts his day as usual now with a choice of frets.

Looks at the weather and plays the endless guessing game of climate--
an open winter coming, or another Alaskan Express? the droughtiness
of the 1980's at last over (the numerals in his grandfather's
identical thought were the skein from 1917 into the mid-1920's,
in his father's they were the 1930's) or only stoking up for more
years of grass-shriveling heat? Checks the commodities page and
calculates one more time what the latest ^{disappointment} ~~see~~ in livestock prices
is going to cost him. (Of all of Montana's hard weather, the reliably
worst has been its economic climate.) He plots out all that needs
immediate doing and tries to figure out why hired help has become
the rarest commodity of all. Runs on through the wish list to where he

always ends up, damning his bones for their increasing complaint
against the daylight-to-dark ranch life, yearning with everything
in him for someone to shoulder all this after he soon can't.

If the legends of his landed occupation are to be believed,

a century and more ago Montana ranching began heroically, almost
poetically, splendid in the grass. Yet even then, here and there
a rancher twinged with the suspicion that legends are ^{what people resort} resorted to
when truth can't be faced. In 1882, cattleman Charles Anceny
contemplated himself and his neighbors in ^{Montana's} ~~the~~ ^{livestock} ~~new~~ industry with
just such skepticism: "Our good luck consists more in the natural
advantages of our country than in the scale of our genius."

Old Anceny portended even more than he knew. Natural advantages
have a habit of eroding away under spirited exploitation. And
the spirit of the West, of Montana, of America, has been what the
legends speak of as grand and truth has to call aggrandizing. The
consolidating, the biggining, goes on yet and with consequences below;
as economic structures become more global somebody has to become more
granular, and the rancher is among those. The marketplace that is

the land is slipping out from under him. If you possess your
own television network or have the spare change to own a professional
football team or are paid an anchorman salary for your face or are
commensurately compensated for your appearance on the big screens
of the movies, yes, you can maybe compete with corporations and
foreign buyers to own enough ground to be a Montana squire. But
this rancher born on a few thousand family acres doesn't have those
infinite pockets. Instead what he owns is a penchant for counting
too much on next year, and the notion that he's not actually working
himself to death because he's doing it outdoors. Well, those
are possessions too. But not the marketplace kind.

The rancher goes back and forth in his mind--give it up,
tough it out. The past stretches from him like a shadow,
recognizable but perplexing in the shapes it takes. He knows
too well he is alone here in trying to look from those times to
this. He rubs at that eclipse-line across his forehead and wonders
how he and his way of life have ended up this way, forgotten but
not gone.

I felt as if I'd been stripped naked, painted rainbow colors, and paraded across the state.

I spun from the newsbox and went to search the building.

—————

He was established at a window table in the not yet open coffee shop, tippetytapping words into his processor. Flexing his fingers for his next character assassination, no doubt.

The newspaper page still was in my hand. Not for long. I wadded it up and hurled it in Riley Wright's face.

He flinched, but let it bounce off him without otherwise moving.

"The latest reader survey shows that the Montanian draws considerable reaction from sheep ranchers with a Scottish surname," the sonofabitch droned in the BB's tone of voice.

My fury was compounded of what he'd written about me, of how he'd resumed with Mariah, of everything this Wright character represented. Hours, years, could have been spent in the telling. But it ~~came~~^{shot} out hard and quick.

"The stuff you do to people would gag a maggot."

P. 375A follows →

375A

"Jick, I think if you'd just simmer down--"

"I don't that much care a shit what you think. Just tell me this.

Why do you keep giving the McCaskills so much grief?"

That got to him. At least something could. Dreadful squintlines of what I took to be anger pulled the skin white and webbed at the corners of his eyes. The torn look of a man seeing something he had hoped to avoid.

For once Riley searched a while to find anything to say. When he did, his voice was surprisingly husky, as if he was having trouble down in his throat, too.

"I'm not going to debate Mariah with you--that's between her and me, even if you don't want it to be. So let's just talk ranch."

"Yeah, let's," I snapped. "Now that you've written me up as such a supreme failure."

The goddamn guy would not give in to my gaze. He folded his arms across his chest and sighed. "Honest to Christ, it never dawned on me they'd slap that Double W picture on the ranch piece. As soon as I saw it this morning, I knew you'd come in here pissing fire. The only people who don't react to being written about are in the obituaries. But

you're taking it entirely too personal. Jick, you're not the only one
in that ~~story~~ ^{piece.} Anybody trying to run a family ranch or farm, maybe any
kind of a family outfit, is in that situation."

"Anybody, my rosy rear end. You might as well have plastered my
name all over that description of--"

I stopped. The only face Riley had described was that of the situation,
just as he claimed. Try mightily as I did, except for the universal hatline
I could not point to where it wore a single identifiable feature of myself.

Riley said quietly, "Jick, there are only four of us in the world
who know that piece fits you at all."

Himself and Mariah and... "Who're the other two?"

"You are. One version of you is as mad as if you'd found flyshit
in your pepper. The other one of you knows what I wrote is the
absogoddamnute truth."

Right then I ached, in mind, in heart, worse than my Attu shin
ever could. "You figure you even have the right to do my epitaph,
don't you," I spat out at him. "'Here lie the collected versions of
Jick McCaskill.'"

Riley bailed out of his chair so abruptly I figured we were proceeding to fists, which suited me fine. By God, that suited me just fine. Sixty-five sonofabitching years old notwithstanding, extincti on ordained for me in every goddamn copy of that morning's Montanian be as it may, I could still plant a few knuckles before Riley did me in.

But the slander merchant was snapping the ~~cover onto~~ ^{screen down on} his ~~writing~~ ^{laptop}



~~machine,~~ and stepped back from the table carrying it at his side like appliances. the most innocent of ~~appliance~~ See how the guy can't even be counted on to erupt when he ought to? Riley only said, "Not that this'll improve your disposition any, but I've got to get to a phone and send in this Chief Joseph piece. I'm sorry that other one happened to hit the paper today. If I'd done the Chief Joseph one last night instead of--well, just instead of, I'd have modemed it in then and the ranch piece wouldn't have run. But I guess that'd just be postponing the inevitable, hmm?" And with that he walked away, squaring those broadloom shoulders, out of the coffee shop toward the mutual motel room.

I slumped into a chair at the abandoned table. How long I stared out along Highway 2 at the Lass in a Glass sign, extinguished now, I do not know, but she found me there after the morning light had flattened into that of day.

"Hi. Up early, same as ever, I see," Mariah imparted too brightly, swinging her camera bag down and herself into the chair opposite me that Riley had vacated. ~~4~~ When I made no response, she took in a breath and tried some more of the obvious: "I was out shooting the country while

the nice light lasted. The Bearpaws are a different set of mountains today."

"I imagine."

She glanced at me, then down at the table, then ^{off} into various corners of the comatose coffee shop. "They ought to be opening up here pretty quick and we can get some breakfast."

"Swell."

"How about a machine cup of coffee until then?"

"Why not."

On her way back from the coffee machine in the lobby she managed balance all the way to the table before the two Styrofoam cups slopped. "Shit," she said. Then while she was mopping at the spill with napkin after napkin, her voice took on another rare tone, a tinny one of every word having been rehearsed. Mariah, Mariah, ran in my mind, what you're doing to yourself. What she was letting be known now was:

"Actually, you were right about that deal you tried to make with me at the start. We can just borrow the rig to do the rest of series and you can be shed of us, how about. I can drive you home to the ranch this morning, right now, while Riley pokes around town."

"Naw, that's okay," I said pleasant as pie but thinking, to hell with this noise, daughter of mine. No way are you going to cut me out of the picture so you can fall heart over head for Mr. Wrong again. Overnight is one thing, every night is another. "I'm kind of growing used to the Bago life. I'll just stick with you and Romeo until you're done. No problem."

Mariah swung her head the little bit to sway her hair away and clear a look at me. "No, really, we--I can get by okay."

"Mariah, I wouldn't dream of leaving you in the lurch. Besides, there's a lot of Montana left to be seen, isn't there, which I'd hate to miss, wouldn't I." I gave her a steady gaze before adding, "Then there's the other thing."

"Which other thing?"

"That if you're going to make a fool of yourself over Riley a second time in the same life, you're goddamn well going to have to do it in front of me."

Mariah reddened as if my words were a slap. But I kept on, I had to. "That's what you originally brought me along for, isn't it? To

ride shotgun against your inclinations to regard Riley Wright as a worthwhile human being? So that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Jick. . .Dad. . ." she sorted nervously. "That, last night. Riley and I were just. . .feeling frisky." I continued to look squarely at her. I hadn't thought it was a mutual yen for a night's deep sleep.

She moved her eyes from the path of mine and tried to maintain, "I don't know that I'm making a fool of myself over Riley."

"You're giving quite an imitation of it."

"This isn't like what happened before," she essayed in what was surprisingly like a plea but failed to convince me one least bit.

"Riley and I, this time we're not, mmm"--to my horror, she was conscientiously sorting out in that flaming head of hers which way to ~~say~~ ^{translate to me} the fact that they were scratching the bed itch; my God, I thought, does their generation have an entire warehouse of expressions for it?--"taking up with each other. We're just seeing each other."

Speak of the devil, Riley right then stalked back into the coffee shop, spied Mariah and marched grimly over, calling out: "That'll teach me ever to go near a fucking telephone. Can you believe this, that sonofabitching--" # Tension must have grown pretty dense in the vicinity of Mariah and me, because Riley stopped as if he'd walked into a glass wall.

"Uh huh," he evaluated. "A family conference. I'll just wait outside until the blood quits flowing."

"Why don't you hang around?" I offered. "You might learn something definitive about yourself."

"Depends on the source," he replied with extreme wariness as he regarded me and then my daughter the paramour.

"He thinks we're crazy to . . . be with each other," Mariah minimally summed up my views for him.

"Never heard of try, try again, hmm?" Even though the words pittered out of him as syruplike as ever, Riley looked drastically serious. "Jick, it wasn't anything intentional, last night. You know better than anybody that Mariah and I both came into this despite each other."

"Then why in goddamn hell didn't you keep it that way?" I erupted. The majority of parents my age were wildly worried about their married kids breaking up. Why was I the one to have to throw a fit that mine were getting back together? "You both were managing to get done what you wanted to, without having to tumble"--into bed, into the jungles between the legs, into an old fever newly risked--"all over each other just the way you originally did. I don't understand why you're willing to set each other up for grief again."

"Last night didn't remake the world," Mariah protested in a perplexed tone, drawing a startled glance from Riley. "I don't know that we're--"

Riley held up both hands as if stopping a shove. "This must be the ultimate definition of the morning after," he growled to Mariah. "We've got Cupid's conscience right here on our case and the BB waiting his turn."

"The BB," Mariah echoed, her perplexity giving way to something a lot worse.

"The very guy," Riley exhaled wearily. "He wants to see us back in Missoula again. Yet today."

Missoula was a whale of a drive from Chinook. What did this Bolitho so-and-so think, that he could just reel us in whenever he felt like it? Or as I ^{stated} ~~put~~ it now: "Can't that guy ever say what he wants to say on the telephone?"

Mariah and Riley exchanged cloudy looks. He was the one who at last said, "The BB is a Bunker Hill type of boss. He likes to see the whites of ~~our~~ ^{the} eyes before he fires."

—————

Past lunchtime but still lunchless, the roadweary three of us ~~filed~~ ^{trooped} into the Montanian building.

A ponytailed young man carrying camera gear similar to Mariah's slouched out of the BB's office as we approached it. He looked like he'd recently been pinched in a tender part. Mariah greeted him and asked how the BB's mood was. Ponytail responded, "He's chewing sand and shitting glass, if that gives you some idea," and stalked off.

So, braced is the basic description for the Montanian centennial task force as we entered the presence of Baxter Bolitho. All during

our drive from Chinook, Mariah and Riley had tried to think of how to save their skins this time. Without any ~~real~~⁹ result, for as Mariah put it, "We don't even know if this is a fresh mad or the same one he was in last time." I'd been bending my brain to the BB problem too, for the one thing I didn't want now was Riley and Mariah cast loose into the world together, without a chance for me to somehow cure her of him.

I mean, this just really frosted my ass; finally wanting the centennial trip to careen onward and here the BB was about to grant my original wish and X-out the expedition.

The BB or Bax or whatever sent the two of them his average steely stare as we filed in, but in my case he bounced out of his chair and came and gave me the pump handle handshake while declaring, "Great to see you again, Jiggs. I wanted you to hear this, too." Huh. Maybe they were fired and I was hired.

With that, Bolitho circled back to his chair, seated himself again, clasped his hands as if glad to meet himself, and gazed at the ~~three~~ of us ranked across the desk from him. When he figured enough time had passed, he pronounced:

"I have bad news for us all."

He eyeballed the trio of us as if he'd always known three was an unlucky number. Then he shook his head gravely and said:

"I lost out on a goat permit in the state drawing."

Mariah and Riley swallowed in chorus. For my part, I looked carefully around the tower walls at the dead menagerie again, trying to think of any other animal to ante in, but no luck.

All three of us waited for the BB to lower the boom on the centennial series. Instead he again singled me out for his approximation of pleasantry.

"But that's all right. We can try again next year, Chick."

Now I didn't know which to be more of, puzzled or alarmed. Nor it seemed did the pair beside me. If I was bonded to the BB as hunting crony for another year, where then did that leave Mariah and Riley? Did this mean he hadn't even hauled us in here to ream out about--

"The centennial series."

The depth of the BB's tone dashed all hope there. "I have something to tell you about that." [#] He gave us another going-over with his gaze, one by one by one. Then intoned very deeply:

"It's a bull's-eye."

The identical thought was in all three of us who heard this: hadn't the BB gotten his mouth mixed up, actually intending to tell us the centennial series was some other bull stuff than the ocular part? But no, huh uh, he was going on and on about how Mariah and Riley were finding the true grit of Montana and what a service to readers to provide them something more flavorful than the usual newsprint diet.

Now this was news. The letters to the editor that had been showing up in the Montanian were saying ^{pretty much} ~~about~~ the same as when our buddy Bax here was chewing the inside of his mouth to tatters over them. Only ~~yesterday~~ ^{a few days ago}

there'd been one that started off, Why does your so-called writer Riley

Dempsey-Gibbons prizefight
Wright dig up old bones like the ~~Chief Joseph story~~ when the Real Issue

is taxes? and signed, Mad As The Dickens On Southwest Higgins. I

noticed that Mariah and Riley, though both surprised within an inch of
 their capacity, were staying on their guard. Riley ^{in a funny way even} also looked a little
 disappointed, I suppose at having his work ^{so} palatable to the BB.

After a lot more salve of that sort, the BB focused on Mariah and,
 to my surprise again, me. [#] "In other words, I just wanted you to know
 what a very good job you've been doing. Now ³ Mariah and Nick, if you
 would excuse us, there's something I have to convey to Riley."

As soon as Mariah and I were out of the tower, I asked: "What the
 hell is that little scissorbill up to?"

"Don't I wish I knew," said she in bewilderment. It wasn't like
 Mariah to look left out, but right then she seemed the occupational
 equivalent of orphaned.

"Maybe he just wanted us out of there so he could stuff Riley and
 put him on the wall," I speculated. "Which would be the best use of--"

"Why don't you wait here," she stated rapidly, "while I go check
 my mailbox," and all but galloped off out of range of further conversation.

Mariah was back a lot quicker than I expected, though, with one piece of mail sorted out of the sheaf of memos in her other hand. "For yoo-ou," she singsonged, holding the envelope out to me with her pinky suggestively up.

The handwriting with merry little o's dotting all the i's probably rated that, but I tried to make it look like a business matter as I thumbed open the flap thinking, what the hell now?

It was one of those greeting cards showing two little creatures, mice or rodents of some kind, wearing great big sombreros and doing, what else, a goddamn hat dance. Inside, the printed message was:

So Now You're a 'Senor' Citizen! Come Join the Fun!

The one in the giddy handwriting below was:

Happy birthday, Jick! Everybody misses you! Affectionately, Althea.

"So?" my snoopy daughter asked with an eyebrow up. "You got a secret admirer, birthday boy?"

"Uh, Howard Stonesifer," I alibied casually and jammed the card in my hip pocket. [#] Mariah's other eyebrow now was up too, just as if she'd never heard of an undertaker dispatching birthday greetings to prospective customers. Right then, though, the door of the BB's office sprang open and out shot Riley grinning like a million dollars.

By now even I was plenty curious, not ~~just~~^{merely} about how the BB had taken a shine to Riley but how anybody could. The ~~so-and-so~~^{sly} warded off even Mariah's intense questions, insisting "This is so terrific, we've got to go make an occasion of it. I'll tell you over lunch. I'll even buy. Even yours, Jick."

Depend on Riley, the lunch place was called Gyp's and was just big enough for a counter and a fry grill. I ever so imperviously slid onto the stool that put me between Mariah and Riley. Behind the counter was a bony cook who, according to the wall's autographed photos of him posing with Mike Mansfield and Kim Williams, was Gyp himself.

"Ain't seen you for a while, Riley," Gyp said affably. "Been nice."

"Hi, Gyp. The Health Department hasn't had you assassinated yet, hmm?" responded Riley as he plucked up a menu, opened it and slapped it closed without having looked at it. "White ~~Cheeseburger~~, fries, and an Oly."

"Same," said Mariah, eyes fixed on Riley.

"Same again," I said, eyes fixed on her.

Our beers came instantaneously, but before I could get mine lifted Mariah was leaning a bit in front of me to look with exceeding directness at Riley and he was peeking around me with a sweetheart grin at her.

I felt like a sourball salesman at a Valentine party. ⁹ Mariah broached it first. "Okay, Chessy cat. What was that all about, the BB wanting to see you alone?"



Riley somehow increased that grin, his mustache almost tickling his earlobes. He announced:

"They want me in California."

At first I thought it was sarcasm of some kind. In the pause after Riley's words, I took a drag of my beer and inquired in kind, "What for, rubber checks? Or just general personality flaws?"

Then I noticed how utterly still Mariah had fallen, frozen in that same position of peering around me at him. As still as if gone brittle; as if the flick of a fingernail ~~against her~~ would crack her to smithereens.

In a stunned tone she finally managed to say: "At the ^{sq}Glob, you mean."

"The Globe, yeah," Riley responded.

"A column?"

"Yeah, a column."

Was it possibly so easy? Abracadabra or whatever the California equivalent is, and Riley vanishes off into the palm trees? A father fraction of me felt bad about Mariah looking so stricken. But the overwhelming majority of me wanted to turn absolute handsprings.

Gyp slapped down our cheeseburgers in front of us. I spooned piccalilli on mine in celebratory fashion while Riley began ingesting french fries.

Mariah though pressed the question that I figured Riley had as much as answered with his proud announcement of California's desire for him.

She choked it out as, "So what did you tell the BB?" Really, it was a crying shame she had to be put through this from the absconder, but how else would it ever get hammered home to her that Riley Wright's only lasting partner in passion was himself?

"This seems to be getting kind of personal," I noted. "Do you two want me out of here?"

"Sure do, just like always," vouched Riley in what was maybe a half-assed attempt to be funny.

"No," said Mariah in her same tight voice.

"Tie vote," I interpreted to Riley. "Guess I'm staying."

"Suit yourself." He took his time about eating a fry, then washed it down with a long guzzle from his beer. "I told the BB yes, naturally, but that we don't want to until after the centennial series is done.

He phoned down there and the Globe agreed to stagger along until then."

"Who's 'we'? You got a frog in your pocket?" It was the most elderly of jokes, but the way Mariah said it, it carried all the seriousness in the world. And not just for her. I put my swissburger down on the plate and began wiping away the piccalilli I'd squeezed out all over my hand when I heard that pronoun of Riley's.

The incipient Californian was gazing steadily back at her, past me.

"Mariah Montana, my notion is for you to come too. As my wife again."

EAST OF CRAZY

. . . .Wind is the ventriloquism of Montana's seasons.

In utter summer it can blow in from the west--the mountains--

and convince you November is here. The other way around, the

truly world-charging,

real recital: the chinook breathing springtime into deadest winter.

In just such a toasting wind-from-another-time we found my father,

slumped onto the steering wheel of his pickup after the exertion

of putting on chains to navigate the instant new mud from the

Shields River calving shed to home. . . .

--Riley Wright's notes,

en route from Missoula to Clyde Park,

September 6, 1989