

"Those bunnies better put on their helmets and flak jackets,"

Riley said from his perch behind me. "The latest notion of what to do with this out here is to bombard the living shit out of it."

"Why's that?" I asked in honest surprise. A glance over my shoulder showed Leona looking at him with her eyebrows raised, too. "Montana isn't at war with anybody I know of."

"Tell it to the Pentagon, Jick." I heard him flipping in his notebook. "The military wants eight million more acres in the western states for tank maneuvers and artillery and bombing ranges--a million of those acres are up here around Glasgow. The other day an Undersecretary of Defense said--how's this for using the language bass ackwards?-- these open spaces out here are 'a national treasure.' What he means is, they'll make terrific target practice."

The slap of Riley closing his notebook was the only sound for a while. His news about forthcoming bombs and tanks and artillery shells bugged the hell out of me. This country of the Big Dry did not appeal

to me personally. Yet why couldn't it be left alone? Left be empty?
 Instead of the human creature finding one more way to beat up on the
 land.

Flip. Flippity flip. Riley at his notebook pages again, but
 what I was hearing was fifty years and hundreds of miles removed from
 the Bago and the Big Dry.

—————
 A September ^{late} afternoon, after the 1939 fire season. I was helping
 my father try to account for firefighting equipment lost or strayed
 in the Flume Gulch burn he'd been the fire boss on a few weeks before.
 The regional forester in Missoula, Major Evan Kelley, had sent down
 instructions to the effect that Scrupulous inventory of equipment will
be a dividend-payer and so it is hoped that in any shortfall between
equipment issued and equipment on hand you will sift the attendant
circumstances to the bottom, and my father still was muttering--

"Screwpulous, all right. . .sift my rosy red bottom, why doesn't he"--

at that latest kellegram. Busy as we were at counting pulaskis and

trying to ~~remember~~ ^{recall} the fate of missing axes, we never even heard the car

pull into the yard. The husky jug-eared guy in rough clothes caught us by

entire surprise when he popped around the corner of the English Creek ranger station and said, "How do you do, I'm Bob Marshall from the Washington office."

My father ought to have gulped himself inside out, because Marshall was one of the really high muckymucks of the Forest Service, chief of the Recreation and Lands Division. But maybe it happened so quick that District Ranger Mac McCaskill didn't have time to think about the countless kinds of trouble he right then might be in. Instead he stuck out his hand and said, "Glad to know you, Bob. What brings you?"

All Marshall had in mind, it turned out, was to punish shoeleather. In a region and profession where a man was reluctant to go to heaven unless he could do it on horseback, Bob Marshall was a demon hiker. Sometimes thirty, forty miles a day on his solo excursions, and those were mountain miles. He had just spent a week on the trails in the Flathead National Forest and now wanted to balance it with some foot travel here on our side of the Continental Divide, he said. ⁴¹ My father was making a mountain ride anyway the next morning, a Saturday--which meant I was making the ride too, for it was second nature to both of us

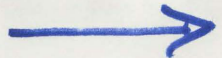
for me to go up into the Two Medicine forest with him--so he suggested Marshall come along with us by saddleback as far as Flume Gulch and then embark on his footwork.

That next morning my father and Marshall seemed to find a lot to talk about as they rode side by side, while I tagged a ways behind, pretty much lost in my own thoughts, which at fifteen years of age are spacious ones. So I didn't get in on things until we stopped for an early lunch along the North Fork, just before Marshall was to shoulder his pack and set out alone. I couldn't help but watch him as we chowed down. He had heavy-lidded eyes, so that as he sat back against a silvered stump he looked like a picnicker half asleep, yet at the same time he was forever fidgeting this way and that and gawking around at every ounce of scenery in sight. I didn't know what to make of him. He seemed like a couple of people bundled into one body. Then after we'd eaten, my father went down to the creek to rinse out the coffeepot. At once Marshall whipped out a



notebook from his shirt pocket and said with urgency, "Help me with this, would you. During lunch, did your father say two goddamns and one sonofabitch, or the other way around?"

I verified that the mention of the Deity had been double and the sonofabitch solitary, watching as Marshall stroked those tallies onto a notebook page. I couldn't help but ask, could I? He explained he was keeping score of exactly how many times he heard various cusswords as he traveled in Montana. It was quite a list.



"Why the hell bother?" I of course popped out with.

Marshall awarded me an ear-to-ear grin, which on him was a lot of grin, and my very own pencil stroke in the hell category, then said:

"Just curious." In which he radically understated himself. It turned out, as he showed me, he had all kinds of stuff down in that notebook.

Hour-by-hour schedules in little precise handwriting of what he'd done each day. Ratings of meals he'd had at various ranger stations during this trip--thank God, my mother's supper the night before topped the list.

Bits of wisdom he'd picked up in bunkhouses such as Sleep in the upper bunk and never piss against the wind.

"Yeah, you really do have to keep at it all the time if you're going to get stuff down, don't you," I enthused as I recognized a kindred pencil soul. I hoisted my own notebook just enough out of my shirt pocket to show him. "Before my dad got me to carrying this, doing his diary was really a pain in the--"

My brain at last caught up with my galloping mouth. Real great, Jick, blabbing what you'd just blabbed. One of the holy rules of the

United States Forest Service was that a ranger must keep a daily diary of his doings on the job, and here I'd spilled the beans to as high a superior as my father could even imagine in the USFS, that I--a squirt of a kid--was the actual author of Mac McCaskill's vital pages.

Then and there Bob Marshall won me for life. All in the world he did was silently grin at me and place his finger over his lips, but that was everything.

Soon he was up and away, walking faster uphill than most people would down, until the trail took him out of sight around the north face of Roman Reef. I don't remember that my father and I said much of anything about our visitor, but he was the kind that somehow stayed in mind the rest of the day and until we got home to the ranger station the next afternoon.

Without preamble my mother asked: "So? How did it go with Mr. Important from Washington?"

"Like they say, he's geared pretty different, all right. Kind of like a perpetual big kid," my father sent a comparative glance at me which I did not at all appreciate, "the way he goes about things. But

he's got a head on his shoulders. He's absogoddamnlutely right, Bet, that people can't go on using up country the way they always have.

He catches all kinds of hell for saying so. But you know what he

told me ^{he} answers when somebody jumps him with 'There's plenty of land

left in America, Mr. Marshall, how much wilderness do we need, anyway?'

He asks them back, 'How many symphonies do we need?''

Even though my father hadn't been in the house more than two minutes,

he crossed the kitchen to the window that looked west to the mountains

where Bob Marshall was on his hiking marathon. I had never thought

of it until right then, but I suppose those snow summits and swooping

canyons were something like permanent music to my father.

Two months later, at the age of 38, Marshall died in his sleep

on a train between Washington and New York. Where my father's eyes lit

on the top of the Rockies, that day after Marshall had gone up into

those mountains with us, there now is a million acres set aside as

the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Those of us who live in sight of it

simply call it the Bob.

#

Gas stations had grown so scarce that I pulled in at the one at Sand Springs--the gas station pretty much was Sand Springs--and crammed every drop of fuel I could into the Bago and religiously checked the tires and the air in the spare. Out on these extreme empty roads, you could die of car trouble.

The station attendant and I had been gabbing wholeheartedly-- people out here in eastern Montana were as open as their plains--and while we did ~~so~~ he noticed Mariah and Leona and Riley one after another emerge from the motorhome to stretch their legs or utilize the restroom or, in Mariah's case, just unlimber her camera on Sand Springs. When we settled up, along with my change he handed me:

"Traveling with your whole family, eh? That's nice to see, these days."

It surprised the daylights out of me, the notion of the four of us as a brood. I was briefly tempted to tell the ^{stationman} ~~man~~ that yeah, we were just your normal vanilla American household these days--the silver-haired lady and I weren't married, at least to each other, but she'd once

p. 469A follows

almost married my brother before thinking better of it, whereas the younger two, she mine (by my second wife) and him hers, had been married to one another but weren't any more, although they intended to be again.

Family tree, hell. We were our own jungle.

~~_____~~



. . . Another voice, another rememberer. "On our homestead
there in the Jordan country, there weren't any trees to be had
when Christmas came. So we brought a big tumbleweed into the
house and decorated it with silver tinsel."

→ Mariah found her picture that afternoon. Leona was the one, as we roved down from Jordan toward Cohagen, who noticed that some of the sheds on the ranches we were passing had chimneys and window sashes and for that matter, regular front doors: homestead houses that had been jacked up and moved after the sodbuster families "took the cure" and abandoned their claims in some final dry year. Mariah pored over one of those old shanties for what must have been an hour, and the photo she finally chose was a close-up of its siding, the wood weathered to the rich brown of a relic.

—————
 As long a day as it had been, prowling around the Big Dry country for Mariah and Riley to work on their piece, that night after we pulled into the campground on the outskirts of Jordan, pop. 450, I simply nuked up some frozen dinners.

Leona tasted the first forkful of hers and asked clinically:

"Excuse my asking, but what is this guck?"

Mariah was in her absent rhythm of tackling the food with a utensil in one hand while she messed around in a stack of proof sheets with the other, and Riley and I pretty much per usual were mauling away at our plates without much thought either, I suppose.

"Soybeans Incognito, would be my best guess," I theorized to Leona, although the label announced veal patties a la something-or-other.

"You people," she uttered more in sorrow than in anger, "eat like gypsies."

"That's funny," Riley answered and gawked out at bare gray hills beyond the campground, ashen distance surrounding us everywhere. This will sound like I'm pouring it on, but honest to God, out there at the side of the road was a sign that read: Hell Creek, 15 miles.

"You suppose maybe it might be because we live like gypsies, Mother?"

Protocol when four people are packed into a motorhome and none of them are married to any of the others is tricky. Leona was up to it, though. She ~~smiled~~ smiled from Riley to Mariah to me, then simply proposed it at

large:

"Would anybody mind overly much if I took on the cooking?"

#

Our next encampment was at Circle, which Riley couldn't resist pointing out was a bigger dot on the map than we were used to; the town had about 800 population. This particular morning, while Leona and I held the fort at the Redwater RV Park, he and Mariah had gone downtown to the Big Sheep Mountains Retirement Home in search of more rememberers for their homestead piece. Old folks' home, such places used to be called. I wondered if I was going to end up in one of those. I hoped not. I hoped to Christ not.

For the time being, I actually had the Bago to myself while Leona was out doing her daily walk for exercise. The motorhome seemed suddenly expanded, big as an empty bus. Just me and a third cup of coffee and the rattle of the pages of the day's Montanian I had settled down with. Eastern Europe in one headline, Cocaine in another. What the news seemed to add up to was



that people were evaporating out of East Germany as fast as they could, leaving everything behind to bravely try to better their lives, while a sizable proportion of this

country sat around trying to figure new ways to put connoption powder up its collective nose. I don't know. I try to be as American as anybody, but the balance of behavior looked pretty far out of whack at our end.

It was a relief, then, when Leona came back in from her constitutional and mentioned that she'd stopped by the phone box and called Morgan to see how things were at the ranch, and I said yeah, I was going to have to do the same to Noon Creek pretty quick, and we made conversation along that line for a while.

Leona hesitated, but then brought it up. [#] "Riley tells me you're thinking about selling your ranch."

I managed not to say he'd be the one to know, he was a major reason for that. Instead: "Thinking about is as far as I seem to get."

"It's always hard, isn't it," she answered. "When Herb and I

eg - no "it"
after
"about"

married in '44 he'd already taken over the place from his folks, so all those years until Herb died, our ranch just always seemed to me as permanent as the Crazy Mountains.

But that's not really the case any more. Morgan will run the place until his last breath. But after him, I just don't know. Jeff"-- by now I knew that was her grandson, in college at Bozeman--"doesn't seem that interested. He's a quiet boy. So far, he won't even look at a girl." Leona turned aside to glance at her reflection in the window above the nook table, as if the answer to young Jeff might be there. "No, I'm not at all sure the ranch is in his future. He maybe takes after Riley." She swung a smile my way. "Don't even say it, Jick."

In truth, it was hard not to burst out at the contradiction of a nephew emulating Riley yet not choosing after the female of the species.

But the eventuality in what Leona had just told me was outechoing that. So even the prospering Wrights were only postponing, staving off for one more generation, the question of what would become of their ranch.

Suddenly the ranch topic lost its appeal for both of us and Leona said she'd better put in a session on her Russian flashcards. I offered

my services, figuring I could riffle cards in any language, and she brightened right up. "Spaseebo. Thank you. It'll make the situation seem more real to have you trying me out on the words instead of doing it myself."

I flicked and flipped to the best of my ability, springing stuff like What time is it now, please? on her until she said that was about enough vocabulary for any one day.

The topic that had been in my own mind while she'd been practicing pah rooskee had to come out. "Something you mentioned earlier, Leona-- I'd kind of like to talk to you about it, if you wouldn't mind too much. All those years you spent with Herb--a lot like what I spent with Marce." I worked my throat overtime but managed to get the next words out. "What can you tell me about--this."

She knew what I meant. About being a widow, a widower. About being the one who lives on alone.

Leona's hands fiddled with the box of flashcards. The same little crimp of concentration she'd shown while I quizzed her on vocabulary

appeared again between her silvered eyebrows, but her eyes stayed steady into mine. "You still miss Marcella something fierce, don't you."

I swallowed heavily and said, "That's still the case, yeah. I guess really that's what I'm wondering from you. Does it ever get any easier?"

"In some ways." Leona paused. "Maybe it has to, or we wouldn't be able to stand it. We'd crush down until there wasn't anything left of us either. But it. . .the grief, the worst of it anyway, eventually does"--I could see her search as she sometimes did for a Russian phrase--"space itself out some. Every now and again, something pops into memory that hurts as much as ever. And there are days you wish you could take off the calendar forever. Herb's birthday is always hard for me. And our anniversary. And the start of calving time, because that's the time of year he died. But"--she found a smile to encourage me--"that leaves a majority of days when a person can get by okay, I suppose is how I look at it."

"Leona, if this is too damn personal, just up and say so and we'll skip it. But--how come you never remarried?"

She flushed a little and looked down at the table, but did tackle my question. "I've had a couple of chances. Not as many as you maybe think. But every time it seemed like such an effort. To get used to someone all over again. I suppose I'm set in my ways, and at this--stage of life, the other person is bound to be, too."

"Yeah, I seem to be finding that out in myself--old dogs bark the loudest." Immediately I wished that hadn't spouted out. Leona was, what, two years further into age than I was.

That inadvertent crack put her to looking squarely across at me again. She said, though, as if going right on with her catalogue of why she hadn't gone the matrimonial route with anybody in the years since Herb Wright's death: "Besides, you know my history, Jick. I don't seem to marry easily."

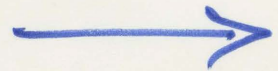
Huh. So she would at least allude in that direction. To Alec.

Her jilt of him. The blond bolt of lightning she was for the McCaskills, back there half a century ago.

I didn't want to get into that with her now, given the missionary work she and I had ahead on Mariah and Riley and their marriage propensity. Instead I kept on the course I'd started with the remarrying question. "There's a real reason I'm trying to get a line on this. See, one thing I'll be going home to, after our newspaper aces finish off the centennial, is somebody who's got herself convinced she and I ought to get together." Althea Frew probably right at that moment was humming around Gros Ventre red-circling on every calendar in town November 8, centennial day and the return of widower/bachelor/eligible-male-at-loose-ends-and-not-yet-utterly-decrepit, one J.A. McCaskill. "And at honest to Christ moments I wonder if she might just be right." Or as the Althea matter formed itself in the whispers in my mind, My God, am I going to end up having to do that? If I am, I've got some overhauling to do on my thinking about that woman. And soon. Centennial day was not that far down the pike now, life beyond Mariah and Riley and the steering wheel of the Bago was fast coming at me, and if I was going to try and follow widower logic--admittedly, it was there--then pairing up with Althea would at least cure what loomed ahead of me at Noon Creek after

that eighth morning of November, the aloneness. Loneliness.

"Oh, sure, she has plenty of things about her that kind of bug me,"
I summed Althea to Leona's smile of encouragement, "but she can probably
double that in spades about me. We could likely iron each other out
enough to make a marriage work, more or less, if it came to that. And
that's what I'm wondering. Whether it's maybe worth it, not to have
to try the rest of life"--the last of, we both knew I was saying--"all
alone. But pretty plainly you've decided it's not worth it, huh? From
your side of things, I mean."



That other side of things, I genuinely did have a long curiosity about. In the skin of a woman, how does life seem? I could remember speculating that about my mother, when I was still only a shavetail kid, fifteen or so: ranching and the Forest Service, male livelihoods both then--what did Beth McCaskill think of her existence in that largely man-run scheme of things? Certainly I'd had the occasions to mull McCaskill women since, too. Lexa, taking herself off to Alaska. Mariah-- God, you bet, Mariah. And even though I felt we knew each other to the maximum, sometimes even Marcella had stirred that skinwhisper question.

"Maybe it's not just a matter of that," Leona was saying now, "the worth-it part, that is. Maybe it's more a matter of getting up enough nerve for it. I seem to have spent my nerve for--mating, whatever you'd say, on Herb."

Thinking how complete my version with Marcella had been, I could understand that too. "Uh huh. Could be that our share of enthusiasm for hearing wedding bells over and over again got parceled out to these kids of ours instead."

She laughed, looking a little relieved at the excuse to. I figured

now was as logical a time as any, to start putting our heads together about Mariah and Riley and the flopperoo marriage they were determined to repeat. "That's something I been wanting to get to with you, too. I don't have a whole lot of sway with Mariah, where Riley is concerned. But I wondered if there's any way you can work on him--or hell, her, for that matter--to keep them from going off the deep end again."

Leona gave me a smile, of a calibration I hadn't seen before.

And delivered:

"Jick, you couldn't be more wrong. I think Riley and Mariah should get married again."

My ears about fell off.

While I was gaping at the woman, trying not to believe I'd heard what I'd heard, she was piling more on. "You're looking at me kahk Srehdah nah Pyahntnyeetsoo. Like Wednesday looks at Friday. But I'd think you, as Mariah's father and all, would be the first person in the world to want them back together."

p. 480A follows

"Togeth--? Leona, that ^{first} marriage of theirs didn't just come apart!

Pieces of it are still flying through the air, it blew up so goddamn bad!

Why in the name of anything holy should they make the exact identical



mistake again?"

"Maybe they've learned how to do better."

"Or maybe they're only going to be better at how to make each other miserable. They weren't a couple of skim-milk kids when they got married, that first time. Now they're even more--well, indegoddampendent, is about the most polite way to put it, the both of them."

She still toyed with a small smile, which did nothing to improve the rotten humor this suddenly had me in. [#] "So you're not really for people remarrying either?"

~~over remarrying?~~ she tried on me, I suppose apropos of the Althea theorizing I'd been doing.

"I'd be a thousand percent happy to see Mariah and Riley remarried,"

I protested. "Just not to each other."

"Jick,
It's their choice."

"I know it's their choice." If it was mine, they'd both have been oblivious to any chance of a repeat performance. "I also know neither one of them is dealing with a full deck when it comes to deciding about the other one." How to render this politely. No, to hell with polite.

"They get hot to trot, out on their job all the time like they are

without any other candidates around to button their bellybuttons to, and then while they're at it, so to speak, they figure hey, wow, they're magically back in love. But Leona, that'll only last as long as the bedsprings squeak. Then they'll be dishing out hurt to each other again, which is what I dread for them. And I don't see why you aren't leery of that, too. For Riley's sake, if nothing else. Maybe I've been misreading, but I somehow got the impression Mariah is not your favorite person in the universe."

Leona stood her territory. "I have my differences with Mariah, that's all too true. We all side with our own children when a marriage of theirs aren't we, Jick, breaks up. After all, we're parents, not neutral peacekeeping forces. But I'm not the one who wants to try married life with Mariah again, am I. Riley is. I know you think he's gone ^{loco} ~~geefy~~ about this"--understatement of the century--"but Riley's instincts are generally right. Usually more right than mine." Her expression suggested the not remote possibility that they might be righter than my own, too.

If she expected that to get a rise out of me, it did. "Let's ~~back~~ back up here a goddamn minute. Didn't I just hear you putting remarrying

out of your own picture? If that's true for you, why in all hell isn't it true for Mariah and Riley after they've already flubbed the dub with each other once?"

"A difference in Vitamin G level, I suppose," wafted across the table from her to me.

"Huh?"

"In guts, Jick. I said it 'nerve' before, but I guess we're into speaking plain, aren't we. My time of life, my way of--getting through, isn't anywhere near the same as Riley and Mariah's. Their generation has its own agenda and it should have. I know you can't help but feel Riley and Mariah are being scatty about this, but Jick, they've got so many more years ahead of them they can afford to take those chances, can't they? If they possess the guts to try to make a go of life with each other again, good for them."

Like the kid starting his third year in the second grade, it was beginning to dawn on me how much ground I was losing. Good God in sweet heaven. Here I'd invited Leona Tracy Wright along as an ally against the tendency of our offspring to get dangerously smitten with

each other and she turns out to be their head cheerleader.

So I wasn't one bit better at getting through to her at this farther end of life than I'd been at the early part, was I. The realization knocked every blossom off me. Why was it, the consequence always had to be the same where this person was concerned? I had believed I was putting aside the past between Leona and the McCaskills, shelving that oldest grudge of her having been too good for my brother, spending these Bago hours getting to know her as she was now instead of a disruptive memory, but no. I still didn't have the shadow of a clue to the real Leona, any more than that other time I had tried to be at my social utmost with her.



Probably she wouldn't even remember that time; there wasn't any great reason for her to. The Fourth of July rodeo, that summer when Leona and Alec were going at romance hot and heavy. I could see Leona yet, her silver hair returned to gold, the half-century gone to leave her magically at seventeen again, there in a clover-green blouse with good value under it, perched on a car fender by the arena fence. Alec was entered in the calf roping and he glommed on to me to go over and entertain his lady love while he spruced up to compete. It promptly emerged, though, that besides keeping her company Alec wanted me to keep her occupied; he didn't want Earl Zane, Arlee's equally bigheaded older brother, to come strutting around and cut in on his progress with Leona. [#] I was just in the midst of telling Alec nothing doing, that my not-quite-fifteen-year-old-yet repertoire of life didn't include anything on how to handle hearts and hand-to-hand combat, when Leona revolved in our direction, patted the car fender beside her, and of course beamed me in with a smile the way a moth would head for a lamp. [#] Well, okay, maybe, I thought

to myself as I zombied over to her leading my horse. The horse, my father's big gray saddle mount named Mouse which he'd grandly ^mlet me for the holiday, actually was my best hope with Leona, for she was such an avid rider she definitely knew horseflesh.

In one way of looking at it, my subsequent brief stay with Leona on that fender did serve Alec's purpose of repulse: Earl Zane never showed his ugly face, nor did any sabre-toothed tigers. On the other hand, entertaining Leona was an uphill battle every moment. Things reached their ultimate dead end just after I had told her a joke she didn't get, which is infinitely worse than no joke at all, when Mouse chose that moment to unroll his business end and proceed to take a world-record leak in front of my horrified eyes and Leona's evidently interested ones. Honest to God, the tallywhacker on that horse looked like a firehose in action and Leona studied it like it was the newest thing in hydraulics. Mouse's golden stream washed away what little composure I had left, and by the time Alec showed up and asked Leona how I did as company, she in all too much truth reported: "He's a wonder."

Her current opinion of me probably wasn't even ankle-high to that.

She was the same calm Leona, dentproof as her smile, but her voice had a different bearing than when we'd been rushing Russian into her. # "Jick, really, I'm sorry we don't see the same way on Riley and Mariah getting together again, but--"

"Forget it.

"I need some weather in me." I said and quickly got up and jammed on my hat and coat and went out the Bago door.

Wouldn't you know, the afternoon had turned as blustery outside as in. Clouds needed to come a long way to these eastern Montana plains and they always seemed to mean business by the time they got here. There already was rain ~~riddling~~ monkeying around to the west and a gusty wind was clearing the way for it into Circle. I wished ~~to hell~~ I'd grabbed my winter cap instead of my Stetson. Not that I've had that much experience at domestic strife, but one of its drawbacks evidently was being dressed wrong for stomping out.

Misery and company. I was forging past the RV park office, head down, when the manager potted out and called to me.

"You're site five, aren't you? Mr."--he checked the sheet of paper in his hand--"McCaskill?"

When I said I supposed I was, he handed me the piece of paper.

"This just came in for you."

"Came in?"

"Sure, by fax. Got our machine right there in the office, in case you want to send something back."

By now I had taken a look at the last line of the facsimile, Yours with every fond thought followed by the emphatic signature Althea, and in my current mood the reply that popped to mind was the legendary telegram to headquarters we used to joke about in the Forest Service, the fed-up ranger wiring his forest supervisor: Fuck you. Strong letter to follow.

However, not knowing the law on transmitting imaginative language by fax, I declined the campground manager's eager offer and dragged a lawn chair over behind a lombary poplar for a bit of shelter from the wind and sat to see what was to be contended with in Althea's missive.

Jick, dear--

Not that I ever need an excuse to keep in touch with you, but
those of us on the committee who are not off glamorously wandering the
world (just joking! you know me!) have been arranging our Dawn of
Montana ceremony, and as you are our orator I'm sure you will appreciate
knowing the schedule.

5:00-5:30 a.m. Gather at the Medicine Lodge; musical interlude.

5:30-6:00 Pancake breakfast

6:00-6:30 Dawn Dance

6:30-6:35 Assemble at the centennial flagpole

6:35-6:36 Introduction of centennial speaker Jick McCaskill

(Penciled in: by you know who!)

6:36-6:55 Centennial speech by Jick McCaskill

There was more, you bet there was--Althea could have given lessons
 to Cape Canaveral on countdown--but I skipped past the rest of the
 schedule to see what she'd tamped in to her last pair of paragraphs.

It's hard to believe our centennial celebration is almost here.

I'll have to find something to do with myself after November 8. But

then I'm not the only one in that situation, am I?

Kenny, who of course kindly told me where you are at this very moment (isn't fax such an advance!), says he'll see you in a day or two when you ship your lambs. I'll give you a jingle.

#

day after,
 In Glasgow the ~~next day~~, Riley and I went to a car agency so he could jimmy onto the expense account a rental means of transportation for me--I made damn good and sure it was going to be a Ford Taurus instead of a Yugo--and I scorched road home to the ranch. That next morning at Noon Creek, events kept on at about the pace of a catfight in a rolling barrel. Typical of shipping days, a bonechilling squall swirled down off the mountains and we didn't even have the lambs started into the trucks before Sean Finletter drove up and said his TriGram bosses just could not understand why I wasn't ready to sell. Right then, with sleet sifting down the back of my neck and a thousand lambless ewes blatting and Helen's dogging in the lamb pen rending the air with barks and Kenny profanely trying to fill the loading chute with lambs who had decided they were afraid of the color of the truck, I could not understand why either. That supertime, Darleen

informed me she and Joe Rellis at the Gros Ventre Mercantile were no longer on speaking terms, even to argue, but before achieving that state^{of affairs}

Joe made it known that the Merc would no longer carry us on a monthly credit account and all groceries hereafter were strictly cash basis.

I was still digesting that fiscal turn when Althea Frew was on the line-- plain telephone, this time--offering herself as audience for me to rehearse my centennial speech on, and I had to freehand invent that I'd left my only copy back in the Bago, which even as we spoke was being driven by Mariah and Riley to a remote site on the Missouri River where Lewis and Clark had once camped, thus regrettably out of range of fax.

And the morning after we shipped the lambs, Helen departed from her herding years with me, riding beside me in the rental car as far as the Amtrak station in Shelby where she gave me a last remembering look through the blowing web of her hair and boarded the train for Oregon and gemology.

—————

Back at Glasgow, at my earliest chance I innocently asked Mariah how everybody had gotten along in my absence.

She retorted with her camera, saying as she snapped me for the kabillionth time on the trip: "Riley would be easier to remarry if he were an orphan, I'll say that much."

—————

Toward me, Leona behaved as if we'd never been at loggerheads at all, asking how my lambs had weighed out and how the grass prospect looked in the Two Medicine country now that some rain finally had found Montana, ranch talk that was our equivalent of church Latin. Yeah, well, sure, I told myself, she'd had lifelong practice at sailing smoothly on, hadn't she. Yet I was surprised to find that my snit at her kept cooling off and off, I suppose because I didn't have time to maintain a mad; there was the hour-by-hour matter of the centennial trip and getting done what we were supposed to, all four. What a size life was these days. A person had to get up twice in the morning to begin to fill it. Across county after county I put on the miles, Leona put on the meals, and Mariah and Riley kept on scouring that upper righthand corner of the state. All navigation was straight on those roads,

one dead-ahead run after another. The gray grain elevators of town
 after town we passed--Culbertson, Froid, Scobey,
 Flaxville--with the high plains all around farmed ~~to all horizons~~ in
 brown plowed strips next to straw-colored fallow ones. Sometimes the
 yield of our miles would be a picture of Mariah's--the water tower of
 the town of Frazer hanging just above the planetary rim of the plains
 like a tiny balloon on a string. Sometimes what worked was a scene
 Riley and his tape recorder found in someone.

* "We had to pack up and pull out of here in '32," the woman
 remembers while revisiting Plentywood for the centennial celebration.

"Just walked away from
 our place, that summer, and never came back. It was so dry the
 corn didn't sprout, the potatoes barely came up, the pasture was awful



short. My dad and older brother had gone on ahead out to the Coast,
to Everett, Washington, where we had relatives and tried to get
any work they could there. Then while my mother went around the
countryside until she finally found somebody to trade our farm
machinery to for a secondhand Model T Ford, my younger brother
and I--I was thirteen at the time--we got on our horses and started
moving our handful of cattle to the stockyard here in Plentywood.
It was an overnight trip, Millard and I slept on the ground, then
the next morning the cattle were anxious for water because they
hadn't had any since noon the day before. But Big Muddy Creek
here was so low there was deep mud and Millard said, 'Mary, we've



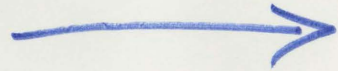
got to push them on past that water or they'll bog down in there
and we'll be in trouble.' I was almost in tears to leave our cows
so thirsty, but Millard was right.

"When we got home to the farm we loaded the Model T--Mother,

Millard and I, and a yellow cat--and started for the Coast. We
lost the cat on the way but the rest of us made it.

"Our horses we just left there on the range."

—————



Miles City. By now we had roved into October. Mapwise, we were
back south out of the farmed plains into cattlegrowing country again
and Miles, as the pleasant brick-faced little city was called by ranchers
who described their places as "forty miles from Miles," came as a
kind of oasis to us all, the big cottonwoods at the Roche Jaune RV
Park greeting the Bago like a home grove every time we drove in from



one of Mariah and Riley's daily delvings.

This day, though, Leona and I had set them off afoot downtown--
 the Montanian pair had come up with the ^{bright} idea of studying what Riley
 called "bucklelaureate ceremonies" and so they were at a westernwear
 store seeing just what belt buckles, cowboy boots, rangerider big hats
 and other regalia walked out of the store in the course of a business
 day--and she and I headed on toward what she'd spied in a Miles City
Star ad, a horse auction at the CMR Livestock Auction Yard. Myself,
 I could take or leave horses, but I knew Leona's interest in them--
 did I ever--and so I figured, well, hell, what's a few hours of horseflesh
 to put up with.

The auction sale ring was actually a half-circle, a tier of seats
 for those of us in the audience arcing around it, with the auctioneer's
 pulpit centered there against the wall where the livestock was hazed
 in through one ~~door~~^g gate, had its moment of being bid on, and hazed out
 the other ~~door~~^g gate back into the stockyard. Friday--feeder calves
Saturday--slaughter animals announced a large red sign above the auctioneer
 but a person pretty much knew by nose the livestock traffic through here:

am quod
 space
 between
 phrases

the mingled smell of cattle and horses was heavier, less pungent than the iodine-and-lanolin fragrance of sheep that I was used to.

Regular buyers had front row moviehouse-like seats with their nameplates on them, but Leona and I tucked ourselves onto an ordinary bench high at the back of the arena. As usual I looked the crowd over for anybody I might know but the only such spotting this time was by Leona.

"I see Ozzie Breckinridge is here," she pointed out a ~~lanley~~ long-drink-of-water guy about our age perched at the far end of the arena arc. "He runs a dude ranch, down by Absarokee. Herb and I used to deal horses with him a little." The dude herder noticed Leona too, traded her a nod and obviously wondered who the Methusaleh in a Stetson next to her was.

"And ready and we go," the auctioneer chanted and the hazers brought the horses on, one at a time. Roans, pintos, piebalds, appaloosas, bays, duns, you name it, the equine parade went on for a couple of hours. It seemed to me there was a serious oversupply of horses in the Miles City country and the bidding reflected that too,

the auctioneer about having to work himself into a lather to get each animal sold off. In fact, the auction wound down to the point where the regular buyers had got up and left and the rest of the crowd was thinning rapidly too. Throughout it all, though, Leona was rapt.

As we still had chores to do around town, grocery shopping and so on, I finally suggested we stir. But Leona said, "Let's just watch this one last one, Jick. That's not a badlooking horse."

Neither was it a goodlooking horse. At best the thing was only about okaylooking, a sorrel gelding no more than fourteen hands high, shaggy and a little swaybacked, with the scar of a bad barbwire cut across its chest; the one pleasant distinction was a nice blaze of white on its face. Obviously Leona saw more in the animal than I could, and I sat back to learn.

"All right, folks," the auctioneer began as the blazeface trotted a tight circle in the sale ring, "we're here to sell. Who'll give me six fifty to start it off? Six hundred fifty, fifty, fifty, anybody six fifty? Six hundred then, anybody six, six, six, who'll say six,

horsehorsehorse helluvahorse swelluvahorse horsehorse gottasellthishorse,
six hundred, anybody?"

"It's a crime," Leona said softly to me, referring to the fact that
the horse would be cut back into the cannery slaughter herd--which meant
his destiny was to become dogfood--if nobody bid on him.



"He's no canner. Look how he handles himself in all this commotion."

True enough; the sorrel seemed alert to its weird confinement without getting panicky. Leona went on in the same soft tone: "That old fool Ozzie could use him in his dude string, if he just would."

Thinking of horses I had known, particularly an assassin packhorse named Bubbles, I started to nod in agreement that this one by comparison might be a decent equine citizen, but caught myself just in time. The auctioneer was spieeling so desperately that I figured if I so much as twitched, I'd have bought myself a steed.

"Folks, remember, you're getting the whole horse here," the auctioneer admonished, "so isn't that worth at least five hundred fifty dollars? You can barely buy a big dog for that. Five fifty will start it off, five hundred fifty, fifty, fifty, ponyponypony onlypony nothingphonypony ponypony ownthepony, five hundred then, five, five, anybody, five? Where's the money, folks, where's the money? Will anybody bid five hundred dollars for this animal?"

Nobody would. The auctioneer's microphone voice took on a sweet fresh reasonableness. "All right, where do you want to start it then?"

Silence ensued. The only motion in the auction house was the blazeface slowly moving his head in wariness of the audience.

"Just one donor of green blood, that's all we need," the auctioneer sounded desperate again. "How about ~~one fifty~~ ^{four fifty}? Anybody, body, body, any bid, bid, bid?"

Leona had been fingering the top button of her blouse as if to make sure it was secure. Now she tapped the button with her index finger, just obviously enough that it was not missed by the auctioneer.

Oh, swell. Just what every motorhome household needs, an auxiliary horse.

But if Leona's signal alarmed me, it translated immediate new life into the auctioneer.

"Four fifty, I see bid! All right, it's more than I had. Now who'll say four hundred seventy-five, seventy-five, seventy-five, five, five, five--I have four seventy-five!" [#] More by osmosis than anything I could actually discern, I somehow knew that competing bid had come from Ozzie Breckenridge. He seemed to be casually eyeing in our direction,

but I was pretty damn sure those gimlet eyes had taken in Leona's bidding method. ⁴"Five now," the auctioneer raced on, "anybody, five hund"--Leona tapped her button--"I have five hundred!"

Expensive as those taps were getting to be, I figured I'd better alert her to oculatory Ozzie. "Uh, Leona, that other guy can see you bid."

"I know," she said, finger delicately on button. "I want him to."

"Five fifty? Five fifty?" The auctioneer was putting it to Breckenridge, who was rubbing the back of his neck uneasily while he studied the sorrel from wither to nether. "Five fifty? It's only double nickels. Five fifty?" Breckenridge continued to inspect the horse as if it was some hitherto unknown species. "It's a nifty for five fifty. Damn near a gift. Why not bid a thrifty five fif--I have five fifty!"

Breckenridge's movement had looked to me more like a squirm than a bid, but maybe it was both.

"I have five fifty, now seventy-five, sev--I have five seventy-five!"

Again Leona had wasted no time with her fingertap.

"Now six hundred, anybody six, six, six, who'll say six?" I saw Breckenridge sneak a look at Leona to make sure she still was eagerly fingering that ^{blouse} button. By now he had the appearance of a man who'd sooner give up several of his teeth, but at last he made whatever indication it took and bid the six hundred dollars.

Instantly the auctioneer launched his spiel anew, but Leona just as promptly had dropped her finger from the button and was shaking her head no, with a little smile. Within seconds the auctioneer banged his hammer down whammo, declared "It's all done, it's a sold one!" and the considerably startled Oz Breckenridge was in possession of a horse.

#

Riley, though. I had to admit he was more immune to his mother than I'd hoped. # Try as I did to find signs that life with Leona was making him unravel, he seemed pretty much the ~~same~~ ^{selfsame} goddamn specimen. ~~that Mariah inexplicably found cozy ever since that episode in Chinook.~~
~~The Lass With Her Ass in a Glass: how about The Sap With Yap Coming Out His Trep.~~ Take the very next morning, when I innocently pulled into a gas station to feed the Bago on our way out of Miles City. Mariah

and Riley were in a mutual work trance, finishing up their westernwear piece to transmit into the Montanian, and Leona had retreated into earsset Russian, so I climbed out to do the gassing up ~~etc~~ by myself. I was topping up the air in the tires when Riley stuck his head out the side door of the Bago, to clear his so-called brain I guess, peering over me and the airhose while he did.

"Shit oh dear!" he let out in an old maids voice. "Everybody knows that's only the half of it! Two elements short is a lot even for Montana--those old Greeks would be ashamed to death of us, Jick buddy."

From where I was kneeling at the front tire I glanced up and down the main street of Miles City who anybody who looked approximately Greek. "What the hell are you yakking about now?" I addressed Riley, but he had pulled back into the motorhome, where I could hear him asking Mariah for something.

Next thing, he bounced out and past me, and I was happy to have him out of my hair while I finished tending to the tires.

Not until I went to hang the airhose back onto its stanchion at

that

one side of the service station did I discover ~~this latest Riley antic.~~

~~Where~~ the sign there read

AIR & WATER

Riley had just finished block-lettering beneath with Mariah's biggest blackest grease pencil:

EARTH & FIRE

"Jesus H.--Riley, you want to get us all thrown in the clink?"

I wildly checked around for the service station owner.

"Hmm?" Riley stepped back to admire his handiwork. "Naw, we're doing this guy a favor. See, now all he has to do is hang up a new logo under his gas sign: Natural Philosophy While You Fill."

"If they hang anything around here it's liable to be us, because of you, goddamn it. Come on, climb in the Bago and let's get the hell out of here."

—————

p. 504C follows →

4 A hundred coal cars on a railroad siding, today's resource wagontrain from the prairie to elsewhere. . . .

As early as Plentywood, it had become a common sight for us to see oil pumps working away in the farmed fields. The rocking-beam kind, that were like washerwomen dipping and rising as they scrubbed clothes on a washboard. But when Leona had cited them to Mariah and Riley once and wondered if they were ever going to do a piece about the energy business in this end of the state, the two of them simply shook their heads and chorused: "Colstrip."

4 The gigantic draglines skin the soil away to get at the coal. Longnecked, mammoth, lumbering, they are oddly technological mirages of the dinosaurs who earlier roamed these plains. . . .

Even the weather was getting to me, on that drive from Miles City down to Colstrip. Warmish and heavy, considerably, too much so for this time of year. About the time you think you have seen everything ~~the Montana~~ ^{this} climate can possibly do, some new wrinkle comes along. Snow for the Fourth of July, or April hailstones big enough

to knock out chickens. And now a sultry day in the middle of October, when the year ought to be gearing down toward winter.

"Must be getting into the banana belt," I commented.

"Tropical southern Montana, sure, you bet," Mariah more or less automatically responded from her watchful gaze out at the passing countryside.

Leona came in late on the conversation, just having shed her headset. "Isn't this nice-looking grassland, though?" she appraised the broad swales we'd been driving through for most of an hour.

"Now you've done it, Mother," Riley quit tapping at his laptop and pointed into the sky ahead. # Mariah had seen it too and already had her camera up. # Riley went on in his Movietone voice: "See there-- the Power God heard that and is throwing thunderbolts at us."

The aircraft warning strobe lights on the smokestacks of the Colstrip power plants did seem like steady blinks of lightning in our direction. Even before I'd seen anything of this coal-stripping enterprise, I didn't like what I was seeing.

There is no muss to the town of Colstrip. Everything looks
laid out according to plan, all the neighborhoods new, the downtown
area that was installed with the power plants sprigged up with
trees and lawn and other landscaping.

Talk about landscape work, though. Just out from Colstrip,
the strip-mining takes hundreds of acres at a time and sorts that
ground into towering heaps, the grayish overburden of soil and
stone clawed aside from the pits in dunelike processions and the
black pile of coal so high that a bulldozer atop it looks the size
of a hornet. The extracted coal is carried for miles by a huge
pipeline-like conveyor to the power plants in town, where electricity
is generated and then goes into the transmissions lines to VCRs,
Jacuzzis, neon signs, all the rest. The smokestacks here above
the mined prairie are the tailpipes of our electrical luxury.

—————
A day of contemplating coal-stripping put all four of us ready
for a drink before supper, you can bet. On Riley's insistence that
the places on the edge of town are always more interesting, we pulled

in at the Rosebud Bar just off the highway before Colstrip. "This way we finally get in on the indigenous here too, gang," he maintained as we trooped up to the door of the enterprise, by which I guess he meant that Rosebud Creek was just about within shouting distance.

Inside, the decor was relentlessly roses. Color photos of them beaded



with dew. Vasefulls of red fabric versions on every table. A blimp shot of a stadium which it didn't take me too long to figure out as the Rose Bowl. A very nearly life-size picture of Gypsy Rose Lee stripping for action, so to speak. Standing in a corner was a kid's sled with a you-know-what decal on it.

"Who do you suppose got hold of this place," Mariah wondered, "Gertrude Stein?"

"All right, tell me," Riley implored, stopping just inside the doorway with his back to it and covering his eyes with a hand. "There's a varnished plaque over the door that says Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, isn't there."

The other three of us turned and gawked up. Sure enough, there it posed: in fancy script with painted roses twining out the ends of each ^h~~y~~, no less.

See what I mean about goddamn Riley--he could even floor his own mother. While Mariah whooped and gave him a vigorous tickle in the ribs, Leona perplexedly looked back and forth from the quotation to her son and asked, "How'd you ever know that?"

"Just unlucky, I guess."

A barmaid considerably beyond the bloom of youth came over as soon as we'd established ourselves at a table. "Hi, kids. What's it gonna be?"

I observed to her, "Quite the scheme of decoration."

"Isn't it, though," she said with a sigh. "They absolutely ruined this place when they went and redid it. They ought to be taken out and shot."

"What was it like before?"

"It looked like a whorehouse. The walls were red, all the chairs and booths were red velvet--we even had red lampshades. It was real pretty."

When we managed to get down to the business of drinks, Mariah of course had her usual Lord C and I my Johnny, and Leona's version had turned out to be forthright Jack Daniels and water. As the three of us entered the company of those gentlemen, though, Riley was brought a white concoction in a frippy glass.

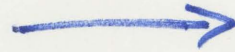
"What in the name of hell are you drinking now?" I had to ask.

"Rattlesnake milk?"

"Naw, it's a White Moccasin. Want a sip?"

"I'd rather parch," I let him know.

"Honestly, Jick, he was raised better than that," Leona frowned in reproof at her son's frippy concoction.



The barmaid saw it was six o'clock and turned the television set behind the bar on. If it proved to be TV Purvis I damn well was going to ask her to click it right back off, but the commercials eventually gave way instead to sportscasters, who seem to come in triplets.

"Well, well," Mariah contributed after craning around to check the screen scene as the players came on, "a bunch of high-paid hot dogs showing us their buns. My God, are they still playing that stuff?"

"You bet," I said. "The World Series, petunia."

"Or at least the California one," Leona said with a least little smile as the Oakland and San Francisco lineups electronically materialized on the screen.

"It comes to the same, I'm sure, Mother," maintained Riley, who I knew didn't give a hoot about sports except for cantering across the countryside.

"What beats me about having three guys on there to tell us what we're looking at, though," I started in, "is--"

"There's an earth--" one of the sportscasters declaimed and the television picture went blooey.

You didn't have to be a seismic scientist to fill in the rest of the word. For the next hours, when the tv people found a way to get back on the air, the four of us sat fascinated watching what the earthquake had done to the San Francisco Bay area. The collapse of that freeway, motorists crushed under slabs the size of aircraft carriers; the broken Bay Bridge; fallen buildings in Santa Cruz; all of San Francisco spookily lightless in the night except for the one neighborhood where apartment houses were burning--my God, I felt as sorry for people in that quake zone as if they had been bombed. And along with it, the overwhelming thought of how much worse it could have been. Candlestick Park with the World Series crowd of sixty thousand in it had not crumbled.

"Holy shit, think of it!" Riley said in genuine awe as a ^{blimp} camera panned down on Candlestick. "Fifteen hundred sportswriters at that ballgame and every one of them trying to transmit the same lead: On this beautiful afternoon beside San Francisco Bay, God chose to shake the 'Stick.'"

"Helicopters," Mariah uttered wistfully, like a kid pointing out toys in a catalogue, as pictures of the gap in the Bay Bridge taken from

~~every time~~

mid-air came onto the screen. Both she and Riley erupted ~~whenever~~ the coverage cut away from on the scene. "You fucking talking heads!" Riley roared at the set when a guy at a network desk somewhere began speaking with the Governor of California who had been caught on a sojourn in Germany. "Piggyback on what KGO is showing! You bunch of dumbfucks, let the local guys do the story in the streets!"

Eventually earthquake experts began coming on and saying this wasn't the Big One, but it was a Pretty Big One. By then Leona and I had looked at each other a number of times with new understanding. A new feel for the distance between us and this avid pair glued to the coverage, maybe say. Neither she nor I would have willingly lived where such quakes kept happening if you deeded the whole of California to us. But if Riley and Mariah could have ~~climbed~~^{hopped} on a plane and joined the newsgatherers right in the middle of all that earthquake mess, they instantly would have.

→

Billings begins a long way out from itself. Scatterings of housing developments and roadside businesses and billboards full of promises of more enterprises to come began showing up miles ahead of the actual city. The Bago and we four were rolling in on the freeway that runs shoulder to shoulder with the Yellowstone River, then the Yellowstone shied out of the picture and snazzy profiles of hotels and banks against the rimrocks became the feature.

"The Denver of the north," Riley crooned in an oily voice as downtown Billings came up on us. "The Calgary of the south." He waited until we were wheeling past a petroleum refinery that was obviously functioning much below capacity. "The Butte of tomorrow?"

"Mmm, though, look what the light is doing," Mariah put in. There in the late afternoon sunlight, the cliffs rimming the city were changing from baked tan to a honeyed color. Then and there I formed the opinion that held for the rest of our time in Billings, that if you had to have a city this was an interesting enough place to do it.

—————

"No, honest to Pete, it's the truth, Jick, if I can call you that. Just about the highest place you can drive in Delaware is the overpass on Route 202 where it goes into Pennsylvania."

"Aw, come on, Carl. How do you keep your heads above water back there?"

"We'd been in the Energy City RV Park most of a week while Mariah and Riley were out toiling away at the implications of Billings--not to any avail that I could see yet--and Leona and I were getting to know the couple in the Bago next door. Retirees from Wilmington, Carl and Harriet DeVere were out here tasting mountains, ~~so to speak,~~ and inasmuch as they were going to drive the alpine Cooke City highway into Yellowstone Park this afternoon, by nightfall they might have their fill of mountains, all right.

The DeVeres now said they hated to break up our coffeeklatch but they had to go food-shopping, did we want to come along? It was a handy chance to do so because they towed behind their rig a Honda Civic--Winnebago Shopping Cart, a carved wooden sign on it said--and Leona volunteered while I said I had something else I'd better get at.

The shopping expedition hadn't much sooner gone out, though, than Riley came in. He plopped the Sunday editions of the Montanian and the Billings Gazette on the nook table. "Holding down the Bago all by your lonesome?"

"Yeah. Nothing injurious seems to happen to it when I'm here by myself."

He gave me a two-toned look but let that pass. Before he could start pawing through the Sunday papers, I asked: "Where's Mariah?"

"Shooting my mother," he reported absently. "The DeVeres, too. They are kind of cute--the three of them peeling off out of here on their Japanese skateboard." He noticed my own endeavor. "What've you got there, your prayer book?"

"Aw, an old paperback I bought in Wolf Point. Figured I better get going on that ~~damn~~^g centennial speech or--what the hell you looking at me like that for?"

"You do it deliberately, don't you."

"Do what?"

"Oh, come on!" He aimed a finger at the title of the book I was holding. The Collected Eloquence of Winston Churchill. Riley actually looked a little wild-eyed, in both separate-hued eyes. "Winnie, in the Bago? If that isn't a weird sense of--"

"Riley, a walking word game like you doesn't have any right to--"

The side door popped open, and the camera bag and then Mariah alit inside with us. She stood there a moment, straight as a willow, and studied Riley and me. "Sipping herbal tea and discussing Zen, guys?"

"Just practicing for the union of our families again," I let her have.

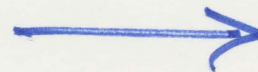
"Actually, our agenda at the moment is to just read the Sunday papers," Mariah addressed back to me. "Do you suppose that can be accomplished without dismemberment?"

Riley still looked snorty and I maybe was a little that way myself, but we clammed up. They put their noses into their literature and I into mine.

Never in the field of human conflict was so much-- Churchill was hard to keep concentration on, though. I was bothered, not to say baffled.

My eyes kept drifting first to Mariah, then to Riley, each of them busily mauling through a newspaper. Was that love? If so, how had it come out of the ash and salt of their first try together? Was I ever going to savvy what, when, how, why? Some great record so far, mine. Plainly I had underestimated Riley. I had misestimated Leona and what I figured would be her natural reaction against our offspring falling for each other again. And after my thirty-five years as her father, Mariah still went up, down, and sideways in my estimation practically all day long. Maybe reading other people's heads was not my strong suit.

I shut Churchill. Newsprint was more my speed at the moment, too. All that was left of the Sunday Gazette from the rummaging those two were doing of it was the section with astrology, crossword, and



wedding couples. A little leery of learning what I might be on the cusp of, and not much one for killing time crosswording either, I examined the fresh faces of the couples, each wearing the smile of a lifetime. Kimberlee This and Chad That said their vows to each other at the...

There were seven or eight such enraptured pairs pictured and I read the particulars on each, trying to think of any logic in Mariah and Riley repeating this process of matrimony. Pretty hard to make parse: Mariah McCaskill and Riley Wright have announced their betrothal, again.

Parents of the

couple are Mrs. Leona Wright of the Shields River country and, against his will, Mr. Jick McCaskill of the Two Medicine country. The bride-to-be graduated from Gros Ventre High School and Illinois Institute of Technology, and is a photographer who does not have a lick of sense beyond her camera. The incipient groom graduated from Clyde Park High School and the University of Montana and has been a Missoula inmate ever since. Ms. McCaskill will retain her maiden name, just as she did the first time they attempted the wedded state and royally screwed it up.

Upon



saying their vows one more time, the rewedded couple will go to California
to have permanent lunch with the future. No, try as I might, I couldn't
 credit these two with as much perspicacity as the eighteen- and twenty-
 year-olds ^{radiating} ~~glowing~~ out of the wedding pictures.

"Funny place they pick to do it, though," I thought out loud.

"Who do what?" Mariah asked from where she was competitively ^{sizing up} ~~eyeing~~
 a Gazette photo of a Crow Indian fancy-dancer.

"Newlyweds."

Both she and Riley shot quick hard looks at me. ⁴ "Where they get
 married, I mean," I hastened to explain. "Not much church to it any
 more, I guess, huh?"

Now they glanced at each other. On their established principle
 that each of them was the wartime ambassador to his or her respective
 parent, it was Mariah who inquired of me in a combat tone:

"Is this leading up to another sermon against our getting married
 again? Because if it is. . ."

^{ca}
 "It is not," I answered chillily. "I am only making the observation
 that it's kind of interesting that of this week's wedding crop here in

the paper, three of the couples got hitched in one church or another, but there's four other pair who went and did it at--"

#

The Holiday Inn was quite the extravaganza, whether or not you were about to get your nuptial knot tied there. # Walk in as the four of us were doing and the lobby vastly soared all around you; in fact, that cubic center of the enterprise at first encounter seemed to be universally lobby, a hollow square the entire six stories to the roof and equally out to the perimeters of the half-acre carpeted-and-plantered space. You had to wonder whether the architect had remembered to put on motel rooms, until you discerned that the half dozen biege facings that ran all the way around this atrium at equal heights apart like the ribcage of the building were actually balconies, with room doors off them.

The place had a lot of other ruffles, too. Up one side of the whole deal shot a glassed-in elevator shaft outlined with sparkly dressingroom-like lights the full altitude to the ceiling. There, natural light descended through a skylight, I suppose for the sake of the trees--some of them fairly lofty--in eight-sided containers, biege,

plunked near the middle of the atrium. At the far end of the expanse was a waterfall, no less.

I fingered my bowtie. A tuxedo was a new sensation for me. Beside me as we trailed the Mariah-Riley vanguard into the assemblage, Leona behaved like she went to weddings in the atrium of the Holiday Inn every day of her life.

True, she had been a little surprised to come into the Bago with the groceries and be informed by Riley we were going to a matrimonial function. "But I thought you two were waiting for the privacy of California.

I don't have a thing to wear and--"

"Mother, it's not Mariah and me, it's"--he consulted his notebook--

"Darcy and Jason."

Which didn't help Leona get her bearings any. "Do we know them?"

"That never matters with these two," I edified her about journalism.

Riley now did bring us to a halt at the edge of where the guest chairs and the altar and the food tables and all the rest were set up for the wedding and the reception after, the first sign of restraint he'd shown in any of this. That Leona and I were here at all was due

cockeyed

to his inspiration that this could serve as a kind of substitute function-- a surrogate wedding, to quote him exactly--for our not being on hand whenever he and Mariah did their deed in California. Next he must have used a chisel instead of a pen to get the rental of formalwear for Leona and me as well as for him and Mariah onto the expense account. I do have to say, on Riley the money looked well spent. Those wide level shoulders of his filling out the fit of the tuxedo like a ship under full sail, his mustache and curly spill of hair a handsome topping to the regalia below, the guy looked slick as an ambassador. Hard to believe this was the identical yahoos who once cracked to me, back in that living-together period of theirs before he and Mariah got married the first time, "Jick, in the immortal words of Robert Louis Stevenson, marriage is a sort of friendship recognized by the police."

"Okay, people are going to be gathering for a while yet," he was briefing Leona and me currently, "and I've got to go locate the bride and groom, see what their last words are." Meanwhile Mariah was chewing the inside of her mouth as she gauged the airy acreages of the atrium, so it was plain that finding a photo was going to occupy

her for some time to come. That left two of us at loose ends, and when I questioned Riley about what role Leona and I were supposed to perform here where we were perfect strangers to everybody, his advice was, "Mingle."

As the Montanians invaded the wedding party, Riley off to corner the wedding couple and Mariah just off, I admitted to Leona: "I don't really feel like wading right in. I'll just hang on here and watch things for a while. You go ahead and circulate, why don't you." With a quick understanding smile she said yes, she'd wander and see who was who, until it came time for the ceremony.

Is it just me, or does such an occasion inevitably prompt a lot to think about? Oh, sure, Mariah and Riley's forthcoming repeat performance-- what do you suppose the California custom is, holding the wedding in a swimming pool?--was prominent in those thoughts, but so was the wife I wished was beside me. I hadn't missed Marcella so much in weeks and weeks. Anybody's start of married life I suppose can't help but remind you of your own. Up toward the altar, where there was an archway of flowers, I could see Riley was now interrogating today's nuptial couple.

The bride Darcy was a looker, a dark-haired young woman with an outdoor tan that set off priceless teeth and quick eyes. The groom Jason, there was hope for; he was at that boy-man age that teeters on the adam's apple and perhaps before he quite knew it he'd be a full-throated husband and father. Even though the two of them had agreed happily when Riley phoned about him and Mariah doing a piece on their great day, I hoped they had some inkling of what they were in for when put in print. But probably not even Riley could dent them today.

"Sir?" I heard and realized it referred to me. It was a waitress, come by to prime me with a cup of punch or a glass of champagne, and of course punch wasn't even in the running. I sipped at the bubble stuff and as I did, the tail of my eye caught a motion down behind where my elbow had been.

Taking a peek over my shoulder, I discovered a bronze statue about a foot and a half high levitating past. Then another appeared and vanished, and by the time I'd blinked at that, a third one silently circled in.

I backed off to where I could view the entire revolving trio.