Huh. Elvis Presley, all three of him. Coming and going as a slowly spinning turntable revolved the triplet statuary. Huh again: in each stage Elvis was in full pelvic deployment, but otherwise these were three distinct ages of him: at the guitar-whanging start of his career, then in summit, and lastly in pudgy decline. Hound dog, top dog, and pound dog, I guess could be said.

The Elvi in orbit behind me, I was just getting my attention back onto the wedding crowd when Leona detoured out of it toward me.

"See what you think of this," she instructed and handed me a dainty cracker loaded with a tapioca-looking substance.

I tried it. "Not bad," I assessed, "particularly with a chaser of champagne."

"Montahnskaya eekrah!" Leona reported in jubilation. "Montana caviar!"

"Yeah? Where's it come from, up on the High Line by Kremlin?" I asked, which I thought was pretty good.

But Leona only shook her head seriously and informed me, "Over by Glendive--it's sturgeon eggs, out of the Yellowstone River." Having imparted that, she headed back to the crowd to delve further into wedding matters.
It was time I got into motion a little, too. So took a stroll around the outside of the throng, nodding when nodded to, sizing people up without being over-obvious about it. Everybody was dressed to the hilt, gabbing in knots of relatives or friends. I wouldn't have predicted so, but the young men displayed higher fashion than the young women.

A number of groomsmen had those porcupine styles of hair they fuss together with gel someway. Highly interesting. As to the other hair situation among the males, a few mustaches besides Riley's could be counted but mine was the only beard in evidence. He and I were safely in the spectrum with our formal apparel, though; starting with the groom, every man there was tuxedoned up in some shade between maroon and purple like ours. I wondered whether Althea Frew knew of this current color scheme.

Doubtless she already had the matter planned out, me in a plum-colored bib and tucker, she in exquisite mauve tulle, tweeting out vows to each other in the flower-arched foyer of the Medicine Lodge.

Uneasily I shook off the thought of Althea, and checked around to see how my Montanian companions were progressing here. Riley, the damn chameleon, appeared to be utterly in his element at this event, cruising
through the crowd as if personally fond of every cummerbund and pleat.

Leona, too, with her freshly done-up silver hair and a blending dress looked classily in place.

Mariah, though. Mariah was in—well, I believe the term for what she was in is hot pink.

Against the general maroon of the tuxedo populace and, for that matter, the similar rich tone of the atrium rug, she looked like something that had ignited. At the formalwear rental shop that morning I hadn’t paid any real attention to the women’s end of things, the prospect of myself in soup-and-fish duds already plenty on my mind, but I did notice Leona a couple of times open her mouth as if to say something and then not. At the time I figured she was just running Russian through her head.

But I now knew that those unvoiced remarks had to do with Mariah’s selection—too strong a word, honestly, because shopping was nowhere on Mariah’s list of priorities and she had simply grabbed out a dress and tried it on enough to be sure it wouldn’t fall off her and said "Okay, this’ll do, let’s go"—of an eyesteniging pink outfit. I wonder, what is the Moscow phrase for If that color was any louder it’d be audible.
Nor for that matter was any other woman at the wedding carrying an appaloosa camera bag the size of a satchel as an accessory to her outfit. Really, to capture the main sensation of these nuptials Mariah should have been shooting herself, for in those high heels and her pink number and her deeper-than-red hair she stalked among the wedding-going youngsters trailing every kind of reaction behind her. Multiply Kevin Frew's calfish gape at her
atop the rodeo arena fence, back there on the Fourth of July, by about twenty and you have the general expression of the groom corps. The bride's maidens on the other hand seemed divided between disgust at such electric fashion and wishing they'd thought of it themselves.

After Mariah had parted the crowd waters all the way across the room and ended up at the revolving Elvi, I felt so sorry for her I sifted over to try and hearten her.

"I haven't seen you so dolled up since your high school prom, petunia."

"This get-up." She kicked off a high heel and massaged that foot against the other one. "I feel like a pink flamingo on a stepladder."

"Well, you look like society to me."

She fired a glance to the far end where a particular regal silver head and complementing aquamarine dress stood out resplendent against the atrium's cascade, as if Leona had magically enclouded there out of the sprays of blues and silvers off the spilling wall of water.

Mariah said with more rue than she probably wanted to admit to, "Not nearly as much as some. How did she manage to coordinate her dress
"Leona would look dressed to the teeth with nothing on but her birthday suit," I attested, which drew Mariah's eyes immediately back to me.

Well, I had given words a try. "How about a snifter of this seasoned water?" I offered her my champagne glass.

She considered it longingly, but shook her head. "Thanks, but not until I figure out some kind of a picture of this circus. Then I'll be ready for a swimming pool of that stuff."

"So," strolled up a swank specimen of plummy tuxedo which of course was Riley. "Quite a shindig, hmm?"

Mariah put her hand on his shoulder to steady herself while she shed her other high heel shoe and massaged that foot. "My God, this is a tough sucker of a shoot," she let out along with her breath. "Everybody keeps looking right at me, right down the old lens hole. It's all going to come out like driver's license photos."

"Maybe you should have worn blue suede and a guitar and blended in as Elvis Number Four," I suggested to her.
"Come on, shooter, you can do it," Riley dismissed her photographic fret with the world's most unworried smile and leaned in and gave her a smoochy kiss alongside one ear. At first I thought he'd been too deep into the champagne, but no, this beamy kissy version was merely Riley rediscovering wedded bliss, even when it wasn't his own, quite yet.

I yearned for the old days of Moiese and Virginia City when Mariah would have handed him his head for that kind of canoodling. The worst she could summon currently was to cock a look at him and ask with just enough of a point on it, "How're you coming with your part of the piece?"

"Got it writ," Riley said to her surprise and mine too. "I've turned Biblical."
...Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth...

She wanted him ever since Algebra. Alphabetized beside each other there in third period desks, $x$ and $y$ doing their things on the blackboard, maybe it simply was a case of possibilities put side by side. From day one she knew he spent that class hour peeking sideways at her results—not just the paper kind—but she didn’t quite know why she one day was fond of that angle of gaze on her and wanted it forever.

He wanted her in every one of the eternal ways of the Song of Solomon. But along other Bible lines too, of course. Those that say things like dwell. Abide, which seems to be a little bit different but no less awesome. Esteem. Worship. Beget. Words that send you a little dizzy, thinking about all they promise and ask.

...Honey and milk are under thy tongue...

Her favorite is anticipation. All her life she has liked to plan, imagine ahead, see how it turns out. It has just always seemed to her that’s the way to make matters come out right, especially the big steps. Like getting married.
His is the avalanche approach. Now is timelier than later, you gain a lot of ground if you don't put off and put off but just up and do it. That way, you're sure you aren't wasting life on the small stuff but are honed in on what counts. Like getting married.

...His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me...

He's a little spoiled, she grants that, coming from the mother he does. And she wishes the little thinning place in his crownhair didn't mark the spot where his father is as bald as a dead lightbulb.

But genes aren't everything. (Are they?) She still feels right, too, about deciding to keep her own name, even though his mother told her she'll give up on that after the first time of having to do Christmas cards with their two separate names. (Will she?)

She's swifter than he is, he knows that much, and there's always been a breath-catching little lag between when she says something funny and when he gets it. But women are like that. Okay, okay,
he realizes you can get the pud beat out of you for saying stuff like that these days. But isn't it some kind of biological fact?

That girls, women that is, grow up faster and all of a sudden-- well, develop into Amazonian princesses?

...There will I give thee my loves...

They don't give a fig, this wedding couple, about odds or obstacles or second thoughts or a million possible frets, is what it always comes down to. Not this day, not at this altar, which is an old, old word for a place of fire.

...For love is strong as death.

Riley still had something monumental on his mind as Mariah balanced against him to grimly work her feet back into high heelery. The moment she was shod again, he gave out another big goofy smile and said:

"You know, we could make this a doubleheader."
Witless witness though I was to Riley's sudden new shenanigan,
I caught his drift before Mariah did, her photographic attention already
focused back into the wedding throng like a riverjack trying to figure
out just where to dynamite a logjam. Doubleheader, hell, the recognition
hit my dismayed brain, there went the ballgame.

The object of Riley's intentions tumbled rapidly enough, however,
to what had just been put to her. Her head jerked around, eyelids fanning,
as she a little wildly sought verification in his face. "Get married,
you mean? Here and now?"

"Yup, now and here," he corroborated with utmost good cheer. "All
we'd have to is arrange for the minister to hang around until Darcy
and Jason scoot off to their honeymoon. Why, we've even got dear loving
family on hand," he dispensed along with a generous wag of his head
toward me and then one in the general direction of wherever his mother
was mingling.

I honest to God had the impression, right then, that even Elvis
in triplicate stopped spinning, for that longest of moments, to watch
whether Mariah was going to endorse Riley's inspiration to hightail to
the altar. So much for my campaign against. No, reason and history and minimum common sense never stand much chance against the human impulse to dart off and do it.

"N-No, no I don't think this is the time and place," Mariah declined nervously, to my surprise, not to mention Riley's. "Getting married in this"—her eyes did a loop-the-loop to indicate the infinite reaches of the Holiday Inn lobby—"while we're doing a piece here would seem kind of, mm, tacked on, don't you think?"

What I thought, not that anybody was running a poll for my opinion, was that now they could derive a sample of what they were letting themselves in for by remarrying. Blow up at her, left, right, and sideways, I matrimonially urged goddamn Riley: insist it's now or never, matrimonially, because that way you'll come in for a nice reminder of the spikes that spring out when Mariah stiffens her back. Jump him, the dressed-up motel romeo, for treating marriage like the decision to go get an ice cream cone, I similarly brainwaved Mariah. Get out the big augur, each of you, and remind the other of how you caused the wind to whistle through the holes of that first marriage.
But see how Riley can't even be trusted to be his normal aggravating self? He fixed his two-tone gaze on Mariah and, in the same soapy mood as when he'd strolled up, grandly allowed: "A woman who knows her own mind, just what I've always wanted. California is fine by me, for us to get official." And off he went to sop up some more mood of the occasion, humming a little Mendelssohn.

For her part, Mariah threw me a don't-think-this-changes-anything-just-because-I-don't-want-to-get-married-wearing-hot-pink-in-a-glorified-blimp-hangar-look, shouldered her camera bag purposefully, and headed out to do lens war with the wedding-goers again.

With the help of a sip of champagne I assessed where I had come out at from this Riley-Mariah close call: gained nothing, but lost none either. Could have been worse. Probably would be.

"Sir, would you care for some?" a waitress made a courtesy stop at me with a platter of hors d'oeuvre tidbits.

"No thanks," I explained, "I prefer big food."
I still can't account for the next event. I mean, there I was, dutifully keeping my nose out of Darcy and Jason's event, trying to blend my plum-tuxed self into the maroon backdrop of the atrium rug, when the bald guy emerged from the crowd and came straight at me as if he was being led by a dowsing stick.

Actually, the guiding instrument sat on his shoulder. The videocam in fact might have been mounted permanently there, the way it led the guy shoulder-first as if he was doing some kind of walking tango across the floor.

"Hi, I'm Jason's uncle, Jim Foraker. You must be from Darcy's side of the family."

"Just mildly acquainted, is all."

"I'm making a video for the kids," he said, bombardiering through the camera eyepiece onto my visage. "When Jason and Darcy get up into the years a little, it'll be kind of a kick for them to look back and see who all was at their wedding, don't you think?"

Especially when they try to figure out who the hell I am. Before I could retrieve my tuxedoed bearded self from posterity's lens, however, Jason's videoing uncle let drop: "I've got the sound package on this
machine too, so how about saying something? Just act real natural--
tell the kids maybe what it was like at your own wedding?"

Which one? tore through my mind first. Shirley, when our young
blood was on perk day and night. Marcella, everlasting but lost to me now
too. My God, it gets to be a lot, to have to publicly pick and choose among
sorrows. Darcy and Jason replaying on their golden anniversary in the
year 2039 will have to be the ones to report whether I flinched, tottered,
trembled, or just what. But whatever was registered by the videotape
constituted
was only an emotional fraction. I felt as if I was coming apart, the
pieces of my life I most prized—Marcella, the ranch, our life there
together, our astonishing offspring tithe Mariah and Lexa—cracking
from me like streambanks being gashed away by remorseless water: yet
at the same time I needed to hold, to not buckle under even to those
heaviest thoughts, to somehow maintain myself in the here and now.
Atrium extravaganza or not, other people's occasions deserve their
sorrowless chance.

So. I had it to do, didn't I. Squaring myself in Jim Foraker's
frame of lens to the extent I could, I began.

"Every wedding is the first one ever invented, for the couple involved."
So I won't go into any comparison of this one with my own. But I can
tell you a little something about after. I don't know whether a shivaree
is still the custom"--some manner of mischief was; out in the parking lot
I could see young guys tying a clatter of tin cans on behind a car with

Just Married! Darcy Jason soaped all over it--"but after Marcella
and I got hitched, everybody in the Two Medicine country who was mobile
poured in to the ranch that night."

Cars and pickups all with horns honking, it was like a convoy from
the loony bin. People climbed out pounding on dishpans and washtubs
and hooting and hollering; you could have heard them all the way onto
the other side of Breed Butte. Of course the men laid hands on me and
the women on Marcella, and we each got wheelbarrowed around the outside
of the house clockwise and tipped out ceremoniously at the front door.
Then it was incumbent on us to invite everybody in for the drinking
and dancing, all the furniture in the living room pushed along one wall
to make enough floor for people to foot to the music.

Luckily there is no limit to the congratulations that can be
absorbed, and Marce and I were kept giddily happy by all the well-wishers
delivering us handshakes and kisses on the cheek. Leave it to our fathers, though, to carry matters considerably beyond that. Lambing was just starting, and under the inspiration of enough shots of scotch, Dode Withrow and Varick McCaskill formed the notion to go check on the drop band for me—as Dode declared, "Mac and me all but invented the sonofabitching sheep business." It was a mark of the occasion that Midge Withrow and my mother did not forthwith veto that foray, but just gave their spouses glances that told them to come back in somewhat more sober than they were going out. First Dode and my father had to flip a coin as to which of them got my working pair of overshoes to wear to the shed and who got stuck with two left ones from the discards in the corner of the mud porch, and then there was considerable general razzing from the rest of us about how duded up they were to be lamb lickers, but eventually the two of them clumped off, unbuckled but resolute, toward the lambing shed. Busy as we were with our houseful, Marce and I lost track of the fact of our sires traipsing around out there in the Noon Creek night, until we heard the worried blats of a ewe. Coming nearer and nearer. Then the front door flung open and there stood the
volunteer overshoe brigade, muck and worse shed-stuff up the front of
both of them to their chins--Dode had been the one who drew the two left
overshoes, and it had been that awkward footwear that sent him sprawling
face-first; my father, it developed, simply fell down laughing at Dode--
and a highly upset mother sheep skittishly trailing them and stamping
a front hoof while they wobbled in the doorway declaring, "By God, Jick
and Marce, you can't afford not to hire us," each man with a lamb held
high, little tykes still yellow and astonished from birth: the first twins
of that lambing season.

Finishing that telling, I sought how to say next what it still
meant to me, that shivaree of almost forty years before.

"I suppose there must have been a total of a couple of thousand years
of friends under our roof, Marcella's and mine, that shivaree night.
A lot has happened since; the toughest part being that Marcella isn't
in this life with me, any more. But that shouldn't rob what was
good at the time. Our shivaree was utmost fun, and by Christ," I nodded
emphatically to make sure the lens picked up this part, "so is the
remembering of it. Darcy, Jason"--I lifted my champagne glass, just a
hummingbird sip left in it by now but any was plenty to wish on, "here's to all you'll store up together, starting now."

Jason's uncle thanked me for my videocam soliloquy and I told him it'd been my pleasure, and next thing, it was ceremony time. I found where Leona and Riley were saving a seat for me. No sooner was I sat than Riley exuberantly said, "Here you go," and proffered me a little packet of the sort I saw everybody had.

"What've we got here?"

"Birdseed," he defined. "You throw it at the bride and groom when they head out the door to their honeymoon these days--it's better for the birds than rice is."

Take progress any time you can find it, I guess, so I tucked away the birdseed for later flinging and sat back to watch matrimony happen. The waterfall had been switched off so that it wouldn't drown out the words of the minister. For that matter, the entire huge cube of the atrium had quieted down. Arriving guests and the desk clerks stopped in mid-transaction to watch. Waitresses paused lest a swinging door emit a sound. By the time the groom was escorted by his best man down
the ramp past the glass elevator and the bride made her entrance from the videogames area, you could have heard a Bible page drop.

The wedding was almost to climax in rings and kisses before I realized. I leaned toward Riley and whispered, "What became of Mariah?"

He murmured back, "She's shooting this."

I inspected every farflung corner of the atrium and behind the potted trees and even cast a glance under the grand piano, but no Mariah.

I whispered again, "Where the hell from?"

This time Riley's murmur was forceful. "You don't want to know."

With that I did know, though. Which is why, in the Montanian's photo of the Darcy-Jason wedding taken from overhead, the bride a white blossom and the groom a plum sprig beside her and the minister's open book and the dot rows of the heads of the wedding-goers as if seen from the ceiling of a cathedral, the solo face gaping directly upward six stories to the atrium skylight--and Mariah and her camera--is my bearded one.
That was Billings, and the day directly after the wedding experience our trend was east again, one last time, another three-hundred-miler to somewhere that hadn't realized it'd been waiting a century for Mariah and Riley.

And so even after we had reversed the long angling freeway journey along the Yellowstone River all the way to Glendive, this time we still kept going east, as if pellmell to see North Dakota. Shortly before the Dakota line, though, at Wibaux, behind me Riley announced "Make a right here and keep going until you hit the South Pole" and although he overstated it a bit, I aimed us down the quantity of miles ahead to Montana's southeastern corner.

Away from the settled valley of the Yellowstone, counties in this part of the state are whopping maps with a single pin of town in each. The fact was, this was almost off the map of any of the four of us—I was the only one who had ever been anywhere into this emptiest corner of the state—and that a long time ago. We might as well have been a carload of Swiss trying to sightsee Mongolia. Grassland with
sage low and thin on it ran to all the horizons—cattle in specks of herds here and there—and a surprising number of attempts had been made to scratch some farming into this barebone plain, but what grew here mostly was distance. Except for an occasional gumbo butte or a gully full of tumbleweeds, out here there were no interruptions of the earth extending itself until bent by the weight of the sky.

Really pretty quiet all four of us stayed, throughout this long country. Leona spent time cramming Russian through her headset. Mariah mostly appraised the horizontal endlessness outside, occasionally fiddling with an earring, today white daisies as if this vicinity could stand a bit of bouquet. I idly wondered how I'd gotten so expert at miscalculation; if anything, Mariah and Riley acted more allied, alloyed, whatever, than before I'd applied Leona to this journey to split them. Mariah's only rival in the cosmos seemed to be Riley's word processor, going pucka pucka now but only sporadically, none of his long runs that said he was getting somewhere with the words.

The terrasphere now... space travel, this, except it's on the ground... the highway the orbit...
Running down, maybe we all were. The centennial was only a handful of days away now. This had to be Mariah and Riley's last piece, until they hit Gros Ventre for our dawn ceremony. Between now and then, once they finished in this last reach of the state I was to drop them in Billings so they could rent a car and scoot to Missoula to begin closing down their lives there, then I'd leave Leona off at her ranch and hustle myself home to the Two country. Humongous agenda, as Mariah would have put it.

So, maybe ahead preoccupied us. Maybe we were each a little hypnotized by the capacities of the plains; the full eighty miles down from the Wibaux turnoff, this road lined away as straight as the drop of a plumb bob. The only hint of deviation came after we passed through Baker, when the land began to rumple just enough to make the ride like a long slow roller coaster.

Even the roadkills were different from what we four mountain Montanans were used to; over the crest of any of the little rolly humps, the Bago was apt to intersect the angular length of a run-over rattlesnake.

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Ekalaka has had to declare itself as best it can in such a circle of horizon. The little town is beside as much of a hill as it could find and has put a big definitive white letter of initial on that promontory.

But what interested me as we gradually—everything out here seemed gradual—
drew closer to our destination was that instead of the E a person would naturally expect for some place named Ekalaka, this civic monogram unmistakably read C.

"What, are they working their way up through the alphabet?" I prodded Riley, as my chances to do so were about to run out.

Ever clever, he explained the landmark C was for Carter County.

Indeed, Ekalaka as we pulled in demonstrated itself even more as a conscientious county seat. Unusual for a Montana community, it had a town square, made up of a white-painted wooden courthouse, a jail, and a funeral parlor. Maybe you had to travel a ton of miles to reach this town but society's basics were here when you needed them.

So were three bars, not bad for a populace of 632, and a couple of grocery stores, and a hospital, and a small motel, and a Wagon Wheel Cafe, and an enterprise that declared it was a clothing store and a liquor store, and a bank and a propane plant and so on. By description alone, I know it does not sound like enough of a place to willingly make a six-hundred-mile roundtrip to visit. But not so, at least for me. I could not have said why, because Ekalaka tucked as it was into the southeast
corner of the state was literally the farthest remove from Gros Ventre, and the two places didn’t bear any ready resemblance. But something about this hunkered little town quite appealed to me in the same way that Gros Ventre’s concentrated this-is-what-there-is-of-it-and-we-think-it’s-enough presence always had.

Now what? was always the question after Mariah and Riley hit a locale, and after a cruise of town and figuring out where to site the motorhome overnight—anywhere—we held a four-way conference on strategy for the rest of the day. Riley had spotted a Bureau of Land Management office and said he’d better get up there before closing time and find somebody to talk to about this area’s yawning surpluses of, well, land. Leona said she wanted to stretch her legs and so she’d go with him and shop around town some while he gabbed. Mariah had her camera eye on the courthouse with its cupola that sat atop like a little party hat, but would stay and take stock of things until the afternoon light deepened better for shooting. For my part, I sighed and decided I’d better stay planted in the Bago too, needing to get myself organized toward my now not very
distant centennial oration. So off Riley and Leona went, Mariah and I
warning them not to get lost in the six-block-square expanse of Ekalaka.

For the first time in a long time, then, we were separated into the
Wrights and the McCaskills, and maybe it was almost inadvertent
siding up into families that finally did it.

I admit I was a bit keyed up, with a speech to put together and
all. Really, it didn't take much of that to give me a sneaking admiration
for Riley, even; this jotting stuff down wasn't as simple as it looked.
Still, if Mariah hadn't done what she did, I would not have flown off
the handle, now would I? All in the world I intended was to take a
little break and administer some caffeine for inspiration. So, as I
was about to nuke a cup of coffee in the microwave, I turned my head
to ask if she wanted one too and found myself gazing into an all too
familiar click.

"Mariah, goddam that camera! You've about worn the face off me
with it! You must have a jillion sonofabitching pictures of me by now,
what the hell do you keep shooting them for?"

She of course could not resist snapping yet another one while I
was right in the middle of that. Probably she captured me looking mad
as a wet hen; white-bearded kid in a tantrum.

But then the camera did come down from her eye, and she was giving
me her own straight gaze. But through a glisten.

I blinked, dumfounded. There was no mistaking her gray eyes were
verging on tears.

Then Mariah said:

"Because I won't always have you."

That dropped on me like a Belgian brick. It had never occurred
to me--how could it?--to regard myself as some kind of memory album
for Mariah. Photographic shadows of myself that would pattern across
her days after I no longer do.

I managed to say, "Petunia, I don't figure on checking out of life
for a while yet."

"No, and don't you dare," she instructed me fiercely. Like mine,
her voice was having trouble finding footing in the throat.

Talk about earthquakes being abrupt. Daughter and father, we this
suddenly stared across the shaken up air between us.
"Mariah. I didn't know, it just never occurred to me that--that was on your mind." The way her mother was on mine; the way the ones we love ever are.

"I suppose really that's why I dragged you into this trip," she said with an alarming quiver in her voice. "And now we're about out of trip, aren't we."

"All good things must you-know-what," I tried, to see if I could jack her out of this choked-up mood. And won the booby prize at consoling, for now two distinct tears carried the glistening down Mariah's cheeks.

This was the exact pain I had wanted to keep her from. Loss. The gouge it tears through you. What I had been so sure would be incurred in her by Riley Wright; incurring instead from me.

Hard to know, though, how to be reassuring about your own time ahead in the green bed. I knew nothing to do but gulp and try from a new direction.

"I'll tell you what. When the time comes for me to go to the marble farm, you and Lexa just give me the Scotch epitaph, how about. The one I read about in trying to come up with something for this goddamn
centennial speech. They used it there in the old country when somebody special to them went out of the picture ahead of time, so to speak.

What they'd do was put on the stone: 'Here lies all of him that could die.'"

The words hung as clear between us as if spelled out in sharpest black-and-white of one of Mariah's photos. Our eyes held. After a bit I provided what I knew from the storms of memory these past months.

"Mariah.

Just because I'm going to be dead someday doesn't mean I won't be available."

Mariah blinked hard, then gave a shaky grin. "You've got a deal."

I'll scratch that epitaph of yours into the rock with my fingernails if I have to." Her voice firmed as she went into stipulations: "But not until a long time from now, you hear? You at least have to match that old fart Good Help Hebner."

"Gives me something to shoot for," I agreed with an answering grin and figured we had come out of it to the good. Mariah, though, gave her hair a toss and looked at me in her considering-the-picture way--her eyes were thinking, so to speak--but without her camera in between and I knew better.

"Well," I said in what I hoped she would think was earnest, "I was
going to have a cup of coffee and then try write a speech."

"I don't mean this very minute," she overinformed me. "What I do mean is the ranch and you and your mood when you get back to the Two country for good in a couple of days. The deciding you've got to do about things." Things, yeah. She hadn't even counted Althea Frew into the enumeration.

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Lots of things."

"Name a few."

"Don't you have something to go take a picture of?"

"That can wait. Right now I'm trying to talk to my father about the rest of his life."

"Let's find some prettier topic."

"No, let's don't. For a change, let's try look at Jick McCaskill after this trip is over. After you make your speech. After you decide about the ranch."

"If you're going to be in the business of afters, don't leave out
the main one."

That threw her off, for a few seconds. Then she took a monumental breath. "All right then. After Riley and I--"

"Mariah, it's okay." I had to attempt this, finally, even if I didn't know how to say it, maybe never would know the right words for it. Nothing ever prepares you for speaking what you most need to, does it.

"What I mean, it's all right about Riley and you. About you and him and marrying again and California, the whole works--it's okay with me now."

"Since when?" shot out of her in astonishment.

"If it needs a birth certificate, how about from right now," I told her and more than meant it.

It cost me a lot of my heart, but this needed doing. No time like--when you're about to run out of time. Minutes ago I had tried my utmost to show Mariah how to make loss into change, to accept that they for a while will seem to be the same, until a healing, a scarring over, whatever works, can manage to happen. Now to make it begin on myself, where my unholdable daughter was concerned.
"Christ knows, I can't guarantee I can always act as if Riley as a retread son-in-law is just fine and dandy with me," I set forth to her. "But I've played out the calendar on trying to change your mind or his. People can regulate each other only so far, huh?" And then they must do what I was now, gaze acceptingly at Mariah in what she chose for herself and tell myself without flinch, This is how she is.

"I suppose I've had some help realizing that, lately," I had to go on, my voice thinner than I wanted it to be. If I forced myself to do this I could. I would. I did. "Leona wouldn't give you the sweat off her saddle, yet it's fine by her for Riley to marry you again as many goddamn times as he can manage to. So if she can think that way from her side of things, why can't I from mine, right?"

Now Mariah really blinked. "You keep on and you're going to have me telling her thanks. Spassyvesbo or whatever the name Russian for it is."

"Yeah, well, you're maybe better off in English."

She said at last: My daughter studied me. "What I can tell you is, I appreciate this. All of it. Even the hard time you gave me over Riley. I can see why
you did it. Riley and I aren't exactly a prescription pair, are we."

"No, but I guess there are other kinds to be."

She pulled her camera to her abruptly, but just when I was resigned to being fired away at, she went to the side door of the Bago instead and peered out. "The light's nice now," she reported huskily. "I'd better go get shots of the courthouse."

"Before you do," I said. "What you were asking about me in--the short run. I'm working on it all, Mariah. Honest to Christ, I am working on it."

"I figured you were," she said and now gave me the full grin, the Mariah and Marcella grin. "You're entitled to a cup of coffee first, though."

Morning brought the next. Morning and Riley.

We were supposed to pull out of Ekalaka by mid-morning, which just would get us to where we each were supposed to be that night--Mariah and Riley relaying on into Missoula from Billings by rental car, myself home to the Two country after dropping Leona off at her ranch.
Quite a tremendous number of miles ahead for all involved and no time for dillydallying. Which Riley now came down with a severe case of.

He broke out with it to Mariah when we were amid breakfast in the Wagon Wheel Cafe, first putting down his coffee cup as delicately as if it contained nitroglycerin. "Got a little confession to make, shooter. I don't have my part of the piece yet."

"Mmm," she responded and stabbed up a next bite of hotcake. "Well, that's okay, isn't it? There's time yet. You can finish it up before we pull out." Leona and I attended to our food. Actually the listening I wanted to do was to the next table, where a habitual bunch of town guys were gabbing and coffeeing up for the day. "This Eastern Europe thing is a growing thing, I'm telling you," one with a Sic 'em, Carter County Bulldogs ballcap told the others. "See, what I'm saying is, what the hell is old Gorbachev gonna do if those countries keep this up, if you see what I'm saying." Even locutions seemed long in this stretched part of the state.

Not Riley's. "I don't have the piece started yet."

Mariah and Leona and I all looked at him.

"You mean," Mariah said as you would to an invalid, "really not
started yet, not even anything jotted down?"

"Oh fuck yes," he responded, drawing a wince out of his mother.

"I've got stuff jotted down until it won't quit. But I don't have the piece. The idea." He reflected. "Even any idea about the idea."

At any point in the trip until then I would have lit into Riley unmercifully. I mean, Christamighty, he had picked one hell of a place to be skunked. It was just about shorter to the moon than what we had to drive yet that day, and for him to do any dithering would just royally screw—but I kept my peace.

For a mother with a California-bound son who didn't seem to know how to aim himself out of downtown Ekalaka, Leona too was comparatively restrained. "Are we talking hours or days, that it's going to take you to think up something?"

But Mariah still was Riley's point of focus.

"I want to get this piece right," he said quite quietly to her.

"This last couple of pieces, here and Gros Ventre, before we quit Montana—I want to do them up the way they deserve to be." He gave Mariah the diamond-assessing look he'd done in Helena when he saw her fresh print
of the Baloney Express bunch and asked, *How good are you going to get, shooter?*

Breakfast dishes between and spectating parents on either side notwithstanding, I more than half expected Mariah to go straight across the table and kiss him his reward. The way Riley would tackle anything and anybody in his work was something terrific, even I had to admit. Mariah as much as said so with the savvy grin she gave him now, but she only reached for her camera bag and agreed in teammate fashion, "Okay, word guy, let's go see how good there is."

"Jick?" Leona asked with surprising shyness when she and I were back in the Bago waiting for Mariah and Riley to *finish* rummaging Ekalaka for their piece. "Would you mind, do you think--could I practice my talk to the Sisters of Peace on you?"

I assured her I didn't overly mind. "As long as there's nothing physical or mental to the job, I'm probably capable." Besides, who knew, maybe some of her Centennial Day spiel to Moscow would rub off on me.
Across the nook table from me, Leona drew herself up, the piping across the chest of her yoke shirt squaring itself impressively, and gazing at me as if I was the video camera, she broke out with an international smile and spouted: "Zdrahstfooyte, Sychstrih Meerah!

Greetings, Sisters of Peace. Mwih ochen rahdih bwit vahsheemee droozyahmee. We are very glad to be your friends. Myehnyah zahvoot Leona Meekhylovna Riyt. My name is Leona Michaelovna Wright..."

Gorbachev ought to have signed her up on the spot.

During one of her pauses to linguistically regroup, I asked something I'd been curious about, even a little leery for Leona's sake. "This sister group—I don't imagine they're ranch women, there in Moscow. So just who are they, do you know?"

"They're wives of soldiers killed in Afghanistan," Leona said in a voice carefully level.

My eyes followed hers, out and away from that mention of dying young in a war, to the hill with the big white C. Figuring we could contemplate the general landscape out around Ekalaka only so long
without becoming too obviously oblivious to each other, I rose and headed for the jar of instant coffee and the microwave. "Get you something from the nuclear samovar here, can I?"

Both Leona and I jumped when the motorhome's side door opened and that son of hers yelped in, "Got it!"

I appraised Riley as he bounded in but confined my response. "Yeah? Where?"

"There." He nodded to the window his mother and I had just been scrupulously attentive to.

We swiveled to see what we'd missed.


White shadows of the towns, these letters on the nearest hill, trying to imprint community, constancy. To cry out in a single capital letter that these painted stones are not yet as abstractly abandoned as tepee rings . . . .

And from that C hill I did see. In my mind, I saw all the way to white letters above English Creek, the outlines in painted rock on the benchland south of another hunkered town, my own town: GV, for
Gros Ventre. For more than that. The devout abbreviation my grandfather Isaac Reese made sure to sprinkle through his letters to Denmark had been DV, the express wish of his world and time: Deo Volente, God willing.

These little towns of the land, the Ekalakas and the Gros Ventres, I believe are written onto time in letters that similarly say their hope and fate.

GV. Deo Volente, The earth willing.

Mariah was the next one to bollix up the departure plan. At least she spilled it right out:

"Riley and I have to stay."

Leona and I looked at each other, then at our contributions to journalism. Mariah had brought it out, so I was the one to inject: "What, are you two going to take up residence here?"

"Just overnight," Mariah maintained and explained her desire for morning light tomorrow to shoot the best picture of the hill. "But you two don't have to stay just because we are," she summed up, sweet reason personified. "We've got it all worked out, huh, Riley?"

He had the same cloud-of-bliss atmosphere he'd had throughout the
nuptial event in the Holiday Inn. "Huh? Right, yeah, all worked out.

Here's the deal." What it amounted to was that the local BLM man had to go into Billings for a bureaucrat meeting the next day and he'd gladly drop Riley and Mariah there, to continue their trip to Missoula by a rental. Twenty-four hours more or less, they claimed, probably wouldn't make much difference one way or another with the BB at this late point in their Montanian careers. So, no problem, Leona and I could hit on down the road without them, right now.

"But if Jick and I go in the Bago," Leona lobbed into that, "where'll you stay?"

"There's a, uh, place at the edge of town," Mariah replied sunnily.

A place. Right. You bet. Also known as a motel. Chinook, Ekalaka; these two were original in their romantic venues, at least.

The C hill and our theoretically adult children behind us, Leona and I scooted for home. Eyebrows had gone up a notch, Leona's among them, when I said before leaving that I guessed she and I might as well head west out of Ekalaka on the back road to Broadus and on across
the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations instead of retracing all
the way north to Wibaux and the freeway. Mariah and Riley of course
had to put in their combined four bits' worth that going back up to Wibaux
was maybe longer but definitely a more major road, but Leona rose to the
occasion. "If Jick wants to go this other way, that's jake with me,"
and that settled that.

West we went, then, for once in this centennial trip traveling in
as straight a line as possible instead of a journalistic curlicue, across
country new to Leona and so far into
my past as to be almost new. When we pretty soon passed by a parcel
of the Custer National Forest that consisted of chalk buttes and some
scattered ponderosa pine, something telling did come back to me from
that early time of mine as a shavetail assistant ranger in this corner
of the world: how those of us stationed out here used to joke that
maybe the Custer wasn't the biggest national forest we could be on but
it sure as hell was the longest. Across about seven hundred miles,
from the Beartooth District midway in Montana to the Sheyenne District
on the far side of North Dakota, the Custer was a scatter of administrative
islands of dry stands of forest or grasslands. This afternoon in the Bago,
with the teeny Ekalaka swatch of federal forest fading behind us and sixty or seventy prairie miles ahead of us to the next district of the Custer, that joke seemed still valid.

You might think Leona and I would be talked out, after a couple of months of motorhome life together. But we did find things to say, whenever one or the other felt like it—she was good to visit with that way. I let her know that Mariah and Riley now had, if not my blessing, at least my buttoned lip. She smiled and said that was probably as much as they had a right to expect. After a while she wondered how I was coming on my centennial morn speech and I said fine, except for not knowing what the hell I was going to say. "'Ostahloe hahchahts, dah koncheets,' the Russian saying is," she provided me. "'All there is left to do is begin and finish.'"

That first hour or so went that way, nicely, on the surface. But after we buzzed through Broadus, Leona seemed to sense that my mind was on something else than talk and we let conversation lapse. I drove remembering. Places coming back to me, places over here—communities that now probably were ghosts of themselves—that I'd never even heard of
in my Two country upbringing, and I'd always thought I was good in geography. Sonnette, Otter, Quietus. The look of this terrain odd to me too in comparison with the Two Medicine land. No real elevation here but constant little rises. Bumpy country, it still seemed to me.
The road, the arid hills; probably the lives of the people around.

I recognized King Mountain, ten or a dozen miles to the southwest, its hatcrown summit in the middle of flattish timbered ridges. It was all I could do to keep the Bago on the galloping highway and gawk at that odd but remembered country. Ever since the four of us headed into eastern Montana, I had hoped Mariah and Riley would not zero in on this particular area for one of their pieces. More of the fact is, I hadn't known how I could handle myself if they dropped a finger onto the map just here and said, let's go. And so, now that I was free of that, how do I account for having chosen this route myself? For what I all at once blurted?

"Leona, would you mind a little sidetrip? Just down the country here a ways--it won't take long."
Leona looked at me from the passenger seat as if wondering where
an outback
country like this it was possible to go on a sidetrip. Whatever was
in my voice must have said more than my words. She immediately answered,
"If you want to, Jick, that'd be fine."

I recognized the turnoff surprisingly well, although I remembered
not a single one of the rancher names on their signboard that soberly
listed extensive mileages to their places. The road south off the
terrain
highway was another plummet-line route, cleaving across the same as
straight and quick as possible.

Leona stayed quiet as we drove. My mind did not. The young man
I had been, I met here behind my eyes, seeing again with him. The badlands
here along Otter Creek had always spooked him, me. Dry gulches and
stark buttes and the odd reddish tone of the ground might be expected in
the honest deserts of Arizona or New Mexico, but to find country of that
kind here, showing through the grass like the bones of the earth, made
the younger me feel like a stranger in my home state.

Three Mile Creek we passed, then Ten Mile, then Fifteen Mile,
with cattleguards marking the trafficless road between those streams.
Then with a last brrrump the Bago rumbled across the cattleguard just before our destination, and I pulled into the driveway and shut the engine off.

The Fort Howes Ranger Station was little changed. The stockade-fence of pointed posts that had been out front was gone, replaced by a rail fence that looked more peaceable but less like the place's historic namesake, and some equipment sheds had been added, but the main buildings were the same as forty years ago—the ranger station like a shingle-sided cottage, the house its longer but similar mate. Their low-held roofs still were covered with fist-sized rocks to absorb the heat of the sun, for it could get utterly broiling here in summertime.

Leona took it all in, the huddle of buildings painted with the same federal red brush, the surrounding badlands with gray lopped-off slopes that duned down almost into the back doors. The rockfield roofs that even in the November afternoon chill looked like beds of rosy coals.

"Different country," she said, with extreme curiosity in the gaze she turned toward me.
"Different guy, I guess I was, the last time I was here." She knew none of the particulars of my three-year career in the Forest Service here; nor, gone from the Two Medicine country into her own life with
Herb Wright, had she ever heard of my first marriage. I told her it all. Of myself and Shirley, when I was assigned as assistant ranger here at the Fort Howes station and Shirley found herself in the unexpected role of Forest Service wife in what seemed the bare middle of nowhere--two Missoula campus hotshots abruptly out into the real world of rocks and routine. Of how, despite my determination to stand up under whatever job the Forest Service saddled me with, I never for a minute felt at home here; to me then, these encompassing buttes and rimrocks were as if the land had been cut down and these were the stumps. And of how, if I was uneasy here at Fort Howes, Shirley was entirely unhinged. Quo vadis, hell, was her reaction to my being assigned here.

Leona was listening as intently as I was telling it. I went on to the finale:

"As I remember it, we passed the time by fighting. In those days we didn't have air conditioning and everything, and it could get pretty tough here in summer. I know the last time we got to arguing, Shirley pointed straight up at the roof and shrieked at the top of her voice, 'Only snakes and bugs were meant to live under rocks!"
It had taken forty years, but I laughed at that memory. Leona
gave a kind of giggle as if trying to contain herself, but then burst
into laughing too. Which set me off all the more, happy with the surprise
that I was at last able to do so, and that really got us going, a genuine
fit of laughing, Leona and I infectious back and forth, looking at each
other and then at the hilarious accused rocks atop the ranger house and
convulsing off into new gales. Rollicking applause, four decades overdue,
for Shirley for that exit line from our marriage.

"And I can't say I blame her," I brought out when Leona and I at
last managed to slow our shortling enough to get some breath back. "Not
one damn bit. It was a case of double behavior. Both of us flung our
way into that marriage. It wasn't just her doing."

In record time Leona's face went from the glee we'd been sharing
to deathly sober.

She gazed at me, her eyes working to take in the recognition as
they'd done that first full moment of look at me in the yard of the
Wright ranch. I could see how much it took for her now to manage the
words:

"You're saying that about another case too, aren't you."
"Yeah, I am." I made a half-fist and gently tapped the steering wheel of the Bago as I thought of just how to put it. "It's probably past time I should've said something of the sort about you and Alec. But that old stuff dies hard, doesn't it." I studied the ranger house, the now-quiet combat zone of Shirley and my younger self, for a moment more and then shifted around to face Leona. "I don't know what the hell it is, whether it's just easier to keep on being half mad than it is to ever get over it, or what. But anyway, I need you to know, Leona--I don't hold you responsible any more for what happened between Alec and the rest of us in the family." For both her and me, I lightened it as much as I possibly could. "Probably you didn't have to hold a gun on him to keep him occupied with you."

She took her eyes from me and looked off at the chalk butte beyond the ranger station. Even yet, even sad, Leona's face fully hinted of the beautiful girl she was in those days. "No," she said as if from a distance. "No, I didn't have to."
The rest of the ride with Leona was a cruise across silk, as far as I was concerned. Ahead of me from Fort Howes, the country and the moments unrolled as if carrying the Bago, bearing us like first guests across the miles, the afternoon. Beyond the Tongue River and then the redstone hills of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation; at Lame Deer an Indian father in a down vest and big black hat was loping his horse in the barrow pit beside the pony of his maybe eight-year-old daughter, this evidently her saddleback lesson, the two of them watching each other without seeming to as they kept their easy but steady gait. Then mountains beginning to the south, the Rosebud and Bighorn ranges.

Another hour of quiltpatch road and we were passing the Custer Battlefield, monument, straggle of graves, wrought-iron cemetery fence. Studying the terrain chopped up by small coulees—"you would have to go some to invent worse country for cavalry—"Leona shook her head and said she never would understand what all the fuss for Custer was about. "A lot only of better people have died in wars." I made an agreeing noise in my throat, those World War Two storms of thought behind me too on the trip now, and headed us on. After Crow Agency the road sledding
down into nice irrigated bottomland, sudden treeline at the far side of it—the Bighorn River hugging below benchland in a way to remind me of the valley of English Creek. Now through the western half of the Crow Reservation, long rolling miles toward Pryor while daylight went, before long the Bago's headlights picking out plywood signs with the spray-painted message Cattle at Large on Road. No more so than me.

Into full night before ever reaching the freeway at Laurel and then the twin lanes beside the Yellowstone River again, the motorhome and I and our passenger as if on comfortable automatic now, until Big Timber where we late-suppered in the Country Pride cafe. From there we had only the easy last hour home for Leona.

So I was surprised, to say the least, at the way she abruptly spoke up after we were onto the ridge road from Clyde Park out toward the Crazy Mountains, minutes from the Wright ranch.

"Jick," she said in a strained voice. "Pull over. Please."

What, could she be carsick, now after damn near two months of Bago motion? Dashlight was all I had to diagnose by, but my instant
glance across at her told me Leona most definitely looked peaked.

Making the best version of emergency landing I could, I nosed the motorhome onto an approach leading into a field and cut the motor.

She did not open the passenger door and bail out into the night air for recuperation as I expected she was going to. Instead Leona faced around to me and spoke beyond the capacity of expectations.

"That time. The night of that supper with your folks and you."

Of my brother Alec declaring as if it was the world's newest faith. We got something to tell you, we're going to get married. Of Leona wielding her smile that proclaimed. And nothing can dent us, we're magical at this age. Of my mother and father as unmoving as the supper plates, more than half knowing the next to come, that Alec was going to say a college ladder into the future was not for him, now that he'd have a wife to support. I sat startled to be simultaneously at that supper scene again and in the halted motorhome. The woman of silver here who had been that invincibly smiling girl said:

"I'd told Alec I was pregnant."

"But then--"
"I...I wasn't."

She was having hard going, her voice throatier than in the most straining Russian lesson.

"But a girl could say that then and be believed," she managed to get it out, "before the pill and the coil and the whatever else they have these days. Men then didn't much understand female plumbing. Whether they do now, I wouldn't know."

Leona turned her head toward the windshield, as if the reflections of each of us in the night-backed glass needed to hear this too.

"In those days, we counted the days of the month," she kept on. At least that much I knew. Shirley and I had our own few months of calendar nerves, that long ago springtime in Missoula before we got married. "We'd been meeting out along the creeks, Alec and I," Leona's words remembered. "The old Ben English place right there across English Creek was standing empty then, that was one we met at. But it was awfully close to town, we had to be too careful there. Noon Creek was better for our purpose, all those ranches standing empty after the Double W bought them up--Fain's, the Eiseley place, the Nansen place. Alec and I both lived
on horseback in those days and there wasn't any shortage of places to ride to and make love. There even were old mattresses left in some of these houses, the families cleared out so fast. Still facing ahead, she stopped and swallowed. Then resumed.

"So it fit with—the way we'd been with each other, my telling him
the calendar had played a surprise on us."

Sometimes you know a thing because even invisible it fills a gap.

I asked anyway. "On the ride out from town that night, wasn't it. When you told Alec that."

Surprised herself, Leona swung to look directly at me again. "Yes, Jick, did Alec... have you always... ?"

"No, he never said a word of any of this to me. To any of us. I just remember there was something about you two when I watched you come over the rise." Alec with his head up even more than his customary proud riding style, Leona golden and promising even at too great a distance for details. Their perfect gait, horseman and horsewoman, down from outline against the June sky as I crossed the yard from a boyhood chore to that suppertime. One of those moments that is a seed of so much else.

"Alec was both scared to death and as happy as he could be," Leona spoke now as if we were both watching that saddle-throned figure of my nineteen-year-old brother. "You can be that way, when you're young and convinced you're in love. Right then and there, on the county road
before we came into sight of the ranger station, he wanted to know if
it was safe for me to be on horseback, would it hurt the baby? I laughed
and told him he was getting away ahead of the game, worrying about that
already." But that was Alec, wasn't it. All go and no whoa, as my mother
always said of him. Beside me Leona was saying now: "It was happening
sooner than he'd wanted, in one way—we still couldn't get married for a
few months, until he'd saved up his wages and talked the Double W into
some kind of living quarters for us. And in another way, he was thrilled pink
with the idea he and I were going to have a child. I hope you see, Jick.
It decided for us. A baby then meant the pair responsible had to get
married, there wasn't just...living together. That was the thing
about it: my telling Alec settled so much we were still trying to figure
out. It made life seem so much—safer. And he wanted some kind of
sure path as much as I did, something he could just latch on to and
go with. You know how Alec was."

Yes. Alec McCaskill and Leona Tracy, I know how they both were then. In
memory the perfect two of them, another month into that summer of 1939,
at the after-rodeo dance in Gros Ventre when Alec won the calf-roping,
my brother tall and alight with the fact that he was astraddle of the world, beside him Leona golden-haired in a white taffeta dress that flounced intriguingly with her every step. His armful of her as Alec advised my friend Ray Heaney and me, enough younger that the only company we kept at dances yet was the wall, You guys better think about getting yourselves one of these things. That was the appearance, royal Alec and priceless Leona. In actuality, both before and after Leona, my brother stubborned his way into a life that did not lead to much of anywhere. And Leona there at seventeen, who looked like her life was on clockwork—smile; let her hair gleam in the sun; beautify whatever scene she found herself in, on the back of a horse or twirling in taffeta

at a Fourth of July dance—in actuality, a seventeen-year-old head with a body with the collected urges of centuries in it, on it. No more than the figurehead is steering the ship under full sail was Leona Tracy in charge of herself then.

This next I didn't ask. Why the episode with Alec didn't come out the way she'd set it in motion. This she owed herself to tell.
"I couldn't go through with it," the Leona of now was saying as if still in accusation against herself. "Pretty soon after the Fourth, I told him that... it was a false alarm, that I was... back in step with Mother Moon. Oh, I think..."
Alec more than half knew what I'd done. Started to do. Especially when I went on and said I thought we had better hold off on marriage entirely, that I'd decided to finish high school and take a look at life then."

A person tends to think that the past has happened only to himself. That it's his marrow only, particular and specific; filling his bones one special way. The anguished look on Leona disabused me of that forever.

"It's there, isn't it, Jick. If I'd kept matters that Alec and I simply were going together, that I didn't want to get serious about marriage right then, he might've eventually listened to what your folks wanted for him." And gone to college and made the life that education could have brought him, I mentally finished the fifty-year-old family accusation against her. "Or if I'd gone ahead and shotgunned him into marrying me, we in all likelihood really would have had a child by the time the war came." And Alec would not have charged off and enlisted the week after Pearl Harbor, this new burden of proof against Leona ran.

"Either way," she finished with difficulty, "Alec might not have... ended up as he did."
I felt a sting at my eyes, but Leona was nowhere near crying.

There is a dry sorrow beyond tears.

She waited, there in the almost-dark of the motorhome cab.

Life is choices. I could go back to the long McCaskill grudge against her, fortified now by knowing that my parents and ultimately I were righter than we had even imagined, about her effect that family-tearing summer. Or. Or I could make as much of a start as I could in the other direction.

By saying, as I now did:

"Leona Tracy was somebody the McCaskills never knew how to contend with. So I think we're lucky to have Leona Wright take sides with us."

We pulled in to the Wright ranch at close to midnight, the yard light illuminating the tidy buildings and the cow corrals and a Chevy pickup with a considerable portion of the ranch on it as mud. Out from under the pickup materialized a half-grown dog letting out a night-splitting woof.
"Morgan and Kathy will be wondering what Manslaughter has got treed," Leona said. "I'll go across and let them know I'm back in one piece."

She sounded strangely shy, tentative, with the next: "You want to come with, come in for a little while?"
"Naw, I'm going to turn in pretty quick, thanks anyhow."

"I guess it's a rare chance in this rig--" she cast a look around in the motorhome, which suddenly was seeming as empty as an unloaded moving van-- "to have some sleeptime all to yourself."

"Yeah, I guess," I managed to semi-chuckle.

"You'll have breakfast with us, surely," she stipulated.

"Actually I can't. I've got to pull out for the Two Medicine country real early. I need to get home and sort out the situation there."

"Then I'd better say thanks now, for bringing me back. And for everything else you did today, Jick."

"That's okay, thanks for riding along. Been nice having some company. Been interesting."

Leona leaned across from the passenger seat and gave me a no-nonsense peck, surprisingly like Mariah's version, on my approximate cheek. She smiled, maybe still a little sadly, before she opened the passenger door of the Bago. "With my background, would you believe it's taken me sixty-seven years to kiss a man with a beard?"