

Where We Were

Adventures in the Last Best Place

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Prelude

*The willingness to believe and to act on one's belief
Is the artificial fly cast upon the waters
The poetry of the experience is a wild trout
Connected to the fisher by the thinnest filament of reality
And each of them suspended in a moment of sudden recognition.*

Part One

Man From Rainbow

It was 1979. Your sister-in-law said to you one evening, “You should talk to my boss, Bob Kay. He’s got a problem with some Indians in Montana. Maybe you could give him some advice.”

You made an appointment, drove out to Lakewood where his offices were, arrived in the midst of a torrential rainstorm, sat in the car as your scheduled time approached, wondering how to get from here to there without getting soaked. The vague memory of an old raincoat wadded up in the trunk came to you, so you climbed into the back, folded down the bucket seat and reached around in the dark until you felt it. London Fog but long since seen better days. Creased, wrinkled, stained with grease, and smelling slightly of mold. Otherwise, perfectly suited for a business meeting.

Bob was a good guy, looked you over with a smile on his face but treated you politely, as though this was just another meeting for him with a guy who looked like he’d been sleeping in his clothes in the park.

You’d removed the coat before meeting him, draped it over your arm inconspicuously as you could while you talked, he told you about his company, himself, his role, the biz. But then he suggested lunch, the rain was a downpour when you reached the front door, and you had to put the coat back on to keep from getting drenched. Bob said nothing. Lunch proceeded apace.

"Mary Anne tells me you know a lot about Indians," he said.

"Well," you said, "I know a lot *of* Indians, and I know a little about them."

"How'd you like to go up to Browning," he said, "and talk to a few of them for me?"

You weren't in the best shape when you left Colorado and headed north, but at least you had enough sense to make the change. Get away from the drugs for a while, maybe get some new habits, a more productive way to spend your time. Make a little money. Live in the daylight and sleep at night. What a concept.

Went to Montana to get away from the stuff, although you would find soon enough they had stuff there, too. Back home, there was nowhere left to turn, no way to put it off, no place to avoid it: it's time to go. Make a new adventure. Find yourself a new dance hall, put a different record on the turntable, get moving to a brand-new beat.

The Seventies were coming to a screeching halt, what was young for so long was now old, all that was familiar was passing away. A whole new decade lies directly ahead. You wonder what the soul of the Eighties will be.

So it is you find yourself suddenly deep in the Montana experience. You are roaring down the highway in an obnoxiously large 1972 Cadillac, a Fleetwood Brougham d'Elegance bought cheap in the aftermath of the gasoline shortage a few years back, which is something like driving your living room down the road, except this vehicle is maybe a little larger and more comfortable. Still, it is not a quiet way to make an entrance.

It's a long way from here to there anywhere you might be going in this part of the world and there are no speed limits on the highways to slow you down. The roads are very wide open and lightly traveled. You can drive a long way on the few major highways without ever having to touch your brakes, and you can see so many miles ahead, there is little that is likely to surprise you about the traffic except how little of it there is.

Heading out from Cut Bank, though, notoriously the nation's icebox, toward the bleak, blustering encampment of Browning, capitol of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, can sometimes be another matter. The path between them, Highway 2, is a narrow, erratically bumpy two-lane strip of blacktop that cuts across the width of the Res, a fifty-five mile stretch of undulating rises and dips along the last swells of the high plains at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

The road has no shoulders for much of the reservation, bordered by deep drainage ditches that carry away the occasional torrential rain of spring and summer, and the persistent snow that pounds the area relentlessly each winter. By late summer during the long, parched periods that bake the plains as fiercely as the desert sun, they're thick with tumbleweeds and trash.

Temperatures can vary one hundred fifty degrees within a given year. The damage of those swings from hot to cold to man-made constructions like the highway erodes the fabric faster than it can be repaired.

For such a remote part of the country, though, the road is pretty heavily traveled, at least when the weather's good. It's

one of but three east-west routes traversing the mountains, the only one north of Helena, 150 miles to the south.

In the summer, caravans of tourists, their coupes, sedans, and station wagons sagging with family and luggage, the inevitable, beastly recreation vehicles, the motorcycles, bicycles, vans and buses, lumber along the narrow route to Glacier National Park in nervous interplay with local traffic, the pickups of the cowboys and Indians, the tractors and combines of the wheat farmers.

The chaos of the highway consistently takes its toll. Small white crosses, each a memorial marker of a vehicular fatality, litter the length of the road. At particularly treacherous points, some are stacked in pyramids five tiers high. The best remembered are ringed with garlands of garish plastic flowers, but none of the crosses receives a second coat of paint, and, like the surface of the highway, the weather beats away their original gleam.

More crosses exist than there are miles to contain them along Highway 2, and, typically, the deaths they commemorate aren't those of the tourists, not the ranchers and farmers, but of the Indians whose land the road invades.

The Blackfeet travel at one of two speeds: soberly slow or drunkenly fast. Highway 2 separates the reckless from the cautious, year in, year out. If you're driving drunk at high speed and a wheel leaves the pavement, the drop into the ditch sends the vehicle into a sidelong roll from which few emerge alive. The rate of alcoholism among the Blackfeet makes it seem like a road

designed to thin the population of the tribe. And so it does, year in, year out.

You might see off to the side of the highway a path here and there leading to somebody's home, and right out front with the sun shining down on it is a car or a pickup, maybe both, parked there on its roof. It's some kind of a sport for young guys around here as they roll back to where they stay to see how nicely they can whip the buggy sideways at speed and slide on the side and then the roof right up close to the front porch.

Most of the fatalities on the highway, though, are collisions in the middle of going somewhere, maybe sober, more likely drunk and raging. Life expectancy of the Blackfeet is very low in part because of the many young men who die on the roads. If a guy makes it through his teens and twenties, he may well live to a ripe old age. Getting there isn't easy.

Non-Indian that you are, considering these thoughts, you slow the pace a little, cruising now at an easy eighty, rolling softly over the highway's dips and rises, cushioned by the super-smooth shocks of the Cadillac, settled in the deep velour and leather, taking in the magnificent view, envisioning what oil rigs will look like superimposed on the glaciers of the distant mountain range. Really?

It seems to be a big year for groundhogs. They constantly dash into the road for no apparent reason, pause upraised on hind legs, their cautious noses sniffing the air often at the exact moment the Caddy passes over them. Either the tires squash them flat or the muffler clips them at the neck, sends them

tumbling through a blood-splattered death dance. Their fate is quickly sealed.

Crows and magpies pick at the carcasses, daring a similar fate. But the birds are quicker, more clever, and alert. Only occasionally does one collide with the grill of an oncoming car. Just now, you clobber a magpie whose greed held it a fatal moment too long. Feathers of deep blue and snow white explode over the hood, sticking with clots of blood to the windshield. The flying bugs, the birds and the groundhogs combine to cover the car with a *mélange* of innards, many layers of wild extinguished. The colors mix with those of the sky in your field of vision.

You arrived in Cut Bank a week ago and found the big old home on the east end of town along the main drag, just past a rickety motel where stood a very large wooden penguin with a sign proclaiming this to be indeed The Coldest Spot in the Nation, then opposite it a Dairy Queen, the Point Drive-In, and two bars with ample parking. The house sat at the foot of a long sloping hill that was covered with a variety of funky homes and patchy lawns, which made this place on a large lot of thick green grass and big trees seem stately by comparison.

Across Main Street were some storage sheds, shacks, tumbleweeds and trash lining the railroad tracks. Beyond it was a stretch of brown fields lightly spotted with homes, corrals, barns, and a few pumpjacks that extended to the northern horizon.

The front door was answered by a very good-looking girl, which was the first of many illusions that presented themselves

to you. She was only visiting and was the last babe you would see for a very long time on this journey.

"I'm looking for Pat Minette," you said. "Is this the right place?"

"It is," she said, with a big smile. "Come on in." You never saw her again.

"Oh, hello, do come in," said a strange looking fellow with a big, somewhat hesitant smile. "No one ever uses this door. Grab your things, I'll meet you round back, show you your room, get you settled. Then I'll show you the town."

He laughed. "That will take about five minutes if you really want to see it all. Really, really, really."

He wasn't kidding. We drove down Main Street just south of the railroad tracks in Pat's Ford Crown Vic, you and him, seeing the blond brick courthouse, an imposing building in the Moderne style set back from the street in the middle of a large lawn, a rather prosperous-looking bank, the tiny one-story, red brick Woolworth's, the dilapidated tire store, a title company that seemed like it sees a fair amount of activity, a couple of two-pump gas stations, three small, old-time motels, and a lot of bars.

At the one traffic light was another commercial stretch a block or so perpendicular in each direction, including the little Post Office beneath a rather large flag, a map store, a few more bars, and the Glacier Motel, Cut Bank's oldest continuously operating motel, with a little coffee shop off the lobby where one day you would save Pat's life over lunch.

At the far end of town, there was a shopping center of sorts, two long, low brick buildings with big, not particularly clean windows, lots of signs, a few trucks in the lot. The Winner's Circle Bar looked to be the focus of the action. A western wear shop called Norman's was doing some business, and there was a pretty big Albertson's grocery store, too.

Just beyond there was a very deep ravine, a canyon really, where Cut Bank Creek divided the town from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. It was a ribbon of colors that grew shades darker the deeper into it you looked.

If you continued on, Main became again Highway 2. It dropped quickly into the ravine, crossed a large bridge in the middle that was suspended high over the water below, and climbed quickly up to the other bank, which was slightly higher than where we sat. The reservation began there and continued west for about 55 miles.

"I was in *Cattle Queen of Montana* with Barbara Stanwyck. Filmed it right over there," he said, pointing at some ramshackle stock pens on the Blackfeet side. "I played the Queen." He looked slightly maniacal when he said it.

That was about all there was to see, at least for now, in the county seat of Glacier, the town of Cut Bank, and this side of that great divide. It was an atypical small town doing a lot of business in the middle of nowhere, which happened to be where the oil was found. Otherwise, it would have been just small.

The sun was low in the west. The high plains rise steadily in long plateaus until you reach the mountains where you leave the reservation. The land from here to there was a palate of brown

and gold pastures and fields getting ready to green up as the weather warmed. Where it was setting, the sun made a rich warm halo over the faint stripe of blue and white far off in the distance that was the Rockies and Glacier Park.

Daylight was gone pretty early still in April, maybe six or so. Eventually, in June, it'll be light 19 hours a day. At the winter solstice, it's dark that long, too.

Maybe you met with the Chief the next day, or maybe a day or two after that. Earl Old Person was the long-lived leader of the Blackfeet Nation, a smart businessman, a skilled politician, a many-times-elected tribal councilman and current chairman of the Council, who last year had been elected honorary chief of his people. He was an impressive person and that was an impressive honor paid him by a people who are strong willed, opinionated, pretty belligerent, and always insistently independent. They voluntarily named him their chief.

"We have an economic opportunity," Old Person said. "Those little wells in the old fields near Cut Bank bring in most of the outside money for the tribe. Now they want to drill bigger wells west of here. They're willing to pay a lot of money."

He was a medium-sized man in late middle age, small and lean for a Blackfeet, with gray-flecked, short dark hair, glasses, dressed in a western shirt and polyester slacks, an embroidered vest, and shiny black cowboy boots.

"Bob Kay told me a lot about this, but I want to know what you are thinking about it. Is this something you want to see happen?"

“Yes, I know Mr. Kay and I like him,” said the Chief. “Rainbow Resources is a company we can work with. We both think it can be a good thing. But we need to do this in a certain way, or we won’t do it at all. It’s not meant to be hard. It’s to do things the Blackfeet way. Do you know how the allotments work?”

“Yes, I know how the reservation was divided up: every member of the tribe got 320 acres when enrollment was established. Those allottees all have ‘A’ numbers. Their heirs have ‘U’ numbers. Is that right?”

“That is correct. The allottees, most of them have died. The last of them are pretty old. So, most of the allotments are carved up now. Lots of heirs to those lands. And if a company wants to drill a well, the Blackfeet way is every owner must agree. The tribal lands can be leased by a vote of the council. Then I would sign it.”

“All these lands are held in trust, correct?”

Old Person looked you in the eye, an unusual thing for an Indian to do. Custom is you look away when you are speaking to respect the other’s privacy.

“In trust,” he said, “of the Bureau of Indian Affairs...because we are said to be ‘incompetent’ to manage our own affairs.”

“Can’t the Superintendent lease the lands to us on behalf of the Tribe?”

“That would not be the Blackfeet way.”

You got the message.

“Some of these heirship lists have more than 100 people on them.”

Old Person nodded, yes.

"And some of the owners have a very small share, like 3/10,000ths."

"Yes, it is true. Some have even less."

"So, I'm trying to think what incentive they have to sign. Even if the bonus was \$100,000, their share would only be \$30."

"You have to talk to them. And maybe some of their relatives who have a larger share can help you. It will not be easy."

"Some of these addresses say General Delivery, Denver or Chicago or Minneapolis. Are there better addresses for them somewhere?"

"You just have to ask around."

"But everyone has to say, 'okay'? Even if they can't be found?"

"Yes, you need to talk to all of them. That is the Blackfeet way." He stood there quietly, chuckled to himself, looked at you and said, "Think of it this way. You will be one of the only white men that meets most all the Blackfeet tribe."

Helluva project it was looking like, even at this very early stage of what would become bigger than any of you suspected at the time and still like so much of what takes place up here in the way of economic development was to be in the end a ferocious jolt of income preceding a precipitous return for most of the Tribe to a welfare state. Meaning not much was accomplished but adventure and a brief interlude of possibility.

This was a few short years after the collapse of gasoline supplies and the oil embargo in the early Seventies, when cars were lined up for blocks beyond every service station in the

country and some ran out of gas just idling and waiting their turn. News reports each day showed images of drivers manfully leaning into the door well and manually pushing their cars to the pumps.

Many times, after waiting in line for hours you'd get within striking distance of a tank full, or whatever limited amount they were willing to sell you, when the sign went up: Sorry! Out of Gas! Try Again Tomorrow. Maybe you had enough left in the tank to make it home and venture out again the next day. Maybe not.

The economy itself and every mode of gasoline-powered transportation nearly came to a standstill. People who had been paying a quarter a gallon for gas suddenly had to pony up \$30 for a tank full, if they could find it. An eerie new day in the international balance of petrochemical power was dawning. It wasn't pretty and nobody but Henry Kissinger was happy about it.

The backstory was that President Richard Nixon, among his many other nefarious schemes, wanted to sell a fleet of very sophisticated fighter jets to Saudi Arabia. A big weapons transaction to pad the coffers and unload some surplus hardware.

ARAMCO had made the Saudis and their American partners very wealthy. Oil there was plentiful and very cheap to produce. But even the royal house of Saud blanched a bit at the asking price. "I'm not certain we can afford them," their defense minister told Kissinger, the wily Secretary of State.

This brilliantly duplicitous man in the near future would be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for bombing Cambodia on Christmas Day and presiding over the lengthy peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong so successfully that the USA abruptly abandoned its allies in South Vietnam to be murdered, tortured and, at best, sentenced to severe repatriation education while the army of the most powerful nation on earth fled like helicopter-borne rabbits before ravenous wolves. A humiliation worthy of a big prize, apparently.

“Can’t afford it? Why, of course you can.” Kissinger said, and smiled. “Raise the price of oil.” That’s what he told the Saudis that auspicious day and they did. Quickly. Exorbitantly. It took the petrol-fueled world years to recover from the shock. In the United States, domestic oil production became a lot more attractive. For the first time in many a year, wildcatting was back.

The Rocky Mountain Front was especially interesting. “The Rockies appear to be the last onshore frontier that is unproven and still wide open,” said one George Musselman, regional editor of Petroleum Information, an industry service group, at the time. “There are so many lightly drilled areas that still seem to contain a lot of opportunities for industry.”

The Blackfeet Reservation met those criteria. It was a big parcel of lightly drilled land in the Disturbed Belt portion of the Overthrust Belt, the geological feature stretching from the northernmost mountainous region of Canada to where the

Rockies play out in New Mexico. The one that had Big Oil salivating.

Wells further south in that structure, in Wyoming and Utah, had come in at thousands of barrels a day. Triple deck rigs the height of a five-story building were braving the elements in the depth of winter and the blazing summer up and down the mountain front in search of pay dirt, some of it 22,000 feet deep.

The price of a barrel of oil had climbed from single digits to \$50 on the spot market, the terms payable to landowners became more generous, and now everybody wanted a piece of the action.

Big Oil needed the product and the Blackfeet needed the revenue. It was an opportunity of immense possibilities that both parties might welcome. Neither side really knew what to make of the other, but they were willing to have at it. The skepticism that rightly might temper their enthusiasm, corporate players and tribal members alike, paled in the sheen of all that black gold they imagined. Maybe we should give it a try, don't you think? What could possibly go wrong?



Lloyd Littleplume looked none too pleased to be disturbed. He was seated in the front room of his little home in Starr School, his massive frame hunched over a table covered with porcupine quills and hanks of fur and hair. Looking back over his shoulder to where you stood in the doorway, mane of coal black hair falling to one side of his back, sharp, dark eyes piercing deeply as possible into the heart of the intruder, he waited for you to speak.

"Nice roach. You a dancer?"

"My boy. He's doin' pretty good. Made four hunnerd bucks last week at Ronan."

He stood up, moving slowly toward the doorway. Less than six feet tall, he weighed some 250 pounds, thick from head to toe and surprisingly graceful. "What you got?"

You held the papers out for him to examine, saying, "We need your signature for a permit to run some pipe. Rainbow's going to hook up the Morninggun well to the main transmission line over to Kalispell and Spokane. Part of the pipe is going to cross your lands."

"How much?" he asked, having played this game before

"Three bucks a rod. Your end's about a hundred."

Littleplume looked at the papers, then asked, "Them other guys come in on it, too? The DeRoches, Spottedeagles?"

"Yeah, you and your brother, and Ivan Redhorn, too."

"You been to see them yet?"

"You're the first one I came to see."

The Blackfeet was silent for a moment, seeming in the quiet to swell to even greater size. You never flinched, but were ready to, when he quietly shrugged, thrust the papers back, saying, "I'm not signin nothin' 'til them other guys agree. You better talk to Marvin DeRoche. Him and his brother tol' me them other tribes are gettin' more."

Gesturing with a subtle shift of his bulk, he headed you back out the door, adding, "If they sign, I'll sign."

He was ready to dismiss the whole thing when he caught sight of the Caddy, two bloody bird heads protruding from its

grill. He looked at you more carefully, then back at the car and the plates beneath the grill.

“How you like this country of ours?” he said, a fleshy arm raised toward the horizon, where Glacier Park rose from the plains, highlighted by the poignant face of Rising Wolf Peak.

“Beautiful as any place I’ve ever seen,” you said, looking at the world class view from his place.

“I been to Colorado once,” Littleplume said, his eyes on the license plate. “Din’t care for it.”

Back in Browning, you stopped at the housing office in Old Low Rent. The cinderblock building was painted a vaguely green shade with weathered yellow and orange trim. A large sign hanging to one side of the doorway decorously announced the building’s function. The equally decorous citizens of Browning were crowded on its porch.

You waded through them, entered, halted at the first barricade of filing cabinets, inquiring courteously as to the whereabouts of Marvin DeRoche. “For his signature,” you explained.

A quiet conference among several staffers ensued, punctuated by small exclamations and sidelong glances at the inquisitor, a suspected oilman. One of the conferees emerged from the group, directing you to look for a little white house down the road in Low Rent, where Marvin’s mother stays. “Way over there,” he said, smiling and pointing obliquely.

Old Low Rent spread out along a loop of roadway beginning and ending at the housing office, a course you took after leaving the building. The circle was lined on both sides by

one-level structures of various lengths, each of which was sectioned into small, shabby apartments. Sparse tufts of grass spotted the dirt yards, which were populated by mean-looking, mangy dogs, separately or in small, snarling packs. Trash was everywhere. Lots of junk, too. Eyes stared out from darkened windows. Here and there, a solitary figure quickly crossed from one building to another through shadows tucked neatly in between the bright stretches of sun reflecting off the cinderblock walls.

You turned back out onto the highway, honing in on the little white house way over here somewhere, passing several of the streets leading into New Low Rent, looking some way down each of them at the irregular rows of brown and yellow-trimmed Mutual homes, two story, standard issue government buildings of wooden siding, their bleak colors broken subtly with variations in gray and black, even an occasional shocker in pink or lime green; and among them all finally you saw down a dirt path of a street, in a patch of weeds and mud, behind a short driveway pitted with craters sunken in the earth, a tiny and very old white house of split-log construction, in front of which was a burgundy Thunderbird, dented and beaten but powerful looking still, up on blocks, missing its tires.

The house indeed held Marvin DeRoche. He filled the doorway when it opened, looked you over, snarling from a wild and fearsome face, not waiting to hear out the proposal. He'd been waiting.

"Them other guys got four-fifty for signin'. I ain't takin' three. If I don't sign, none of them other guys will."

You gave him a good spiel, trying to keep it alive, but Marvin wasn't having it.

"Give me a ride downtown," he said. "We'll talk to Ronnie Crossguns."

He disappeared inside, leaving you to face a roomful of curious kids. They gestured to come in, pointing to the corner. You leaned forward from the waist, looking with your head just barely inside the frame of the door, seeing where they pointed a haggard, toothless old woman lying in a pile of paper and rags. Beneath her ragged white hair, her eyes rolled toward you, watery and glazed, her mouth slack and drooling.

"Napi-kwan!" the children shouted at her, pointing at you. She sagged deeper into the bedding and drooled even more.

Marvin came back on the scene, moving quickly and powerfully, brushing past as you stepped aside. He loomed over the Cadillac, jerked open the door and disappeared into it like a large animal being swallowed by a shark. You took the driver's seat. "Go down there," Marvin said.

The two of you sat outside an office on Piegan Street, near the drunken stretch of Main where Yeagin's Bar pours forth. Ronnie wasn't in, shade drawn, door locked. You waited, seated in the car in the shade of the hardware store, object of hard looks from passersby, none of whom, not even the drunks, were inclined to intrude on Marvin's scene.

"They must be pretty bad," you said, indicating the two Tribal policemen cruising past in a green government car.

Marvin spit out the window at them, snarled, held up a massive fist, the knuckles thick with scar tissue. "Beat the shit

out of every one of them, FBI too. They don' fuck with me. The las' time they put me in jail, I tol' them it was the las' time. No more! They come after me out at the ranch one time, but my brother was there with me. Them guys're still tryin' to remember what hit 'em. They really don' want to though. We hurt 'em pretty bad." He laughed, then was quiet, saying no more.

Ronnie arrived, ushered you in, nervously shuffled some papers on his desk. He advised Marvin to hold out for more money. He was a token landman for Damson Oil, valuable because he was a member of the tribe, a former councilman, obviously not stupid. Marvin could count on him for advice, knowing he'd be around to answer if things went bad and Marvin was made to feel foolish.

"The Flatheads got four-fifty," he confirmed. "I got to recommend against signin' for less." He smiled shyly at you and shrugged.

Marvin spun on his heels and was gone. "Tell your people," were the words left in his wake.

"Let me ask you something, Ronnie," you said. Did you know Damson is our partner in this deal?"

He looked a little shaken, but replied, "I live here. These guys ask me, I got to tell them the truth."

It was early yet, barely three o'clock, and you had nothing in particular to do. The sign marked "Heart Butte" caught your eye as you neared the eastern edge of town. You turned off there, heading south. This was totally new territory, an unknown stretch of good road toward a place you've never been but often

read about in tribal histories of years past, the home of the southern branch of Picunni Blackfeet, or Blackfoot as they were called then, the traditional defenders of the tribe's south flank where most of its enemies were, and the outskirts of the reservation today, an encampment of full-bloods, notably hostile and reclusive.

The road was well-paved, Federal government money behind it, and the Caddy flew, fairly soaring over its roller coaster path past the train depot and the Pencil Factory, up to the crest of a ridge, then steeply down the bank of the Two Medicine Canyon, across a concrete bridge over the shallow, emerald river, and up the other side. You came out on a plateau, glacier-laced mountains on the right and the tumbling, twisting canyon weaving its way into the distance on the left.

Directly ahead was the most beautiful scenery imaginable: the mouth of Badger Creek flowing from the mountains where they curved sharply to the east, lined with trees of every shape and hue, cutting through foothills of deep green grass and Ponderosa pine on its way to the plains. There was a series of glacial pools, small bodies of water carved out by glaciers during the Ice Age and still collecting water twelve millennia later, that dotted the meadows in which grasses and brush in shades of green, grey, lavender, and purple layered the slope as it rose to peaks striated with prehistoric ice in the distance.

Lone trees and small clumps of pines were very dark images against the lighter shades of vegetation in the meadows, but elsewhere higher on the hillside in depressions where the water flowed toward the ponds, they stood together in thick

clusters of deep green surrounded by the silvery shimmer of birch and aspen. Maybe Matisse on a very good day could do it justice in summarizing the sheer, breathtaking beauty of the place. When later you heard Blackfeet refer to the cathedral of their spiritual origins, this is what you thought of. The landscape forever after was fixed in your memory.

You came to the creek, crossed it, swinging hard to the right up the opposite bank. As you crested the rise, you saw them: three men clad only in breechcloth, riding hard on horseback, long black braided hair flying in the wind. They looked after the car as you swept past and on down the road.

You were running along the foot of the mountains now, one of which was Heart Butte, which looked from this angle like a poster for the head of a gorilla, King Kong maybe but bigger, for which the town was named. You could feel it up ahead, an unseen presence but somehow known before it came into sight.

Thompson's store came up on the right, the Industrie building farther down and opposite, where you turned left onto the first of three paved, pitted streets that made up the town. Heart Butte was a very old, tiny town square, an oval actually, a block or so in length each way, and two semi-circles farther off in the field to the south and east of government housing mingled with old cabins from the earliest reservation days, looking like paintings of pre-reservation Indian encampments, but with wooden homes instead of tipis. You covered every bit of the town's pavement within a few minutes, stopped by the old red schoolhouse, which was abandoned for the summer, stopped in

the courtyard at the center of town, and wondered where to begin.

Off in a field, a woman was standing alone, apparently doing nothing more than staring at the horizon. You saw no one else outside. The town might have been deserted. You were parked in front of the school bus garage, next to the octagonal-shaped council house built of big logs, across from the Eagle Shields senior citizen center, and there was nowhere in the courtyard or anywhere else a soul to be seen. Just one old woman, alone in the distance, silhouetted against the sky.

You eased out onto the highway, swept around the big curve at the south end of town, turned onto the outer street, parked, and approached the solitary figure deferentially. Her back was to you when you emerged from the car, saying, "Hello...excuse me...hah! Hello there."

She never moved, stood stock-still until you neared her and began to circle around to face her from a respectful five feet away. Then, she slowly began to turn away from you, keeping her back to you with tiny, measured steps. You both circled twice in this way, never so much as catching a glimpse of her face, except little snatches of her stoic profile seen from a severe angle. While she turned and you circled, you said to her a quiet patter: "I'm looking for Clifford Eaglespeaker. Does he stay here? Could you show me where? It's no hassle, no trouble, just his signature, can you hear me?"

It was beginning to look as though this curious prairie dance might go on indefinitely when a voice surprised you. Another woman, dressed at K-Mart and appearing absurdly

suburban, came up saying, "The Eaglespeakers stay way over there, where them big dogs are. One of 'em's chained. You want to watch him close. Is this about Linnie?"

"Oil and gas," you told her. "I don't know anything about Linnie." You thought about asking for specific directions, but the pastel, polyester woman seemed disinclined to say more and the dark woman deep in her shawl was still with her back to you both. You left, wishing you had been able to see her face, wondering what sort of eyes looked out from it.

The dogs were German Shepherds, maybe spawn of ravenous wolves, it seemed. They snarled ferociously, jumping up and down, the one unchained snapping at your face in the window and likely scratching the hell out of the paint with his long-nailed paws. You sat in the car, watching them until the unchained one lost interest and wandered away. You eased out of the driver's door and slowly edged around to the passenger's side, only to see the remaining animal leap to its feet with a savage snarl, rip the stake from the ground and charge, in full attack, dragging some fifteen feet of heavy gauge chain and a metal stake the size of a small tree.

You leaped on top of the Caddy's roof and cowered fearfully before the leaping beast, whose gnashing teeth seemed perfectly capable of biting a stray arm or leg in half. An eternity passed in a moment. Finally, from the dark and shuttered house, Clifford Eaglespeaker stepped into the bright sunlight, blinking and showing on his face more amusement than concern.

He called off the dog, but the animal merely circled at a short distance, snarling and pacing, looking askance at you

perched atop the car. Eaglespeaker offered no further restraint, so the conversation took place while you sat on the roof. The Blackfeet was docile, compared to his brother at Starr School, even apologetic about refusing to sign.

“It don’t mean nothin’ to me, these papers, but Marvin wouldn’t like it if I signed. You should talk to the Spottedeagles. Nobody tells them nothin’. You’ll find ‘em right up the road there, where it opens up into the valley.”

You circled back to the highway, south to the entrance to the courtyard; but turned right instead, up the dirt road ascending the side of Heart Butte, up past the cemetery and the little church, through the aspen groves and thickets of pines, over the first rise, down a few hundred yards into the valley, and stopped.

Beneath the bright blue sky were a series of smaller valleys, some no more than wide, verdant gullies, held within the great valley sloping down from the very top of the butte. Approximately at eye level, far up the road, was visible the shore of Mittens Lake, and above it high mountain meadows and steep rock walls. On the horizon against that deep blue sky, outlined by a billowing white cloud, were two riders on horseback holding their rifles above their heads, shaking them menacingly.

So, this is the dreaded Spottedeagle Valley, memory ticking off references in Blackfeet history to this very place, where the notorious clan of Spottedeagle held sway for nearly the past two hundred years, always then and still feared.

Before the reservation, the Blackfeet lands extended from present-day Edmonton, Alberta Province to somewhere north of Yellowstone Park, and from the Continental Divide as far onto

the plains as the Black Hills of South Dakota. There, they clashed with the great, numerous Sioux tribes; with the Crow and Shoshoni tribes to the south; the Flathead and other Salishan tribes to the west; and the Gros Ventre, Assiniboine and Cree to the Northeast. The Blackfeet had no allies; they fought everyone who encroached on their lands, were feared by all, and yet, at the apex of the tribe's strength, the three main branches of the Blackfeet Nation, the Siksikia, Kainai, and Picunnie, numbered no more than three or four thousand people, few enough to make one wonder at their ferocity, to have held a territory more than twice the size of Montana, until Napi-kwan came and took it all away.

And now, yet another white man was here maybe to take away a little more. You pulled down the road to a branch that led to a small ranch, where a tall, lean, handsome Indian in a black baseball cap, plaid shirt, jeans and cowboy boots, was working on a beat-up blue pickup truck. Several fierce dogs ran about the yard, jumping at the heels of two teenage boys, dressed similarly to their father, and like him, looking sideways at the Cadillac as you pulled in.

"I'm looking for the Spottedeagles," you said, while still seated in the car.

The Indian looked at you with something like contempt, as if to say: who else you gonna find around here? Nobody else comes here. But he answered, "I'm a Spottedeagle. Who you lookin' for?"

You read the names from the list.

"What for?"

You explained.

"Yeah, most of them guys stay around here. You better see my dad. He owns the most. I ain't signin' unless he says it's okay."

"What was your name?" you asked him

"Jess," the Blackfeet replied.

"Sorry, Jess," you told him, thumbing through the list, "haven't got you on these papers. Maybe next time."

"Yeah, you do!" he answered, shoving a long arm through the window, poking hard against the list on your lap where the name, Clifford Spottedeagle, was typed. Another jab, higher up beneath the name, Francis Spottedeagle, Sr. He withdrew his hand, the strong, dark forefinger last to exit, leaving on the list two neat, quarter-moon shaped tears next to the names he had indicated.

"Where's your dad's place?"

Clifford gestured with his chin, nodding down the path where it left his yard and cut through a shallow stream.

"Close the gate behind you," he said in parting.

After the stream was a thicket of scrub brush, then, a wide white gate between stretches of barbed-wire fence, beyond which the trail dropped away to the right. The moment you unlatched the gate, returned to the car, drove through, stopped, returned to the gate, closed it, latched it, got back in the car and drove on; before any of that took place, the moment you unlatched it, you heard the dogs coming, howling through the trees.

There are dogs and then there are dogs; and these that ran alongside the car as you jumped inside and threw it into gear were no worse than the rest you'd dealt with today, just more of them, howling, snarling, jumping at the window, but no worse than the others.

But then, there are dogs quite unlike the others and one of them was waiting when you reached the gray-log ranch house. It was small, close to the ground, legs spread wide apart, head low, salivating, snarling, squared away on the porch like a wolverine, appearing impossibly ferocious.

A little man in a wide-brimmed cowboy hat came up behind the beast and hit him hard across the back with a cane, then kicked him squarely in the belly clear off the porch. "He won't hurt you," he said, with his head cocked to the side and a wide smile on his face.

He was barely five feet tall, if that, hard featured, vaguely whiskered, wearing an attractive calico cowboy shirt, light patterned with black pearl snaps, a leather vest, blue jeans and boots.

The papers were no problem. He knew all about them, far more in his way than you did. Asked the right questions, listened carefully and looked hard at you when you answered, wanted to know where the pipeline was planned, where it would be placed, saying, "I own other allotments, you know. Just to the west of this one is mine. The one they give me when I was a child, newborn. My number is A-1144, same as that allotment.

"You see," he said, holding the heirship list, "I got the only A number on here. That's because I was here when they cut up

the land. Every member of the tribe, men, women and even little babies, got an equal piece, half a section for their own. The rest of them guys inherited their shares, just like I did from my mother on this one. But I got my own allotment, too. Them DeRoches won't sign this one, you tell your people they can come across my land, instead. I'll sign it."

"How 'bout this one," you asked him, "will you sign?"

"What company is it?" Francis, Sr. asked, suddenly innocent and shy.

When you told him, he tilted his head far to one side so the brim of his hat cast a shadow that cut his face in half, saying, "Well, now, you see, the last one of you guys that come along, he lied to me. Big guy like you, in a' old red truck, papers just like these, promised me I'd get five hunnerd if I signed. I did, and I never got nothin'."

Unsure what to say in response, you had to pause, but had a thought. You guessed and were right. "Was it for a road?"

Francis admitted that it was.

"See," you said, "we were going to build a road in to a well site. Wanted to drill an offset to the Morninggun, but the Tribe wouldn't permit it. Said they were going to drill their own well. These right-of-way payments are for damages. Since we couldn't drill the well, we didn't need a road, so there weren't any damages. That's why we didn't pay the money.

"Tell you what. I'll write down what you've got coming on this piece of paper, with my name and phone number on it, and leave it with you. Nothing's for sure, you know. If any of these other guys won't sign, we can't run the pipe and you won't get

anything. But I'll guarantee you, if the pipe goes in, you'll get your money. It gets paid into your account at the Office, you know."

"Yeah, in trust of the BIA. I got lots of land here, all in trust. Funny thing is, I don't belong here, shouldn't be here. My gran'dad was a Spaniard, Castillian. I shouldn't even be here."

He said it in all seriousness, looked at you with a wide smile, took the signature sheets and signed all five copies with a flourish. "Give me Eugene's, too. I'm his legal guardian. I sign for his shares." He signed them, as well.

"Junior stays up there," he said, indicating a brown and yellow house on the hill above them. "You got to watch him. He's my son, but he's a bad one. Never know what he might do."

There were no dogs around. Apparently, none were needed. Francis, Jr. opened the door before you knocked, asked what you wanted. Junior was big, stout, handsome were it not for the hard, mean look on his face. You expected eyes full of hatred, but they were placid, almost expressionless. He didn't hate you, not yet.

"Marvin DeRoche told me you wouldn't sign, but I've got to ask you anyhow."

"Did my father sign?" he asked and scowled when he heard the answer. "What makes you think I won't sign."

"Marvin is against it. He said none of you guys will sign if he doesn't."

"That right? It's up to him what I do?" He took the papers without reading them and signed.

You tried to make small talk after getting the papers back, but Junior cut it short. "We're done," he said, and closed the door in the oilman's face.

The sun was low behind the mountains when you hit the highway again at the bottom of the dirt road. Sixty some miles northeast, beneath the crimson and coral clouds set in the slate gray sky where it was turning dark, was Cut Bank, some dinner, and a warm bed.

You took the fork to the right when you reached it just north of Heart Butte, heading past a cluster of old houses that dispersed into ever greater isolation as you drove further from town. Eventually, you came along the lush banks of Little Badger Creek, way out on the high plains, and a series of ancient tipi rings, small circles of stones that once held down the rims of buffalo-hide tents, appeared in a field on the left, duly noted by an Historic Marker. Up ahead, on the opposite side, just before the road connected with Highway 287 and on north to Highway 2, was another marker. You stopped, got out, and read it in the fading light.

It said, in clear white letters on dark green metal: "On this site was the original Blackfeet Agency, which stood here until it burned to the ground in 1899. During its first year of operation, in the winter of 1877-78, government rations failed to arrive at the Agency until late spring. More than six hundred Blackfeet starved to death that winter. They are buried on the hill directly to the south, which still today among the Blackfeet people is called 'Ghost Ridge.'"



The night was deep, starlit, still when you reached Cut Bank. A faint odor of gas hung in the air, drifting in from the north field. The Winner's Circle was rocking. Bars do well here; 28 of them in operation, all solvent, near as you can tell, in a town of less than 4,000 people. Down Main, past the darkened shops, through the one traffic light to the east side of town. That large house of gray slate tiles, red roofed, a nicely landscaped yard with lots of shrubbery and many large trees even in the dark stood out among its more modest, less attended neighbors. You pulled up along the side street and parked. Cowboy boots and tired legs walk you through the door.

"These fucking Indians don't even know their own names," was what you heard Tommie Hughes say as you entered.

"Really, really, really," Pat was saying, "oh, very much so! Isn't that so, Tommie? This inbreeding has just ruined our Indians."

You came to a halt where you first had entered the room, unwilling to proceed any further into the conversation, listening, saying not even hello.

"Really, very much so. The incest is terrible. Some of these families are breeding monsters: fathers with daughters, sons and mothers, the offspring is indecent, horrible! You've seen them, Tommie. Isn't that so?"

Young, wild-eyed Ron, his wild red hair an explosion on his head, impishly looking from face to face from where he sat, bent forward in his seat and said, "You know the definition of confusion?" Pause. "Father's Day in Browning!"

No one laughed, no one objected. They weighed the truth of what was said without comment. Tommie glanced at his Uncle Pat, then back at some papers he was shuffling.

"It's a terrible problem. Oh, very much so. The mentality is very low. And the death rate is phenomenal. I'm fifty-one and not one Indian I went to school with is still alive. Isn't that right, Tommie?"

He paused for breath, which in Pat's case meant several quick drags on his ever-present cigarette, and Tommie, his long hair tied back in a ponytail, shirt untucked, stocking-footed, needing a drink, laconically mumbled, "Uh-huh."

"Except," Pat resumed, only to break into a terrible fit of coughing, "except John Juneau, and he's four-fifths white. Well, they all are. Really. There aren't a dozen full-blood Blackfeet left on the reservation. Oh, this reservation system has just ruined our Indians. Really, it has and yet, none of them could survive without it. Very much so. They just don't have the mentality to survive in the white world."

Pat sat back in his chair, tilting away from his typewriter. His slick black hair, backlit by his desk lamp, shone halo-like above his head. From his high forehead, an olive-skinned brow gave way to a long, large nose, Roman in profile, although his heritage was German, or Alsatian, maybe, and Black Swede. In the soft light framing his face, he looked like a Sioux chief of the type seen in old-time frontier photos, or perhaps, a Mexican or an Arab. Anything, in fact, but a native son of Cut Bank, Montana.

“The first white baby born west of the Missouri,” he said to you when you first met. His face then had seemed harsh, hard-edged, flashing occasional signs of lunacy. His conversation skipped erratically from the rational to the maniacal and back. He could pass for virtually any age past puberty, could have been seemingly anything, it seemed, anything that is except heterosexual. Pat Minette, most certainly, was gay.

He may not have been the first white baby born hereabouts, nor the queen of Montana’s heart, but being prosperously gay in Cut Bank was more amazing.

This is a town whose citizens are tough, thick and merciless. They attack the wounded, devour the dead. They wear short sleeve shirts in any temperature above zero, a light jacket when it gets really cold. They live on meat and potatoes and whiskey, and they’d rather suffer fools than anybody who thinks for himself. Oil field trash, as they proudly call themselves, comprises more than half the town’s population. They are hardworking, hard drinking, hard-hearted, well paid, and stuck in the middle of nowhere. Women are scarce, unmarried women even rarer, and most of them are of a type referred to by the locals as “diesels” for their bulky physiques, their tendency to be smelly, and a bit slow on the uptake.

You recall an article in a national magazine entitled, “Ten Towns Without Pity,” which examined America’s urban morass and gleaned from it such notable jungles as Newark, New Jersey; Cicero, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; Riverside, California; Biloxi, Mississippi (because of that airbase); and, among those

ugly, desolate centers of humanity, decaying and hopeless cities, was one tiny, rural exception, and it was Cut Bank, Montana.

A place of such unbridled masculinity has deeply ingrained in its soul an instinctive distaste for queers, although such proclivities might be the obvious solution to a deprivation of females. But, no! Cut Bank breeds real men, guys like Ernie Good, Pat's boyhood friend, who's among the crew gathered with you, listening to the boss, who's gay and possibly psychopathic. And, you have to wonder what Ernie is thinking, what he knows, and whether he ever says.

"You wouldn't have known him back then," Pat is saying, "to look at him now. Oh, he was an athlete, you know. One of the top basketball players at State. Tall, skinny, really, he was. Such a handsome kid. It was at the All-Star game, wasn't it, Ernie, where you hurt your leg?"

On cue, balding, obese Ernie hikes up a polyester pants leg and shows one and all a deep red and jagged scar across the faint purple flesh of his knee. "Went through a glass door at the end of the gym," he recalls, "shooting a lay-up, what?"

"Oh, but you were pretty," Pat gushes, "Really, Ernie, you were."

And Ernie later would take you aside, saying gruffly, intimately, "This stuff people say about Pat, I've known him since we was this high and he never done nothin' with me, what?" And that was that, as far as he was concerned.

Pat was pontificating on the Indian problem, about which he considered himself an expert, particularly as it pertained to the Blackfeet. The problems of Indians, he had discovered, were

simple and universal: inbreeding, disintegrated family structure, liquor, lack of motivation, and Indian jealousy. One almost felt they should be writ large, bolded, italicized, so profound and omnipresent were they in his mind. The sum of his half-century's observation of the Blackfeet Nation was distilled in those expressions. Having lived and worked with them for most of his life, Pat could barely stand the sight of them anymore.

It was a breathtaking introduction to the mood of this crew you had joined, an attitude of ridicule that you associated with old-timers in border towns, with straight people steeped in racism, with ignorant rednecks, but not the sort of thinking you expected from your peers, longhairs like Ron and Tommie, whose look at one time very recently was emblematic of peace, love, and equanimity.

"And how did you do today?" Pat asked you, finally, the first time you had been directly acknowledged since you arrived. All ears, if not eyes, in the room were focused on your reply. Tommie still was grouching over his paperwork and Tom Southard, who was something of a recent addition to the crew was listening with his back to the group, when the new guy from Colorado answered.

You briefly summarized your day on the res and Pat listened, responding with exasperation, "Oh, I knew we were going to have problems with this one. Very much so. I just knew it." He was looking at the floor, up now and pacing, when he turned to face you, saying, "Don't worry, though. We'll get them, we always do, isn't that right, Tommie? But you got the Spottedeagles?" he said, "which ones?"

"Francis, Sr., Junior, Clifford, calls himself Jess, and the old man signed for Eugene as his legal guardian. His number's U-15896. He's just a kid."

"Oh, very much so," Pat said. "That would make him about fifteen. The Superintendent will sign for him, but it's alright to have the grandfather, as well. And you got Junior, too? Let me see."

"He was the easiest. Hardly said a word. Then I got Jess on the way out. Nothing to it, once the old man signed."

"I can't believe it," Pat said, staring at the papers.

"Tom got all of 'em last time," Tommie interjected matter-of-factly.

"No, no, no, Tommie. Not Junior he didn't, remember?"

To which Southard added, over his shoulder from where he was speaking on the phone, "We were working on him when they decided to can the well. Then, it didn't matter."

Ron said, "Did Jess mention Neva is his wife? She was probably there."

"No shit? He didn't say a thing. Had me inside when he signed. She even offered me a piece of pie. Wait a minute. How could she come in on the same allotment?"

"She's his cousin, or something." Ron laughed, "Maybe even his sister."

It was nearly midnight, Ernie long gone to his home on the West side, Ron and Tommie gone drinking, Pat asleep and snoring loudly with his dog, Lucky, slobbering noisily on the bed at his feet, when Southard came into your bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed where you were reading, leaning forward

with a hairy hand placed uncomfortably close to your upper thigh.

"You want to be very careful with Junior," he said. "He's a very dangerous person. If you conned him into signing, you could be in a lot of trouble. The whole family is capable of anything. Murder is a tradition in Heart Butte. Nobody goes there. Even the Blackfeet in Browning are scared to go out there.

"The Spottedeagles are the worst of them all. They kill their own. That's what the Indians say about them. Junior and his bunch are feuding with Francis, Sr. and the rest of the family over the way the ranch got divided. He's very dangerous. No one can control him. You should ask Ernie about the deputy who went out there to arrest him. Ask him what happened."

"Okay, I will." You paused, sized him up a moment, then asked, "When you told me you had hepatitis, you never said how you got it. Was it drugs?"

Southard laughed softly, shook his head "no" and answered smoothly, "I was a medical technician in San Bernadino. Changing an I.V. on an infected patient. Blood spurted out on my leg. I was wearing cutoffs, had a bad scratch on my leg. Some of his blood got on it, but I never thought about it until I got sick."

He left then, after saying goodnight softly and fluttering the lids of his large, protruding brown eyes; and you thought about what Ron had told you earlier, that Pat had picked up Southard on the streets somewhere in California, badly strung out on drugs and bordering on insanity, brought him back to work with the crew and straightened him out.

“He worked with us for about six months before he came around. He was really a wreck at first. But he came around and then he got a message that his father died. Went home to New Jersey for the funeral and, when he came back, he was with a girl named Minette, whom he’d met and married during the two weeks he was gone. Minette! Can you believe it?” Ron cackled maniacally. “That gave Pat Minette something to think about.”

The morning came early in Cut Bank. By six o’clock the sun was coming up and, shortly thereafter, so was the crew. Coffee was brewed, showers taken, fog in the collective brainpan gradually lifted. Pat soon was on the phone with Bob Kay in Denver, talking nervously, seeming particularly frazzled; Southard was departing for Victor to spend a long weekend with Minette, the female one, that is; Tommie and Ron were gulping aspirin with their vitamins and coffee; and once-pretty Ernie was just now rolling up in his big, white Chrysler New Yorker.

Pat looked up as you entered the kitchen, said something into the receiver and handed you the phone. “Tell Bob about the situation with Marvin DeRoche.”

You did. Bob was amiable. “What do you think we should do?” he asked.

“Let me offer him four, as a gesture of good faith I’ll tell him, even though the Flathead situation was a whole different deal. I’m pretty sure he’ll go for it. It doesn’t make much sense to be screwing around for a few thousand dollars.”

“Okay,” Bob said, “I’ll authorize it. Go ahead, get it done. How are you enjoying Cut Bank?”

“Very different, isn’t it though.”

Pat was thrilled, greatly relieved by Bob's response. He sat back in a tall wicker chair, coffee cup at his side, cigarette between his lips, arms around the dachshund, Lucky, who was sitting up in his lap, scarred snout stuck in the air, sleek, seal-like skin shining a golden brown in the morning light, back arched against Pat's chest, while his master stroked his belly rhythmically, repeatedly sliding his hairy black hand against the underside of the dog's huge, glistening erection.

"It's very important that you get that bunch now," he told you, a blissful look on his face. "Don't let it get any more complicated."

Ernie had shuffled in on his gimpy leg, sat down heavily in another of the wicker chairs, which sagged dramatically under his weight. "Mornin', boys," he said. "I'll take a cup of that coffee, if you got it." He smiled big and toothless at each of us, one at a time. "Went off and left my teeth in the cup, what? Pick 'em up on the way out of town."

Then to you, he said, "So, you went out to Heart Butte. What's a white boy like you doin' in a place like that?" He laughed in a breathy, wheezy way, twisting in his chair, looking from face to face, nervous like a little boy in a crowd.

"I liked it. It was beautiful."

"Yeah, and you meet such nice folks, too. Don't you get to like it too much, boy. I'll tell you; some people go out there, they never come back, what?"

"Oh, Ernie," Pat purred at him, "you just love to tell those stories. Don't you scare this boy away. He's going to be our Heart Butte emissary, aren't you? But, first, I want you to finish

up that allotment, get Marvin and the rest. Then you can go to Thompson Falls and clear up another allotment. Just one to sign on that.

“Meet us in Whitefish tonight. It’s lovely, oh, very much so. You can stay at the trailer with me. Tom and Minette will drive up from Victor to join us for dinner.

“You get this work done and you’ll deserve a good meal. This Indian work will burn you out, isn’t that so, Tommie? Really, really, really, you have to have a break. Oh, very much so.”

You cornered Ernie before he left for Great Falls, asked him about the Spottedeagles. Ernie swayed from one leg to the other, looking about secretively, speaking softly when he answered. “Now, I don’t know this for a fact, what? Nobody does, or somethin’ might get done about it. But the story is, at least what everybody says happened, it’s like this.”

He paused emphatically, looking sideways at you, speaking in little more than a hoarse whisper: “There was this new guy down in Conrad, came from Minneapolis, or somewhere. Went to work for the sheriff’s office down in Pondera County. Kinda pushy, people didn’t care for him much. He got it into his head one day to go arrest Junior for assault, something that happened sometime back. People told him to leave it alone, but he was having none of it.

“He went out there in his squad car, asked around for Junior, found his way to the house, and nobody heard from him for days. Finally, the Sheriff asked the Tribal Police in Browning to look into it, which they wasn’t crazy about doin’, but they did. They asked around and looked around and finally found what

was left of his body in a tree near Big Badger, the whole damn skeleton hung upside down with not a lotta meat left on it. Nothin' ever come of it. Nobody saw a thing.

"But the story always was that Junior tied him up to the back of an old Buick and dragged him up and down the highway 'til he'd scraped him clean to the bones, what? The birds and weasels ate his insides and that was that."

"What happened to the guy's car?"

"His car, what? They traced it to Browning. It was stripped a' course. Three guys was living in it down one a them streets in Low Rent. The police decided officially that a grizzly bear must a done it. That's what they said."

You were ready to go, stopped by a canister in the kitchen and helped yourself to a large handful of buffalo jerky. "Isn't it delicious?" Pat asked. "Tommie and I got it last week at Flathead Lake. A place called 'M&S Meats and Sausage.' The fellow's a Swede from Minnesota, smokes it himself. I just love it."

You skipped the usual donuts from Albertson's, had instead spicy, lightly smoked dry meat for breakfast, and chewed on it thoughtfully while you drove back to Browning.

Marvin was out at the ranch with his dad, who was drying out again. The kids at the little white house in Low Rent told you so without much prodding; and, again, they were gesturing that you should come in, pointing at the corner where the old woman stays; and finally, with a big piece of jerky in hand, you entered.

She was there in the corner. It was dark and virtually bare in the room, and you had trouble for a moment seeing in the blear, but she was there, if only a shape in the rags.

You moved to her slowly, holding out the jerky, and saw her eyes focus briefly like a snake spotting a mouse. "Dry meat!" the kids shouted at her, and she took it gracefully, barely rising from prone, and wrapped her black gums around it where she held it to her mouth; and this time when she drooled, a long viscous salivation hanging from her lips, draped across her chin, it was colored with the stain of buffalo meat.

Marvin was indeed out at the ranch, where you found him after the long drive toward Starr School, down a twisting, pitted dirt path crossing pastureland, through scrub brush, sage and jack pine, in and out of coulees, dropping slowly to the bottomland of a tributary of Cut Bank Creek.

He and his dad sat on the wide porch of the white frame ranch house, and, when you finally crossed the creek near the stand of tall cottonwoods and entered the yard, only Marvin arose.

"Did you get me four-fifty? Or are you wastin' my time?"

"You know, Marvin, I looked into that Flathead situation and it's a whole different deal. It was a utility company putting in a water main for some folks who live over there. They did pay more for the right-of-way, but anybody who uses the water they pipe in is going to get billed for it every month.

"Our deal with you is for a skinny little pipe. We'll run a trencher through there, lay in the pipe, and back-fill it as we go. Soon as the grass grows back, you won't even know it's there.

Couldn't find it if you wanted to, and you've got to remember that we're paying royalties for all the gas that goes through the pipe.

"The Morningguns, Homeguns, those guys are getting checks every month for their share of the well, and that's only for the condensate. We've been flaring all the gas so far, but now we've got a way to produce it and take it to market. You guys don't come in on the well, but there's about four hundred Blackfeet that do, and I'll guarantee you they want to see this pipe go through.

"Besides, this is just the first well. You know we're drilling more of them and you guys own land all around there. If a well comes in someday on one of your allotments, you're going to want it produced, too. I'll bet you won't be arguing about a few bucks then."

Marvin visibly bristled and you immediately shifted gears.

"The thing is, Marvin, we don't want to go against you on this. We want you to okay it. You've taken a stand and we sure don't want to make you look bad. But I need your help here and I hope you'll hear me out.

"The Office only requires fifty-one percent of the shares to okay a right-of-way across these allotments. It's different than the leases, not the Blackfeet way. And the Spottedeagles already signed. They own more than sixty percent, so we could get it approved without you."

Marvin began to swell up, looking very angry, but, behind those fierce eyes, his mind was working fast, considering.

"I spoke to my people about your position in all this and I told them that you're important up here, that we should work with you. So, we're upping our offer to four bucks a rod, as a sign of good faith.

"It's not as much as you wanted, but, this way, you got your people more than they would have gotten if you hadn't stood up for them. What do you think? Can you live with it?"

He grumbled and groused, but it was a done deal. Finally, they went out of the sun into the house, Marvin first, then you, and finally, old Clifford DeRoche. They sat near a window that overlooked the creek, at a little wooden table covered by long faded paint and the fresh residue of this morning's breakfast, and Marvin signed, and Clifford signed, and when you reached over and picked up the papers, you had to peel them from the spilled syrup.

"Will your brother sign?" you asked.

"Tell 'im I did. He stays at 711 Low Rent."

Back to the highway, on to Starr School, signed Lloyd Littleplume, got Ivan Redhorn at Boarding School, where he found the young track coach hung over, sheepish, seemingly relieved that he could sign with Marvin's approval; then, on to Glacier Homes near Browning, where one of Francis Spottedeagle's sisters lived with her husband.

In the bright sunlight, standing on the porch, it looked dark inside. But you knocked hard on the door and, after a moment, someone called, "Who that?"

"Man from Rainbow."

"Uhhh," came the voice from inside, and shortly the door was opened.

Neva was visiting, as luck would have it, and both women giggled softly when you said to her, "Hello again. I was just heading out to see you at Heart Butte, hoping for another piece of pie."

"Well, I saved you the drive," she said, waiting her turn while her sister signed.

"Thanks," he replied, "but I have to go see Clifford Eaglespeaker, too."

"Oh!" both women said in unison, "poor Clifford." And the first sister, Mathilda Runningwolf, who was big, homely, and dignified, added, "It's such a shame about Linnie."

The three of you, each in your own direction, silently looked around the house from where you sat, at the orange and brown shag carpeting and the pieces of furniture of the type one finds in motels, the cheaply framed family photographs and the splashes of chintz. The house, already several years old, was nearly spotless, and the three of you sat motionless and silent while the question in your mind hung like a ghost in the room, and, finally, you asked it.

"What happened?"

"Oh," said Mathilda, while Neva stared at the floor, "that ol' Clifford was drinkin' and his wife fought with him somethin' awful. She kicked him plumb outta the house and he was real mad, jumped in that big ol' truck a his and squealed his tires clean across the lawn to the street. Little Linnie, poor baby, only

five years old, was playin' on her bike and Clifford backed right over her, killed her dead, right there in the yard.

"He kept right on goin', tore outta there real fast; maybe he din't even know he done it, he was so drunk."

Neva added quietly, "They found him sittin' on the hill above the church, cryin' somethin' awful. He ain't been the same, but he sure don't drink no more."

You drove up and down the mysterious streets of Low Rent, trying to fathom the numbering system, which seemed to have no rhyme or reason. The sequence went: 795, 787, 773, 761, 755, 1887, 1875, having changed in the middle of the block for no apparent reason. Every block, every street presented the same baffle, and you became dizzy, disoriented, began imagining that the houses somehow were rearranging themselves each time you passed.

Finally, you pulled up to a group of teenage boys, asking with as much composure as you could muster, "How do you tell which numbers are where?" To which they smiled, shrugged, and one said, "You just hafta know."

Somehow, in the numerical whirl, tucked neatly between 933 and 987, was a brown frame duplex with 711 painted on the wall of the enclosure around the porch. In the yard was a hoist composed of conically stacked log poles, supporting the engine of an old Pontiac GTO, beneath which was the shadow of a very large person, likely Alvin DeRoche.

The person who emerged from under the Pontiac was the largest human being you had ever seen up close, a giant of the type you always before had believed to exist only in the realm of

mythology. This person truly was larger than life, and you could have accepted such a concept easily enough had not the behemoth been standing before you, looming like a mountain blotting out the sky.

His head was huge, framed by long, tangled hair growing wildly about the scowling, scarred face; his shoulders were impossibly broad, his arms thick and roped with sinewy muscle; a barrel chest swelled with each breath he took, lifting his sizeable belly away from the characteristically slim Blackfeet hips, and his wide-spread legs were long and rippling with power.

“What?” he spewed at you, and it was all you could do to keep from jumping and running at the sound of his voice and the ominous figure he presented. But you told the Blackfeet why you’d come, and Alvin simply asked whether Marvin had already signed, then took the papers in hand and signed them without comment.

He handed them back to you, gestured at the Pontiac and added, “Got to get this sumbitch runnin’ if it kills me,” and disappeared underneath the car.

You thought about him all the way to Heart Butte, thankful that he had been so docile and disinterested, wondering what one would do if these people were looking for trouble, wanted to vent their very reasonable hostilities on the nearest representative of the Caucasian race, these cute and fragile little white men who ride around in big white Cadillacs and always are smiling and shoving papers in their face, haranguing them with one deal after another, none of which ever turn out to mean

shit to most of the Blackfeet, whose lives continue to spin through an eternal cycle of poverty and despair.

Fortunately, that hadn't been the case. Thus far, most of them have been in their own manner hospitable, not that one should become too comfortable with them. That could be like lying down with lions. Still, they've been a lot more accommodating than you had expected.

You were feeling good. The drive to Heart Butte passed easily, full of scenes of beauty and thoughts of the successful completion of his task. Bob would be pleased. It went as you had suggested, nothing left to wrap it up but humble Clifford Eaglespeaker; then, on to the other side of the mountains, the likelihood of quickly completing another allotment with the signature of the single owner of that piece, who had many thousands of dollars of incentive to sign, and you'd have it whipped. Dinner this evening in Whitefish at a restaurant of some repute, a tomorrow full of pretty girls and the other amenities the resort offered, and back to work on Monday, refreshed and ready to go.

But Clifford was having none of it. He was a different guy from the person you'd talked to yesterday, all puffed up, ornery, cagey, looking for trouble. He balked at signing, saying the money wasn't enough, he was being cheated, and on and on.

The Blackfeet Way that Earl Old Person cited to you was what you were respecting, even though you knew these rights-of-way only needed 51% of the owners to agree and that was long past done. "Patience," you reminded yourself while Clifford continued to rant.

It was the full tilt boogie of bullshit and began to appear that this routine was to go on indefinitely, but finally you stepped up close to his massive chest, looked him in the eye and said, "You're wrong to be screwing around with us at this stage of the game, Clifford. Everybody else agreed and you own the least shares of anybody. Besides, from what I hear, you've got enough troubles with your family already."

He looked at you long and hard, the air went out of him, he shook his huge head emphatically as if he was trying to erase the memory, shrugged once, then again, and then he signed.



You left Heart Butte with relief, flooded by the mood of the place and the nerve of your aggression. How wondrous is the view and shaky the ground at the edge of the abyss here in Blackfeet country?

Early in the 17th century, the Blackfeet dwelled in the Red River drainage of present-day Ontario and Manitoba provinces. They were loosely allied clans of hunting and gathering peoples, traveling afoot, moving with the game and the harvest seasons for berries and wild rice.

Surrounding them on all sides were various of the Cree tribes, with whom the Blackfeet constantly warred. They were noted for their fierce nature and exceptionally large stature, so, despite their small numbers, the Blackfeet had little trouble holding their ground from incursions by the Cree nation.

But the day came when technology intruded. British traders established posts at James Bay to the north and the Cree in that area received the largesse of English goods, among them

muskets, balls and powder, which they in turn began to trade with their brethren in all directions. They lost little time in turning the weaponry on the Blackfeet, who were defenseless in the face of the “thunder sticks.” One imagines the awesome impression firearms first make on primitive man. The Cree drove the Blackfeet like rabbits before them from the Canadian woodlands far out onto the bleak, foreboding Northern Plains.

Gradually the Blackfeet adapted to the vast, harsh landscape, using their camp dogs as pack animals on the long treks in search of game. Immense herds of buffalo became the staple food source. Elaborate methods of hunting the beasts evolved, requiring feats of daring and cunning, herding them over cliffs, the “buffalo jumps” where they fell to their deaths in huge piles, were butchered for food, clothing, shelter, and the Blackfeet became a Plains culture after a time.

Their new homelands brought them into conflict with earlier occupants, notably the Snake Nation of Shoshonean tribes, who had held sway in great numbers long before the Blackfeet arrived. The early battles between them were largely mock encounters where a few people on either side hid behind shields and threw rocks at each other, only occasionally loosing a precious arrow at the opponent and rarer still hurling a lance. Weapons were hand-fashioned and meant for hunting. Survival on the plains was yet too dear that much firepower ever was wasted on battle.

Even the slightest injury was cause for retreat and anything like a serious wound concluded the battle. Those rare instances where someone was killed on the battlefield were so

unique that they became the stuff of tribal legend, related as the years passed with ever greater elaboration until the event assumed mythic proportions.

But soon enough colonial adventurers from across the ocean were to intrude, culturally cross-pollinating the aboriginal Americans. Just as British guns were finally finding their way into Blackfeet hands, nearly simultaneously from far to the south came a wondrous animal, the “big dog” of the Spaniards, which the Snakes acquired from their Comanche brethren on the southern plains.

That the Blackfeet prevailed over the Snakes and drove them eventually south and west of the mountains is largely incidental; what is significant about the meeting of these two European influences on life among the Indians is that they heralded the beginning of the renaissance of Plains Indian culture.

Armed with rifles, astride fast ponies in a land of plentiful game, the Blackfeet and other Plains tribes became truly magnificent forces, able to master the harsh environment and surmount their survival needs sufficiently so that an elaborate and vibrant culture was able to evolve.

The time of the classic warrior of the plains was at hand. For the better part of five or six generations, the Blackfeet gave rein to his every whim and knew no master but his spirit.

What you wouldn't give to achieve such mastery. Yours is a wandering search for a time and place you fit. Rather than the proud and confident warrior, much more like the Blackfeet in the time they first were driven out to the Plains, looking back over

your shoulder at all that was, the places left behind, and looking forward too to this new place, trying to imagine how you might survive.

You crossed the Two Medicine River twice more on the way west, once again between Heart Butte and Browning and then once more at the western edge of the Reservation where Highway 2 spans the narrow canyon before entering the township of East Glacier near the Two Medicine Lakes of Glacier National Park.

Many years past, one story has it, an albino buffalo reputedly of magical power was seen by some Blackfeet by the shore of the upper lake and again sometime later grazing below the waterfall, along the banks of the swift, clear stream and then again later still drinking from the lower lake. He conferred great power on the Blackfeet and this place became to them sacred land.

That iconic creature hasn't been seen around these parts in some time. The albinos of Glacier Park today are bipedal, of nearly translucent skin tone, their hairy legs marbled with knobby blue veins and spotted with angry red blotches where the underbrush tugged at them as they hiked along the trail, natty in safari shirts and matching khaki walking shorts, willing in spirit but clumsy in their hiking boots and woefully maladapted to the environment. What these creatures confer on the Blackfeet is something less than sacred.

East Glacier Park, as the local postmistress insists it be specifically addressed in any correspondence delivered by her troops, is a tiny tourist trap of a town, clustered about the Lodge

at the south-east boundary of the Park. There is the post office, a general store, two service stations, a few motels, a few more restaurants, and the ever-present bars that ring the Reservation.

Nominally the town is situated on land that belongs to the Blackfeet, but as is the case with most all the more prosperous portions of the Reservation, it is largely owned by whites. The local school serves primarily Indian children and is administered by whites. Nearly all the services in town are owned and operated by whites.

The Lodge itself, a magnificent structure of huge timbers and awesome scale, the township's *raison d'être* and one of several such scattered throughout the Park that are owned and operated by Greyhound Lines, Inc., the bus people, is staffed by fresh-faced college kids on summer vacation, not an Indian among them nor among the guests that flock here from all around the world and not next door. Except for the proliferation of bars nearby, the broken-down pickup trucks, shabby homes, the packs of mangy dogs and smattering of trash blowing in the wind, you'd never guess this is Reservation land up to the border of the Park.

You filled the tank at the Conoco station and walked across the street to the store, where a curious mixture of people was gathered, buying supplies, cigarettes and beer, sandwiches and film, or just lingering. The senior citizens among them all were tourists, come in the family sedan or with the tour bus, travel bags stuffed with food and pharmaceuticals, their faces lined, weathered and genuinely genial. The young adults, like you, were road warriors passing through, purchasing necessities of

the highway, quickly disappearing. There were college kids, locals now that the summer was in swing, congregating after their shift at the Lodge, dropping into town for the action. The only Indians were a few young girls, giggling as they sifted through the magazines and cosmetics.

Money was changing hands and the woman behind the counter was smiling with each ring of the register. It's a very short season, followed by a long, hard winter. This one was just getting underway. The merchants tuck away the cash purposefully. Her eyes vacantly met yours for just a moment when you paid for the gas but her toothy smile automatically shined on you as it did on each of the others who fattened her till. This was her temple, *her* sacred place where survival for at least another year was assured and the certainty that her station would remain above those welfare-dependent Indians hereabouts raised her moment by moment and dollar by dollar to a faintly beatific state.

Standing outside for a long moment on the boardwalk in front of the block of shops lining the highway, wondering what sort of meetings take place among the East Glacier merchants, all the white carpetbaggers and the few Blackfeet who've emulated them, hung a shingle on a rented building and spent summer after summer kowtowing to the scant stream of curious visitors who come calling at this national park, most of them not knowing it is the site of sacred land.

What sort of Chamber of Commerce have the merchants formed? What degree of collusion has evolved to bridge the gap between the hard-bitten whites of Northern Montana who take

to this stuff like bears to berries and the few dispirited Indians whose homeland has sunk so far under the weight of progress that selling trinkets to tourists has supplanted their warrior heritage? Trying to fathom a symbiosis between them, standing there on Main Street dead in the middle of nowhere watching commerce work its ways, you can only shake your head and move on.

Back in the Caddy, on the road, between the southern boundary of the Park and the adjacent northern rim of the Great Bear Wilderness, headed for Whitefish, crossing eventually over the Continental Divide and down into the valley of the Flathead River, a brilliant emerald stripe that flowed westward from the mountains into a Northwestern ecology, where stately tamaracks were interspersed with evergreens; and, there was a similarly distinct change in the mood of the people you passed on the road and that of your own mood, as well. Here the climate was temperate, none of the harshness of the other side was evidenced and it showed in the faces of the people and seeped into your body like warmth.

The stop in Thompson Falls produced the expected result, yet another allotment wrapped up with the unhesitant signature of the single allottee, an old man who had many tens of thousands of dollars to gain, and you rolled into Whitefish at sunset, arriving at Pat's little trailer house with a satisfied smile, expecting praise to be had and a weekend of hard-earned pleasure to follow.

But, for the second time today, your confident assumption of what was to come was quickly shattered. Pat was on the

phone when you entered, talking in hysterical tones to Tom Southard, looking extremely stressed and glancing at you with a startled sort of anger at the intrusion.

“Don’t you tell me that, Tom, no, no, no! I know how you kids are. Don’t you try to put this on me. I can handle you. Oh, very much so. You know how big my balls are. You’ve felt them! You know you have. I won’t take this from you. As far as I’m concerned, you’re through.” He slammed the phone into the receiver.

You were sitting against the far wall, wishing to be anywhere but here, while Pat paced the room with growing agitation. Suddenly, he turned on you, spitting venomous words.

“And you! I know what you’re up to, don’t think I don’t. You kids are all alike and I’m not taking it anymore. You’re padding your expenses, thinking I don’t notice. Oh, but I do, you see. I know what’s going on.”

“What? You’re crazy, Pat, I...”

“Oh, crazy, am I? I’ll show you who’s crazy. As far as I’m concerned, you can pack your bags and take yourself right back to Denver. Tell Bob Kay I don’t need your kind up here. I’ve had it with all you kids. You’re fired! Now, just get out of here. Really, really, really, I don’t need any of you.”

Back to the Caddy out front, heat still coming off the engine from the long drive just finished, now back behind the wheel again, slowly cruising around the little town, finally down to a motel on the lake, booking a room for the night, thinking about how best to deal with this situation. Pat is in way over his

head, stressed from the responsibility he's trying to carry, reaching the breaking point.

He's an oilman in an oil patch, been at it for a while. But this is another level of activity that's developing, not the stripper wells in the old fields that he knows so well, fields like the Kevin-Sunburst and the Reagan that have been pumping oil from shallow sands for mom-and-pop companies since the first decade of the 20th century. This is of a different magnitude entirely.

This play that's coming to the Res is big. Rainbow Resources is the lead, but the partners are giants like Superior, Burlington Northern, even the big guns like Exxon and Arco are said to be snooping around. This is not for the faint of heart. Pretty soon, everybody's gonna be here, the competition will be fierce. Pat is far too erratic to handle it, his crew too inept, and he knows it, but here he is.

Maybe he needs the money, maybe he just doesn't know how to say no. Depression era kids can be afraid to. That work may not come around again, especially in a place like this, where opportunities of any sort are scarce in good times and nonexistent in bad times. More than likely, though, it's the loneliness, the affection he misses, the love he needs, this lifestyle he's created looking in all the wrong places. These kids he's had it with, or maybe would like to have it with.

The Viking Motel was a pretty nice place in a beautiful spot on the shore of Whitefish Lake, just below the western boundary of Glacier Park and northwest of the Flathead Range. The lake is a natural body of water, no dam holding it in place, and for some reason that makes it all the more appealing. The town itself is

small, tourist based, skiing in winter and the Park visitors all summer. Being between seasons, it was easy to grab a room and some peace and quiet. Pretty remote like everywhere in Montana yet, compared to life on the other side of the mountains, it is sophistication itself. You were able to score a decent bottle of wine at the state liquor store and drink it at a picnic table while the sun set over the lake, thinking deep thoughts about this chaos that's visited on you and how to finesse it.

You realized now what Bob Kay knew when he sent you here, that this crew he had been relying on was inadequate and the person heading it up was unstable. It had mattered less when the stakes were lower, a little wildcat play in a remote place, unlikely to produce anything but dust and a write-off. When the first well they drilled hit pay dirt, began pumping nearly 200 barrels of oil a day together with a tremendous amount of natural gas, the complexion of the project and Bob's needs changed dramatically.

It was not lost on you that the crew treated you with a mixture of deference and suspicion, seeing you no doubt as a spy sent from Denver to size them up. Until now, you hadn't realized they were correct. You were, in fact, looking them over, Bob was looking you over, and the prospect was demanding change.

Having witnessed this wobbly side of Pat manifest in full, you saw very clearly where Bob's concern was coming from. There was too much at stake now to let this continue until the pressure overwhelms him. It had to change. How it plays out remains to be seen, but you understood what was intended.

Finally roused from your thoughts by the depth of silence along the sleek, still lake, you realize somehow suddenly it's pitch black, the night has come on stealthily as has the bottom of the bottle. Here and there on the opposite shore, a light dances its reflection across the water; otherwise, it is very dark and quiet.

Sitting there, the sense occurs that this is a place out of time, from the past and the future simultaneously, this adventure a plunge into a deep pool of mood, a dreamscape resistant to and without any discernable thought that can advance a resolution. It is an indefinable space of uncertain parameters, like the Blackfeet concept of time itself, an amorphous, ambiguous force ever evolving, changing, in the act of becoming, made to fit circumstances and belief systems on an as-needed basis. In the distance was a voice, or a bird perhaps, calling, but for whom and to where? You stumbled back to your room.

When it rose over the southern part of the mountains that contained the lake, the sun reflected from the icy patches of snow that remained all summer on the slopes of the ski area north of town, reflected from there on the surface of the lake and bounced bright ribbons of color through a slight opening in the curtains of the room, waking you with its brightness. The world was new with first thoughts of the morning and the events of yesterday were less ominous.

You lay there in comfort, recalling some of what occurred to you last night. You had come here for adventure, sure, and it already was that. But be honest, you came because you needed a job, a new set of habits, a change of scene.

All things being equal, you'd like to think you'd be happy to chug along on your own, doing what you'd been doing, overlook the nonsense as much as you could and just soak up the beauty. That and collect a few dollars for your efforts.

It wasn't your nature, though, to let things be less than they might be if you just tried a little harder. Carefree as you like to imagine yourself, you always felt a nagging obligation to people who gave you a chance. Trust is hard-earned. You didn't want to blow it.

Dragging yourself from bed, reaching first for a cigarette and then for the telephone, you call Cut Bank, reach Ron, give him a run through of Pat's tirade, and ask him what he thought.

"It's happened before," Ron said. "Pat loses his grip."

"Do you think it's for real?"

"Maybe not. There's no telling."

"What do you think I should do?"

"You may as well head over here. You can get your stuff together in case he really wants you to clear out. Maybe it will blow over by the time you get here."

And so it did. You lingered with eyes and senses and thoughts on every nuance of the landscape as it passed, riding back through the Flathead Valley, up the pass to the Divide and down the other side along the border of the Park, through East Glacier and suddenly out onto the high plains of the Reservation.

You wondered as you drove whether you would pass this way again or was this the beginning of a long ride home to Colorado. It wasn't likely, no, but anything is possible. Maybe you've misread Bob's plan for you. Probably not.

In Browning, at the east end of town, at what passes locally for a strip mall, a low building of aluminum and brick with big glass windows and a few enthusiastic businesses hard by the highway, you stopped at Greco's Bakery for coffee and a sweet, pasty roll, and inhaled the starkly unique atmosphere of the little Indian town in the middle of the most remote piece of the United States.

It was 900 miles to a city of any size from here, west to Seattle, east to Minneapolis or south to Salt Lake and Denver, a long way from anywhere, surrounded by Indians and half-breeds, and yet there was something homey and settling in the breath of the room. Funny how quickly certain settings become part of your place in the local scene. This was one.

Shirley Jones, who wasn't the famous one but enjoyed some celebrity locally by virtue of being so named, and because she and her husband had inherited one of the largest, finest ranches on the res and were therefore among the wealthiest of Browning's citizens, sauntered up to you, very Western-like, and said, "What do you think those leases at the next sale will bring?"

And before you could answer by shrugging your shoulders, she added, "I'm asking because the ranch falls right in the middle of 'em and the lease on it is up this year." And with that she faded into the crowd with a pot of coffee, courteously offering her fellow customers a refill before returning to her seat.

You didn't mention you might not have anything to do with those matters anymore, that you might be gone tomorrow; you

didn't because you hadn't said a word to her except hello and goodbye, but also because you never truly believed it was going to happen. Not just because you now expected to move it a different direction, to reshape the way it worked and who ran it, but rather that it simply didn't feel that way to you and feelings tell all at these times when nothing is certain, and the hand is just beginning to play out.

And, when you reached Cut Bank and the big gray house, sitting there stoically amid the thickening grass and the shade of several mighty pines, retold the story to Ron and Tommie, and climbed the stairs to begin packing your bags, thinking about whether to take a room at the Glacier, or look for a house to rent, or whether you should in fact head back to Colorado and see Bob Kay in person, the phone rang and Pat was apologizing, pleading exhaustion, assuring you that you should stay and resume the very excellent work you were doing first thing Monday morning.

"We need to talk when you get back, Pat," you said to him, and he agreed without hesitation, as though he knew it was coming. You sensed relief in his voice when he said it.

Ron was relieved, too, seemingly genuine in his concern, and Tommie was overly friendly, even suggesting to Ron that you would be welcome to join them in the bowels of the basement where they retired most evenings to paint a while before heading out into the night, regularly in Tommie's case and more often than he'd prefer in Ron's, to drink themselves into oblivion. Tonight, that sounded good. You would be glad to

join them and try your hand at painting a portrait of your astonishment and apology.

The rising sun sliced brightly across the variegated landscape of the Reservation, deepening the shadows where the coulees cut through the flat stretches of pasture grass and wheat field, highlighting the newly emerging tips of the hard-red wheat, silhouetting the occasional trees that rose in the fields, and causing the long shafts of buffalo grass to appear translucent.

It was morning so suddenly in this part of America: a faint reddish hint of light in the dark, spacious sky to the east; within moments a brilliant glow; then, the quick peek of sun on the horizon and immediately thereafter the sharp, piercing light. As you headed west, the sun glinted off the glaciers that were tucked everywhere in that mountain range and when there was some moisture present, as there often was, the mountain front was a ribbon of rainbows.

Things already had changed a lot the past few weeks. Something big was on the very near horizon. Pat when he returned to town was easily persuaded.

"You're overworked, taking on way too much of the responsibility, all this management piece when the best use of your time, where your talents lie, is in the title work, organizing that critical piece, which will be more important than ever going forward. Riding herd on this project is only going to become much more insane, and very soon.

"It makes sense for me to take the lead and you to get back to what you do best, without all this constant pressure," you told him, and he hardly flinched.

"We'll have to talk it over with Bob Kay," he said.

"I'll take care of it," you said. "Don't worry. It'll be okay."

"The crew may not like it. They don't know you well enough to trust you. No reason why they should."

"They'll be fine, once they think it over. They can work with us or they can make their own way. There's going to be plenty of work to go around, way more than we can handle unless we make changes. I'm going to bring some people up from Denver, and line up a few new contracts, too. When they think about it, I think they'll see it's for the best. First of all, we're going to get a big raise in pay. Then we're gonna make sure we earn it."

They moved the office out of Pat's place and into a building downtown. Hired a secretary to organize the files, keep the books, make sure the crew met the schedule. Jake and Jimmy came up from Boulder, looking to make a few bucks. You disabused the old crew of its long, dearly held practice of keeping up a very modest pace to stretch out the work as long as possible.

"We've got a lot more work from Rainbow, and we've signed up most of the other companies that bought leases at the auction this month. First thought is, whoa! Aren't they all in competition? Yep, they are, but our job is to get the owners of those lands to sign, and we were able to make the case that all these companies are pretty much chasing the same owners.

“So, we have filed all the signature sheets by enrollment number, and color coded them by the different companies. Now we’re gonna go like hell for the next couple of years getting all those pieces of paper signed. So, when you go see Woody Kipp, for instance, or Jerry Prairiechickenshoe, or whoever, he’ll be signing leases with a half dozen different companies for all those allotments he comes in on. And getting money for all of them. Same with all those other folks. We got our work cut out for us and there’s plenty for everybody to do. To get this started right, we’re raising everybody’s pay by half. If we really produce, we’ll raise it again. If not, you’ll have to find something else to do. Understood?”



The frigid cast of winter hereabouts was well known. The temperature plunged so dramatically, to 40° below zero for days and weeks on end, that everyone came to picture Montana as a vast, frozen place. And it was often that.

But the summer sun heats the air to 100° and more a few times nearly every July and August, and one would never guess in the midst of such heat that this is the Montana of your imagination were it not for the moment when you lie back in the grass on this sweltering day or that and feel the very cool earth beneath you. The ground never warms completely, never frees itself from the chill of the north, and the sense of the cold ground against one’s back even on the hottest day of the year is chilling in its implication more so than its touch.

You had occasion to mull over the sensation so often that summer, spent so much of the free time on your back in the

grass watching the lazy clouds drift through the sky, the wind-whipped shapes fascinating in their variety and the steady progression they made, west to east, fatter to thinner, the fastness of a shape dissolving into elongated, wispy threads of its former self, all within the space of the visible sky and the gaze of a boy on his back in the grass with the heat of the sun and the coolness of winters past vying for his attention.

You were like that, you and the woman you'd left behind, the way you were together, drifting, growing thinner and more ethereal, relating ever more tangentially and less directly. She had sent presents on your birthday, had been there usually when you called, and you exchanged a few letters. Otherwise, there had been no contact since the first time you went back to visit months ago.

Sometimes it was lonely, true. But you had mixed feelings about the way it might work out. Since Deva had returned to her mother in California shortly after you came north, there was far less of the sense of a family back in Colorado. It seemed likely to you the relationship was wending toward used-to-be from still-in-play. But one never knows. You had talked one or twice about maybe she'd like to see Montana. Now, finally, she was coming for a visit at the end of the week.

That particular week, which was to bring you together once again, began as most others on the Res, hustling one deal or another. But it was to take a dramatic turn in a totally unanticipated direction.

You and Southard were working in East Glacier, staying that night at a little motel by the Lodge, and knocking them dead.

Southard's ego drove him relentlessly to match your output; they were hourly eclipsing the old crew's agreed upon five or six signatures a day.

That Tuesday, you signed up 32 leases and Tom brought back 29. You were wrapping up allotments like cats after mice. He might have had even more, but...You might have had more but you got tied up at the Runningwolf's, waiting without success for Cletus. And the thought of that time spent at the house recalled immediately the girl, June, who was Cletus and Darla's sister and was stunningly beautiful. She made the waiting quite bearable and made you glad to go back for the brother. She'd suggested tonight.

You dined that evening at the Lodge and got to talking with a local cowboy who was putting away the whiskey at a thundering pace. "Leased the ranch today for \$30 an acre," he said, and smiled big. "There's 3,600 of 'em."

The money was fairly falling from his pockets, a hell of a roll, and the two of you shared many a tale over many a drink. He was a big guy with plenty to say and thanks to the money was feeling pretty full of himself. Got around to telling you about how solid you have to be to run a ranch like he does. "Nothin' knocks me down," he said. "I know how to handle myself."

You heard plenty more about what a remarkable fellow he'd identified himself to be and had more drinks by far than you'd planned on with dinner because he insisted and he was buying. It was quite a while before you begged off and stumbled into the night to the Runningwolf's.

Before you reached the door, you took a moment to clear your head and a few deep breaths that made you kind of sober even if you were just pretending to be. Once you had your act together, you knocked.

June answered the door, said, "Come in." Unlike this afternoon, gone were the aunts and cousins and children and babies and others of unknown relation. She was the only one home, Cletus was expected, and you were welcome to wait; and to watch her move through the room like a deer, dark and graceful, long-legged and shapely, wearing only a cotton shirt that barely covered her ass and showed her breasts beneath the thin fabric to be unbound and beautiful.

She was coyly but not too subtly showing herself, making certain you noticed she was unlike the typical Blackfeet girls who are stocky in the trunk, nearly hipless and short of leg. She was like Wyeth's Pocahontas, an Indian of Anglo proportions, and you really liked how all this was looking.

An hour passed. She was seated across the small room, her beautiful, long brown legs stretched out beneath the kitchen table where she worked at a jigsaw puzzle, purposely fitting the pieces, hundreds of them, sighing contentedly as a piece of the sky slipped into place, oohing occasionally when a large slice of the picture came together, shifting in the seat, causing the hem of the shirt to rise even nearer her hips. It was powerfully attractive to see.

You moved next to her, kneeled beside the chair, resting an arm near the puzzle, finally letting your other hand reach for the long, bare stretch of her thigh and trailing your fingers softly

along the length of it, leaned nearer her, kissing her cheek until after a long moment she said, "Don't, please."

You stopped, rose up and moved away from her while she stared straight ahead. That was that. No more to it. No bad feelings. You left a moment later without saying goodbye.

The erection subsided pretty quickly as you drove away. You were just a little disappointed but clear as you thought about it that it was better things went no further, that keeping a firm, respectful distance up here was the wiser course of action, and you needed to remember that, drunk or not. The absence of a little romance for long weeks on end can make you do foolish things.

All that and thirst, too, occurred to you as the Lodge came into view. Maybe stop in for a night cap?

There in the lobby, slumped over the grand sofa in a drunken stupor, was the cowboy from earlier this evening. Beneath the big timbers that supported the enormous ceiling, before the vistas of the spacious oil paintings that comprise the Great Northern Railway collection of artwork and ring the lobby like an endless pearl necklace of the West, sailed the cowboy's fine Silver Belly Resistol, tossed around the room like a Frisbee by drunken college boys.

"Give me the hat," you demanded, and they did so with surprisingly little resistance, leaving so quickly you immediately thought of the cowboy's bankroll. But it was there, tucked in his pocket, looking little diminished from the way it appeared at dinner and that was more than a few drinks ago, judging from the smell of him and his harsh, dry snore.

There was no point in trying to wake him. He was dead to the world for now and due to suffer terribly when he revives. You removed the money from his pocket, folded it in your hand, and moved to the registration desk.

"I want to get this man a room for the night," you told the clerk, "and I need a heavy envelope, some papers for your safe." You paid for the room with a fifty; unseen by the clerk, you tucked the rest in the envelope, sealed it and wrote the cowboy's name across the seal.

"Lock this up and give me a receipt in his name for one manila envelope of private papers with his name across the back. I might need some help getting him to the room. You got one nearby?"

He was a big son of a bitch. You and the clerk drug him by the arms down the hall to the room and piled him face down on the bed. Before the two of you left him, you slipped the key to the safe deposit box far down the cowboy's boot where he was sure to feel it in the morning and left the room key on the dresser. The clerk saw only the latter.

You and he walked back to the lobby together and you had a couple of drinks at the bar before leaving. On the way out, the clerk called you. "Don't forget your hat," he said and handed over the Resistol. Shit! You didn't want to explain, get a pass key, and stagger down to the room again. You wanted to get home to bed, so you placed the hat on your head, decent fit, too, and resolved to get it back to its owner after a good night's sleep. Maybe you would still have it 40 years later.

The fog in your head was a bit thick and a bit terrible when you rose on the following morning. Little pains shot through your body, preceding bigger pains that reached your brainpan as you fully gained consciousness. Your head and neck were throbbing mightily and your whole being was parched by the vodka. It was all you could do to stumble to the shower, stand there in misery as the hot water poured over you, the soap washed away some of the stench of last night, and ever so slowly revived you.

“Why do you do it?” Southard asked with thinly disguised disgust. “Aren’t you getting a little old to be spending your nights like that?”

“June Runningwolf got me kinda wound up. Maybe I overdid the drinking a little,” you said. Something about the guy brought out the worst in you.

Southard looked at you sideways, his hangdog face sallow in the dim light of the room, his eyes quickly hooded again, and said nothing more.

You stopped at the Lodge, confirmed the cowboy had departed with the envelope from the safe, so all was well with that episode, needing only to get his hat returned to him and share a laugh about it. When you called him a couple of days later, expecting thanks, a few laughs, maybe an invite to get together for drinks or dinner and return the hat, he was just short of hostile, embarrassed maybe or for whatever reason disinclined to pursue it any further.

“How can I get your hat back to you?” you asked him.

“Keep the damn thing,” he said.

But that was later. For now, you had some breakfast, left the Lodge and went by the Runningwolf's again, hoping to catch the elusive Cletus at home. But June answered the door, speaking from the shadows behind the reflection of the bright sun off the white wooden walls. "He ain't here. You shouldn't be either. He'll find you. Go away and don't come back!"

"What the hell's the problem, June?"

She stepped into the light, showing her battered face, black eyes and split lips. "Just go away," she said, "and don't be bothering me no more." And she slammed the door in your face.

There certainly is nothing uncommon about battered faces on the Res, but seeing her like that, her beautiful face bloodied and blackened, left such a hollow feeling in your gut. The juxtaposition from last night to now, the innocence to the violence, was shocking to see. You decided to hell with East Glacier and drove back to Cut Bank in silence.

Two days later, early in the morning, you were on the phone with Linda in Denver. She was to fly in on Saturday to Great Falls for a long weekend together.

"Wow, really glad you're coming. I can't wait to show you the Reservation. It's like nothing you've ever seen. So beautiful out there, it's incredible. Yeah, the people are really special, too. The poverty is sort of overwhelming at times, but the people, a lot of them, are so proud and dignified. You'll see what I mean. We'll have a great time."

You said your goodbyes, and you had barely crossed the office to the water cooler before the phone rang. The office had

two, a general number they gave to the public, and the internal one the crew used. It was the private one.

Pat answered. It was Ron calling from Browning, asking if you had left for the Res yet. "No," Pat said, "he's right here."

"Tell him to stay there. Don't go anywhere until I get back. I've got some bad news for him."

You were hard pressed to imagine the problem, so much so that only a vague anxiety persisted while all of you waited for Ron. Tom Southard appeared, buzzard like in his interest and anticipation. "I better wait around to see what this is about," he said and looked at you with something like amusement.

Ron pulled up some 45 minutes later, bolting from his old Volkswagen and rushing inside. He looked at each of them gathered there, then at you. "I just saw Shirley at Greco's. She says the word is all over the Res, everybody's saying that Old Lady Runningwolf is going to charge you with raping June."

"What?"

"Yeah, the girl is pretty beat up. She told her ma the man from Rainbow did it."

It was completely quiet for a moment, you stunned, the rest of them silent with thought, until Pat said, "If you didn't do it, you've got nothing to worry about. If you did, I know a good lawyer." He seemed to chuckle to himself as he said it.

In the fountain of color that rose with the previous night's moisture into the air, caught the morning sun and bounced it from the glaciers back onto the Plains, your mood was black. Fear grabbed you spasmodically, gripping you for moments at a time before reason wrested you free. A complete farce, this rape

charge, but a serious threat. You were at the mercy of the tribal courts if the old lady pressed the matter and what sort of justice could you expect from them?

She was unlikely to file charges in Cut Bank, and even if she did, nothing had happened that you were involved in and no evidence could show otherwise. The police, the courts would be guided by the evidence, or the lack of it.

Somebody had beaten the hell out of June Runningwolf and needed to be brought to justice. But it wasn't you. Probably her boyfriend, why you didn't know. It seems unlikely whoever did it is going to be charged. A cover up. So that was a nuisance, but not something that worried you.

But to be barred from the reservation, or just to have to stay away on the off chance the tribal police might be waiting to arrest you, was a serious problem. How could you do your work? How could you clear your name? Be welcomed? How could you ask for trust up there about anything ever again?

The fact there was no merit to the charges might not matter in tribal court. You didn't know, but the word of an outsider wasn't likely to carry much weight with the judge. So, what to do?

Maybe it will blow over. Maybe it will be disproven. Maybe Junie will own up to the truth. Maybe the next calamity in a steady stream of them on the Res will capture people's attention and this will be forgotten. Maybe it's just noise. Best to be cool and see what develops. Then you can try to straighten it out.

Linda arrived Saturday and nothing more had been heard about it, so you thought the risk of showing her Heart Butte was

worth it. No tribal cops there, no administrative presence from the Office in Browning anywhere nearby. They are not part of that community.

She was taken with the place, the scenery, the magic of Little Badger, and especially the old schoolhouse, next door to the original superintendent's house, of the school or the entire res, you weren't certain. Next to the school was a shabby single-story dormitory, where a few newly minted teachers recruited in one of those "forgive your student loans" deals were housed if they stuck around. They were said to keep to themselves out of fear, spend all their off hours drinking Lewis & Clark vodka, which is *not* the good stuff, and making their exit plans. You were told faculty turnover was 100% per semester or sooner.

"Your kinda place?" you said to her, only half joking. She looked at the kids as you drove past little clusters of them, her eyes wandering, remembering maybe the words of her father, who told her: "You want to make a difference? Go teach in the ghetto. That's where they need help."

On the way to Cut Bank, after you stopped at Ghost Ridge, you told her about June Runningwolf, what her mother was saying about you, and why the rest of the reservation at least for now was off limits. She may not have been pleased about the kissing part, but she wasn't surprised, and she made all the right noises of concern. At one point, though, she said, "You'd been drinking, right? A lot?" and betrayed a brief moment when she wondered if it was possible you'd done such a thing.

That she could consider it, even for an instant, was astonishing and disheartening. It passed quickly and never

surfaced again, but you knew then and realized even years later how much it colored your relationship, at least for you. She was used to your philandering, which you'd never denied nor hidden, but you were surprised by her distrust. It was inconceivable to you that someone can claim to love you and still wonder if you might be capable of severely beating a woman, regardless of whether you'd been drinking or not.

The guys in the crew didn't know you at all, so whatever suspicions they might be harboring really didn't matter. Southard even knew you'd been drinking pretty hard that night, so if it spooked her, why not him? If she could consider it possible, as well as she knew you, it was indicative of how fragile trust can be. It also was a clear warning about the danger of being careless in a place like this.

The entire thing did blow over, just vanished as an issue, and very quickly. When you finally caught up with Cletus, he said, "Sorry, she's schizie, just nuts. Her boyfriend saw you leave the house. Freaked out when he saw the way she was dressed. Ho! Beat the shit out of her. Huh. She didn't want Ma to know, so she said you done it. We figured it out when we saw his hands were all busted up. Hard to pretend after that."

Work got back to normal pretty quickly. The crew treated you with new deference, feeling guilty for suspecting you maybe. In Southard's case, maybe disappointed. A guy can hope for the worst, huh?

With such a strong list of clients lined up, you hesitated when a woman from Sohio called to ask if you could handle their

leases. You were curious why she was so late in lining up the work?

"We offered the job to someone else, but I haven't been impressed so far and now I'm hearing things that concern me. Maybe you know him? His name's Tom Southard."

"Let me get back to you," you said.

"Tom," you said when he got back to the office that evening, "I hear you landed the Sohio account. Good on you, man. I thought you were working with us this time round, but maybe you were thinking of doing that one on the side? That ain't gonna happen, of course, so let's consider this your last day here and then you can get started on your new gig. Hope you do real well over there. Thanks."

You let the crew know Tom had decided to work on his own, and you told Sohio "no" when she called again. "He seems to think it's his account," you said. "Don't need the headache, sorry." She didn't use him anyhow, but he raised hell and they finally settled with him for a small sum, the way you heard it.

The crew tightened up its act. Jake and Jimmy came up from Colorado to join you, arriving late summer, ready to work. It was good to have some people you could rely on in place, and they helped set a pace that dragged the slower ones like Ron to a slightly better output. Pat was ferociously cranking out the title work, the sheets literally flying out of his typewriter. He was proving to be a great asset, doing something he was good at, could relax and enjoy.

Mixed in with the trust lands were a lot of fractional interests in fee simple. You had begun to concentrate on them because

they were mostly owned by white people and required some delicate negotiations, particularly when they found out the Indians were getting better lease terms than they were. There were enough of them being leased that Pat was kept very busy running title.

"How come all these white people come in on Blackfeet lands?" you asked him. "They're checker-boarded all over the Res."

"Sometimes white people were heirs," he said. "It's rare that any Blackfeet leaves a will. Almost all of them die intestate and the court rules on heirship. Very much so. But sometimes, there's a will and somebody who isn't enrolled inherits. They issue a fee simple title for that interest because it can't be held in trust by the BIA anymore unless you're a member of the tribe.

"But that's just a few of them. The rest of the answer is complicated. It used to be until about 20 years ago, you were enrolled in the tribe if you had at least 1/16th Blackfeet blood. So, if your great grandmother was a Blackfeet and everybody else in the family was something else, you still could be enrolled.

"Then, in the early Sixties, they changed the requirement to 1/4th blood, so one of your grandparents had to be Blackfeet. But when they made that change, they grandfathered in all the kids living on the Res at the time. So now you have enrolled Blackfeet who are less than 1/4th blood, so their kids can't be members of the tribe, at least legally. It's insane. Oh, very much so."

"Crazy," you said. "But that's still not all the fee lands, is it?"

“Not by a long shot,” Pat said. He looked out the window, nodded at Wilbur Werner, a local attorney, former judge, who was passing by. “And speak of the devil, there he is.” He laughed his maniacal laugh, said, “Don’t you dare repeat that around here. Any of this I’m going to tell you. But you need to know.”

He sighed, said, “Like I said, it’s complicated. Probably started with oil, whatever. The Blackfeet lands are valuable, for those big wheat farmers, for ranching, for water, minerals, all those resources. Local people just naturally wanted some for themselves. Really, really, really! Very much so.

“It wasn’t long after the reservation was allotted that some of the Blackfeet got to wondering why the BIA made all the decisions about *their* land. First the government put them on this land and said here’s how much there that’s yours. They said this is where you live now. And this is the piece you own. Own? said the Blackfeet? Yes, the government said, it’s yours. Except, we decide what you can do with it.

“Some of our local attorneys were consulted. Ha! They very patiently explained that the Bureau of Indian Affairs holds those lands in trust for you Blackfeet because you have been deemed to be *incompetent*. The attorneys were happy to tell them that, and to add that if you really didn’t think that was right, you could file in court for a Decree of Competency, which these lawyers were willing to help you do for a modest fee, whatever you could afford.”

He chuckled vaguely, shook his head, mumbled, not happy sounds.

“The Blackfeet didn’t really understand land ownership to begin with, and most of what they were told about this new life of theirs didn’t make much sense. Oh, very much so. But they did understand what was meant by incompetent and they didn’t care for it being said. Like them or not, they’re proud people.

“They were told, if you get a Decree of Competency, you can put your land in fee simple. Then you can do whatever you want with it, just like the white man. Really, really, really. What a shame.

“So, just like that, a bunch of Blackfeet sued for a Decree, got it, put their land in fee simple, all with the help of those lawyers who helped them get it done practically for nothing. Other Blackfeet saw it and did it themselves. And then the vultures came after them.

“It was just awful. Like a land rush. ‘Would you be interested in selling? No, well, do you need to borrow some money? Maybe a new truck, snow mobile, some furniture for the house. Oh, maybe that fine Appaloosa stallion coming up at the auction next week. Gonna be some fine horseflesh for sale.’”

“And foreclose on them when they can’t repay. Cold.”

“There was an even easier way, too. There’s not ten people up there that knew what property tax was, although they eventually learned when your land is in fee, the tax man comes calling. You get a notice in the mail that most of them couldn’t read, let alone understand. And, if you don’t pay? Tax lien. But they had already tossed that notice, probably used it to light the stove. End of story? Nope.

“Wilbur and his friends bought a lot of land up there with tax deeds. Hold ‘em for a year or two and if the owner doesn’t redeem them, pay the back taxes he owes and all the penalties, the land is yours.”

“So, all those parcels came very cheap?”

“Pennies on the dollar. Oh, very much so. Really, really, really.”

Border towns around Indian reservations everywhere you’ve been are much more similar than different, regardless of the place or the tribe. The white people who own the stores in town are very much the same. There is a tenuous balance between greed and disgust among them for the customers they serve, the money they take from them, the simple fact their livelihoods depend at least in some large part on Indians, whom they consider to be beneath contempt.

For the Indians who must buy goods from them, it is a tale of day and night. All day long, their pickups park in dingy lots outside the shabby stores and they shop for things they need. Groceries, of course, but things like clothes, too. A nice rayon cowboy shirt for him, one with pearl buttons, a calico dress for her with lots of nice ribbon. Maybe a nice hat, a scarf, even a new bridle or saddle if things are flush.

Then, too, there are the times when annuity payments come in, or the occasional oil & gas leases that put a fistful of dollars in hand. Every truck dealer in town is at their service. A brand-new Ranger XL. Why, hell yes, it can be yours. Want it with a club cab? A camper shell? An extra stout hitch to pull your horse trailer? You name it and it’s yours.

That's in daylight. At night, if you're an Indian and you know what's good for you, you better be long gone. Don't be caught in town after dark. The price is steeper than you want to pay. How much? Maybe some pain. Maybe even your life. How much is it worth?

You don't know which stories are truth and which are just local scuttlebutt. But you do know there are enough such stories that where there's smoke. Like that.

In Cut Bank there are tales of one sorry Blackfeet or another who got drunk in town and didn't leave. When the sun set, and the mood changed. Or maybe he got drunk in Browning and for some twisted reason drove the wicked stretch of road to town. Whatever the reason, there he was, drunk in town after dark. The cops had to arrest him.

Maybe he was shamed. Maybe times were tough and he'd had enough. Maybe there was some terrible worm of guilt or fear or illness twisting inside him, eating away. Maybe we'll never know. But when the dawn came and the deputy checked his cell, he was hanging from the rafter by the belt around his neck.

Sad to tell these tales, but Indians and alcohol, you know. It comes to no good and life moves on without him. His family collects his body from the morgue and hauls him back home. They are sad, of course, but maybe not surprised. Drunk in Cut Bank after dark is on the road to ruin.

His mother, old woman that she is, has seen a lot in her time. Sorrow is the cost of living when so many pass away. She touches his neck lovingly, the terrible bruise, the cold flesh. He

was a good boy at times, a bad boy at times, but in his entire time among his people no one ever saw him wear a belt.

Winter came. Un-fucking-believably cold. You are very far north here, farther by nearly two degrees of latitude than the northernmost tip of Maine and there is no ocean to moderate the weather. The wind and massive weather systems move unimpeded down the mountain front from the Arctic Circle. People who have lived both places told you Cut Bank is considerable colder than Alaska.

On Halloween, still a long way from actual winter, the temperature of the air dropped to 20 degrees below zero and stayed there or even lower at night, maybe zero or near it during the day. With the wind chill, you can suffer frostbite to unprotected skin in less than a minute.

Every vehicle has a wire with a plug on the end that connected either to the radiator or the oil pan, which is plugged in at night to the outlets in front of every parking place in every motel, or to large, hardy extension cords running from the house or office.

If you didn't plug it in, your car or truck wouldn't start in the morning. If you did, it would start right up, but you still had to jerk the steering wheel hard in one direction, then the other, to break the grease on the column free from its frozen state and get the juices flowing.

You also had to leave a faucet on in your home, preferable the one you used least, dripping just enough. If you (damn!) forgot after washing your hands, or whatever you used that faucet for, and shut it off, the water pipe would freeze instantly,

and a contractor had to come out with an arc welder to run a charge from the street to your house to get the water flowing again. The water main pipes are buried six feet deep, which is something to contemplate.

Unless you're a bear, you learn to function in that weather and carry on with your business. Life as they say goes on, and whiskey helps keep you warm.

It warmed up for a while, above zero anyhow and sometimes for an hour or two on an especially gracious day the sun would shine and the temperature creep up into the thirties. Above zero as a basis made above freezing damn near tropical. Like a holiday. Brief and great but no tan.

Just after Thanksgiving, a curious holiday made stranger by the current surroundings, it became really cold. There was a stretch of nearly six weeks when the *high* temperature was 10 or 12 degrees below zero. At night it would fall to 32, 38, even 40 below. You'd go to put the cat or dog out to relieve itself, get a little exercise, and the poor creature would desperately cling to the door frame, like, please, no, anything but that. And you knew just how it felt.

Travel in and out of the area was tough. You could take the train, the Empire Builder, across the Highline east to Chicago and west to the Coast; or you could fly out of Great Falls to hubs in different cities, and on from there. The Blackfeet are all over the country. These are nomadic people who don't "live" anywhere. They "stay" places. Ask directions and, if you get an answer, you'll be told, "He stays way over there." "She stays there sometimes." So, travel was extensive that year.

Getting to the train station at Shelby 25 miles east of Cut Bank was sometimes a very treacherous drive, but almost always passable because it's regularly plowed. East is downhill around here and Highway 2 in winter can be a skating rink. It was frustrating if you were catching the train after a tough drive because the first place it passed through going west was Cut Bank, but the station there long since was closed.

Shelby was also where you had to get to if you were flying, but then only to take a hard right turn onto I-15 and south 90 miles to the airport at Great Falls, the third or fourth largest city in the state with a population of maybe 80,000 on a good day.

Urban (sorta). Wow! Department stores, restaurants, bars, maybe even some hookers and other signs of civilization. The state itself was a big place, just slightly smaller than California in land area with a population of barely 800,000. There are counties where the number of people is less than one per square mile. A lot of dirt between light bulbs.

All that, and it was frozen solid for months at a time, so travel by car was a challenge. Getting to other modes of transport was a challenge, too, because it was all a ways away. But you did it, and it was mostly a lot of fun.

You chased around cities big and small, finding people with no address and even a guy who supposedly was wanted by the FBI. You visited people in jail, even a couple of guys on death row, one in Walla Walla and one in Salem. That guy in Oregon, Frank Redhorn, pestered you for years thereafter: "send me this, send me that, I need money, food, cigarettes, whatever." His hustle and your empathy kept colliding.

You never forgot the sound of those metal doors opening and closing as the guard walked you to a meeting room, really just another cell with a table and two chairs, which is where attorneys, priests, and people like you meet with the condemned. When it was just the two of you sitting there, Frank seemed kind of like a regular guy, and you talked pretty freely about all sorts of stuff, but all the while you kept thinking about what would happen if the guard never came back for you. However, after an hour, he did.

You were with your darling daughter Deva one December evening on the Hupa Reservation in a dark valley of the Coast Range in Northern California, or maybe in a trailer park nearby. When you returned from a meeting with some guy to where she waited in the car, you turned on the radio and heard the DJ talking about “the late, great John Lennon.” Some savage had shot him dead in New York City, outside the Dakota, no less.

The January thaw was short but glorious. How the starving appreciates a feast. Warmth in the winter is a gift of merciful gods. Just when you thought you couldn’t stand it anymore, or worse, when you began to think you could adapt, the weather gives you a glimmer of what can be, and you are so ready.

It got cold again, of course, but the tide had turned, the days very slightly got longer, hope recalibrated its eternal spring, and a change of the season was on the horizon. The far horizon, perhaps, and there were days on end working toward spring that tested your faith, but eventually you got there. It was a long, cold, first winter in Big Sky country.



Throughout it all business kept bopping along. The leases were being completed, the prospect map being formed, and by spring, the project clearly had reached a critical point in its development. You met with the crew to game it.

"There are about 50 leases left to complete, and about 100 people left to sign. They come in on different leases, but about half of them we just haven't gotten around to until now, so we need to get them done.

"Of the other 50, about 40 of them will clear up ten leases, and the last ten, this is what we need to think about, the last ten will complete about 40 leases. We get those taken care of and we'll be golden."

Jake was quick to look at those numbers. "There's three or four of these folks that come in on a lot of them. One guy comes in on almost all those 40. Really small interest in all of them."

"Still got to sign him. What's his name?"

"Daryl Rattler," Jake said. "Anybody ever heard of him?"

They asked a lot of people over the next several weeks and you got word from somebody that he was a Runningwolf, which made sense. They came in on most of them. He must have gotten some of the other interests from another way, a branch of his family you couldn't yet guess.

As time passed, in getting just the most rudimentary information about him, they wrapped up the ten leases with all those fractional interests they hadn't gotten around to until now, and they knocked off a few of the other leases that had seemed more complicated. When they looked at what was left, they had only seven people left to sign, but they affected 34 leases,

probably 10,000 acres, which made for a pretty sizable hole in the project. Their respective interests were so small that any of the individual leases, which were pretty big bucks per acre, would pay them only a couple of bucks each. On the other hand, times 34 is probably upwards of \$100 at least.

So, all of you went looking for them to see what could be done. Finding them wasn't easy. If you're the seven least known and locatable Blackfeet of 16,000 members of the Tribe, you are someone really scarce. Your particular focus was Daryl Rattler, né Runningwolf, né what else, you wonder? Finally, you learned of the woman who'd raised him, his grandmother maybe, who lived in Browning, and went to see her.

Old Mrs. Runningwolf lived in an even older log building by that strip of new homes near the hospital. The Blackfeet with their unshakeable wit called it Death Row Housing. Mrs. Runningwolf was home. You sat across from her, asked the whereabouts of her grandson, Daryl. Her answer was like a chant.

"Alla time, no money! Looka my clothes, justa rags. Oh, oh, nothin' ta' eat, dry meat an' beans s'all. Stove don' work, got no heat, snow come right throu' ta' roof. Thos' boys: raise 'em up, take good care, neva' come home, no mor', neva' come home. Got no time fo' old lady, no mor'. That Rattler, eva' since he was a boy, runs aroun' all ova', no mind, no care, no good, drive t'em fast cars, all ta' time drinkin' with t'em bums, don' come see me no mor'."

She sat in a beat-up rocker, hands folded in the calico lap of her dress, skin like old parchment, her face deeply creased, eyes heavy-lidded and glazed with a milky film of cataracts.

"You like Indians?" she said, reached down to a sack beside her, pulled from it a buckskin doll, a warrior in a fancy beaded costume, decorated shirt, pants, moccasins, with human hair tied in the traditional Blackfeet style, a long braid over each shoulder, another one down the back, and a plume upright and curved forward over the forehead like a sage grouse crown.

She handed it to you, and as you rubbed the beautiful soft leather, she made a noise, held her hands to either side of her mouth, and mimed chewing to show she'd tanned it with her teeth. "You like? Ten dolla'. Take 'im home."

You gave her \$10, which she tucked away, said, "Brave need squaw," reached into her sack and pulled out another doll, this one a woman with long hair and a buckskin dress with a yoke of shells stitched to it, a beaded panel down each side of the skirt, and beaded moccasins. "Ten dolla'," she said.

You gave her another \$10, which disappeared into the folds of her dress. She took a breath, looked at you, the slightest hint of a smile on her face and her milky eyes seeming to sparkle. You both knew what was coming next.

"Brave and squaw need baby," she said, and produced from the sack a beautiful cradle board, elaborately beaded buckskin over wood, with a plump little face tucked comfortably in its pouch. "Ten dolla'," she said, handing it to you.

"Oh, I'm sorry," you said, as you reached in your pocket again. "All I have left is \$5."

“Five dolla’,” she said, palm upraised, holding out her hand.

You left with empty pockets, a lot to think about, a story to remember, and a finely wrought family in hand, but you were no closer to finding Daryl Rattler.

The clash of cultures was always in your face, this effort by big energy to develop resources on the reservation in this very remote place among people for whom the concept of ownership was still foreign. There were some examples.

The Cherokee Nation, victims of the Trail of Tears, force-marched from the Carolinas to a bleak reservation in Oklahoma, reaped some small amount of redemption when their land was found to be sitting on huge reserves of oil. A lot of wealth was generated, power gained, big homes built, fancy cars and trucks purchased, ways of life adjusted to new and pretty comfortable circumstances. That was the upside. No doubt a lot was lost, too. We remember the favorable outcomes and tend to bury the tragedies.

Those experiences happened to a few tribes in Oklahoma, and elsewhere, and variations on it like all the water in Palm Springs of which the Agua Caliente band has prior claim. Developing natural resources on tribal lands over the years taught the better educated, more sophisticated Indians to pay close attention and cut deals that were more favorable for their people.

There was every level of sophistication represented among the Blackfeet, from the extremely primitive to the very hip and happening. Some of them, like Bill Big Springs, were very savvy about how things work in the white man’s world. He was a wily

political operator and a skilled businessman who had become quite wealthy from real estate and ranching. He was also a county commissioner, which in rural America is where the political power resides, and his ranch near East Glacier Park was among the finest anywhere in northern Montana. He had adapted, maybe even acculturated. He certainly had prospered.

Others, especially among the young people, were college educated and veterans of the cities like Oakland, Denver, Seattle, Minneapolis, where they learned enough about what passes for success to know they preferred to return to the reservation and find ways of applying their knowledge where *their* people lived. In doing so, they had to find ways of incorporating their heritage and belief systems with the need for accommodating commerce and industry into the fabric of this place they called home. It was a helluva challenge.

They were the ones who were making it, one way or another. And there were plenty of others to a greater or lesser degree who had successfully come to terms with the situation they found themselves in, a formerly fiercely independent people whose forebears once commanded a territory the size of New England and now were wards of the U.S. Government, which, having conquered them, now deems them legally “incompetents” and handles their affairs in trust.

Many other members of the tribe fare less well. Opportunity to make a living, earn a wage, develop a degree of financial independence, was scarce. Poverty was endemic, maybe three-fourths of the tribe were unemployed, welfare payments and commodity rations were most everyone’s basis of survival. All of

the social ills were present in extremis: alcoholism, drug use, spousal and child abuse, suicide, crime, violence. Average life expectancy was mid-forties.

The Tribe itself was the largest employer, allocating its scarce income and federal government monies as well as possible. The income came from leases of various types, to wheat farmers on the east side of the res who planted and harvested famously high protein hard red winter wheat on the vast steppes near Cut Bank; from grazing leases to ranchers, whose herds of horses, cattle, and sheep fare well on the high plains if they are hardy enough to take the cold; and, a steady, modest stream of cash from oil and gas royalties produced by a cluster of shallow wells at the northeast edge of the res on lands the Tribe long ago had leased to local oil companies.

Otherwise, the largest employer was the Pencil Factory, a place begun by Earl Old Person, that made plain wooden pencils and shipped them to clients worldwide. It was an industry of modest proportions and exceedingly limited potential.

Nobody argued that commerce was needed, and any sort of opportunity should at least be considered. Fitting it into the ways of the Blackfeet was the rub. How much value was gained for how much tradition lost? Reference the many bars that recently had been allowed to open on the res as a for instance.

Bob and Linda Juneau were among the first hipster Blackfeet you met. They were handsome, cool, dressed in designer jeans and ostrich skin cowboy boots. Hard not to notice. Bob was a Vietnam vet, had been around a bit. Both he and Linda were college grads. They, like many Blackfeet, were descended from

French traders who were among the first Europeans the tribe encountered, many of whom married or otherwise co-habited at least long enough to birth children.

Many of those traders in fact became part of the tribe and lived among the Blackfeet until death. It was a tradition that being Blackfeet was less a matter of lineage and more a matter of compatible lifestyle, at least before the Reservation was established and white man's ways instituted. The children of these people became Blackfeet, too.

Like a lot of the younger people, the Juneaus were an active part of the discussion between the Tribe and outside groups, including the subject of all this talk: the oil companies. The Council of Energy Resource Tribes from Santa Fe was very prominent in all these oil and gas discussions. CERT, in fact, had an active hand in writing the agreed-upon lease terms the tribe dictated to the oil industry, which were steep and pretty much unprecedented in wildcat areas like the reservation. They were mostly young, well-educated lawyers, accountants, policy people, almost exclusively Native Americans, or people claiming to be. They gave the oil industry serious pause, which likely was their intention.

Others were more controversial. The American Indian Movement had some support locally, led by Woody Kipp at Heart Butte, but most Blackfeet saw AIM as a Sioux initiative and kept them at arm's length. Still, they insisted on a voice in the discussions.

Then, too, there were the Browning and East Glacier merchants, many of them white people, or in local parlance,

“half-breeds” who actually were maybe four-fifths white, maybe less, or some who were whites married to members of the tribe but all of them somehow deeply entrenched in the community. There were many permutations of “Blackfeet” among the Browning shopkeepers.

Like merchants everywhere they pushed for action, traffic, butts in seats, sales, the more the merrier. Even the limited oil & gas work already taking place up here was lining their pockets in a big way.

So, everybody had something to say, and the Blackfeet Way is to allow for plenty of deliberation. Some of what was said was absolutely germane to the decision-making process, some of it was the worst sort of posturing, and some was pretty funny.

At one very important meeting, big wigs in suits and ties from a half dozen oil companies travelled from Denver, Dallas, Houston, and Lafayette, Louisiana for a 10 a.m. meeting with a collection of activists at tribal headquarters in Browning. You advised them to take their time, that arriving by 10:30 or 11:00 would suffice, but they only looked at you oddly and showed up at 9:40 or so.

When none of the Indians had shown by 11 a.m., the oil men said the hell with it and left, grumbling very audibly about being treated this way, wondering to whom exactly they should make their displeasure known. You were able to steer them to Greco’s for lunch and convince them to return around noon.

When the Indians began drifting into the office around 11:30, nobody said boo about “where are the oil men?” They knew it’s all Indian time, the meeting would happen when it happened,

and they were just preparing to get down to business, show the visitors their chops.

While you waited, you heard a couple of the young guys tell Bob Juneau he needed to let his hair grow and braid it. "It really intimidates them white guys."

Everybody had an agenda, but the basis of it all was a desire to understand what was best to do. For yourself, of course. But for your people, too.

This is a society of individuals, families, clans, tribes, the Blackfeet nation, the Blackfeet Confederacy. It's the interests of all Native Americans, too, that are considered, as peoples, of course, but also as a concept all of us hold dear, them who were here before us, who lived differently, who believed deeply, who were free and self-determining until we came and took it all from them; all these very different peoples from different places with one specific commonality of interest: coming to terms with this modern dilemma of being an Indian, maintaining your dignity, and respecting yourself, living in the white man's world. How to keep a piece of yourself, the best piece, and always hold it dear.

You had more than a couple of deep conversations about the meaning of it all, what benefits might accrue to the tribe, what cost to tradition and heritage, how it might fit or be incorporated into the Blackfeet belief system.

Bob said to you once, "We're hunters by tradition. This is just another type of game we can chase down, harvest, and eat."

Linda said one time about the production of oil, "I've heard it described as the earth's menstrual cycle."

Another time you were rationalizing the monetary value of oil production from the Disturbed Belt at the foot of the mountains. She listened, looking at you while you respectfully stared off into the distance as you spoke. Then, looking away while you watched her, she said, "You have to understand, this is our cathedral of origin. It is sacred land."

"Sacred, I do understand. Anyone who has any sense can feel the importance of this place. Origin, though, I'm not sure what you mean."

"Our oral tradition tells us that the first Blackfeet came to be in this very place, some say 10,000 years ago."

"But all the evidence is that the Blackfeet came onto the Plains in the 1600s from near the Great Lakes."

"It's a matter of the way we think about time. We believe what we believe. To us, what the elders tell us, the story is everything. It's more important than the white man's facts."



And so it was. The reverence you observed that the Blackfeet, especially the full bloods at Heart Butte, had for this Cathedral was powerful. Elders like Mike Swims Under, who stayed in an old frame house where Little Badger Creek emerged from the mountains, were treated with profound respect.

You came to think of him as the Watchman, keeper of the gateway to a place where often you faintly heard drums and singing far up the creek and tried many times to find a way there, curiosity pushing you to places maybe you didn't belong, wanting to get just a sense of what was so compelling there to

these deeply spiritual people, a glimpse of what goes on; but, no matter how you tried to approach it, the trails through the woods were blocked, large trees felled across them, boulders rolled into the way, and no car or truck could pass. Likely horseback got them there, but you had no horses. The land was lush with trees, shrubs, bushes, and berries. It was grizzly bear territory, not a place for a hike. Short of renting a helicopter and flying in, you couldn't think of a way to get there, which was as they wanted it: a place never seen and forever only imagined.

The spirituality up here was leavened by a lot of humor, much of it of the absurdist sort. You had that big Caddy, a purchase you made when cars of that type became very cheap because of the gasoline shortage of the early 70s. It was a Fleetwood Brougham d'Elegance, a gigantic car with a back seat that was almost as roomy as a limousine. You could sit with your tailbone pressed against the plush leather couch and with your legs extended straight forward could barely touch the front seat. It was a bit like driving your living room around. Maybe more comfortable, in fact. Got about 10 or 12 miles to the gallon.

For its time, it also was very technically advanced, including doors that automatically locked with the touch of a button. Trouble was, if you hit it when you got out of the car and closed the door, and oops the key's still in the ignition, you were locked out. Worse still, you were in the habit of leaving the engine running because you were in and out so many times in the course of a day on the res, and so more than once you locked yourself out with the engine running.

Those occasions always gathered a crowd. The Blackfeet are nothing if not ingenious. Resiliency is the price of admission when you live up here. They are that and, also, they have a lot of time on their hands most days, so they take their entertainment where they find it.

Often times, a collection was taken to purchase a six pack or two of beer, which the crowd shared while one and then another of the onlookers would take his turn at trying to jimmy the lock. The Caddy was pretty sophisticated that way, too, unfortunately, and getting that door open usually occupied several hours of failed attempts by several of the best car thieves in Browning and Heart Butte. By the time it finally was accomplished, mostly by dumb luck, that big V-8 had idled away a lot of gas and you barely made it to a local station to fill it up again.

One of those events featured a display of ingenuity you still have trouble believing, although you saw it for yourself. When the first six pack ran out and the car was still locked, you got together a few bucks for some more beer. But the guy who was going to get it couldn't get his truck to start. Dead battery.

Jumper cables in this crowd were about as rare as an albino elk and yours were locked in the trunk, so: what to do? They pulled another truck up in front of his, pried the rubber stoppers off the bumpers in those days when they still were made of metal, pulled closer until the bumpers touched, disconnected the ground wire from the batteries, revved the engine of the one that was running, cranked the starter of the other one, and jump-started the dead truck.

The dogs were the other side of doing the streets of Browning. There was nothing funny about them. They were always a nuisance and often enough flat out dangerous.

You learned early on to carry a length of transmission cable with you when you got out of the car. Getting from the car to the door of a home in town was a gauntlet of snarling dogs. Most of them backed off when you showed the cable. Some didn't. Most of them slunk away if you hit them. Some didn't. Then you had a problem.

In the middle of the road in Low Rent, a three-legged dog limped along. You had no sympathy for the beast. The first time you encountered him, he tried to tear you apart, attacking from behind an old wreck of a car abandoned in someone's yard, first snapping his teeth together very near your crotch, then ripping your pants leg apart and leaving deep scars in the ankles of your boots. Several heavy strikes of the cable finally drove him off. In the interim, neither of you had forgotten.

These are the camp dogs of the Blackfeet, mongrels whose ancestors carried the tribe's travois of goods and lodging in the days before the horse. They often were eaten when food ran out in the depths of the furious winters.

No one cares for them now. No one feeds them. They hunt and scavenge for food. They're wilder now than in the old days. An injury that fails to heal lowers their place in the pecking order and their chances for survival.

Many of them bear crippling wounds. You see them chewing furtively on tin cans, rags, discarded diapers, watching with envy as healthier mates run down cats, rats, rabbits, birds,

ripping them to shreds, devouring meat and bone both with a savagery only the starving know.

The three-legged dog got by with a ferocity that was unmatched among the many you encountered. You took aim with the Caddy, sped up and tried your best to run him down. He was too quick, crippled as he was, and jumped aside, snarling as you blew past him. One day, perhaps, this will be settled.

You picked up a lot of hitchhikers. It was easy to get people in the car but sometimes hard to get them out. Mostly, though, people were pretty nice, they appreciated the ride, and once in a while they were helpful.

"I'm looking for some people you might know. No luck finding them so far."

"What for?" asked a young guy you picked up on Highway 287, way out near the Hutterites Colony in Depuyer.

"Signature for some leases. They've got some money coming."

He said nothing. We rode in silence for a while.

"Clarence Heavy Runner, Jerry Prairiechickenshoe, Daryl Rattler, Linda Calf Looking. You know any of them?"

"Maybe."

"I'd really like to find them. Everybody else who comes in on those leases already signed, but nobody gets any money until everybody signs. Been looking for 'em for a long time."

"How much?"

"Money? Probably shouldn't say. That's between us and them, you know? These guys have pretty small shares, but some of their family have a lot coming."

"How much Clarence have comin'?"

"You know him?"

"Yeah. Rattler, too."

"You know Daryl Rattler? Wow! I *really* need to talk to him."

"He ain't around here. Hin'it?"

"Yeah, nobody seems to know where he stays."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah. Clarence, too."

You took a couple of deep breaths, thought about how to handle the ask. Your own. His. He was slumped low in the passenger seat, volunteering nothing now, waiting you out.

"Do you know Old Lady Runningwolf? Stays in town. She has a bunch coming from these leases and she really needs the money. I can really use your help here. It means a lot of money for a lot of people."

He didn't say anything. A few miles passed in silence.

"Look, if you can help me find Daryl Rattler and Clarence Heavy Runner, you'd really be helping out a lot of folks up here. Would you be willing to tell me where they are? No hassles, I promise."

He said nothing for a long time. Calculating his ask. Finally, he said, "Ho! Oh! Been snowed outta my place by Starr School all winter. You help me bust a trail in there, maybe I can help you. You got a truck or somethin'?"

"We've got a Power Wagon with big tires parked out at East Glacier. That do it?"

He said maybe and shrugged. You'd been out that way last week and the snow had settled a lot. "Let me ask you, you saying if I can get you to your place, you'll tell me where to find these guys? That right?"

"That hin'it. You get me to my place, I'll tell you where Daryl Rattler stays."

"What about Clarence Heavy Runner?"

He looked at me, smiled a little, looked away.

"I'm Clarence Heavy Runner. Get me to my place, I'll sign them papers."

Clarence lived back in the land way off the road, maybe seven- or eight-miles in. Most of the reservation is dirt trails made by a few cars and trucks going out in the fields to individual homes, the older ones mostly, from back in the day. The newer places like Glacier Homes, New Low Rent, Easter Egg Homes, and Death Row Housing are mostly right in the center of town or on the near edges. Browning is where most all of the people live on the Res, but a lot of folks live farther out on the family allotments. Clarence was one of them.

In good weather, you just follow the tracks that everybody else made, ease up and down the coulees, find your way around the horses, the cattle, and sometimes the wolves and the bears, and if you're patient and your tires hold up, eventually you get there.

In the winter, maybe you get snowed out. If you have a snowmobile, you can get there. If not, you're out of luck until the snow melts. It snows hard for a day or two and you say, "Hell, I'll wait 'til the snow melts down a little." Then it snows again.

Keeps snowing. Now you can't get in at all. Probably all winter. Snowed out.

Clarence had been gone for months. Getting him in there took a while, and you made it only because he knew the way so well that even crossing a solid white landscape broken only by occasional trees and shrubs, reflecting in your eyes a brilliant sun in a deep blue sky, he could say, "keep over there a bit" or "now pull it back this way," and despite snow still better than two feet deep, you made it.

His place didn't look too bad from the outside but inside it was really trashed. The sparse furniture was overturned, dark stains streaked the floor, and at the end of those streaks, a window had been broken out, frame, molding, and all. Snow and ice covered a good part of that room. Small animal droppings, too.

Clarence had an astonished look on his face, something not often seen in your experience with Indians. You followed his eyes, saw the old chest freezer standing on its side, deep claw marks in the steel sides, the top wrenched open.

"Had me two hind quarters in it. Big elk I got last Fall at Chief Mountain. Ho! Damn! Can't believe the damn bear smelled 'em in there. Maybe from when I hung it. Guess I shoulda cleaned up better. Hin'it?"

So, Daryl Rattler stays with the Sioux at Eagle Butte, South Dakota. You cleared up some business in Billings and headed over. The roads were clear, the motel in Spearfish was clean and comfortable, the meal you had at a local bar was pretty damn good. Breakfast next morning was okay, too.

The road up to the Cheyenne River Reservation was drier and less distinct the farther away from the Black Hills you drove. There were still patches of snow on the north and east sides of the hills, and no doubt more cold weather to come, but not much stood in the way of Spring and warmth. You could sense that rich eruption of grasses that was about to happen.

You went north back to Belle Fourche, reconnected with Highway 212 and then east-northeast 150 miles or so to Eagle Butte. It was a warm spring day, the many subtle charms of the plains were beginning to show themselves, and the drive was pretty uneventful.

The further you went, though, the bleaker the surroundings became. The fields were mostly bare dirt, the earth was broken, segmented into curled up wedges in vast fields after the snows, the freezing, melting, the hard clay soil quickly drying out, sod that never should have been busted. Some grass would grow before too long, but for now it was very barren, textured like an alligator's hide, but colored a plain, muddy gray.

Both Cheyenne River and Standing Rock to the north were what you think of when the image of an Indian Reservation comes to mind: a very sparse place out in the middle of nowhere that makes you wonder why anybody lives there. You learn it's maybe the best of a few tough choices they can make.

The Missouri River swoops down from the north and runs along the eastern borders. The land there is richer, but most of these two reservations isn't very hospitable. What you're looking at right now, over on this side as you head into Eagle Butte, is scary bleak.

The usual basic brick government buildings, offices for the BIA, the Tribe, their various services, were concentrated in one end near the commercial district, which was a few retail establishments including bars, and near at the other end the public school and the park. It was pretty green and about a square block with maybe a swing set and a jungle gym somewhere in the area.

The rest of it seemed to be a variety of broken-down buildings made of wood, a lot of trailer houses, battered tires stacked on their roofs to hold them down in the wind, and some other homes, nicer or not, built by government contractors in a few unimaginative styles.

There were lots of trucks: pickups, hay wagons, dump trucks, a few semi cabs, trailers for cattle, trailers for horses. Some cars, too, mostly old beater sedans and station wagons. A lot of flat tires.

You asked in the feed store, and at the gas station, and the little grocery at the exact center of the shopping area. Got a lot of questions, a few guesses, not much that was helpful.

You wanted to leave the bars for last. Only if you had to did you go in them. They were mostly trouble. Just before you headed that way, a group of young guys drinking beer and leaning on an old pickup truck appeared in front of you. You asked, and a guy said, "Maybe he stays with them Many Horses, over there in them places by the Rodeo."

"Over by the College?"

"Yeah, maybe 3rd or Chinatown. In there."

You thanked him, he shrugged, said quietly, "Them folks say he don't like white men much."

Never know what to expect but a warning can be handy. You asked all around that neighborhood, pretty funky, pretty nice people, nobody said for sure until finally an old lady on Dupree Street said, "Daryl. He stay here sometime. Not now. You ask him," she said, and turned her stocky body sideways, her hands in her apron, her chin nodding toward an old guy and a young guy sitting at a table, not indicating which one.

They said something to each other in Lakota, the young guy pushed his baseball cap back on his head, then the old guy said, "He's pow-wowing. Up to Standing Rock. Should be back tonight. You want something to eat? Coffee?"

You had some coffee, fry bread, a seared ear of corn cooked with a few others in a big tin can over an open fire outside. There wasn't much to say. A radio station was playing in another room. A few people came and went. None of them took much notice of you.

The afternoon turned to sunset, the sky was partly cloudy, and the edge of every cloud was singed with red, then gray, then it was twilight. You wondered if you should go.

A guy came in, pretty ragged, kind of excited. There was a bit of a hubbub. The young guy said to you, "Go with him. Him and Daryl, car broke down."

The guy walked with purpose, never said a word to you, covered a fair piece of ground almost to Main Street, and came to a very funky Ford station wagon, sagging on its springs, the right rear tire flat. There were a bunch of people in it.

The guy talked to the people in the car, there was some palaver, then one or two guys got out. They looked at the tire and talked some more. Some more guys got out of the car. Everybody looked at the tire. They talked about it some more. Nobody said anything to you.

There was a taut piece of rubber tied around the tire that had kind of held the inner tube in place where it had bubbled out. It was burst, the tire bald as the rubber tube, shredded, completely flat and not fixable. These folks were going nowhere, it looked like, but it came up in fact they were headed to White River on the Rosebud Res about 150 miles south of here and they meant to get there tonight. You assumed all the talk was about how.

Finally, one of the guys walked over to you and said, "You lookin' for me?"

"I came over from Browning. Got a big stack of papers I'd like you to sign. "Leases for some oil wells that might get drilled. You come in for about \$400."

He looked at you for a minute, then walked away without saying anything more, back to the guys and the tire. They talked about it some more. After a while you caught his eye and shrugged, palms up. He didn't look friendly.

More time passed, more talk, no progress you could see. It was getting very dark. There was very little going on anywhere around you.

"Don't have time for no papers," he said to you. "You might as well go on. Got to get these guys fixed up. Get that tire pumped up."

You thought about how he needs an inner tube, but he needs a tire, too. This one is shot, chewed up for good. Even if you had the money to buy a new one, everything's closed up. These guys ain't going nowhere.

But you said, "I wish I could help, but I don't know what to do. I have to get these leases cleaned up. What can I do to get you to sign?"

"Them other guys all sign? Cletus, Clarence, all 'em?"

"Yes, everybody. Your grandmother, too. You're the last guy on all the papers. You don't sign, nobody gets their money. Mrs. Runningwolf told me she needs it bad."

Huh! he snorted, what passed for a laugh, shook his head a little. "I got to get these guys going," he said. "Get them done, maybe we can talk."

You are standing on the side of the road in the dark in the middle of an Indian reservation in South Dakota, been standing there in fact for quite a while and not a single car or truck has passed by, a group of travelers with a flat tire and no spare has been conferring the entire time but the tire's still just as flat as can be; and you have coordinated a project on behalf of the Blackfeet Tribe and a host of big time oil & gas companies, chased thousands of people all over the country, answered their questions, debated their arguments, heard their stories, and finally convinced them to sign these leases worth tens of millions of dollars; and you have been told by the last guy you need to get signed up to have 100% of the signatures that are required for a done deal, he's told you he doesn't want to sign but gave you just the tiniest window of an opening to get it done and all it will

take is sweet talking him a bit after you produce an inflated 15 inch tire out of thin air, preferably really soon before everybody gets tired of talking and scatters to who knows where; and you know full well that you damned well better get him signed or you can kiss your ass goodbye and nobody, the tribe, the companies, your crew, not any of the thousands of people who won't get paid will give you the time of day, or even nod when you pass by. You realize you are screwed.

Unless... unless.... something miraculous happens.

You can faintly hear in the nearly absolute stillness somebody humming a tune, growing ever so slightly clearer, coming nearer, and way off in the distance, barely visible is a boy walking along, almost skipping, not a care in the world, playing with something - a ball? A hoop? What is that he's rolling down the road?

It. Is. A. Tire! There is a boy walking toward you, rolling a tire alongside him, and when it hits bumps in the road it bounces a bit, which suggests it might be at least slightly inflated, and here he comes! With a tire! On a rim.

It goes without saying you met him at the corner, told him you wanted to buy his old, bald, inflated tire and you'd give him \$20 for it, and he didn't say anything except put out his hand, palm up, took the money, and that was that.

"Damn," you said to Daryl, rolling it over. "It's only a 14 incher."

"Don't matter. Gonna work good."

They did have a jack, raised up that old wagon as high as they could, and got the shredded tire off, but the springs sagged

so badly they couldn't seat the new tire until each of them grabbed the car wherever they could and lifted it just a bit higher, got the rim on the lugs, tightened the three nuts they had, said their goodbyes and were gone.

"How many papers?" Daryl said. "Ho! I got to sign all a them?"

Part Two

Heart Butte

The Chief himself asked you one day about the woman who visited. "People said she was a teacher. Is that true?"

You said that it was. He said nothing more.

The next time you saw him, he said, "You should stay at Heart Butte for a while. You can have the superintendent's house, right there by the old school. If the woman wants to join you, she can teach at the school. It would be good."

The house had a pretty good bed, some chairs, and a table. It was very old and rustic, but in some ways, it was the best place in this little town. Taking that for what it is, it was rent free, so maybe you could learn to live with its shortcomings. When you got there the old woman who showed it to you seemed to know you were coming. Afterwards, when you thanked her and turned to leave, she said, "Here. You keep 'em," and handed you the keys.

So, now you were staying in Heart Butte. It was summer, the scenery was glorious, the weather warm and gentle. Day by day, you explored a little more boldly and really felt like you had the run of the place. Nobody went out of their way to welcome you, but they didn't run you off, either.

You were treated with deference, tolerance, or complete disinterest by various people, any of which worked just fine, and it had all the makings of a hell of an adventure. Understand that Heart Butte is maybe the most remote spot in the continental

United States. It is 900 miles to Seattle, to Denver, to Salt Lake, or to Minneapolis. It's about 350 miles to Calgary across a border in another country. Hell, it's over 100 miles to Great Falls, and once you get there, where are you then?

So, it's remote, not to mention it's a settlement of full-blood Blackfeet, the Picunnie branch that traditionally had been the tribe's southern defense when their land ranged from what today we call Northern Alberta Province nearly to Yellowstone Park. Their enemies were plentiful. These are tough people.

Anarchy is the organizing social structure. The tribal police 25 miles away in Browning do not come here. Although the FBI has jurisdiction, too, they are never seen. Matriarchy directs the day-to-day affairs through the sheer dominant will of the old ladies who enforce it. They keep things in line a little bit.

There are no commercial buildings in the town except Thompson's, which is the post office and the commodities store. It's also the home of the owners. The goods for sale in the tiny front room are basic foodstuffs: coffee, sugar, butter, bread, cheese, meat, salt and pepper, maybe potatoes. The U.S. mail is delivered twice a week, Tuesday and Thursday, unless the weather's bad. The truck pulls up in front of Thompson's, pushes a bag or two out the door, and roars away as fast as possible. If there is any outgoing mail, which is not often, Mrs. Thompson runs out and shoves it in the driver's hand before he drives off.

Thompson's is on your right as you come into town from the north. A quarter mile further is a turn to the right, which takes you past the little stone Catholic Church and a graveyard to the Spottedeagle Valley, or a left turn, which takes you into the

innermost of three circles that make up the town. The other two are a ways off in the distance to the east across the field.

If you make the left, at the top of the circle you slowly pass Industrie and Eagle Shields senior citizens center, then another building, then a big tank on the ground, two very old log houses, and, at the far end of the circle, the old frame house painted white that was the superintendent's place once upon a time, where you are staying, and next to it, back toward the paved road, is the school house, somehow in shadow, a two-story building of dull red brick.

Now you are headed back toward where you entered, passing a low strip of four one-room apartments set at an angle to the road where the few teachers live, then the school bus garage, and finally the Round House, which is actually an octagon of logs, where stick game is played Saturday nights until sunrise.

There are two other white people here, both Mormon missionaries who run the school. Husband and wife, Vernon and Myrna. Vern 'n' Myrn. They were nice enough but a little flinchy. Tics and twitches are mostly how you remember their faces. They were all business and seldom seen outside of school.

They wondered if a woman (your wife? - they didn't ask) was joining you, a teacher who might work with them the coming school year. There was a lot of excitement about the new school just getting finished up around the corner and over the hill toward Big Badger. It was going to open in January. Very big news.

Linda, who was not your wife at that time and never had been, was in fact interested in teaching at Heart Butte. She

visited again in summer, talked to Vern about it, and apparently, they agreed. She returned to Denver to gather to some stuff, put the rest in storage, and rode back into town. Now you were shacking again.

It was nice to have some female companionship. She was blissfully brave, which was a nice thing, too, if maybe a little worrisome. But, at this point, it truly seemed your fortune was in the hands of fate. You both had decided to go for it. So, you just went ahead with what there was to do. You also had the good sense to realize you should be very good to each other. There was no one else to turn to, so you better be the best of friends, now if ever.

The natural beauty, so powerful, so wild, was intoxicating. You wandered around the countryside, reminding yourselves to be alert, but feeling very stoned and transcendent. It was psychedelic.

She and you went up to Mitten Lake one day. The sun was shining, a soft breeze was blowing, fish in the water were rising to midges. You decided to walk around the lake, which was two or three miles of mostly clear hiking through a few patches of scrub brush and clusters of trees.

On the far side of the lake from where you parked, in a thicket of trees and brush where a creek ran down to the lake, there was a huffing, some branches breaking, the sound of a log being ripped apart, noises that a bear would make as it was feeding. Neither of you missed it.

“That’s a grizzly,” you said. “Let’s get out of here.”

You began jogging, gaining speed. She tried to keep up, stumbled, swore. "We can't outrun a bear. Why are we even trying?"

You looked at her with sympathy, smiled, said, "You've heard the old saw: I don't have to outrun the bear, I just..."

"Asshole," she said, and picked up the pace.

It was a long way back to the car, but it was clear soon enough the bear wasn't chasing you, had no reason to, was already eating in fact and not much distracts a bear from feed, but still it was scary to be that close.

Bear stories became a huge part of the consciousness of living there. Not for the Indians. "Ho, they don't bother you," they'd tell you, as if everyone with any sense knows that. And you did know that was true, mostly, except for a few situations when they could be deadly. It partly colored your attention every day, because you weren't used to staying in a small, remote place where the majority of grizzlies in this country still live, forage, breed, and raise their young. And you'd like to live long enough to become used to it.

So, you went about your business, September came, the school opened, and Linda started teaching. Very soon the kids became a part of the daily routine and you learned a lot from them about life hereabouts. Unlike their parents, they wanted to hang out and loved to talk. They asked a lot of questions, too.

"Misser Pah-so-ti, how many horses you got?"

"None," you said.

"Oh!" they all said, with astonishment and sorrow, embarrassed for your poverty. When you got to know them

better, Dougie Calfbossribs, who was eight or nine, said, "Misser Pah-so-ti, you ride *my* horses. Any time you need 'em, you can use mine."

Dougie was something like royalty in the tribal hierarchy, a prince, the first among equals. His family was very prominent and by local standards wealthy. They had land and lots of horses. Their name said it. They got the boss ribs of the calf, the sweetest, most succulent meat. Why that was, you never found out, but it was obviously so.

The other kids were Comes At Night, Heavy Runner, Rides At the Door, Bull Plume, Scabby Robe, Stabs By Mistake, Old Gun, Mountain Chief, Takes Gun, White Quills, Weasel Head, Bear Chief, Longtimesleeping, and a boy once badly burned in a fire known by one and all as Crispy Critter. They were wild, soulful, funny, energetic, relentless, and very kind. Their first names were Smoky, Dan, Francis, Rico, Arthur, and so forth, but it's the family names you remember.

Indians, at Heart Butte at least, raise their kids by letting them run. They are all over the place at all hours of the day and night. Apparently, they sleep when they feel like it and eat catch as catch can. Meat and sugar are the main food stuffs, cans of pop in every hand. They have lots of energy.

Our gang spent a lot of time running in and out of our house, which they treated as their own unless the door was locked. Then they ran off through the gate in the chain link fence, a rarity in town, that circled our side yard and the huge old cottonwood that shaded it, all of them playing some sort of game

with a lot of shooting that made sense to them, if to no one who was watching.

“What ya’ playing?” you said.

“Cowboys!” they said and doubled over laughing.

They also liked to wrestle and challenged you to a fight every time the thought occurred to them. You had a very large buffalo hide on the floor in the main room, where many a match took place. The kids were impressed by it, thick hair still attached, the skin beautifully tanned, and made it the place of honor.

You were much bigger than they were, but they were younger and there were a lot more of them. They’d fight like hell to get you on the ground and get on top of you, but once the fight went far enough in their favor, a few of them would switch over to your side and help you get back in the match. Bloody noses and split lips were standard fair, but nobody got hurt too bad and it was big fun.

You got in the habit of locking your door all the time and eventually they got into the habit of knocking. It was local custom that nobody came to the door after dark. They pretty much respected that and after a while adapted to your customs, as well.

You parked the big white Caddy out front on the side of the circle about 20 feet from the front door. You asked the kids not to climb on it, which they thought was an odd request, no doubt, but they complied. You asked them to shut the gate to the side yard when they used it, too, which mostly they did.

Linda had brought her cat with her and that creature was challenged. The camp dogs that roamed the area were pretty

wild and guaranteed there was not another domestic cat still living anywhere else in town.

But Gray Matter was unique. A Russian Blue, smart and very alert. Plenty quick enough to bolt for the fence from wherever the dogs tried to corner her, fast enough to outrun them for short distances, happy to strut and preen once inside the fence after she cleared it in one bound, leaving the mad pack pacing outside, howling, frustrated, short of the kill. But they were persistent. This was home.

One evening something unprecedented happened. Bob Kay had heard so many stories about Heart Butte that he asked you if he could visit to see it for himself. "Of course," you said, never imagining it would happen. But that day he had arrived in Cut Bank from Denver and made his way out to your place.

Wow, we had never had a visitor, other than the few adult Blackfeet who ever crossed the entry, and unlike anyone else before or since, Bob intended to spend the night. It was said by folks here that one and all are warned, if you don't live here, you should be gone before dark. You didn't know for sure if that applied to overnight guests, but the thought may have crossed your mind.

It also was advised you never go visit places at night, unless like stick game or such things it is a community event. All the old ladies at Eagle Shields, the senior citizens center where the powers that be in Heart Butte met each day to counsel, let it be known that the classroom where Linda taught was haunted. "Big spirits," they would say. "Don't be messin' wit' 'em."

That building was separate from the main school building, a short walk across the circle where you lived, right past our house, and on over to Linda's classroom, about 50 yards at the outside. There was a very prominent woman whose entire job it was each day to walk the groups of students from the school to that satellite building for their class. Such is gainful employment on the reservation. But she took her work seriously, and four or five times a day she would deliver the next small group of students, get them settled, point at Linda and say, "Don't you listen to that white woman."

Visiting that room after dark was probably a serious breach of etiquette too, but Bob Kay, gentleman that he was, asked if he could see where she taught, and so you and Linda took him on a brief tour of what little there was to see, spirits being mostly invisible, after all, and the rest of it being a basic wooden shack where learning was attempted.

So, there were probably at least two things you did that evening that were not the way things should be done. Innocents that you were, the three of you had a lovely evening, went your separate ways to bed, slept soundly, and awoke to yet another reminder of being strangers in a strange land.

Being well on into fall, the morning was still pretty dark. You'd let the cat out, put the coffee on, scrambled up some eggs for breakfast. From where you were inside the house you heard the familiar barks, snarls, the pounding of many feet as the dogs came after the cat. She cleared the fence as usual but this time unexpectedly the gate was open, and the dogs came through it after her. She could have climbed the tree but maybe was cut off

and so she jumped into the back porch, which was enclosed, and they trapped her there.

We rushed through the kitchen to the back door and the porch. You hit two of the dogs with a cane, one of whom had Gray Matter in his mouth. He dropped her, snarled, and backed away as you raised the stick again.

You picked her up, her body slack, she looked at you with distant eyes, took a deep breath, sighed, and died. Much later, you came to realize how really extraordinary that creature was to have lasted as long as she did. There was no margin for error, and she only made one. It was fatal.

A day later, one of the old ladies took Linda aside and said, "Sometimes they come for the animals first before they come for you." Thereafter, every night for the rest of her stay there, Linda carefully lowered the blinds, closed and locked every window, both doors, and the gate to the yard, and never again but once entertained anyone after dark.

A few years later, you would return for a brief visit to Heart Butte, not more than a slow drive through. In circling the loop through the center of town, passing the place where you had lived a few years before, you noticed there had been a little bit of change but not much.

The house was still there next to the tree, but the fence was gone. In the shade of the tree, under those thick branches and their dense leaves, was the same pack of dogs that came hunting back then. They were resting on a swell of land at the base of the tree, which is where you had buried Gray Matter that day.

The one other time you had a visitor after dark was a complete surprise. No one came to the door at night. It simply wasn't done. If you heard a knock, chances are it was spirits looking to haunt you, and you knew better than to let them in. Huddle near the fire, keep your own counsel, and let them go away.

But one night there was a knock and you asked who was there. Go figure. The voice that answered didn't sound at all like a spirit. Not a Blackfeet either. In fact, it sounded rather white.

Now, you and Linda and Vern and Myrn were the only white folks within many miles in any direction and so you were caught off guard. You actually opened the door to see who was there. It was a guy selling Kirby vacuum cleaners.

"Well, hello," he said with genuine enthusiasm, "I'm so-and-so and I sell the finest vacuum cleaner money can buy. If you will give me ten minutes of your time, I promise you it will be absolutely worth your while." And he smiled at you very sincerely.

If an orangutan had arrived with two dancing bears and a trapeze artist at your front door, you couldn't have been more astonished. You stared at him with your mouth hanging open, noted his pleasant round face, bright eyes, a hopeful smile, and the vacuum cleaner he held at his side.

"You better come in," you said to him.

"Thanks," he said. "I'd really like to."

Once he got settled in the front room, before he could begin his spiel, you asked, "Do you know where you are?"

He looked a bit taken aback. "This is Heart Butte, isn't it? I think I'm right."

"Oh, you are," you said. "But what are you doing here?"

"Well, I'm selling vacuum cleaners. This is part of my territory. Um, I'm pretty new to this, but I know my product very well and I'm very confident that people will want to have a Kirby once I show them what a fine machine it is."

He looked at you, then at Linda, smiling a genuine smile, and decided to elaborate just a little more.

"I noticed in the company logs that no one in Heart Butte has ever bought a Kirby. How can that be? I thought to myself. It's time we get that straightened out. So here I am."

He looked at you now as if everything now was cleared up and he'd like to get on with it.

"How's it going so far?" you asked.

"Well, the truth is, you're the first people I've met with tonight. I've been knocking on doors all over town but nobody ever answers. It seems like no one's home."

Suffice it to say, you let him do his entire routine, ash tray dumped on your carpet and cigarettes ground in that he skillfully vacuumed up, the rug now cleaner than it's ever been, and on and on, one nifty sales technique after another, and when he finally was done, completely talked out but still bubbling with enthusiasm, an irrepressible smile, you were so impressed that this crazy kid was trying to sell you a very pricey vacuum cleaner in the dark of night on an Indian reservation in one of the most remote parts of the country that you nodded sagely, pursed your lips, said to him, "I'll take it."

“Really?” he said. “Really? You will?”

The little church at the edge of town, just at the foot of the Spottedeagle Valley, was a tiny stone building with the cemetery at its side. You used to walk that way pretty regularly to get a little exercise and often a gang of the local kids would join you.

Supposedly, when the reservations first were established in the West, the Protestant and Catholic powers that be met to divide up the potential converts. The Catholics got Montana and made a bit of a dent in resident spirituality.

It’s a fool’s errand to speculate on the nature and depth of one’s religious leanings, especially so with people who likely relate to what they’re taught from a totally different reservoir of understanding than the background of the teachers.

What little you were told by locals about the impact of the white man’s religion on Blackfeet people was that for some it was strong, for many it was a curiosity, and for nearly all it was thought to be potentially more medicine you could add to your bag of tricks.

The church here in Heart Butte seemingly was operated part time by a Native American priest, not a Blackfeet but maybe a Flathead from the other side of the mountains. There the famed Jesuit black robe Pierre-Jean De Smet had established a virulent strain of Catholicism among the Salish in the 1840s that persisted to present day.

While you marched along at a steady pace across the main road and up the first slope of the Valley past the church, the kids adapted in their own way to your pace. They’d run, jump, twist, twirl, charge in circles around you, sometimes unintentionally or

not bumping into each other, sometimes knocking each other down only to spring right back up and carry on, talking all the time. They had big energy, they had enthusiasm, and unlike many of their elders, they were very forthcoming about their ways, what they had been taught, what they believed, and the way clans viewed each other from inside the community.

The cemetery sprawled across a low, undulating stretch of ground a little way up valley from the church, a smatter of white crosses standing in something like orderly rows, but not quite, many of them leaning at various angles or tipped completely on one arm to the ground, a small rail fence surrounding it all.

Flowers sometimes were placed here and there, but it looked largely unattended. The ground was rocky in places, weedy in others, and if it weren't for the crosses and flowers, it looked pretty much like the rest of the hillside.

"You know why there's that fence around them graves?" one of the kids asked you one day. They all shouted the answer: "So the Spottedeagles won't dig them up and eat their guts!"



Clifford Eagle Speaker came around one day, knocked on the door, said, "Good morning." Asked you how you were doing and how you like this town? Said, "You *need* to play in the tournament. Basketball. All the guys do. Them guys come down all the way from the Reserves in Canada, even. It's for Linnie!"

Indian basketball is a game unto itself. If you haven't seen it, you just have to imagine. Start by thinking extreme Run and Gun. It's a very fast game, up and down the court at breakneck

speed, dribbling, a little passing, big focus on shooting. Not much defense except fouls. Hard fouls. Still, very high scores.

So, you agreed to play in the Linnie Eagle Speaker Memorial Tournament and found out when you showed up that it was a big deal for Heart Butte and for the tribe, even the clans from the other side of the border, and you found out not only were you the only white man in the game but also the only player who was over maybe 25 tops, and you were 35, so there was that.

Then there was the good time that was had by all those folks in the crowd, a lot of which focused on hooting at you, laughing, yelling, "Hey white man! Hey! What's that stuff on your chest? Some animal got you? Ho!"

Shirts and 'Skins. The first game you were Skins and yours was white. It was pretty noticeable. You didn't know a lot of these people, and there were maybe 250 of them from all over the Blackfeet Confederacy. Even the local guys you knew a little bit weren't necessarily friendly, especially in crowds. For you it seemed like a big deal, but to the audience you were just a part of what made for the party. The game was the thing.

The first game, your team won, like 150 to 138 or something. You were pretty tired but holding up. You had learned not to drive to the basket, or you might get killed. Also, throwing an outlet pass paid huge dividends.

The guy you passed the ball to was more than happy to drive the ball at high speed to the other end of the court, throw up a shot and either score or miss, grab the rebound and score, or head back on defense as the game came roaring back the other

direction. One very quick eye contact. Ready for you to throw him another pass when the ball changed hands.

Then too, the more rebounding and passing you did, the less you had to run because everybody wanted to run and shoot, nobody wanted to rebound and pass. It gave your team a unique edge. One person in the entire tournament played this way. You ran a lot less than the rest of them. Still ran a lot.

Less than two hours later, you were told the team from Cardston, Alberta, the Canadian Indians, had won and that's who you play next. You have the advantage since they just played, maybe they're tired?

Ha. You *are* tired but okay. This time was like the first game on steroids. Ferocious, very fast, lots of good shooters, final score, 172-169. Your team lost. You were beat. Battered, bruised, blistered, stumbling home.

Home was next door and you made it, walked in the door, told Linda, "Yow, I did it. That was amazing. And I am ready to die."

You were in the shower, starting to feel like you just possibly may survive, when Linda comes in, says: "They say you have to play the consolation game."

It took about a week to recover, and you were thinking about swearing off cigarettes once and for all, but good things came of that basketball tournament. All of a sudden, you had some cred with the young guys in town, the ones who sat in the stands with their friends and yelled at you while you tried to compete with teenagers. But they knew. You ran the gauntlet and survived. At

least for a while, you are part of the community. They started coming around.

The Blackfeet have hunting rights granted by treaty in the eastern side of the Northern Rocky Mountains, including Glacier Park (although the Park Service disagrees), Great Bear Wilderness, and Bob Marshall Wilderness, three huge parcels of federal land that are home to some 600 to 1000 grizzlies, maybe more. It's a big area but they cover a lot of ground, so for about eight or nine months of the year, you have a pretty good chance of running into them up there.

Mostly, they'll know you're coming and disappear well before you ever see them. They prefer to avoid you. You are merely a nuisance but one they can live without and try to. Sometimes, encounters are unavoidable. Those too are likely to be scary but not normally dangerous.

We're talking about the bears and not the hunting because the Blackfeet do in fact go hunting in this very beautiful and wild country pretty much whenever they want, and they asked you to join them. It was really an honor. There was elk, deer, mountain goats, and big horn sheep to be had, lots of them where no one else could hunt. You knew what a big deal it was to be invited along.

It was also a venture into big time grizzly habitat, which bothered them not at all because they did it all the time and insisted that grizzlies don't bother you if you leave them alone. That's what they all say. And they live here.

But it gave you a lot to think about, because if the hunt was successful, blood would be involved, and bears can smell blood

from miles away. Mainly they eat bugs and berries, huge amounts of them, but they are carrion eaters, too. Something recently dead will bring them running. When they arrive, they are willing to fight over who gets the goods. It was intimidating to think about. Scared the shit out of you, to tell the truth.

In the museum in Browning, there is a stuffed and mounted sow grizzly that is pretty impressive just to look at. Big, fierce, scary. Once you knew the story, she was very impressive, indeed.

The card said, "Shot by Louie Nightgun south of Browning near the Two Medicine, 1957." A couple of days later, you ran into Louie and asked him about it.

"A bunch of us was horseback, down near the Two Med, when we saw some big prints and I got down to look at 'em. Big grizz. Had a .357 with me and was down on a knee, looking at the tracks, when this sow come up outta the coulee and charged me.

"Ho! I was scared. Pulled my gun and shot her, point blank, real fast, right to the head. Them guys shot her best they could, too, but the horses was real spooked. She got to me and tore me up some. But I got lucky. One a them guys shot her right through that vein in her neck, bled her out pretty fast, so she didn't get me much as she could."

He was a small man, about 60 years old, in his tuk and his vest, his scarf tucked into an old shirt and his beat-up pants, a good pair of boots, deep creases in his angular, leathery face, with large scars on his neck under his ears that he touched unconsciously while he recalled that day.

“So, we got me fixed up back in town and the bear skinned out. Them museum was just getting’ goin’ and I guess they decided they needed a bear. They paid for stuffin’ it. Damnedest thing, though, when they skinned it out. All six a’ them magnum shells was flattened out to her forehead.”

You happened to be riding one afternoon with the resident grizzly bear expert of the Blackfeet Tribe when he got a call on his CB radio. Been a mauling near East Glacier. Victim deceased.

Guy was camped on the trail to the dump. And he had food in his tent. Other than that, it was hard to figure.

The bear eviscerated him. His head was missing. You and a few others, officials, most of them, searched the area. You found the skull. Hair still on it but the brains devoured.

Glacier Park was designated a national park in 1906. The first fatal grizzly mauling of a human was 1969. That year, in separate incidents in different parts of the Park, three people were killed by bears. Since then, it is infrequent but persistent, as encounters between humans and bears increase.

When you’re sleeping in your tent and a grizzly rips a hole in the side, you probably freak out. That gets the bear excited and he kills you. It’s not personal, of course, not even hostility on the part of the bear. He smells food, or maybe is just curious, tears into your canvas clad world, discovers you there, you are animated, he attacks and that’s it. Over. You are toast.

You were not an intended victim. Just an accidental encounter. But once the bear has killed you, your brains and entrails taste pretty good. So, he eats. That’s mostly what he does. You are on the very exotic side of his daily menu. Once in a

lifetime experience, you suppose. Nobody wants a bear with a taste for human flesh. So, it's a rare treat, just this once, but one he makes the most of.

By chance the director of the National Park Service was at Glacier. He was present at the investigation, too. Made a nice speech afterwards to the local press about how safe our national parks are, how welcome the visitors. Your sordid background as a newspaper reporter rose up. You caught him alone, said, "Would you sleep outside in Glacier Park?" He looked around, asked, "Are you the Press?" "No," you said, "just wondering is all." He looked around some more, seemed to focus, looked you in the eye, said, "Not on your life."

So, when the boys in Heart Butte took you hunting in the Great Bear, you were trepidatious. One thing you always disliked about hunting is getting up at O dark 30. That was not a problem on this hunt, which unfolded in Indian time like most everything else out this way. By the time you guys gathered, saddled up, headed out, rode way up into the back country, and set up camp, it was getting dark and time to eat. You had a meal around a roaring fire, and for your special entertainment, you suspected, everybody started to tell bear stories.

There were some good ones. Bear in the chicken coop, ate 20 or 50 dozen eggs and a bunch of the hens that laid them. Bear ate Bill Big Springs' sheep one night, gutted maybe 30 or 40 of 'em. Came back the next night, ate another couple dozen. Bear in a corral one night, horse kicked 'im and that bear tore its head clean off. Bear chasing him on horseback, ran him down at a full gallop, brought the horse down from behind, him tossed in

the bushes, bear tore that horse apart. Big boar, just keeps prowling afterwards, maybe marking the spot. When he left, two more arrived, smaller, maybe sows, and ate the horse. Ho! Ho! Everybody said. Ho! There were more stories. They just kept coming.

Finally, everybody got tired, the horses were hobbled, the fire burning low, you laid down on the ground with your blankets, head on your saddle, and tried to sleep. Listened long into the night to a lot of snoring and behind that noise you heard the sound of every creature out at night doing whatever it is they do and prayed none of them was a curious bear coming around to see.

Morning came. The hunt ensued. Another thing you never liked about hunting is the killing part. Stalking, seeing, the wilderness, the beauty; that part really works. Killing not so much. You're really not much of a hunter, truth is. The Blackfeet are after elk, deer, things to eat. Not trophies. That makes sense. This is a tradition with them. A means of survival and prosperity. They're good at it. It's as important today as always if they're going to have good food.

They took it very seriously, worked together beautifully, communication unspoken, and they got it done. Two elk and three deer. Each of them quickly field dressed, the hind quarters hitched on either side of the pack horses, other parts like the ribs and some organs rendered and kept, the rest left for the bears as distraction while we made our exit with the bloody cargo. The horses were not happy and led the way back to town

at a brisk pace. They smelled the bears and the bears smelled them.



The greatest danger though was always the cold. In winter, hereabouts, the storms came one after another and temperatures can stay well below zero all day every day for weeks on end. Usually, there were brief periods of respite that came along just when you thought you couldn't take it anymore; but they were brief, indeed, and soon enough the temperature plunged again, the snow fell and the wind blew it sideways into your face with unbelievable ferocity.

The people in Heart Butte talk about "open winters" and "closed winters." Closed winters are when you drive in an enclosed tunnel through the snow the twenty-five miles to Browning. You never had that experience, but there were times when the plowed snow was piled higher than the car on both sides of the road and the wind blew a steady stream of powder and ice crystals across the opening at the top, sometimes hard enough that it seemed to have closed the gap. That always gave you pause.

One evening when you were traveling in that time before cell phones, the desk clerk at the motel flagged you down. Said there was an emergency at home. Please call asap.

Linda advised when you reached her that the heating oil had run out. It was 35° below zero, the wind was blowing down the mountain front, gusting through the walls of the house, and she was huddled in her mother's mink coat, three layers of long

johns, seated in front of the electric stove with the oven on high and the door flung open. And she was freezing.

The heating oil guy somehow had missed you on his regular rounds, which was potentially a deadly mistake. You reached him by phone at 9:00 pm and in that brutal weather he left immediately from the refinery at Great Fall to bring the heating oil nearly 100 miles to Heart Butte. He knew the situation was life threatening and by midnight Linda confirmed the tank once again was full and the house gradually was warming. Fortunately, she lived to tell the tale.

One evening that same winter, near the end of a long day, you decided to make one last stop before heading home to catch a guy who lived a few miles east of Highway 287 back in the fields above Little Badger Creek. The sun had set, twilight was just thinning out, and the trail through this stretch of the high plains was maybe a foot deep with snow.

You were driving an American Eagle, an early version of an SUV made by Jeep, which was ugly as your worst sin but reliable and sure footed in the ice and snow. It also had a good heater, the defroster worked great, and you were very comfortable rolling through most everything winter around here could throw at you. So, although the weather was showing the first signs of getting downright nasty, and it was well along toward dark, you didn't think twice about heading off through the fields in the middle of nowhere to nail down another contract.

To appreciate the foolishness of that decision, realize that the majority of people who freeze to death in Montana die on their own property. When a storm begins to rage, and you have

to get feed to the animals, check on a yearling, a calf, or a kid, do something in the sheds, or the barn, or for whatever reason you must go out in the dark, you keep one hand on the rope that extends from the back door to each of your outbuildings, and you do *not* let go.

Because, if you do, and turn left instead of right in the blinding snow and wind and cold, you may wander just far enough away from your home that you are lost. As lost as being adrift at sea, except here the cold will eat relentlessly through your parka, your quilted jump suit, whatever it is you happen to be wearing, and before the light of day comes, you will be brought to your knees, then to lying on your side, and after you shiver and shake for a long time, a sudden warmth will envelop you, and you freeze to death.

So, when you were cruising across that frozen, dark, and stormy field at twilight in the southeastern part of the Blackfeet Reservation and just like that drove into a snow-filled coulee and sunk the car up to both axels, it was cause for concern. You thought a lot very quickly about what to do and decided the best thing to do would be walk to the place you were headed, probably a little over a mile ahead, and get Clinton Scabby Robe's family to crank up one of their trucks and pull you out.

You started walking. It was really getting cold, the wind blew the snow sideways, lashing your face and especially your eyes with rough-edged icy pellets, which formed in chunks along your lashes and as crystals in your nose. You zipped up deeper into your coat. The track in and out was pretty well formed. They

were a big family, and it was worn from their traffic, so following it was easy. Nothing else about it was hospitable.

This is damned wild country in any weather for a stroll across the fields. The bears by now are hibernating, but there are wolves up here and like every other species in winter they are probably hungry. Very unlikely to encounter them, but still. And for that matter, the packs of wild dogs are plenty bad enough. Some of them are so aggressive that, even in summer when you were fishing with a friend from the res on the Two Med, a pack appeared on the butte across the river, barking and snarling, then came down the side of the cliff and into the water, swimming toward us and didn't turn back until we shot two of them with the rifles from his truck. Even then, they only trotted away, circling slowly. Didn't even run.

The frozen fruit of your imagination and the memories that drove it were plentiful enough to carry you all the way to the cluster of shacks and two small log homes where not a soul anywhere among them was to be found. Nobody!

You were really cold and thought you might as well break in as stand there shaking and shivering, freezing. Get warm. But desperate as you were, you just couldn't do it. You knew these people well enough to knock on their door, even as it was getting dark, and expect they probably would accept it. You didn't know them well enough to assume they wouldn't mind if you broke into their home. Even to save yourself. "Why aren't you home where you belong, anyhow? 'Stead a breakin' into my place?"

You walked back to the car. It was unbelievably cold, but you made it. Dug the snow away from the exhaust pipe, started her up, and finally got warm. It took a long time.

But you were still stuck. As your senses regained equilibrium, you looked at the gas tank and realized you had enough gas maybe to leave it idling all night long, maybe 14 more hours until sunrise. At least you would be warm.

But you would sleep, too. While you did, the heat of the exhaust might melt the snow continually, or it might not. The sheer weight of all the snow already in the coulee and what was falling fast and furious might well overcome the exhaust and seal it in a bubble of frozen snow and ice. If so, you might not wake up at all.

The nearest place where people might be, once you made it back to the highway, was along the Little Badger maybe a mile, more likely two or so, from the intersection. Best case from here is a 2 ½ mile hike. Maybe as much as 4 miles! It is dawning on you that you might be in big trouble.

It is getting dark, and it is getting colder. The wind is blowing harder. It shakes the car a bit as you sit there thinking about what to do. What choice there is. Not much of one, except get walking.

At the Hudson's Bay Company in Lethbridge, Alberta the first winter here, you made a serious purchase: a parka the exact replica of what that company had built for Admiral Byrd and his trip to the South Pole. It seemed at the time you bought it that someday it might be a lifesaver. That day may have arrived.

It was quilted with goose down inside a thick, dense wool serge with a hood that zipped up into a tunnel of wolf fur through which you could see a very small, fragmented section of where you were going. It kept your face from being frostbitten and struck a good balance between the frigid air seeking to assault your nose and the moisture of each breath you exhaled.

Underneath it, you wore a wool tuk with ear flaps, flannel lined Carhartt jump suit, long johns, two pairs of socks inside a pair of Sorel Caribous, and ski gloves. You were well prepared for the cold and still shortly after you set out into the blinding snow, you were freezing.

At 287, at long last, you still felt pretty strong if very cold, but doubt began to creep into your thoughts about just how far in fact that first place west of the highway might actually be. Whether you could make it. It seemed like a question you'd rather not answer right now.

It's hard to hear in wind and snow like what was raging, but you suddenly heard what was a truck coming down the road. In weather like this, most people hunker down at home or wherever they happened to be when night falls, so you aren't going to encounter much traffic on a walk like this one. Maybe it's the first of many hallucinations? You turned to look and thank the gods, it was indeed a pair of headlights heading your way.

You did your best to jump up and down, wave arms wildly over your head, make yourself visible as possible. People will always stop for you in weather like this if you're on foot. They

know it's a matter of life and death. But he drove right on past you.

Your heart bounced off the ground and back into your chest, which was trembling. With disappointment. With fear. With a brief, blinding thought about giving up. Can't do it. Can do it! Go? Give up? You hunched over, began walking again, one foot, then the other, trying not to think but just move.

The truck pulled up next to you, door opened, "Get in!" a voice said. "Wow," he said to you after you were seated, shaking almost uncontrollably, "I almost didn't see you. Just caught a glimpse in the rear-view mirror when I went past. Took a bit to get stopped and turned around. Hey! You gonna be alright?"

He was driving a Power Wagon, had a winch, drove you in to where your car was buried, easily pulled it clear of the ditch, and you were on your way home. It took a long while to stop shaking, from the cold and the fear both. He probably saved your life. Never even got his name. Never saw him again. Would have liked to say thanks, now that you've thawed out and had a chance to think of it.



Saturday night in Heart Butte was like a night on the strip in Las Vegas, except maybe it started a little later and most everybody's wearing shades. Stick Game holds a cherished place at the very center of local social activities and the people take it seriously. Like any other type of gambling, it's fun if you win.

Winning came easy the first time out. Some local folks told you, "Come by Stick Game. At the Round House. Bring some money if you got it."

"How much?" you said.

"How much you got?" one of them said, and they all laughed.

One thing you always liked about the Indians you met was they had a great sense of humor. Probably the saving grace in getting through.

Another thing you liked is that a lot of them wore sunglasses at every hour of the day and night. Full time shades. It made you feel right at home.

So, you watched out your window as a few folks gathered from here and there in the dark that Saturday night and waited a while longer as more arrived until it seemed like the time to show up, not too early but soon enough to beat the crowd. Right around 11. Ha! When you got there, with a few hundred bucks in your pocket, hoping that wasn't too ostentatious, and your shades firmly in place, there already were seven games going, teams lined up on benches face to face, money all over the floor.

The cash was picked up and thrown down again too fast for a count, but a quick look showed thousands of dollars in play. And the action was hot! Drums were pounding, people were shouting, there was a deep murmur of chanting in the room. Some of the teams were very animated, their opponents perfectly still. Watching. The movement of the hands across the way. The feints, taunts. Five, six, seven people bouncing up and down, singing, chanting, yelling, trying to distract your eye from who has the bones? The sticks? Now? Follow the hand jive. She had them then, and he had them next, and then... Who has them now?

That is the game. People bet lots of money for the right to hide the sticks, find the sticks, back and forth, one team blazing away, full tilt boogie, one team stoic and focused. What you got behind your back? Each guess costs you some money. Unless you guess right. Then the money is yours. Something like that. You didn't exactly understand how it worked. There is a tremendous amount of energy generated by the game and expended by the players. Lots of teamwork, lots of ritual, lots of music, singing, drumming. A whole lot of motion, bodies swaying, arms waving, hands flailing. And lots of money changing hands.

The psychology of the game is critically important. The team that is hiding the bones tries to mesmerize the opposition. They create a dense puzzle of deception. A web of sudden turns, blind corridors, dead ends. Like seven games of hypnosis going on at once, with each side taking a turn at being hypnotist and subject. There are trances being summoned and inflicted. Suffered and survived.

Beginner's luck was yours and Linda's because neither of you understood the game completely so you couldn't be psyched out. The best strategies of the opposing players were lost on you, the rituals weren't yours, you didn't speak the language. so all the jive, the taunts, the insults did no harm, and you sure had no ego involved. The drums drew you into the rhythm of the action, the chaos of the room was so intense, the environment so different from anything familiar, that you had to withdraw from it, simply stare at the hands of the team across from you and watch the movement of the bones. And time and again, you won.

Mostly people were pretty good about it, some of them even impressed, but one old lady after Linda took her money several times in a row raised holy hell about “that white woman took ma’ money! Who say she cun’ play? Who bring her, huh? Ho! No white woman. No belong here. No good for me!”

It wasn’t a big deal, the games went on, but it made us enough of an issue that there was no longer any way we could duck out early. Which meant we were there until dawn. By then we’d given back some of our winnings, everybody was tired out, the old lady hadn’t been heard from in hours, and all was well.

Sometimes the action came early and unexpected. You walked out the front door of your little house one morning, ready for all sorts of things you had in mind to do and looked up just in time to see a silver tip grizzly cross the lawn between you and the car. He lumbered along steadily, looked at you, then away, kept moving, head swinging back and forth, a ridge of gray-white hair rising along his spine above his shoulders, near your height and he was down on all fours, rolled on out past the fence, out into the field and gone.

You jumped back inside, locked the door, breathed hard, thought, “What am I doing? That bear could take this house apart if he wanted to. What lock?” The closest you’ve ever been to a grizzly that you know of but, of course, you don’t know for sure. Sometimes in the mountains you’re probably a lot closer than you know. Everything was metaphorical, each moment a place to notice and to reflect, each event another reminder about getting comfortable.



"I heard a story 'bout a guy like you," Woody Kipp said one day. This was after he asked you for a smoke and you offered him a Camel, which he shrugged off and left the rest unsaid. It wasn't the first time he'd asked, and yeah, maybe you'd love to get high with him or anybody else in this beautiful place, but you knew enough to be very cool and keep your powder dry until you know each other *way* better than now and the place you occupy here is far more secure.

"Yeah," he continued, looking at you from under the brim of his battered hat, "it was a guy like you maybe. He was from Colorado, too, way down there somewhere, got sent up here for some reason and stayed awhile."

"That right?" you said, looking away as you said it then right back at him, meaning you wanted to hear more. He was insulted that you wouldn't trust him with some smoke, share a joint, and take this step with him who knows where?

The Kipps were from the early days, among the most prominent of the French-Canadian traders who parlayed with the tribes when this was the last best place to be an Indian, still wild, free, plentiful country where you could roam high, wide, and handsome, and where the traders converged to capture the game.

Woody lived on the side hill on the way into town, in one of a half-dozen homes that the Kipps inhabited there for many generations. They looked out over the swell of the land as it formed and reformed around Badger Creek in generous textures, colors, scents, and serrations, dropping away to the place where it fed the Two Medicine River off in the distance,

then on to the Marias, and rolled from there away to the Missouri.

The Kipps knew how things worked around here, and Woody was the man these days who was carrying the legacy. You first met up with him when a lease to his family's property came along, chased him down, and talked about the deal. The Kipps knew how to parlay, in the blood; it was easy to walk this one along. Asked a few questions, his share of the bonus, said that's fine and signed.

His share was pretty sizable, and for some reason, you asked him what he'd do with the money. Like so many of his people when they open up to you, his soul was that of a poet.

"We got rights to log up there," he said with a gesture over his shoulder toward that rich timber in the Great Bear up behind the place he stays. "Been thinking about buying them big horses, Percherons. Stand 19 hands and weigh a ton or more, some of 'em 2500 pounds. Couple of them I could log that land up there, drag the big trees back here to saw them up and sell.

"See myself leading them out of the forest, *big* trees they're dragging, and we come on down the hill. Just me an' them big horses pullin' them trees. Makes a beautiful picture. Get a big saw table set up out here and go to work. Think I would like that."

"So," you said to him, "what was the story?"

"Ho!" he said. "The story. Yeah, two guys, had a store, sold Indian stuff, art and all that, you know? One of 'em, guy kinda like you, white man, came around and stayed for a while. That's

okay but some of the guys think why? Know what I mean? Must be a reason.

"Yeah, this here's a beautiful place, sacred even. Maybe he knows that. Us're glad to be here. But we got put here, too. Told to stay. Know what I mean? That's one big reason that *we're* here. So, we think about why *he's* here and ask each other. What you think? All the time. What you think? So, I ast' him."

Woody was medium height, wiry, slim for a Blackfeet, maybe his French heritage there, in jeans, denim shirt, scarf, good boots, a beat-up cowboy hat. He had long braids, one over each shoulder, one down his back, sunglasses, a way of staying right in the middle of the conversation. Smart guy. Pretty cool.

"One nice day, kinda like this one," he said, "him and me was smokin' some weed." He looked at you quickly, looked away, made the point, continued. "Yeah, I do that sometime. Good stuff, too. We was sittin' there, laughing a little, 'jokes,' you know? And he says something about something and I jus' said, "Why did you come here? He said, 'You wanna know?'"

"Kinda a long story he told me then, but we was high, ya know, no hurry. Had the time. Sat there on the side of a hill and it just kinda rolled out. Called it 'Unbundled'. What he said."

"Sounds more like a dream you mighta had."

"Why you say that?"

"Cuz it's my story that you're talking about and I haven't told it to you yet. 'Unbundled' is a story I wrote a couple of years ago."

"Sometimes that happens to me," he said, looking at you from under the brim of his hat with a little smile on his face. "That

Injun mojo, ya know? Get to see stuff before it happens so I'm ready for it when it comes. Maybe even shape it a little different than it was gonna be. Know what I mean?"

"Like déjà vu?"

"Don't know if that's what it is or not. Somebody told me once that déjà vu got nothing to do with seeing the future, 'cept maybe a very little bit. He said it is the phenomenon of two synapses in the brain that are supposed to fire at the same time that got a little off. One fires, then the other, and our brain goes, 'Whoa, I seen this before.' A second before. You know? Think this is something bigger than that."

He smiled broadly, looked at you straight on, making sure you noticed how smart he really was, all them big thoughts tucked into local patois. "So, maybe now's the time to tell me."

The two of you walked a ways down the side of the hill, sat down in a spot where some tree stumps made for comfortable seating, and stretched out your legs. You reached in your pocket, pulled out a silver cigarette case, took one of the two joints it held, fired it up, and offered it to Woody.

He took a deep hit, held the smoke, blew out a long, slow stream and smiled, settled back some where he sat, said, "Yeah, this is what I meant about shaping things a little. You wanna tell me that story now?"

And you did. It was something like this.

"Here's what I don't understand," Snake was saying, doubtful, being the shrewd New York Jew. "The guy shows up out of nowhere, looks around and decides he wants to be a collector. Is that right?"

Smooth Dog ignored the intensity Snake tried to bring to the discussion, being not just the Dog but the *Smooth* Dog. "Something like that," he answered, his manner offhand.

"In fact, he wants to buy a collection?"

"Right."

"So, you tell him about the stuff in Oregon and right away he wants to buy it?"

"Right."

"So, here's what I don't understand. He wants to be a collector, but he doesn't know what he wants. He just wants a collection. Not blankets or beadwork or baskets or anything in particular. Just a collection, whatever it is?"

"Like what we've got here is what he said."

"But that's what I don't understand," the Snake said yet again. "He isn't buying a collection. He's buying an inventory. Am I right?"

"That's what he wants."

"Because he's going to open a gallery?"

"He has some space on the main drag in Cheyenne. Owns the building. His tenant left, folded, whatever. Said he came in here, looked around, thought: why not?"

"Probably thought: if we can do it, anybody can, huh?" the Snake said, putting him down, making it "we" when Dog's the one who talked to the guy.

"Probably thought he don't have to make a living off it like we do."

"Because he's like an attorney, right? You checked him out?"

"Yeah, I checked."

"And learned what?"

"Mostly does divorces. Lots of those in Cheyenne, I guess. Air Force and cowboys. Has an office on the second floor of this building. Big picture window on the first floor. Thinking about how good his stuff is gonna look, all the people passing by."

"So, like what? He's gonna run downstairs every time somebody wanders in, leave the blonde in the beehive sitting there with her legs crossed and the hanky in her hand, saying to herself: whatever happened to that lawyer I was just telling about the way Buck's been treating me, how much alimony I'm gonna need? While he's downstairs selling pottery to some tourist?"

One random day at the gallery, Dog was approached by a stocky guy with short red hair and a strong sort of look about him. He was dressed like a gentleman cowboy, a crisp rayon shirt with pearl buttons, denim pants and regular boots, no hat and no sign of chew in his pockets.

He was very interested in the art on the walls and asked again and again, well, what's that? Yeah, well, and what's that? And he'd point again at another object and stare at it intently and listen carefully while it was described, and then move on to the next thing that caught his attention. And say, huh, well, tell me about that. What did they use it for? Pointing at it and looking back at Dog with his quick blue eyes. Then listening some more. This went on for a while and Dog was glad to oblige this guy because it happened that what he did right now was

know this stuff and love it and like to tell anyone who asked about it a lot of what he knew.

But this guy was of a different order. Other people showed this kind of interest, but they were deferential. Not this guy.

My name's Bill Wilson, he said at one point and Dog shook his hand. Glad to meet 'cha. I really like this stuff, really do. I'd like to buy some of it.

Well, said Dog, smooth as could be, that's why I'm here.

But, no, I mean I really want to buy a lot of it. Like a whole collection. Don't you have anything like that?

Do you mean you want to buy a collection of American Indian Art? Do you know what that would cost, a collection like this I mean?

How much? Wilson asked.

Well, you understand you couldn't buy this stuff here as a collection unless you bought the business. It's worth a lot, either way, but there's only one way you could get it and that's buy us out. The business, you understand. Sometimes a gallery like mine comes up for sale, but not any that I know of now. So, there're only a few big collections in private hands to be had and all of us in the business are looking at buying them ourselves, so that affects the price.

How much? he asked again.

For instance, there's a pretty good collection out in Oregon that's for sale, pretty damn good as a matter of fact, but quietly for sale. I can tell you Oregon because you couldn't find it for yourself if you tried. If you did, you'd spend more getting it done than you'd spend working with me and I know what I'm doing.

We could buy it outright, you and me, and you'd have a good start on this kind of a collection. It won't come cheap.

How much?

\$300,000. Supposed to be worth six or seven easy. Maybe we could get it for less.

Okay, well, I'd like to look at it.

They'd want to know right away whether you're serious. First thing they'll want to know is can you afford it. I need to be able to tell them before we could begin to talk.

Wilson smiled a small private smile and leaned in toward Dog intimately. You tell them I'm very serious about seeing what they've got and if I like it, I'll buy it. Tell them that and tell them I damn sure can afford it. Let me know what they say.

He left a card with name and number and the fact that he was an attorney with an office in Cheyenne, which was found to be part of the story when Dog checked him out, but only a part. He also was the Attorney General of Wyoming, the native son of a very prominent family and owner of one of the nation's largest collections of antique firearms. Indications were that he can afford it.

The Dog called out to Oregon and spoke to the whacko who owned the stuff, some small-town guy with a large collection of pre-and-early-reservation material that came mostly from California, the Basin, Plateau and Plains areas, with a few very valuable Tlingit and other Northwest Coast pieces that were instant cash.

It's probably worth a million, the fellow said with a lilt in his voice and probably a prance in his stance, as well. But we can talk.

Dog arranged to see it. He and the Snake drove out to Lakeview in his 1961 Cadillac sedan, which he had acquired when he appraised an estate in Colorado Springs and after two days of poring over the stuff and assigning a value to all of it, and thinking about all the work it was going to be to type it up on his very clean stationery for the insurance company and the courts, the client said, oh, there's one more thing and, while they headed toward the garage where it was housed, asked him what his fee was going to be, and Dog was about to tell him it was \$1200 when he saw the Caddy up on blocks, its thick white paint gleaming, the blue on blue leather trimmed velour upholstery without a scuff or a wrinkle, the big white wall tires sitting in a stack nearby with not a sign of wear, and the odometer when he looked inside reading 200 miles, all original.

I'd take this car for my fee he said, and the client fell all over himself in agreeing to the arrangement, being a guy who preferred not to part with cash when he had his druthers. So it was that Dog returned in a few days with his friend Billy and the Snake, who dropped them off, the appraisal in hand, together with 10 gallons of gas, oil, transmission fluid, and a new battery, which they put in the Caddy and cranked her up. She fired instantly and away they went in his brand-new car. When they reached that stretch of the Interstate where it leaves Castle Rock, spreads out into four lanes and heads up the hill toward Denver, he punched it to the floor and it hesitated for a moment

before roaring to life, throwing both of them back against the plump bench seat and leaping up the hill like a rocket being launched. Damn, said Billy with a smile, 12 years old and it's never been in passing gear before! Off they went at a pretty clip to Boulder.

And so it was that he and Snake were riding through the west on their way to bumfuck Oregon in the big white Caddy with a lot on their minds and more than a little concern. They were concerned about getting this appraisal done, needed to make sure they did it right so that if Wilson actually bought it, they would make some badly needed money from the deal but make it knowing that they'd done right by their client. There was that. Then there was their concern about how much to charge him and how much of what they sold him they could move for him quickly so that he could get a chunk of his money right back and take the selling of the rest of it at an easier pace. And they were concerned too about dealing with this whack job of a collector who had run off every other buyer who'd approached him over the past couple of years. Even if Wilson really does want to buy it, there's no assurance this guy really wants to sell. Could be he's just a queen holding court in his little hometown with nothing better to do, liking it when people come around trying to curry his favor. Like every other prospect at this stage of the transaction, they were concerned about whether it was real or whether perhaps they were wasting their time chasing after ghosts.

But mostly right now they were concerned with the size of the gas tank in the Caddy, the distance they had to cover

between Winnemucca and Lakeview where the collection awaited, and whether in fact they could make it on one tank of gas. The road between them when they reached it, after filling up the tank in Winnemucca and asking about it with the locals who said yes indeed it was the route to Lakeview and was passable last time they heard, was in fact marked No Maintenance Proceed at Your Own Risk, and for the next 190 miles except for the pavement beneath their wheels there was not a building, a sign, a post, a fence, or any other indication of civilization, except one. Just a strip of two-lane blacktop through the wild land climbing up from the desert.

This beauty of a car weighed 5800 pounds, had steel an inch thick that made up its body, which was covered in chrome, and a 358-cubic-inch engine with a four-barrel carb that squeezed out maybe 14 miles to the gallon and the tank held 16 gallons, which should be just barely enough. They'd make Lakeview on fumes if they were lucky.

They were sitting very lightly, more so as the drive progressed and the extent of the emptiness they were passing through was manifest, sitting lightly as though they didn't want to weigh down the car, make its passage any more difficult, consume any more gas than was absolutely necessary to get there.

"This is the weirdest place I've ever been in my life," said the Snake. "You think anybody lives around here anywhere?"

"When we hit the halfway point, the road bends to the left at a place called Denio Junction. There must be something there."

"Like a town, you mean."

"Doubt it. More like a store or a camp or something. It's marked on the map with a name, but none of those little dots they use to indicate a town. More like just a name."

"Like the Painted Desert or something? I was asking about people."

"There was a piece in the paper a while back mentioned Denio Junction."

"Yeah? What'd it say?"

"Said there'd been a couple of people, some guy and a chick, camping out near here. They were murdered."

"Don't tell me that shit! It's not funny. We're out here in the middle of nowhere and you're telling me the only other two people probably ever been here got killed? By what, a bear or something?"

"Murdered, not killed."

"By who?"

"Whom."

"Whom! Who the fuck murdered them?"

"Said the cops looked around for a long time. Found some tracks and other evidence right away, but they had to look a long time before they found this guy. Some kind of a hermit. Lived in a hole in the ground out in the desert."

"Bullshit. He lived in a hole in the ground. Are you serious?"

"That's what it said."

"Why'd he kill them?"

"Said they were trespassing."

"What, on his desert? What are we doing then?"

"He's locked up."

“Yeah, but you wonder: are there anymore out there like him?”

It was quiet then. The stillness was deafening. Just the quiet whoosh of the tires passing through this alien land and no other sight or sound.

“Bullshit,” the Snake said again, sounding wishful but he didn’t say anymore, just sank a little deeper in his seat and stared at the emptiness out the window, thinking no doubt he was a long way from Brooklyn.

It was getting deep into dusk and the road they were driving was passing ever deeper into a landscape of sterile beauty, not a tree or a bush but only scrub brush here and there to be seen. Denio Junction had come and gone, a trailer and a tiny building of some sort, looking lived in but not especially welcoming. Very mean looking dog on a chain but no other sign of humanity about.

A long pool of lava beds stretched out in all directions before them and big cracks appeared every so often in the surface of the land to either side of them, as though there might come a place very soon where the road was swallowed up and them with it, but they pushed on. What else to do?

The needle on the gas gauge dipped toward empty, the road continued to unfurl, the darkness came over them, and their thoughts for a long time rested in a crevice of wonder where they thought about how far they could make it on foot in this place if they had to, and both of them after thinking about it privately concluded that they wouldn’t make it very far at all and in fact would be likely to expire in this desolate place where

they'd never be found...except maybe by some hermit who was inclined to kill them for trespassing.

About the time they came to accept that as a possibility, there was a faint glow on the horizon growing closer and as the warning light indicated they were nearly out of gas, they rolled into Lakeview, got a room, and made a call to the man they were seeking.

Oh, do come right on out he said you can take a quick look at my collection, and we can take a good look at you. He was a queen all right and a sour one too, it seemed. Introduced a couple of local characters and then the county sheriff who did indeed have a hard look at them, and they were just tired enough to show him back a fair amount of attitude, asking can they be certain if they buy this collection that his county is a safe place to transport such valuable goods? Don't you worry, he replied, we'll keep a close eye on you. You can be sure of it.

Well then, any other questions? their host asked. Dog cocked an eye at him, snuggled up a little closer just for the sake of the impression it would make on these guys, cleared his throat, and said, yeah where's the lake?

The lake? They all looked at each other and then back at him. Lakeview, he said. I'd like to view it.

Turns out the nearest lake is 50 miles away and one of the boyfriends offered that the name of the town was a sly reference to prehistoric Lake Bonneville, the remains of which they'd driven through in crossing the Great Salt Desert and which maybe could have been seen from here in long ago times. If you were a dinosaur, he said. Ha-ha.

“Bullshit,” the Snake said, and somebody laughed but not for long.

They took a quick look at some of the loot the fellow had laid out for them, arranged to come back first thing tomorrow to appraise the entire collection, said a friendly good night to the sheriff, went back to their room, and smoked a very large joint before falling deeply asleep.

This collector planned to discuss each item with them individually, and the first thing they did that next morning was firmly dissuade him of that notion. They took the pieces from him as fast as he could produce them, looked at each of them quickly, calculating its worth and adding up each of them as they came along, how many, and how much, and when they hit their stride, they were handling and handing off for packing maybe a half dozen a minute to look at each one of them and pass them on. The two of them were in a rhythm, cooking, and the collector was freaking out, certain that they were dissing his stuff, failing to appreciate the rarities that they were handling, and on and on.

But they were on top of it! They had it down, and it's a good thing too, because it wasn't far into the day before the guy stopped freaking and instead subtly began to ferret away piece by piece in some other place stuff they had just appraised and counted toward a total. He was trying to steal it back before he'd even sold it. Get paid for it and keep it.

They called him on it time after time and believed when all was said and done, they'd got back every piece they were shown,

but who knows? With that sort of hassle and the sheer volume to be handled, they worked through the day and finally got it done.

Here's the deal, Dog told the collector, who by now was a little frazzled but still trying to keep it together. We're going to go back to our room, talk to our guy, give some thought to what we can pay you, shower, clean up, have a drink, and then we can make you an offer before dinner or after, whichever you'd prefer.

Well, I'd prefer it during dinner. You two absolutely must dine here tonight. God, wherever else in this town would you eat? No, be here for drinks at 6:30 and dinner at 7:00. Then we can discuss it. Will that work for you? Lovely, see you then.

And they left, out through the arched wooden door and into the last little bit of the sunlight. Neither of them said a word until after they'd climbed in the Caddy, driven back to their room and past it to the bar down the road, ordered up a couple of stiff drinks, Snake's a Scotch and Dog's a vodka martini, and after the drinks were served and they'd settled deep into the cushiony Naugahyde booth and belted back half their drinks, not until then did they say a thing. But then they had plenty to say.

"I see \$600K value," he said to the Snake, "what about you?"

"Yeah, six and change I'd say. Most of it's all right, some's very good, and some of it's fucking incredible! Just incredible."

"Yeah, I can turn those slave knives in a heartbeat for \$50K and there's plenty of other stuff there we can move without a lot of heartburn, make some very good money doing it. There's stuff there we could sell all day long in the store and other stuff as

good as anything we have right now. Be worth it just to have it on the walls."

"So, you're saying that we can take our end in cash or product, either way, and make out like we need to? That what the Smooth Dog thinks?"

"I'd rather have the cash 'cause we need it that bad and it's quicker. But if we took 15% of the stuff off the top, the best stuff there, took it at his cost and took the time to move it, then of course I'd rather do it that way 'cause we'd make two or three times as much and he wouldn't know the difference. But then that's not the way we do things, is it? Tempting as it seems. Let's be straight shooters. Right? Forget it!"

"I just hope we're not wasting our time," said the Snake. "We can't afford to. Nobody else has gotten him to agree to a price. Why do we think we will?"

Dog said, "It's like the time I was living in Raton and my Great Aunt Annie got it into her head one day to have me weed the back yard. Mostly she and Uncle Frank treated me good. But for some reason she sent me out to weed the yard one day and it was a big yard, rural, you know, even though it was right in town, maybe half an acre, and I buckled down, worked my ass off for fifteen or twenty minutes, and when I looked up, I'd barely put a dent in it. You know?"

"There was nothing but weeds as far as I could see. It was hotter than hell and I just said screw it. Told Annie that was the best I could do, and she let it be but never really treated me the same way again, at least that was the way I felt about it. I've kept on thinking about it ever since, how I could have made the

effort and ended up with a better outcome for me and for my Aunt. It didn't seem possible at the time to make all of the steps that were needed to get it done. But I wish I had tried, you know?

"That's kinda how I feel about this. I don't know where Bill Wilson came from and I don't know if this old queer is going to sell us his stuff, but I want to find out. And until I find out otherwise, I'm betting that he will."

He went off to a pay phone to call Wilson and told him the deal. "It's worth an easy \$600K, maybe \$750K if you take your time selling it. We'll offer him \$250,000 cash, subject to your final approval when you see it. That's not a problem 'cause you'll love it. It's great stuff. You owe us another \$25,000 in cash, plus the right to sell \$100,000 worth of it and split the profit with you. That's our fee. We'll make another \$25K and you'll get back more than a quarter of what you laid out within 60 days. Does that work for you?"

"Let me make sure I've got this right," Wilson said. "I'm paying \$275,000 total, \$25K to you and \$250K to him. When you say cash, I take it a cashier's check? Right? Okay. Then you're gonna sell \$100K of it in 60 days. I get \$75K and you get \$25K. Is that right?"

"Exactly right."

"So, what is it you're gonna sell so fast? The best stuff?"

"We're going to sell a few of the very high-end items, things we have customers for that you'd be hard pressed to move for anywhere near what we can get for them. You'll make more this way than if you sold them yourself and it gets us the commission

we deserve without having to soak you for all cash. If you'd rather keep all the stuff and pay us \$50K in cash, that'd be okay, too."

"Go ahead and make him the offer. We'll do it your way. It makes sense to me. Are you pretty sure he'll take it?"

"I hope so. I'll sure be pissed if he doesn't but there's no way to know 'til we try. He's a weird guy but I think it's gonna work out."

"Well, if you have to go a little higher, do it. Don't let it get away over a few more dollars. Call me the minute you know, no matter what time. I can be there tomorrow afternoon with the check."

"You got a plane?"

"Friend'll fly me over. You can line up a truck to rent and I'll drive back with you. Your partner can drive your car back, huh?"

"Okay, I'll let you know. If he says no, I may need an attorney 'cause I just might kill the son of a bitch."

"I'm sure we can find you one if need be. Let's hope we won't."

"Oh, there's one more thing. There's a piece you're going to let me keep until I can arrange the right thing to do with it. It's something we can't sell."

"Why not? What is it?"

"Medicine bags. Called the Buffalo Bundles. Big mojo, very important artifact of the Blackfeet Tribe. Three branches of the tribe, each of them had a keeper of a Bundle. This is one of them."

"What's it worth?"

"It's literally priceless. And it literally can't be sold. It wouldn't be kosher. I'll look into it, see what's the right thing to do. Chances are we'll donate it, hopefully to the tribe. Save you some taxes. But it's my call. Agreed?"

"Only medicine I take is for my allergies. Do what you have to do."

And that was that. Over dinner, they talked about the collection and Indian Art in general, waiting until the dessert was cleared and coffee served before they made the offer.

"\$250,000! Are you kidding? You're kidding. I know you are. I wouldn't sell it for less than half a million. My god, darling, it's worth twice that much."

"Actually, my friend, it's worth barely \$600,000 retail if you sold it one piece at a time over the next ten years. You *might* get six for it then, and frankly it could be none of us will live long enough to see that eventuality anyhow."

The collector now was sputtering, working himself up, but Dog cut him off. "Here's something else to consider. You're quickly running low on anybody to sell this stuff to, know what I mean? You've screwed around with just about everybody who's come out here to look at it, run off just about all the guys who've got the kind of cash I'm talking about, and your reputation has gotten around. We might be the last guys who'll be willing to make you an offer. Maybe you better think about whether or not you really want to sell 'cause if you do, you just got as good an offer as you're going to get."

"Dale, honey, calm down now," his dinner companion was telling him, "please don't get yourself so upset." But Dale was

plenty upset, and Dog knew enough to bring discussions to an end for tonight.

"We'll be leaving in the morning. If you change your mind before then, give us a call. Otherwise, we'll just thank you for the dinner and take our collector elsewhere."

He and the Snake left quickly and said not a word to each other all the way back to the motel. When they got there, a message was waiting.

"I'll give you 48 hours to get me a cashier's check in hand and get the stuff out of my sight. I hope you feel good about yourself."

They looked at each other and decided that yes, they did feel very good indeed.

It was nearly midnight in Wyoming when they reached Wilson to give him the news. "No shit!" he said. "Yeehaw!" He actually said that, too. "I'll be at the Lakeview airport by two tomorrow afternoon, checks in hand, one for him and one for you. Line up a truck and we'll start loading it up as soon as we can get together with him. Damn, Mr. Dog, I'm really pleased!"

"You'll be happy when you see the stuff. It should work out good for both of us."

"Oh, I just know it will. Don't doubt it for a minute. See ya at the airport."

And that again was that.

Early the day after Wilson arrived and Snake had departed, they were packed up and on the road. Driving the big Ryder truck back to Wyoming with Bill was a trip, so to speak. The guy was really a wild man. They traveled the same road in reverse

that he and the Snake had taken but with a much more animated response from Wilson.

"Damn, look at them antelope, everywhere you look...This is beautiful country, I like it wild... Hey, let's pull over here and see just who in the hell lives at Denio Junction...that dog won't hurt us none, will you, boy...nobody home, I guess, too bad, I would have liked to meet him...sure has himself a mouthy hound" and on like that for most of the trip, and when they got to Winnemucca, Wilson insisted they stop for a little blackjack at one of the casinos.

"We've got a load of art in the back you just paid a lot of money for and you're gonna trust it to a padlock while we play cards? You've got to be crazy, man."

"Aw, it'll be all right. We'll just play a few hands."

Dog said he'd stay with the truck, but Bill wouldn't hear of it. "Come on, you can't pass through Nevada without trying your luck," so they finally found a place where they could back up flush against a brick wall, making it harder if not impossible for someone to get into the bed, "although that doesn't mean it can't be hotwired and driven away," Dog pointed out.

"You worry too much," said Wilson and off they went.

They played for an hour or more. Wilson won a grand, while Dog, who was so anxious he could hardly sit still, lost a couple of hundred before he dropped out and waited nervously by the door. He couldn't see the truck from there but only the driveway where it would have to exit if somebody stole it, and for whatever good that would do him, it was better than looking at

aces and eights. Course it didn't matter. The truck was untouched when they got back to it.

"Damn, I like to gamble," said Wilson as they pulled away and, in fact, he wanted to stop again in Elko when they pulled over for gas, but Dog told him to forget it. They drove straight on through the night and all the next day to Cheyenne, some 900 miles in all, taking turns at the wheel while the other dozed. And while they both were awake, they carried on a palaver of the sort that doing a deal of this magnitude can often bring about, one that grew increasingly intimate the more tired they became, so that by the time they reached Bill's home on the night of the following day, they both had revealed more about themselves than either likely intended.

"Come in for something to eat," he said to Dog as they pulled into the long driveway leading to a very large house. "Then you can take the pickup back to Boulder and I'll fly down with one of the boys in a couple of days to drive it home."

It was 1974, hardly the age of enlightenment in relations between men and women, but Dog still was shocked by how rudely Wilson treated his wife. He greeted her without kiss or hug and barely introduced Dog before ordering her to "fry us up some chicken and potatoes while I show him my guns" and turned his back on her to lead the way down a broad staircase to the basement.

There was a large, elaborate entertainment center and through another door was what can only be called a very big vault with a combination lock, an alarm system, and a thick steel door that swung open easily and soundlessly after it was

disarmed. Inside was a stunning collection of guns, pistols and rifles of every sort in expensive mountings in floor cases and all along the walls, which enclosed an area the size of a tennis court.

“Most of these are antiques,” Wilson told him. “They date clear back to the beginnings of firearms, although you wouldn’t know it from the condition they’re in. They look brand new, don’t you think?” he said and looked at Dog for confirmation before beginning to describe them in detail, pointing out his favorites, their history, and how he’d acquired them.

It was a subject Dog knew nothing about and he was dead tired from the drive, but even so it was impressive and got his attention in spite of it all. The same attraction to beauty that stimulates a collector’s passion to acquire is obvious in any quality collection, and craftsmanship this fine is truly a thing of beauty, regardless of the object’s intended purpose. Weapons weren’t Dog’s idea of art, but he saw in them a terrible beauty, nonetheless. It was clear that Wilson had closed this loop, completed this collection, and now was moving on. In the truck in his driveway was his next obsession, stuff that someday soon would be as familiar to him as these guns.

When they finally sat down to eat, the man surprised him again by cutting into the chicken, throwing down his knife, and yelling at his wife, “This isn’t cooked through, damn it. Put it back on the stove and get it right.” With that, he grabbed Dog’s plate with one hand and his own with the other, shoving them at the woman and turning back to his guest to say, “Sorry about that. I can’t abide a chicken that isn’t cooked through.”

When Dog finally got back on the road, driving Wilson's Ranger XLT with a nice camper shell in the back "in case you want to grab a nap on the way," he was catching a second wind. He was beat, yeah, but really feeling good. Just made \$25K and a clear shot at another \$25K in hand. Very badly needed, too.

Let's face it. The gallery was hanging by a thread, always had been since they opened it a couple of years ago with his modest collection and about \$20 grand in borrowed money. This definitely bumped up the ante, gave them just a bit of breathing space. Plus, it was another rung in their climb up the ladder, another success these two guys from nowhere could claim. Word gets around and the fact that they had pulled this off where a number of better-known dealers had failed was good for their reputation.

When he crossed over I-80 on I-25, he fired up a big spliff and took several hits, soon to be sailing along in the friendly breeze that was carrying him down this road. It was 125 miles to his home, and he wanted to really relax for the next two hours or so, give himself a break after so many days of tension and stress, take some time to enjoy this success, which was badly needed and well deserved.

He was settling into this state of mind, a place where he could see the rightness of his pleasure, the moment of satisfaction in knowing that through his good efforts the wolf for another few months at least was kept from the door. He was realizing once again how much baggage he carried around just because he was trying to do things *his* way, rather than the way he'd been told all his life that things had to be done.

He could hear his father the day the old man realized that he at age 15 finally had left home for good, saying, "You're a fuck up, boy, you've made a big mistake. If you have any sense, you'll turn around right now and get back where you belong. Nobody pays you to do what you want. They pay you to do the job. You better get your head on straight, because you're well on your way to being a bum. And nobody's going to give a damn when you come crying."e was realizing how much baggae he carried just because he was rt

Nobody did give a damn, he was thinking, although they watched with a certain grudging respect and more than a little resentment from their predictable routines. He was out there on a limb, and they didn't give a damn whether he flew or he fell. They only cared enough to watch and see what would happen to him in spite of it all, as though it instructed their own lives.

He was thinking these thoughts and feeling pretty good about himself, not smug exactly but at least relieved and on the edge of comfortable, when the red lights began to flash in his rear-view mirror. The state patrol was pulling him over and, um, oh yes, the cab of the truck was still full of smoke.

He took his time pulling over, simultaneously fired up a cigarette and rolled down both windows, letting the rush of air and the rapid exhalation of nicotine smoke do whatever it could do to cover for him as he finally came to a stop.

"Can I see your license and registration, please" said the cop from tight against the cab of the truck directly over Dog's left shoulder.

"Of course, officer," said Dog, keeping his movements easy and his hands in plain sight. "My license is right here," he said, handing it out the window. "This isn't my truck, it belongs to my friend, but I would bet the registration is in the glove box. Let me take a look."

And it was. He handed it over and sat quietly with both hands on the top of the steering wheel while the cop took a long look at the paperwork. Finally, he moved around to face Dog, looked him hard in the face and asked, "Just what exactly are you doing with Bill Wilson's truck?"

"Oh, do you know Bill? We just got back from a road trip together. I'm heading home. He's going to pick up the truck in a couple of days when he comes down to visit."

"And why should I believe that? How do I know this truck isn't stolen?"

"I just left his house a few minutes ago. You could call him. I'm sure he's still awake. Did you say you know Bill?"

"I know he's the attorney general. What I don't know is why some hippie is driving his truck."

"Well, sir, I'm not 'some hippie.' I'm the owner of an art gallery in Boulder, Colorado, and Bill is a customer of mine. We just bought a collection together for one helluva lot of money and drove it all the way back here straight through from the West Coast and I'm really tired and I want to get home. I'm driving Bill's truck 'cause he told me to take it and I've said you can call him to confirm it, so I don't know what else you want from me, unless it's to bust my balls."

The cop looked at him long and hard for a while, leaning in toward the window with his left arm resting on the roof of the cab, then he said, "In the first place you were speeding and in the second place you're driving a truck that doesn't belong to you. Oh, yeah, and the third thing is, marijuana's still illegal in this state, so I guess if I wanted to bust your balls, you've given me plenty of reason." Then he flipped the license and the registration into his lap. "Why don't you get your ass on home to Boulder." With that, he turned and walked away.

Dog carried the three boxes into his gallery and back to his office, where he carefully unpacked them. He lifted the baskets free first, setting each one aside after looking it over for any damage and feeling relieved to find none after having carted them a thousand miles by truck.

They were the most fragile of the material he brought with him, and even though you always feel you packed them carefully, the exit from Lakeview had been hurried, the process distracted by the need to inventory the collection repeatedly, making certain nothing had been quietly spirited away by the seller, who was unhappy, duplicitous, and less than gracious as they loaded the truck.

Three of these baskets were among the things he had not so innocently set aside and protested his ignorance when they reclaimed them. Crooked he was, but at least he had taste. This is very good material.

Most of the baskets in his collection were the typical Oregon-Northern California material from the Hupa, Yurok, Karok tribes, nice but common vessels woven from willow, pine root and

maidenhair fern. Basketry of native peoples evolved over time from utilitarian purposes to more decorative uses and much of it eventually was made to sell. Those baskets he'd left with Bill Wilson were good gallery material. Attractive, relatively cheap, they were easy to sell.

This dozen, however, were Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakiutl, and a few Aleutian baskets, early, rare, very finely woven, and exquisite. Their value was correspondingly high.

The Northwest Coast tribes had highly structured communities among which were artisan societies, skilled makers of elaborately carved masks, bowls, spoons, knives, every manner of implement, and totem poles, lodges, ocean-going canoes, and beautifully woven robes, mats, hats, nets, and baskets into which were worked the designs emblematic of their respective clans and their very ritualistic way of life.

In pre-history these peoples enjoyed the same largess the environment bestows today. Fish, game, and other foodstuffs are plentiful, water is clean, pure, dependably replenished, the weather is temperate, living is easy. Then as now, survival was easily accomplished, abundance was to be had.

By the standards of indigenous peoples, the Northwest Coast tribes were rich, leisure was commonplace, their way of life accommodated elaborate rituals and complex artistic expression. They were successful warriors, too, often raiding lesser tribes for booty, children, and slaves. So prosperous did they become that potlatches, a kind of celebratory tribal give-away party, were hosted regularly as a demonstration of the giver's wealth. The most dramatic statement was made by large, sharp knives

with elaborated carved and painted handles, aptly called “slave killers,” which were used to publicly execute one or more of the host’s slaves, just because he could afford to.

Dog stared at the baskets for a long time, the spruce root warp and weft interwoven with dyed grasses that comprised the designs, some of them so tightly woven with a twined technique that they held water, some so seemingly fragile that it amazed him he could hold them in his hands a hundred years or more after they were made.

One of them was an Aleutian basket from the Attu, a tiny tribe of Inuit people inhabiting the westernmost of those islands that extend from Alaska to nearly the Siberian edge of Russia where that chain of inhospitable land separates the Gulf of Alaska and the Pacific from the Bering Sea and where the baskets are made of sea grass roughly the thickness of human hair, which the basket makers in this faraway land gather when the weather is good and cure the grasses by a means used continuously since prehistory. When the winter settles in, the days and nights are dark, the wind howls and the seas churn, in their little domiciles lit perhaps by whale oil they gather the grasses and separate them into individual strands which they clamp between their teeth, firmly holding each in place, and, having moistened that strand at the end in her mouth, the basket weaver grasps the outer husk on each side between her gnarled thumb and first finger of each hand and strips it into three long pieces, of which she keeps only the middle third to weave with and discards the outer pieces.

Once, under a powerful molecular microscope in the museum at the University of Colorado just up the Hill, Dog was able to photograph one square inch of an Attu basket and enlarge that picture by 100 times, and when he methodically counted and then, in disbelief, recounted the stitches that were shown, he was able to confirm that in that one square inch of weaving there were 5,600 of them.

Sitting in his office with just such a basket, one perhaps not quite that fine but very close, and who really can say without a sophisticated microscope to assess it, he was as always simply stunned to have such a thing of beauty in his hands. Who were these people? Who are these people? What are they telling him?

Well, in fact, they're telling him and anyone else who pays attention what it was like to be them in that time when they were sovereign nations in the full flower of their evolution as a people, as peoples who once long ago migrated into this thawing, lush, unpopulated land, one wave succeeding another over tens of thousands of years and spreading to every corner of the continent, where they displaced the previous occupants or were rebuffed by them and deflected to another path.

One thing is certain: over time, most all of these peoples who at one time were somewhat homogenous groups became very widely distributed throughout the land.

So, when you encounter their art and artifacts, there is a lot to discover and a seemingly endless series of revelations to be had. You learn that cultural similarities are more attuned to the environment in which they live than the language stock from which they derive, that amity and enmity are shifting states of

encounter based on need or aspiration, and that war itself most often was a game of adventure where courage and bravery were tested, prowess demonstrated, booty garnered, and influence extended. Injury and death in battle in raids were rare, except when territory was at issue and whole clans or tribes fought to protect their home.

And you learn all this because their art makes you notice. There is a profound beauty in these things that can't be dismissed nor ignored, once it comes into your life. These people communicate and you begin to hear them.

Theirs is a way of life centered on ritual, and much of what is spiritual to them is manifest in their art, in the ways they decorate their clothing, their implements, and themselves. But some of it is secret, too, for initiates only.

When the sacred buffalo bundles of the Picunni Blackfeet came into your life, you knew better than to open them. They are central to some of the most profound medicine of that proud and powerful tribe, whose three divisions, the Siksika, Kaigani, and Picunni, each had a keeper of that group's bundles and its medicine was powerful.

These people once inhabited the lands north of Lake Superior and west of Lake Winnipeg. They seem to have had no allies and fought other tribes in the region for the best hunting lands and the most accommodating places to camp, even though they too were mostly Algonquin peoples.

In very early historic times, when European cultures began to impact the lands of North America, the vast Cree tribes just to their east began to trade at Hudson Bay and James Bay,

gathering such amazing new things to them as glass beads, metal pots, hatchets and knives of steel, and rifles. With these cap and ball muskets, these “thunder sticks,” they “drove the Blackfeet like rabbits” away from the familiar Woodlands and far out onto the Great Plains.

There 60 million buffalo provided them a new way of life. The Blackfeet traveled on foot, with camp dogs pulling small travois loaded with the basic gear of the people’s life, their clothes, bundles, shelter, gourds and bladders full of water, and dried foods wrapped in skins. Their weapons, knives, spears, bow and a quiver of arrows, they carried with them.

Hunting and slaying the buffalo on foot was difficult, but there were huge herds of them covering the plains as far as the eye could see and the people found ways to reap this harvest of their new lands. Herd animals can be stampeded. The Blackfeet learned to guide them toward cliffs, where dozens or even hundreds of them would plunge to their death. These were the buffalo jumps. These piles of dead buffalo provided the essentials of life for the people.

Food, clothing, shelter, domestic implements, weapons and shields, all of this was embodied in the buffalo and given in their death to the Blackfeet. The animal was sacred. Big medicine grew from the relationship between the people and the creature that sustained them. The buffalo bundles were the place where the symbols of that medicine were contained. The keeper of the bundles carried with him a powerful responsibility, the means of spiritual communication with the most essential aspect of the people’s life.

What were those symbols? Curiosity was persistent, temptation powerful, but you knew better. Only the initiated should know what was in the bundles. Only those so ordained could understand them. Custom said that no one else should open the bundles and you respected custom, did you not?

Yes, you did. And yet? And yet? This was something only a few people ever had seen in their entire history. The sacred buffalo bundles of the Blackfeet. And they were in your hands.

You sat there for a long time, leaning back, pretty high still and digging the beautiful view that stretched out before you clear to infinity it seemed. Woody stretched, stood up, walked around a little ways off and took a leak. Came back buttoning up, sat down again, looked off in the distance, said, "So you opened them bundles, huh?"

"Yes."

"Hmm."

"Worse than that."

"Yeah?"

"I took some pictures of them."

"Ho! No wonder you got sent here. Prolly just the start of your way. Maybe plenty more to come."

"I thought about that plenty, believe me. Spent a long time trying to get those bags back where they belong. Finally got the museum in Calgary to take them. I guess it was a bad thing to do, opening them up. But I really wanted to see what was in them. What mattered so much, you know?"

Woody said nothing for a while. You both drifted off for a bit, a very fine high seeming to creep up on you, a less powerful rush

than what carried the story you told. This that was coming on now was more ethereal, like a perfectly matched mate to the elixir of Heart Butte and all its beauty.

"There's stuff I can tell you about them bags," Woody said. "Big medicine, yes. Lotta power. But you should know the real big ones are the Beaver bundles. They say there's 600 songs you have to know to carry them bundles. They go clear back to the beginning.

"See, the thing is, you got to know the songs before the medicine gets to see the light. You open 'em after the songs are sung. Drums, too, sometimes, different stuff. Not before. But the keeper has to know.

"Now, most people don't know them bundles can be traded or given away, even sold. So, them bundles you had got sold to somebody. A white guy? Maybe. Then they got sold to you. What should happen is that person had to learn the songs. Then he had to teach them to you. See, maybe it woulda been okay if you knew that. But you didn't. And you opened 'em. That's where you screwed up."

You had thought a lot about the implications of what you had done, spent a long time over many months and years rationalizing your decision, turning it this way and that. You had deep respect for the Blackfeet and a seemingly insatiable curiosity. You wondered if there was more to say.

He finally said it. "You know what they say about curiosity and them cats. Least ways this didn't kill ya."



All sorts of strange and wonderful things happened at Heart Butte. For the most part, people treated you like gold. There were some pretty hairy incidents, a lot of things that made you wonder but turned out okay, and so many things that were absolutely magical about your time there.

You had agreed to stay for one year, Linda for one full term, and you did. One thing you both agreed on, though, is that if people came to the door and told you to go, you weren't welcome anymore, you would pack up immediately and leave, even if it was the middle of night in the dead of winter.

That never happened, of course. Not to you. But Vern and Myrn had a different experience. They were Mormons, this was their mission, and there was a period of time the Church expected them to complete in fulfilling their work.

Teachers were very hard to come by here and theirs was difficult work. The "staff" each semester was a hodgepodge of locals lacking professional degrees and a few poor young folks who were sent to Heart Butte without any idea what or where it was by a federal government that offered to forgive their student loans for a year of teaching at an Indian school.

These poor kids would arrive, be led to their meager apartment, never get past the stunned look on their face, drink a lot at night and leave town at the first opportunity. Staff turnover was 100% every semester. Most left much sooner.

So, there was a premium on the few odd folks like Linda and your friend David Rowe, hippies who for reasons of their own wanted to work here for a time, and there was value, too, to the steady flow of missionaries who arrived over the years, doing

their part to minister to Jesus' flock. Vern and Myrn were the latest of them. They were earnest, hard-working, focused, no-nonsense people.

But the folks at Heart Butte got tired of them. You don't know any more than that. Before the change of semesters that year, it was suggested they go. The people didn't want them running the school anymore.

Vern resisted. "We have a contract," he said. "We are hired to run the school until the end of the term next year. Eighteen more months."

"You need to go away," the people told him.

He said, "no!"

There were no threats, nothing physical, but the energy in town changed for them in profound ways. The vibes became very unfriendly. The shunning was frontal, obvious, palpable. It was a strong enough force that Myrn finally gave in. You don't know the details, but one day she had left, and Vern stayed.

Live and let live, right? You minded your own business, the new school opened after Christmas break, Vern was still in charge. But the contrarian role he assumed in town was taking a serious toll.

You saw him at a basketball game one afternoon in the gym at the new school. The Warriors were playing a team from the high school over in Choteau. He was in the homestands, surrounded by a space of several feet between him and the rest of the crowd, who were ignoring him, and he did not look good. There was a green pallor about him, his face puffy, his neck swollen.

"Vern," you said, "how are you?"

"Getting by," he said, nodded, and smiled wistfully.

He died that afternoon.

"Shooting arrows, they call it," an old man at Starr School told you. "The people send all this bad medicine his way, mean thoughts, all that. They all get together, it's powerful. You can only take so much."

Part Three

Dearborn

You were flying back to Great Falls from Minneapolis, one of those flights from a pretty big city to a much smaller one, so the plane was not too large and had just eight seats in first class. You had one of them.

The guy next to you turned out to be a doctor from Conrad, county seat of Pondera, the one south of Glacier. "Just heading home from a conference with the rest of the trustees," he said. "Cooper Estate. Got to dispose of a property we own. Run through its tax benefits."

"That right?" you said, to be polite.

"One of the finest pieces of property in the state. Twenty acres of title, right on the river, and most of a 99-year lease to 1900 acres around it. You fish?"

"I do."

"Lot of good water in this state. Lot of world class fishing. Fact is, there's none better than right off our front lawn. Caretaker's son, lives a couple of miles upstream, caught a 27-pound brown off his. With a fly!"

"Damn, that's a big fish. That true?"

"Take it to the bank. This stretch of river has many tons of wild trout per mile and nobody but locals even fish there. Got whole days of it all to yourself."

"Sounds like a great place. Hope you have some luck moving it along."

"I'm sure we will. Where do you live?"

When you told him, he said, "I assume that's not your final destination. Maybe you ought to have a look at our place."

You asked him where it was and said, "Yeah, that's a beautiful stretch of the river. Stopped in that canyon many a time just to take it all in."

"Well, hell," he said. "You can own it for yourself. Why don't you at least have a look?"

When we landed in Great Falls, a beautiful afternoon in late spring, he said, "It's right down the road a piece. Why don't we just run down there and I'll show you the place."

"A piece" was 50 miles south of the airport, opposite the direction you were going, but why not? One time you had driven 700 miles, all within the state, Cut Bank to Plentywood and back, all in one day and done a deal while you were there. Mileage in Montana can't intimidate you or you'll never get anywhere.

So, off we went, and you learned a lot along the way. South of Ulm on I-15 at the very end of the high plains, at the foot of the Big Belt mountains across a lush expanse of flowers, shrubs and grasses where the Smith River tumbles out of the Big Belts into the Missouri, was a beautiful scene exactly as Karl Bodmer had painted it in 1836 when he followed along with Prince Maximillian the route Lewis and Clark had taken three decades earlier. Nothing there had changed.

From there, we climbed a hill straight up the side and dropped down into the Missouri River Canyon, which is one of God's gifts to vision and sensibility. The river, which is powerful, wide and deep, cuts a curving path through these mountains of

earth, trees, and huge boulders. So much life of every kind lives in it, there are times when it *is* intimidating. But it's always attractive. Powerfully so.

"Pretty wild country here," he said as we crested the hill. "My neighbor hit a cougar right here on the Interstate last year, middle of the day. Ran out right in front of his car. Shame."

Near the other end of the canyon is the Gates of the Mountains, said by Lewis and Clark in their journals in 1805 to be the most beautiful spot on their entire journey from St. Louis to Oregon and back. The river emerges from Canyon Ferry Reservoir just south of there, maybe 40 miles away from here. Helena, the state capital, is another dozen miles beyond. The entire drive, along the interstate highway or the fine frontage road, rolls through some of the most extraordinary land on earth.

And this gentleman's piece of property, about right in the middle, in the last sweep of the two big S curves there, was about as good as it gets. Serious everything! Fishing, hunting, birding, ranching, relaxing! It was pretty fine.

"Gary Cooper built it. After he'd become the biggest star in Hollywood. Making \$50 grand a week in 1927. Think about that!

"His father owned the ranch, 7__9, one of the three big ones in the canyon. Was a state supreme court justice, the old man. Married a British woman. Gary went to boarding school in England.

"Once he'd made it in the movies, he came back here, bought the best spot on the ranch from his dad, built this place, and it was his refuge from then on. Him and his foreman, A.N. Hanson

was his name, spent a lot of quality time here. Entertained a lot, I guess. Know what I mean?"

Beautiful place. The house though, really a lodge is what it was, maybe eight or nine thousand square feet, was in rough shape. Skeletal, actually, and a long way from habitable. There was a massive river rock fireplace, the frame of the walls and windows, and the trusses for the roof. A large stone root cellar was built into the side of the hill past the kitchen on the far end of the structure. The very long stretch of floor from one end of the building to the other was wavy. You looked at the doctor again.

"Had to do a lot of rehab. It had fallen into disrepair. Been in the Trust since 1957, when it was set up, hadn't been stayed in by anybody much at all since before he died. That was May 13, 1961."

The day before you turned sixteen. Whether that mattered or not, it sure jumped out at you when you heard it. Twenty years later now, maybe you'll think about this place for a while. The better part of the rest of the Eighties, as it turned out, and ever after. But you didn't know that then.

You got out, walked around with him. It was a very cool place, the lodge dominant among the structures, partly because of its size and partly its perfect placement on the land. It stood at the highest level of a deep, broad meadow at the foot of the canyon wall. From there, the land tailed away gradually toward the river some 100 feet lower and a good 500 feet distant. On the covered front porch, some 120 feet across and 12 feet deep, you sat and looked around.

There were cabins along the edge of the hill where the land flattened out and gradually sloped down to the river. The water swept in toward you and then rolled away, tumbled over and around the rocks, continued to carve this canyon. In every view, from every perspective, the river was visibly a mighty force.

There were 60-foot elms lining the front of the property, a grove of aspen down by the well house at the spring, the pond it filled, the overflow running down into the river. Looking the other direction, Andy Creek formed the border between this property and the original ranch house and the corrals, some quarter mile distant. The front yard was maybe three or four acres. Big boulders, some moss covered, the size of large homes dotted the land and helped secure the hillsides. The higher you looked up the canyon walls, in front and back of you, the thicker the stands of pines. The sounds of birds calling to each other filled the air.

Across from the front porch, looking up at the canyon wall on the other side of the river was Eagle Rock. A rookery for bald eagles, many dozens of them, who with hundreds of osprey, herons, pelicans, kingfishers, cormorants, and other species of birds fish this very productive river. With field glasses, they can be seen all over the side of that massive slab of rock, the trees around it, and other crevices here and there throughout this stretch of the canyon.

These are the headwaters of the Missouri River, beginning where the Madison, Jefferson, and Beaverhead rivers join about 100 miles south of here, run downhill from the Continental

Divide and north through three hydroelectric dams that supply power throughout the area.

When it emerges from the last of them at Holter Lake, this stretch of river begins. Eighteen miles of water exactly like a spring creek, with abundant plant and insect life to feed the fish, except it's hundreds of feet across with some channels 60 feet deep. Think of the creatures that dwell there! Tons of them.

It is perfect trout water. It's also the beginning of the longest waterway in North America just before it spills out onto the high plains at Cascade and heads its inexorable way north, east, then south, draining the Milk, Musselshell, Marias, Yellowstone, Little Missouri, Grand, Cheyenne, White, Niobrara, James, Big Sioux, Platte, Republican, and Osage rivers, and finally, on to where it joins the Mississippi River, draining a dozen more into the Gulf of Mexico.

"You lose your Stetson fishing out there in the wind," the doctor said to you, nodding toward the river, "a few months later some coonass'll fish it out of a bayou in Lose-iana."

Back in Heart Butte, the school year was coming to an end, followed by a couple of weeks to play, and then it was time to move on. Nobody said goodbye or made a big deal of it, except the kids and even they were pretty reserved. You were staying there and now you're not.

You bought a house in Cut Bank from Pat Minette, a very simple place with a small living room, kitchen with a table where you can eat, one small bedroom, a bathroom, a back porch, an unfinished basement with not much but the furnace, and a little yard with patches of grass here and there. It sat near the bottom

of the hill just above the parking lot of a main street saloon, which made for some noisy nights and more than a couple of major-league brawls. Full price including ringside seats was \$3,000.

After the Reservation, living in town was a bummer. The air smelled like gas, as often as not, harvest was over, the gleaners moved on, all the big wheat farmers heading to their winter places in Arizona, the seasonal laborers drinking up the last of the summer's profits, all the oilfield trash settling in, getting set, winter coming on, the mean season, people were kind of edgy, too many men, too cooped up, too much whiskey, and living there was a challenge, with Linda the more so. But you had made a deal with the doctor to buy the Cooper Lodge, the work was being completed to your specs, with luck you'd take possession in the spring. Something to look forward to through the long, cold months ahead.

You got to know a lot about Gary Cooper that winter. Read a bunch and heard all sorts of stories. "Hung like a horse and he can go all night," Tallulah Bankhead said of the famed Lothario, who reportedly bedded all the big-name actresses in Hollywood and many of their lesser-known colleagues. He was a hound. At a time when the studios held all the power in Hollywood, and kept their actors on a tight leash, Gary Cooper was the centerpiece in one scandal after another, although by today's standards, they were pretty tame stuff. Still, for the era he starred in, his was hot copy. And the newspapers did run with it.

Less notorious but more glorious was his talent for acting in film. He was a natural. The camera loved him, and the audiences

did, too. He was the biggest star in the business for probably 25 years or more. Many pictures were made only because he agreed to play the lead. He won two academy awards for best actor and was the star of many more good and some great films.

One of his Oscars was for Sergeant York, a biography of the Medal of Honor winning hero of World War I, a Tennessee hillbilly and noted marksman who although a pacifist had killed a dozen German soldiers in fierce battle and famously captured 130 men almost single-handedly. He was very reticent about public attention, refusing all attempts by the outside world to grant the rights to his life story. Everyone who approached him came back empty-handed. Cooper went to meet with him, spent a long time talking over the kitchen table, went for a walk together out back, shots were heard way off in the distance, and afterwards returned with a signed contract to make the film.

"Nice fella," said York after the Hollywood star departed. "Helluva shot, too." They had spent a little time on their walk shooting at targets with muzzle loaders. Cooper, who knew his way around firearms from his upbringing in Montana, apparently acquitted himself well. One of many good stories.

But the tabloids loved the sordid stuff best, and most of what you read about him that winter had to do with his persistent infidelities. There came a time a year later when you dug out a second trout pond filled like the first one by the spring at the Cooper Lodge and unearthed a trench of empty champagne and whiskey bottles half the size of a football field. Well, maybe a little smaller.

“They used to hole up in there for weeks,” George Olds told you that first year about Cooper and A.N. Hanson, “with a bunch of them starlets. You know, girls that came with ‘em from Hollywood to relax, I guess. Take it easy.”

Anyhow, whatever else it was, living in the Cooper Lodge, once it was rebuilt a bit smaller but maybe more habitable, was a great time. Whatever else *he* was, Gary Cooper was a native Montanan whose family owned one of the finest ranches in the state. He could afford to buy the best piece of it for himself where he built a very fine retreat. What he chose was plenty good enough for you. An awesome place to spend a part of your life.



When you tell stories about this place, they’re about people and about people fishing. Agriculture is nominally the industry hereabouts, but the ranchers and the farmers and the feedlot operators, they all fish. They work hard, have plenty to attend to most every day, and in warm weather those are very long days. But when they can squeeze out a moment to themselves, they go fishing.

So does just about everybody else. Maybe you’re a doctor or a lawyer or a guy who works at the grocery store, or maybe the gravel pit. When you get a little time to yourself, you go fishing.

Why not? The fishing is incredible. But if just about now you’re saying to yourself: oh, Christ, here we go with the fish and game saga about life in the great outdoors...well, yeah, maybe, but not like that, exactly. It’s stories about people and places and things you see when you happen to be fishing

because that's what there is to do around here first and foremost. World. Class. Fishing. And all the different things it brings out in the people who do it. And, yeah, the hunting is pretty damned good, too.

It's not often that we get to have world class experiences in this life, those things that absolutely lift you up, shake you awake, and show you something you've never even seen before, let alone get to experience in person. And when you do, if you have any small piece of poetry in your soul, it doesn't much matter what the vehicle is. It's the ride!

So even if transcendence isn't your thing, if nature at its most glorious bores you, if the quality of wild that's so rarely encountered anymore isn't worth your time, well, there still are some very interesting characters at play here who just might get your attention.

Guys like Harry Hickel. When you first moved into the Cooper place and starting asking around about who might be the person to ramrod the place, get done all the things that needed doing, and point out the things you hadn't noticed that ought to be attended to, you asked and everybody said, "Harry Hickel. Yeah. Harry's the guy you want. You oughta talk to Harry Hickel. He's your man."

Hard to imagine today, but back then, up there, lots of people didn't have a phone number. Some like Harry didn't even have an address. Where they lived didn't have a street, rural route, nothing like that. General Delivery, Cascade was where the mail went. There was nowhere to call. You just left messages with folks all over town and maybe he would get in touch.

One night the phone rang. "This is Harry Hickel," said a deep, soft voice. "Hear you want to talk to me."

"Well, yeah, Harry," you said. "Got some work I need to have done and people tell me you're the guy to do it. You interested in talking about it?"

"How about Saturday night, say six, at the Bar?"

"That works for me. I'll look forward to meeting you." The line went dead.

Saturday night, you were there early. Shortly after six, the door to the bar opened, a giant appeared, and the waters parted. He was about 6' 8" or 9", shoulders wide as an axe handle, just out from his weekly bath. A black hat, kerchief, black shirt under a good leather vest, jeans and boots, fresh-shaven, hair slicked back, looking good. Impressive. Must be Harry, do you think?

We said hello, talked over what was what, the new property, he knew it, what I needed, could he do it? This and that, 'course he could, this could be one way to do it, you might want to go this way instead. That kind of stuff. Seemed to be on the same page. Might as well go forward.

"Well, Harry, it all sounds good to me," you said. "Is there anything else we need to talk about?"

"Well," said Harry, and looked me in the eye, "I guess you want to know about that guy I killed."

Harry was a regulator, one of the guys the government contracted with to hunt down grizzly bears they knew were wounded. Go into the wilderness, deep in the wild, where a bear with a bullet from some dumbass hunter who mistook him for a deer is lodged in his ribs or ass or guts, bleeding but still

moving, and get him. He carried a very small pack with provisions, two .410 shotguns with hand grips that fired ball bearings, and a rifle in a sling over his shoulder.

"Find 'em, break 'em down, shoulders, hips, maybe a good shot at the spine, then a couple right in the face. Hope you can stop 'er before she kills you. If it's a boar, got to get off twice the shots, keep shooting 'til it's done. One way or the other."

That was one of his jobs. He worked in one way or another for nearly every local ranch, or at least knew the combination to every locked gate you might encounter. He ran illegal trap lines in the river, hunted deer, antelope, and bear in and out of season, took small game like rabbits and quail all day long everywhere he went, gathered rattlesnakes for the venom farm, was among his many local legends, true or not, verifiably listed in Boone & Crockett with his father as world, national or state record holders in several categories of trophy game, and lived among a small tribe of survivalists in a series of caves up the Dearborn Canyon, where outsiders *did not* go. He'd also killed a man in a fistfight. "Methedrine or some damned thing, it musta been. He just would NOT stop."

In his own way, on his terms, Harry was absolutely honorable. That doesn't mean he operated within the law. Kind of *not*, in fact. Part of the code. This was forty years ago, true, but those were not primitive times. People even then had addresses, phone numbers, jobs that paid a living wage and took out taxes. They had insurance, social security numbers, checking accounts, and the mighty first wave of credit cards. Not Harry.

That was not the life he led. Emphatically not. He lived *his* way and had many an encounter with the law and lawmen who preferred he do it *their* way. There's a lot of space up here, a live-and-let live attitude, and not all that many people to rub the wrong way.

But Harry took up a lot of room and was hard to miss. Most of the locals either ignored him, gave him wide berth, or actually kinda liked the old school, pre-fence cowboy that he was. The law, though, the county sheriff, Fish & Game, some of the others with jurisdiction over this or that, felt that he badly needed some comeuppance now and then. A curbing of his wayward approach to getting by. A reckoning. They met with not too much success. Harry was a survivor.

One of the best known, if unproven, stories was the sheriff who harassed him mercilessly one summer for poaching. You understand that Harry and his tribe lived off game. It was their main provisions. These are meat and potato people. They don't buy meat at the store, just chew and coffee, sugar, butter, the basics. Most of what else they eat they grow or hunt. Meat comes from all those critters everywhere about: elk, deer, antelope, bear, rabbits, squirrels, possum, turkey, pheasant, quail, fish, maybe a cow or two that might not be missed at roundup, although you certainly don't know that to be true.

Hunting season for them is year-round. When you're hungry, when stocks are getting low, you go get more. You resupply. Yes, the law can be a nuisance, cause you to go about your business in a different manner, but it doesn't stop you from eating.

This sheriff *was* a nuisance. A persistent pain in the ass. Tried like hell to catch them in the act. Stumbled on a trap line still wet from the river that Harry had in the back of his flatbed truck, an otter still in it when the sheriff surprised him. He actually arrested Harry, left him in jail overnight, took him before the judge the next morning, got him fined and warned. Harry was not pleased.

There was a customary way of telling people to fuck off, that they had really annoyed you and you decided to let them know, anonymously if obviously. Gather a big pile of shit, your own, a dog's, really ripe cow pies, whatever. Put it in a paper bag. Put it on the asshole's porch, set it on fire, and ring the bell. Then you quickly ease away.

The sucker comes out, sees the fire, stomps it out and is splatted with crap. On his boots, his pants leg, all over the porch, and maybe the front door. Lot of noise. Behind their curtains the neighbors are laughing.

Harry did it differently. At least this time. So it's said.

This sheriff might be smart enough not only to be well aware of that smelly prank and avoid it, but also to be taken in only by something clever enough to get his attention and still fool him. Not a problem.

Someone placed on his front porch, right against the screen door, a large firecracker, really a stick of dynamite, truth be told, but specially loaded. He lit it, rang the doorbell, and disappeared. When the sheriff answered the door, hand on his holstered pistol, he saw the wick of the dynamite burning toward boom.

Smart guy that he was, he knew he could stomp it out without setting off the gunpowder. If he didn't, the explosion might take off his balls.

He didn't know it, but Harry wouldn't do something like that. Might as well just shoot the guy if that was his way. He's not that kind.

The intention was to deliver something in proportion to the harassment he had suffered. Something equally threatening, disruptive, costly, and maybe *just* a little more. So, when the sheriff quickly and professionally assessed the situation, he deliberately stomped out the cracker and the wick. Then it hit him.

One of the most powerful odors in all our world, natural or otherwise, is wolf musk. A mere drop will mark territory and attract females for miles. This firecracker contained about a quarter ounce in a glass tube that he broke open.

No one could come near the sheriff for days, and even weeks afterward he still reeked from a distance. His clothes were burned in the big furnace at the mill, he bathed until his skin was rubbed raw, and still the odor was blinding.

Worse was the damage to his home, a modest, clean and comfortable frame house on the edge of town. It was destroyed. Uninhabitable. Completely saturated with a smell so powerful the county quickly condemned it and had it torn down.

The contractor wanted to burn the wood, but the EPA said no. The smoke would be too hazardous. The insurance company said no, too. Not about how it was disposed of, they didn't care. They insured the house for all sorts of damage that might occur.

They *did not* insure it for the malodorous outcome of legal squabbles. They were sorry. But they weren't going to pay for it, no matter what.

Fair is fair.

Harry did a lot of work for you. He was absolutely amazing. You watched him run up the hillside with a bale of barbed wire over each shoulder to what would be the top side of the largest corral. If he broke a sweat at all, nobody noticed. The fence he built was straight and true. Came together quickly, too.

In six months' time, he had the place shining and was due the agreed upon semi-annual payment. "In cash," he had made clear back when the deal was struck, which was fine with you. You handed him 60 \$100 bills, which he took in his hands and stared at for a very long time but didn't count before tucking them away. Nobody in his right mind would short-change Harry. No issue there. You suspected it was the most money he had ever seen at one time.

After a while, you were granted a little access to Harry's world. Hanging with him was interesting, sometimes very interesting, and often astonishing. One time we jumped a big buck on the bluffs outside Cascade. Harry was out the door with his rifle in hand and off at a full sprint. So was the buck.

"Come on!" he shouted at me over his shoulder and off he went. The buck headed straight uphill, opening a hundred-yard lead, increasing it from there with each bound up the hill. Amazingly, Harry stayed with him, not losing too much ground to him, and seeming not any more winded than the buck.

You had a great view as all this unfolded above you, the side of the bluff growing very steep as the buck, then Harry, and finally you all headed to the top. It was maybe an 800-or a thousand-foot climb, and at one point the buck stopped about two-thirds of the way up, he turned sideways, his huge rack sunlit and his body glistening, breathing deeply, looking down at his pursuer for a long moment or two, seeming to ask himself, "Who is this guy?" before bolting uphill again.

Harry actually seemed to be closing on him as they neared the top. The buck went over the ridge and you lost sight of him. Maybe a minute later, Harry went over, and you commenced to climbing faster, although there was still a long way to go.

You hadn't covered more than 50 yards or so when the crack of a rifle sounded. Once. Then silence. You kept climbing, thinking, "God, did he hit him? Did he miss? If he missed, why am I bothering to climb this hill? If he hit him, how will we pack him out? How hard is my heart beating? How tired am I? How much farther?"

When you crested the ridge, off in the distance maybe 200 yards or more, Harry was bent over the buck, which was dead on its side. Tumbled him right there. He was field dressing the animal, skinning it first, and then gutting it and quartering it with his knife. By the time you got to his side, breathing hard and not much use, the work was nearly done.

"Grab one a them hindquarters," he said to me. He grabbed the other one, the hide, and some organs he wrapped in it, and led us out of there. The route down the backside and around to the truck was a much easier hike, except for the 75 pounds of

meat slung over your back. When he dropped your blood-soaked self at the ranch, he offered you any of the organs, "Your choice."



Lance Leffel was a guy who lived way up at the top of the canyon in a cabin that overlooked the river far below. He was reputedly a hit man for the Licavoli family, at the time when that part of the mob, like most of the rest of it, was on its last legs and fading away. Whatever the truth of it, it was said they'd sent him to Alaska to cool out after some heat developed in Detroit. One night in that long, dark winter, word was he'd killed a guy in cold blood for the egregious offense of being a black man with a white woman.

Now he was cooling his heels in an even more remote place, but not keeping a very low profile, it seemed. In a determinedly live-and-let-live place, he was notorious, a guy that you were quietly advised by your neighbors not to get crossways with, no matter what. "What" happened quite a bit, it seemed, and Lance was right in the middle of it so much that you were astonished nobody did anything about it.

You and he got to know each other a bit shortly after you got settled in the Cooper place. One day a small, handsome, cocky guy showed up at the door and invited himself in. "How you liking it here?" he said. Before you could answer, he said, "Pretty place. Pretty damn slow, that is. But it's okay, for now."

He looked around the room where you were sitting, cup of coffee that you offered him in hand, nodding affirmatively at what he saw. It was an alcove off the big open kitchen that

looked into the dining room, and beyond it, the main entry, which almost never was used because everyone came as he had to the kitchen door.

"Place is looking good. Like all this Eastlake stuff," he said off-handedly. "Those lithos, too. I always favored the post-impressionists myself." So now he'd let you know he was smart, or at least had been around a little, was familiar with the good stuff.

"Word is that you intend to breed horses here." He looked at you calmly, got your affirmation. "What kind?" Before you could answer, he said, "I ask you because I own the finest brood mare in Montana. I've been looking to sell her to the right person, but these yahoos up here don't know anything except quarter horses."

He smiled broadly. "Cowboys. I get it. I mean a quarter horse is as basic as an old Jimmy. Haul anything, work all day, get a lot of mileage out of 'em. But show them a classy horse, an Arab or a beauty like Cascade Lil, this mare of mine. They don't know what to make of it."

"Lil's an Arab?" you said.

"Worse than that," he said, and laughed. "Finest roan Appaloosa you've ever seen. Twice cursed hereabouts. To the local yokels, she's an Indian pony."

You thought about what he said, listening politely but offering not much comment. One thing that was percolating was your intrinsic belief in kismet. It happened that within the past week, you had made connections with a stud farm that happened to have a magnificent Appy stallion.

“Sounds like a beautiful animal you have, Lance. Truth is, even if I decided to go with her breed, she might well be too rich for my blood.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you. She’s worth ten times what I can get for her here. You can buy her for pennies on the dollar. Get you started off right.”

She did. Cascade Lil threw the most beautiful colts imaginable, and you came to love her dearly, especially for the first colt she birthed, Filly Lilly, who became like a pet. So, you owed her a lot. But she also threw you into Lance’s orbit for a year or two, a decidedly mixed gift, at best.

Once he showed up at the house with a guy named Kevin, who had a pet cougar on a leash and drove the first Mercedes station wagon you’d ever seen outside Europe. “Come on,” Lance said with a big smile. “We’re gonna go shooting.” Indeed.

The three of you went up the Dearborn for a ways and stopped at a broad meadow backed by a rock wall. We parked, walked around to the back, and Kevin opened up the rear gate. Underneath a tarp was a stash of automatic weapons, mostly M-16s, a few AK-47s, and some other stuff you couldn’t identify, including something that looked like a grenade launcher. Lance handed each of you a rifle, grabbed one for himself, and a large bag of ammunition, tipped his head sideways to say, “follow me” and headed off into the meadow.

We fired so many rounds that my ears rang for days. He and Kevin had a great time sawing small trees in half with bursts of automatic weapon fire, tracing lines of destruction in the tall grasses, spooking a few rabbits and shooting them dead with

blasts of bullets that carved a path in chase until finally the pursuer and pursued crossed in a deadly finale.

“Once you shoot one of these,” Lance said to us with a grin of something like ecstasy, “you can’t ever get enough of them.” When I read a few days later in the Great Falls Tribune that the local armory had been robbed of a large cache of weapons, I didn’t need a weatherman, as a future Nobel Laureate said, to know which way this breeze was blowing. “Mind your own business,” a little bird said to me. And I did.

Among the many things Lance did that annoyed the hell out of the locals was that he allowed a couple of goats of his to run free. They ate anything and everything, including people’s flowers and vegetable gardens, as they wandered the hillside up and down the canyon.

One day, you were standing with your neighbors George and Aggie Olds in the kitchen of their home alongside the river. The view from there looked out past the garage down a long stretch of grass toward their vegetable garden, where one of Lance’s goats was busy devouring a few weeks’ worth of lunch and dinner.

“That goddamn Lance,” George said. “I’m gonna tell him exactly what I think of him and his damn goats.

“You’re not gonna tell him anything,” Aggie said to him, and looking at me, she said, “Neither are you. You’re both afraid of him. Well, I’m not.” She reached up above the sink to where a 30.30 was racked, pulled it down, levered a shell into the chamber, opened the window and shot the goat immediately

behind its right ear from 200 feet away. It staggered out of the garden and fell dead in a coulee that drained into the river.

George and Aggie were native Montanans, in Aggie's case all the more so because she was an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe, although likely from the time when a 1/16th bloodline could earn that designation. No matter, they grew up in Great Falls and along the Missouri River, were absolutely tried and true Westerners of the type we like to imagine but rarely meet.

Aggie was barely five feet tall, George a few inches taller. They raised three boys and a girl on what he made laying carpet, her ingenuity as a homemaker, his skill at knocking down an elk, a deer, and an antelope each season, hers at raising a great crop of fruit and vegetables every summer in Montana's notorious short growing season and putting up the preserves.

So, when Lance's goat made yet another visit to her garden that year, she shot it dead. And then, the three of us waited. For weeks, while the goat rotted, critters devoured it, and the carcass very noticeably lay in the yard near the river.

Tough as they were, no doubt they both wondered what Lance would do about his goat. After a while, it became apparent that he wasn't going to do a thing. Maybe he didn't want to get crossways with two long-lived, well respected members of the community. More likely, he admired Aggie's spunk for taking out that obnoxious animal of his. Whatever his reasons, the next time they ran into him at the Firefighters Pancake Breakfast in Cascade, he was all smiles, how you doings, glad hands. Friendly. Never mentioned the goat.

A time came a few months later when Lance was apprehended by the local sheriff in the act of suspending a guy by the ankles over the side of the Hardy Bridge high above the Missouri River. Something about money owed.

He was charged with assault, released on bail, and had the good sense to disappear once again before the FBI report came back with the results of his fingerprints scan. It wasn't until a year or so later you received a mysterious message from an unsigned author in Possum Hollow, Tennessee, asking after Cascade Lil. It went unanswered.

Joe Filipowicz lived up Andy Creek in a home you passed by a number of times but never visited. He had a steady job at the big gravel pit in Cascade, a charming wife, Peggy, who often waited tables at the Dearborn Inn, and three vivacious daughters, each of whom grew up to be a remarkable young woman. They were a competent and seemingly contented family making their way on their own terms in this remarkably rural part of the world. Which is easier said than done.

Joe was a very tough guy, hardscrabble, reserved, even stoic, but friendly enough if you kept a respectful distance and didn't push him too hard. Like many people thereabouts, he'd give you the shirt off his back if you needed help, but that didn't mean he wanted to be your best friend. He prized his independence, the integrity of his family, and the life they were able to lead that was plenty full enough to suit them but not too complicated.

For recreation and to put food on the table, Joe was a bow hunter of some repute. Anybody up here could take down an

animal with an .06 or a .210, but Joe did it very skillfully with a compound bow and steel-shafted arrows.

He was hunting one fall afternoon on the back of the ranch when he ran across one of the resident grizzly bears. It was the cinnamon grizz with the four black feet you had seen on numerous occasions, a beautiful creature to look at but like all her species not one you want to bother in any way whatsoever if you want to maintain your health.

Joe watched the sow grazing in the grass from a respectful distance when a coyote came running out of the bushes and attacked the bear. She stopped browsing only long enough to whirl around and with one swipe of those incredibly powerful paws smack the coyote a good 10 or 12 feet in the air. When it landed, it slowly rose and dragged itself away while she went back to eating.

One morning at the Lodge, you saw at the far end of the front yard maybe a hundred yards away or so a very mangy-looking coyote hobbling its way through the big trees by the front gate. Wildlife was everywhere up here, including plenty of all types most days in your front yard, but this animal was strange enough that you took note.

Your daughter Deva came in to say she was going out to ride her bike. "Be careful," you said. "I saw a pretty ragged looking coyote out in those trees." She took off down the long drive but was back very quickly. "Dad," she said, "he's out there lying in those bushes and he's making really weird noises."

You grabbed the rifle but couldn't find the shells. Linda was concerned about firearms and children, so she'd hidden the

ammunition. All you had handy was a Browning 9mm that was part of the booty Bob South had traded you when he bought the house in Cut Bank. It held 9 shells in the magazine and one in the chamber, but they were reloads, you'd never fired this gun before, and that model was famous for jamming.

Running out across the lawn, those were your thoughts, and when the coyote saw you coming, it whined an eerie, high pitched wail, rose from the thicket, foaming from the mouth, and lit out for the railroad trestle near the river, dragging its hind legs. "Great," you thought as you followed it into the waist high grass, "I'm going after a rabid animal with a gun I've never fired before which likely will let me get off one shot before it jams and then, what?"

Which is exactly what happened. The coyote turned sideways and looked back at you just as you cleared the grass, took careful aim, fired once, kicked out a patch of fur on the top of its neck, pulled the trigger again. And of course, the gun jammed.

The coyote began to move toward you, and you began to calculate which way might be the best to try outrunning it when a chunk of its head exploded, and it dropped in its tracks. Your neighbor, Lyle, had seen all this unfolding from his truck as he came down the hill, got off a clean shot from the road 50 yards behind us, and killed it before you had to face the consequences. Lucky you.

The two of you had a look at it from nearby, called Fish & Game in Helena to tell them we had the body of a rabid coyote and would they come remove it safely from the property. "Don't

have the manpower, but we would like to examine it," they said. "Cut off its head and mail it to us."

Yeah, right. And if the knife slips, you might as well come in yourself so we can examine you. Lyle buried it with his backhoe as deep as the shovel would reach. When Joe heard about it, he told us the rest of the story. Any animal would have to be pretty damned mad with rabies or something like it to attack a grizzly. And when it did, a broken back is not a surprising result.

That same winter, we had an especially bad snowstorm that came in the morning and continued with increasing ferocity throughout the day. By the time, Joe made it back to the Dearborn exit from his job in town, the snow was very deep, and he didn't make it very far at all up the ranch road before he was stuck. So, he started walking.

The snow was waist-deep in places and higher than his knees everywhere else, not to mention that it was very cold. By the time he reached the top of the hill, he'd already covered more than a mile. There was Rocky Top, owned by a fellow who mostly lived in town, but also Lyle's and your place along the way as he headed toward his home. He passed us all by, now more than three miles into the walk and another couple of miles to go.

Joe was a very tough guy. Independence was a matter of pride. It very nearly killed him. Peggy drew him a very hot bath when he finally made it home, poured one hot toddy after another into his massive frame, and still, he couldn't stop shaking. He was in bed for three days, with his wife or one of the girls at his side 24/7, feeding him hot soup and whiskey in one

vehicle or another whenever he was awake, before he finally warmed up and got his strength back.

We knew about the struggle, waited apprehensively for any bad news, and were greatly relieved when news came that he was up and around again. "I've gotta tell you," you said to Lyle, "I feel bad he didn't think enough of me to at least stop in and warm up. We would have gladly poured him a drink, fed him, put him up, whatever he needed. Guess I thought we were friendlier than that, to have him risk his life rather than come by." Lyle just shrugged and looked off up the road. "Not his way, I guess," he said.



You always had a curiosity about a certain storefront on a side street in downtown Great Falls. That towering metropolis of maybe 80,000 people on the very high plains of Montana was the closest place of any consequence where folks in your neighborhood could do their shopping, such as it was. Helena was about equidistant from the Lodge, and although it was smaller, it is the state capital and in so many ways was a more sophisticated and much more enjoyable place. But Great Falls was where the Buttrey's was, and that grocery store was the best of a few poor choices where you could buy provisions. So once a week at least you found yourself in town, and while you were there you explored the place as much as there was to be seen.

That particular store front was interesting because it was always closed, the windows were too aged and dirty to see inside, and anyways it was dark so who knows what cleaner

windows might have showed. Abandoned or otherwise unoccupied shops in town were not uncommon, Great Falls not being a thriving hub of commercial real estate development, but this place was clearly occupied. Just never open it seemed and no one ever around.

So, it was startling when a pudgy young man with long stringy hair tapped you on the shoulder one day while you were peering in the store window, hands cupped against the glaring sunlight it reflected, and said, "May I help you?"

You looked at him, wondering who he might be and why he asked, noting that he clearly did not look local. "Do you happen to know who owns this shop?" and he said with some enthusiasm and a broad smile, "Mais oui! I am the owner."

Mais oui? French? Who is this guy? In Great Falls, Montana?

"I've passed by a few times," you said. "Never found the place open. Always wondered what was sold in there."

"But let me show you, si tu me permettait? Ah, but forgive me. I speak English, yes, but when I am excited, I forget myself."

He unlocked the door, which opened with a groan and a few cobwebs to be cleared, and led you inside. What you saw when he lit the lights was no less amazing than if an orangutan had walked in with a ballerina and a banjo.

To understand why, you'd have to understand that the Buttreys store was a place where you could purchase a pretty good selection of meat, coffee and other canned goods, lots of different brands of mostly white or whole wheat bread, and any kind of cheese as long as it was American or cheddar, or slices of one or the other with some pimienta, perhaps.

There was usually a good selection of potatoes. The rest of the produce was pretty much iceberg lettuce, tomatoes hard as rocks and tasteless, and maybe some green beans and squash. For a brief period, you discovered and purchased big loaves of Jewish rye from Chicago, but soon it disappeared from the shelves and when you asked the manager why, he said no one but you ever bought it and the rest all went stale.

You also could buy beer there, which was the store's strong suit when it came to variety, even some brands that weren't American. But you couldn't buy wine there, if memory serves, or if you could it was stuff you've never heard of and would be very reluctant to drink. The state liquor store was the place to buy wine of the most ordinary sort and when the rare decent bottle came into their possession, they would display it upright in the front window where it could bake in the sun.

So, when the lamps came on, and this fellow by the name of Guillaume de' Greaux, as he introduced himself, shined a light on two whole walls of dusty wine bottles and a long-refrigerated case of very moldy cheese, you were intrigued.

"What is all this?" you said.

"My shop," he said.

"But you are never open."

"Oui, it is true. When I first arrived, I managed very dependable hours. Some people came in, but nobody wanted to buy anything."

"But, why?"

"Some said the cheese is covered in mold. 'Of course, I said. It is very good cheese. They said, 'your wine is all dusty.' I said,

'it is very old wine.' They said they wanted something fresh. Not old wine. 'This is very valuable wine,' I told them. 'How much does it cost?', they asked.

"I showed them a 20-year-old Latour. Wiped it clean with my cloth. 'My price is only \$100,' I told them. 'It's worth much more.' They said that I was crazy. To es fou, ou quoi, they meant. 'No one will pay that for a bottle of wine.' I didn't understand. But I came to see this town was not interested in my shop. What could I do? I come by now some days only for myself, through the back door, you know, without hope for my business. Still, I need to eat. Enjoy some wine. Would you like to join me?"

He produced a large loaf of bread from somewhere in the back, cut generous chunks of cheese from three different wheels in the case, and set them on a small table covered by a white cloth. He returned to the case and came back to the table with a large slice of pate. He asked you to be seated, walked directly to a rack on the back wall, returned with a bottle of wine and a corkscrew.

"This is the bottle of wine," he said, and cradled it so that you could see the label. "Chateau Latour 1961. It is a very fine wine. My price is very fair. Someday it will be worth much more."

He opened it, set it aside, returned with a decanter, and slowly poured the wine in to it. From where you sat, fumes of an extraordinary fragrance were rising above the table. He smelled the cork, nodded, offered it to you. You declined.

"Do you know wine, my friend?" he said.

"I know enough to wonder whether I can afford this bottle, all this food."

He looked like he'd been slapped.

"Vous êtes mon invité!" he said emphatically. Then, "I'm sorry. I would not insult you. You are my guest, and it is my pleasure if you would, how it is? Break bread with me?"

We ate and drank all afternoon. The Latour was probably the finest wine you had ever tasted, certainly one of the very finest to this day. The conversation was the equal of the repast, or repaste, as he pronounced it. He asked about yourself, and you more curiously about him. How in god's name did he and all this extraordinary booty come to be in Great Falls?

He had a nearly identical shop in Bordeaux "near the Place de la Bourse," he said. "A little larger, nicer than this, and much busier." He looked around the empty shop where we sat. "Business there was very good.

"My wife, she is the colonel in your Air Force. She is in France where we meet. Romance, you know. Ah! We marry. Then she is sent to Malmstrom for her next assignment. Where is Montana? I ask her. What will we do? I decide I will follow her and bring my shop here.

"It was complicated, all this wine, the food. But she has rank, you know? Flew here with us on a big Air Force plane. 50 cases of wine and many coolers of cheese and pâté. The bread I make myself."

The two of you shared another bottle, a Pomerol, also very good, and so much food you could barely rise from your chair when the time came to leave. You convinced him to sell you two bottles of very good, modestly priced wine and a quarter pound of the pâté, which you suspect he sold you very cheaply.

"This has been so enjoyable," you said. "I can't thank you enough for your generosity."

"Oh, no, mon ami. It is I who owe you thanks for this. To share something I love with someone who appreciate my passion – paSHen, he said – it is a joy for me. I thought it would never happen here."

"Well, I thought this would never happen here either. I'm really glad we got to do this."

"The first of many, I hope. Here is my number. You must call me anytime you can come by and join me again. As often as we can would be my pleasure."

And so it was, for better than a year to come, at least once or twice a month, sometimes weekly, the two of you drank and dined. It was truly an oasis of sophistication in a sere landscape on the high plains.

Outside, all the trappings of an agricultural community were in play. The tractors plowed, the fields were planted, the pickup trucks hauled seeds, feed, equipment, supplies, grasses grew tall, and hay was baled, eventually in autumn the gleaners arrived, and the wheat harvest happened. The culture of Great Falls continued its methodical, productive path, while inside a dimly lit, sparsely decorated room downtown at a small, generous table, you and your good friend Guillaume enjoyed many a taste of the best French cuisine. How lucky are you?

And what a sad day when he told you the colonel had been transferred.

Haute cuisine wasn't so hot in Montana in the 80s. Once Guillaume left, there was nowhere in Great Falls or Helena you'd

go out of your way to eat, except for hopeful little ventures that came and went very quickly in the capital city. In Billings at the Northern Hotel downtown, there was a notable effort. A French place near Victor on the other side of the mountains was pretty good. Russell Chatham's place in Livingston was a hot spot for a time, until that devil cocaine and larceny bankrupted the well-known painter. The restaurant at Chico Hot Springs just below Yellowstone Park was worth the trip, especially when your first course was a long soak in the pool. There may well have been others you didn't find, but damn few you are certain. It was slim pickings at best and all those few places of some note were very far from where you lived at the Lodge.

In the Missouri River Canyon, there was just one place worth the effort, and it wasn't anything great, but good enough to look forward to pretty regularly as a weekend place to celebrate. The Holter Lake Lodge was a long low strip of rooms for rent, mostly to fishermen, on a ledge above the reservoir, and on the next ledge below a bar and burger joint that was open pretty much every day of the season. The featured fare at the bar was the poster burger, said the sign.

"What's the Poster Burger?" Your wife, Tita, asked when the two of you visited many years later, just a year or two before the place was torn down.

"The burger on the poster," the fry cook said. That was the Holter Lake Lodge.

In a little space on one side near the back of the building, with windows overlooking the lake, a young woman named Dale and her family started cooking some more sophisticated fare on

Friday and Saturday nights. Butterflied shrimp, beef tenderloin with mushrooms and onions, a very tasty artichoke dip, a crab stuffed chicken breast with capers, stuff like that, and some perfectly drinkable if undistinguished wine. For a night on the town in your neck of the woods, it was just all right, and we appreciated it.

With some fanfare it was announced late one spring day that henceforth Japanese cuisine, including sushi, would be served to a select few by reservation on Thursday nights. Just as with Guillaume, the Japanese spouse of an Air Force officer, who was a highly skilled cook, found herself in Great Falls and rather than drink herself into oblivion or become a drug addict, which many cosmopolitan folks facing the same situation might choose, she contacted Dale and began to whip up some absolutely wonderful meals.

You, your family, and some of the guys who worked for you, in one or another combination, made it to virtually every Thursday evening feast for the brief tour of duty her husband had at Malmstrom. Sushi in Wolf Creek, Montana. Imagine! It was an extraordinary pleasure given the paucity of anything like it within many hundreds of miles.

The very best people you ever got to know in Montana were your close neighbors, George and Aggie Olds. They and their four adult children and their spouses became the people you learned the most from and remember most fondly. They helped you get your bearings, propped you up when you needed it, guided you to the best path through the ins and outs of local living, taught you to be one helluva fly fisherman (said with all

due modesty), wised you up when you got a little loose in the lip, and made your time at the Cooper Lodge one of great pleasure and profound memories.

George and Aggie did a whole lot more than laying carpet and killing goats. They were generous hosts to anyone who happened along, kind, patient, and tender teachers to all the kids who wanted to wet a line and catch a fish in the big river just outside their front door, and they were nearly iconic examples of the Montana lifestyle, how one goes about doing well with not a whole lot except what is important and what matters.

George stood maybe five foot four on a good day when his knees allowed him to stand up straight. He was balding with bushy sideburns, his pale face weathered, and like most of the locals showing patches of frostbitten skin.

“Minus 69.9 degrees on Rogers Pass, January 20, 1954. Bill and I were hunting elk up near Lincoln. This patch here below my right eye is what froze that day. Bill got a touch of frostbite, too. It was cold. You better believe it. I hear tell the official temperature has been rounded off to minus 70. Either way, it was the coldest ever in the lower forty-eight. I guess up in Alaska once they had a day a little colder.”

He was a handsome man in his own right, piercing eyes that sparkled blue when he let you in on a little joke, a stern, commanding look when he shared some piece of his past that was just between friends.

“Had a terrible pain low down in my belly. Got so bad I went to the doctor in town. He said, ‘George, you have a kidney stone.

We'll give you medicine, see if we can break it up over time, or we can operate and cut it out. It's your choice.' I told him, let me think about it."

"He called the next day or two, asked me had I decided. I told him it was not a problem anymore, I passed it last night. He said, 'George, no man alive could pass a stone that size.' I said, Well, I did. Pissed it in the toilet." He nodded, grimaced a little at the memory, looked at you to see if you understood, nodded again to indicate that was that.

His son Bill had taken over the carpet-laying business after George retired. He lived with his wife, Rita, a nurse at the hospital in Great Falls, in a log home about a mile upriver that was so solidly built it was said to be fully capable of dispersing a tornado if such a thing was ever to set down in the canyon. Bill was the eldest of three boys and famed among everyone hereabouts for the 27-pound brown trout he caught on a wet fly off his front lawn, which was still some kind of a record in an area where there were lots of big fish.

Second son, Bob, was an ironworker who built a massive insert for the big fireplace at the lodge, so we could use that beautiful creation of river rock built by Gary Cooper himself and his sidekick, A.N. Hanson, to be a source of efficient heat, rather than the traditional exchange that drafted out and up the chimney more heat than it sent back into the room.

The rock face of the fireplace spanned one end of the room wall to wall, some 30 feet across and maybe eight feet thick. The bed was big enough to roast a whole cow or a buffalo, so the insert had to be very large. We had to remove the French doors

in the room from their frame and bring in the cast iron stove on a forklift. Once it was in place, a giant log lit on the huge andirons, and the two iron doors closed tight with the solid brass handles locked down, it would keep the room at 70 degrees for two or three days, even in the dead of winter.



When you talk about fishing in this part of the world, you're broaching a serious subject. You got a glimmer of that intensity when George introduced you to Pete Cardinal, who is a marine biologist by training and a fishing guide on the Missouri by preference.

If you head up to Craig, Montana these days, you will find a little town hard by the river that supports several deluxe fly-fishing shops full of every manner of high-end equipment, \$500-a-day guides by the dozens and fleets of drift boats in which to float the river, accommodations in town and strung along the banks of the river, with a couple of decent restaurants, and any number of other luxurious means by which local people are squeezing a living out of fishing this pristine stretch of trout water.

But in the 80s, Craig was a dirt road past a single gas pump outside a tiny convenience store across from a particularly shabby bar just before you crossed a one-lane bridge on a set of wooden tracks that spanned the Mighty Mo. There were precisely 27 residences spread out casually in what comprised the town, or rather there were the 27 Lights of Craig you called it for the number of yard lights high on poles that glowed through the night.

There also was a very small nook of a shop just north of the bar where Pete held forth if it was open. He sold some flies he'd tied and, if they could pass muster by his strident standards, perhaps some flies by local tiers, as well. He also would guide you on a float down the river if he liked your looks. Many a guy got not much farther than hello before Pete wrote them off.

In a place where a lot of people really know how to fish with flies, Pete was notorious. He'd learned the ways of this particular river by lying on the bottom of it in scuba gear and watching until the tanks ran low on oxygen exactly how these wild trout behaved, what they ate, which among the many dozens of competing hatches they choose to dine on at what times of the year, the month, the week, and where they preferred to rest among the ripples and riffles, sandy shoals, and plunging pools.

Pete knew his stuff. If he deigned to take you fishing, he'd row you to one place after another where very large trout would strike your fly. When they did, you'd better catch them. He might forgive a single miss, reluctantly, of course, but shit happens, right? Miss a second strike, though, and he was well known for rowing his passenger to shore, wherever they happened to be, and telling him to "get the hell out of the boat and don't come back. I can't help you." Often enough when you saw a fly fisherman in full regalia, rod in hand, waders slung over his shoulder, creel empty, hitchhiking a long, lonesome way from anywhere, he had been sent packing by the famed Pete Cardinal. He'd never get a second chance.

Because of where the Lodge was located, on the big S curves of the Missouri in this still largely unknown stretch of water, the cognoscenti who found out you lived there were unabashed in seeking an invitation. Fishermen (and they nearly all were men in those days, although among your friends, pals like Sandy and Addy, a few spouses of guys who visited, and your darling daughters, made up some impressive female fly-fishers who came to ply these waters), came from all over the U.S. to fish with you, grateful for the chance.

Many of them were pros or nearly so, friends of friends who wrangled an invitation, and most of them really knew how to fish. You secretly were pleased to be the equal of any of them, although that stature was mitigated by the fact these were your home waters and brand new to them. Still, it was great to know you could hold your own and then some with people who wrote books on the subject.

Fly-fishing was becoming wildly popular in those days. A sport that dated to the ancient Chinese 5,000 years ago always had a strong cadre of adherents. But this was the 80s, where affluent youth and their Yuppie mentality of “how much does it cost and how much can I flaunt it?” was emerging. Fly-fishing checked a lot of boxes for the self-referential. It was outdoors in beautiful places, but cooler and wilder than golf, it was expensive, and as extensively complicated as you chose to make it. And you got to wear a lot of bizarre gear.

For those of us who lived along the river, it was the last best place to go fishing, a pristine stretch of water like a giant spring creek where many tons of wild trout thrived, Rainbows and

Browns mostly with Cutthroats and Brookies in the tributaries, and it was possible to fish for entire days without seeing another soul. When someone came along, it was always a local, usually someone you knew. Everybody was respectful, for the most part, and tended to keep it simple.

Too many forces were converging to keep it much longer the way it was, and when you picked up a copy of Fly Fishing magazine one day at a fly shop in Helena and saw the cover article, "The Missouri Nobody Knows," you knew the clock was ticking faster. But at first the flow coming at you was gentle.

The visitors who came there fishing sometimes made it amusing. Your pal, Jimmy Cotton, came up from Boulder with a \$2,000 bamboo rod, fancy reel, a vest loaded with every kind and size of flies, lines, leaders and tippet, pliers and nippers, spring loaded scales, screens, belly pumps, and a thermometer.

"What's that for?" you asked him.

"See how cold the water is. Fish only feed in a certain temperature range." He dipped it in the river and announced we should wait for the sun to warm the river a little. Then he went to his cabin and made lunch.

When you saw him an hour later, you were returning to the Lodge with a half dozen fat rainbows that were destined for dinner. "Where did you get those?" he said. You just stared at him. "You didn't just catch them!" he said. You just kept staring. "Impossible," he said. Then he began to get ready to fish.

You looked at the pile of stuff he was assembling and couldn't help saying, "Jimmy, you don't need all that stuff. These critters don't know how much that rod cost or the reel is made by Hardy.

They don't even care who tied the fly you're using, or whether your line is from Orvis or Walmart. It's all the same to them. Fish just wanna eat. Put the fly where they can see it and they'll do the rest."

It's what George Olds taught me. Keep it simple, relax, have fun. If you're nervous, it makes the fish nervous. If you relax, they relax. They have just as much fun as you do, so the more fun you're having, the more fish you'll catch. Simple as that.

In fishing manners matter. One thing you never do is cross another fisherman's line. You also don't slip in upriver from where a fisherman's working. Fly-fishers work on upriver after trout and stay out of each other's way to the greatest degree possible. If you come to water another guy's fishing, you come in below him and give him room. That's the way it's done. Lots of little things like that.

Where you lived in the Missouri River Canyon it was rarely ever an issue. But if you fished the Beaver Kill, the Au Sable, the Roaring Fork, or any of those famed rivers where you often found yourself damn near elbow to elbow with a lot of other folks wetting a line, one thing you do *not* do is float your line over somebody else's. You don't work water someone else is working.

George Olds was a gentleman and the nicest guy in the world. But he had his limits. When you've lived all your life on a stretch of river that is big, abundant, and almost unsullied by human hands for most of its existence, where there is so much clean, clear water, so many wild trout feeding on vast swarms of insects, and there is nearly always nobody about, plenty of room for everyone to do whatever they want to do, you don't take

kindly to some guy who crosses your line. Not once, not twice, but several times.

There is something in the cosmic order of things that makes certain no matter where you live, be it however remote from other human beings, there among the few whom you do encounter will be a glaring asshole. Yours was a young guy whose name you have gladly forgotten.

From the Lodge, if you walked a ways, you could see to the north the home where George and Aggie lived. And in the other direction, across the creek and beyond the big pasture, you could see the original 7__9 ranch house where Lyle and the boys were holding down the fort. Way up high at the top of the canyon if you squinted a little and focused hard, you could make out the roof of Rocky Top. Otherwise, you could see just one place, high up on the canyon wall and slightly around the bend, a small red cabin only occupied part time by this guy, a long-haul truck driver nobody cared for. With good reason.

Live and let live is the ethos. You don't have to like your neighbors to just let them be. And sometimes you have to be a bit rude to let them know you're not interested in their company. Which was how the few of us on the ranch had dealt with this particular fellow. And he eventually got the message.

But he had a drift boat and, when he was around, like everyone else he spent a fair amount of time on the river. George and you one afternoon just as the sun was far enough off the water to make the fishing fine were casting from the pile of earth which held the foundation of the old bridge that washed away in the flood of some 50 years past and never was rebuilt.

Folks on this side of the river liked it better without the easy access.

George like all of you enjoyed the sublime pleasures of fly-fishing, but he was getting older, it was harder to thread the eyelets on those tiny flies when you changed up one for another, and like most of the local guys he knew spinning gear sometimes can get the job done better. So, although you both were fishing with fly lines well out into the channel above the island where the waters divided and big fish settled in the eddy to feed, George had his trusty spinning rod handy just in case.

The two of you had been pulling in a few fat fish and letting them go when our untoward neighbor came drifting around the bend and directly across our lines. He seemed to be smirking a bit as he drifted past the island and tucked into the backflow of the inside channel, which brought him around again and right across our lines once more.

George looked at you with an expression of “what can a guy do?” and said, “I’ll fix him if he comes around again.” He reached for his spinning rod, tied a lead sinker the size of your thumb to it, and waited calmly to see what’s what.

It wasn’t long before the guy came drifting toward you again. As he crossed our lines about 20 yards offshore, George flicked his wrist and cast the sinker at his boat. He hit him directly in the temple and the guy went down like he’d been shot. “That’ll teach him,” George said.

You watched the boat drift downriver in the current for a long way before suddenly the guy sat up, looked around, and reached for his head with both hands. Even from the distance,

you could see his body language was stricken. It's a big, powerful river. Rowing all that way back against the current probably took a very long while. Or maybe he went ashore somewhere and walked back along the railroad tracks. Hard to say. All you know is that you fished in peace well into evening and never saw hide nor hair of him. Then or ever after.



A former brother-in-law, his wife, and two boys came to visit. Not sure how that happened because you don't remember inviting them, but no matter. There they were. The parents retreated into one of the cabins, while you took the boys fishing. They were aged maybe 10 and 12, something like that, and like most kids, the sight of the big river and all those fish jumping got their attention.

George Olds stepped into his familiar role as host and river master, setting up the boys with gear and showing them the basics of what needed to be done. It wasn't an hour into the afternoon before Ben, the younger brother, caught a very nice rainbow trout, about 15 inches and a pound and a half. Very nice fish. Nathan, the elder, began working even harder but had no luck at all.

When Ben carried that fat trout on a stringer back to show his folks that evening, he was beaming ear to ear. His dad looked at the fish, looked at you, and said to his son, "You didn't really catch that fish, did you?" That was a deflating moment for the boy. He and Nathan had it for dinner. You cooked it with them in the pit by the kitchen. You have no clue what his parents ate and didn't much care.

The next day, both boys fished their hearts out. Ben had a couple of strikes but missed them. Nathan caught nothing but frustration. He was starting to press, which isn't the way to catch fish. But being humbled by your younger brother isn't a meal anyone wants to eat.

Their parents were no-shows throughout those two days, seizing, one supposes, the chance to relax, read, nap, watch the birds soaring on the currents above the canyon, and generally be free of their kids for a while. Ben by the third day was mostly goofing off, satisfied he'd caught his fish and by now his attention wandered. Nathan though was really bearing down. They were departing in the morning and this, his last chance, was slipping away.

He and George worked all the best ripples and the holes where the big fish held. Nathan never let up, barely had lunch, and was back to the river one cast after another. The sun was getting low on the water and his hopes were beginning to fade, when Nathan got a powerful strike just as his father wandered down to the water. With George's guidance, he played the fish perfectly and brought it in. An 18-inch rainbow at least two pounds. He was immensely pleased and more than a little relieved. His father just said, "Wow!"

The family packed up the next morning, headed out early before you were up, said not a word of thanks. You never heard from the parents again. You did have dinner with Ben once some 30 years later at your daughter Kate's home, and he said he remembered the experience well. He was living overseas now, the partner of a young man in the diplomatic corps who was said

to be going places. Nathan had married a very wealthy woman and was living large in Utah.

Ben said both he and his brother had fond memories of that time on the river. Maybe he was just being polite, but you always hope those moments matter as much to the guests as they did to you and George. Who knows what if anything it may have meant to the parents? They never said.



Uncle Billy came calling on more than one occasion and it was always a pleasure when he did. He and you had been tighter than ticks in the bad old days in Boulder and Denver, spent a lot of time, effort, and money together dancing on the hyphen of irrationality, as he might put it. Although he was glad to accentuate your worst behavior, he also was quite good to you and every bit a friend.

Shortly after you were settled in the Cooper Lodge, he flew in and took up residence in the cabin closest to the spring, hard by the aspen grove. Billy was from a well to do and somewhat prominent family, Denver 400, debutante sisters, all that muck, and although he never had worked a job in his life, he expended serious energy in meeting the demands of portraying the landed gentry, absent the land which he was yet to inherit. An important part of all that, of course, was being handy with rod and reel. Billy was that.

So, shortly after he'd arrived and settled in, a cocktail or two was downed and maybe a reefer shared, he and you headed for the river. The fishing here always is somewhere between very good and extraordinary, but as George Olds always told you,

fishing when the sun is on the water is always going to be the least of it. Many a time he tapped you on the shoulder, turned from the river to point at the rim of the canyon far above us and a ways off in the distance, and said, "When *that* sun goes behind *that* ridge, *that's* when the fishing begins."

It was early summer when Billy and you headed down to the river, a few hours before sunset and a few more before dark this far north, but the sun was only an hour or so shy of dropping behind the canyon wall and the fish already were feeding hard on the surface. From the sound of their strikes and the splashes that followed, the fish seemed to be hitting the first caddis hatch, as often as not jumping clear of the water to catch them in the air.

"Try a Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear," you said to him, "and a little later when the hatch gets heavy, float them one of these." You handed him a few locally tied flies called Missouri River Special. A guy just couldn't go wrong.

The next day at lunch, when you were roasting the previous night's catch, Billy looked at you with that charismatic smile of his, and said, "I've been fishing since I was seven-year-old in all kinds of water. The first fish I caught last night is the biggest one of my life."

He nodded, smiled again, pointed at some of the smaller ones, a couple of one-pounders on the grille above the fire pit, said, "Look at that flesh, the color of salmon. The ones I cleaned last night were full of shrimp and crayfish, and about a million little bugs. No wonder they're so good. They dine on lobster!"

And it was. 99.9% of all the fish you caught over the years were released back into the waters. But a fella has to eat, too, and these trout were incredibly tasty eating. The flesh was firm and succulent. Like wine, it reflected the terroir.

They lived in a pristine river that hosted every type of aquatic creature and all the types, too, that lived along the banks and occasionally fell in. It wasn't unusual when you gutted one for dinner to find a small mouse in its stomach. Crickets, ants, worms, shrimp, crayfish, smaller fish, and all manner of crawling, swimming, and flying insects that hatch near, on, or under the water. These were not the bland, pale fleshed trout served at restaurants, which are bred and raised in tanks. Nor are they the sweet pale-flesh of high mountain Cutthroat or Brook trout, whose environment is more limited in how they live and what they eat.

Missouri River trout live in one of the world's great habitats, one that is much like a classic spring creek writ very, very large. There are holding areas of every kind in which the fish find relief from the powerful currents and dine on the smorgasbord flowing toward them. If it looks good, they'll chase it down.

There are times nearly every day of the year when masses of insects hatch, less so but even in the dead of winter if the sun is shining. In the summer, those hatches are so prolific, especially in early evening when the sun is off the water, that driving along the river, you have to stop every couple of miles to clean the bugs from your windshield so you can see. There are times fishing one of those hatches when the greatest distraction, other

than the swarms of trout voraciously feeding, is that you are literally covered head to toe with caddis or mayflies. The fish that eat them were well-fed, fat, and very tasty.

Even for a well-versed, practiced fisherman like Billy Hillyard, the Missouri was a unique and exhilarating experience. The image of himself he cultivated was a person of extraordinary taste and culture who accepted only what was best in what life offered. This was all of that. Were there room in any encounter to note the chinks, the clichés, the shortcomings, whatever was less than excellent, he was quick to call it. There was none of that here. It was what he sought and was thrilled to have. The finest. World-class fishing in the last best place. To his way of thinking, it was exactly what he deserved.

He sat in a rocker on the porch of his cabin in the lazy afternoon digesting his lunch and admiring the view. Birds of prey were soaring on the currents high above the river. A dozen head of horses grazed in knee-high grass in the pasture across the creek. A small herd of elk trotted through the far end of the front yard, jumped the fence and ducked under the railroad trestle. “So,” he said, and looked at you with great seriousness, “is this where you’re going to make your stand?” Clearly, he was hoping so.

Lots of folks came calling at the Lodge over the years, mostly folks you didn’t know who’d wrangled an invitation to fish these famed waters through a friend of a friend of a friend. But a few of your actual, tried and true friends came for a visit, too, and that was really a pleasure.

Sandy and Addy came up from Morrison, Colorado, where they'd lived for many moons at the foot of Red Rocks Amphitheater. They were two particularly feisty women who'd taken a liking to fly-fishing and came to try their hand. You and Sandy had been friends and colleagues going back more than 15 years. She and Addy had been together a while now and it was great to have them visit.

The weather, unfortunately, didn't cooperate. The wind blew pretty hard every day of their stay and trying to cast a fly in those breezes isn't much of a pleasure. Then, too, the wind knocks down the hatches and the fish don't feed much until it lets up, which, for their visit, it never did.

Still, it was great to have their company and cheering, too, to learn shortly thereafter Sandy came into a small inheritance, which they spent on a cabin in North Park, hard by the Wyoming border, a place beloved by wild creatures, fly fishers, and a whole lot of mosquitoes. They came to be excellent fishers there and hosted you to fish those waters on more than one occasion.

Thom and Gayle came for what was planned to be a week. It didn't last that long, but was particularly intense while it did, in an enjoyable if curious way.

Thom was a long-time friend and colleague. We'd worked and played together over most of the previous decade, both being deep in the scene and all its proclivities. Some of that was what you came to Montana to get away from, although your success was mixed, at best. Thom, on the other hand, was still in Denver and deeper than ever in some parts of it all.

You had a place in Denver, the very spacious attic at Billy Hillyard's home on Lafayette Street near the Country Club, which you visited frequently with his indulgence, and the two of you when you got together were particularly prone to indulge. Food and drink, of course. Of course. But plenty of cocaine, too. It was a hard habit to break, circumstantial in so many ways and easily environmentally triggered. When you were back in town, you were back in the bag. At least now, it was only periodic and infrequently that.

Thom, though, was still in the thick of it. When you saw him on your trips to town, it worried you specifically because you'd spent so much time in that very space yourself. He was strong as an ox, born hip, was gyroscopically attuned to the times that were, and he was very much his own man. Still, you worried.

So, when he and Gayle arrived at the Lodge, it wasn't surprising they were well armed. You don't know how much for sure, but maybe a half ounce, or more. The first thing you learned on that visit is fishing high on coke does not work. Thom spent a few hours that first day riverside, casting, swearing, muttering to himself, tying his leader in fantastic knots that no human could possibly untangle. Metaphorically, it was neat, tight, tangled.

You didn't fare any better. Cast, mend, stare at the surface, jump out of your skin if a fish hit your fly. It was comical, untenable, a familiarity encountered in a different setting with predictable results. You were fucked up and the fish weren't

cooperating. Neither was anything else that might pass for productive.

Instead, you, Thom, Gayle, Linda had the good sense to give up any pretense and just plain party. You rocked and rolled and bopped and strolled and had a helluva good time. Went through a pretty sizable amount of blow and had some soulful encounters.

You and Gayle, who had never been especially tight, spent a long stretch of the night wandering from one vantage place to another on the front lawn, conjoined in your observation of a very distinct UFO. It hovered, darted, blinked in and out, around and about, showing itself very clearly to be of unearthly origin.

The very next day arrived as scheduled and the party took off at a very strong pace. It's hard to recall the details but it covered all the essentials and a lot of the added attractions. Then came another night of grinding teeth until sleep.

The third morning made for a very rapid transition, where Thom and Gayle bid you a very abrupt thanks for the great time but allowed as how they had to return right away to Denver. The stash had expired the night before and it was necessary to get back immediately to civilization. I'm told they drove the Beemer straight through more than 900 miles directly to their source.

Susie and Dixon came to visit more than once, or rather, Susie came more than once, and Dixon once came with her. She and Linda were pretty tight, had been pregnant at relatively advanced ages together, each had a boy who grew to be pretty damned difficult, and so had the early part of a long narrative arc developing.

Dixon was a more recent addition to our friendship, and although you had known him since before they got married a few years back, you really didn't know him well. He was of a different background, too. A little older, a little straighter, not one of your drug-addled hippie pals. He was, however, the sort of husband a socialite like Susie needed for a spouse, once her grandmother took her aside, pulled her from her walk on the wild side is maybe a better way of putting it, and said, "It's time." Enough is enough, you know.

Susie looked over the roster of eligible guys, decided Dixon, Black Irish of Main Line Philadelphia and now residing on a few acres in Cherry Hills Village, was the designated hitter. They married, birthed a couple of kids to add to those they each had from previous marriages, and got on with being a family.

But in the early days of all that, they came to visit for a while and Dixon was a revelation. Those were the days when from his perch on high at the company where he worked, he'd give orders to mine a field, level a mountain, maybe reroute a river or two, who knows? He was deep into that way of classic American enterprise and sufficiency, and was we were soon to learn wrapped a little tight for fly-fishing.

He knew such things as blood sports demanded mastery. And he was the sort who was raised to expend whatever effort it takes to get it done. Try as he might, though, the subtle grace and elegance of fly-fishing eluded him. Power is not the solution, but he tried ever harder as the days passed to power through it.

Flies were fairly cheap in those days, local wages being what they were, but even so you would guess he went through at least

\$100 worth, snapping them off one after another with violent casts and peppering the air with a stream of quietly muttered profanity. Even George sized him up and said to himself, there's a guy I just can't help. He's just going to have to wear himself down a bit before he can figure it out. It took quite a while.

One of the beauties of the fishing experience in that exquisite place is there finally comes a time despite your best efforts when you drift a ways outside yourself and into a dream state wherein you make the perfect cast to the precise point where a big fish is waiting to strike. And so, just as Susie and Linda wandered down to the water late one afternoon toward the end of their stay, Dixon did exactly that and caught a very nice fish.

There was one fly-fishing shop in Great Falls, another in Helena. George turned you on to Gary, who ran the shop up north and that was where you tended to get most of your gear. It was an Orvis shop, well stocked, all the best local tiers kept the bins full up with the flies you wanted, and Gary was a good guy. He had a heart attack a few years later, passed away while still in his fifties, which brought the shop and that chapter to a close.

But in the day, you rarely made a trip to town without a stop at Gary's. One such day, a couple of cowboys were leaving just as you arrived. You made a quick purchase, some flies and tippet, and headed back outside. The cowboys still were standing there, out on the lawn toward the street, and one of them called you over. He was a short guy with a broad brimmed hat. The other guy was taller.

He held out his hand, showed you a little plastic container, and asked if these were the flies he needed. "Did that guy sell me the right ones?" he asked.

"Gary knows his stuff," you said. "Where you fishing?" you asked and got your first good look at him when you did.

"The Smith River," said Robert Duvall. "Will these work up there?"

"Yeah, I'd use these here during the day and some of these later on. They should do you fine. I won't bother to tell you I think you're a helluva actor."

"Okay," he said with that classic squint of his, nodded, and walked away.

You saw him around Cascade quite a bit that Spring. He was shooting a film called *Stone Boy* there with Frederick Forrest, Glenn Close, Wilford Brimley, and several other lesser-known actors. It was a beautiful story, set on a local farm, that almost nobody saw when it was released, but it was interesting to have those celebrities around that very small and lonesome town. You ran into Duvall several times and he was always friendly. "We did catch some fish that day," he told you.

A friend from the past came calling at the Lodge one day, unannounced, unexpected, and just impressed as all hell. He knew you lived somewhere near Cascade and drove all the way from Arizona with the intention of asking around until he found you.

He arrived on the evening of the 4th of July and all the way over the top of the hill coming out of the canyon and along the stretch of highway to Cascade, he watched a world-class

fireworks show lighting up the sky. “This guy is so unbelievably hip,” he said to himself about you as he rolled into town, especially after he saw a number of well-known actors strolling the streets. “Out here in a place nobody knows, and he’s got himself the next Aspen.”

He didn’t know until later the scene he wandered into was all part of the movie they were shooting, and that Cascade did not normally provide a \$50,000 fireworks display each year, nor was Robert Duvall in residence here other than right now. Still, he was mighty impressed and suspected even after you told him what was what that more was going on around here than you were letting on.

For that matter, more was going on with Gynnie than he first let on. When he got around to telling what he was doing in town, it wasn’t something you were all that happy to be hosting.

He had in fact in a very cool custom camper on the back of his brand-new truck some 800 pounds of marijuana he was taking to friends in Canada. He was curious to know what you knew about the different places to cross.

Gynnie had been raised in Tucson at the time the marijuana trade was being developed by a bunch of hippies, long before the big-time drug dealers came to dominate the scene. He’d begun as a runner while he was still a teenager, and being a dependable, ambitious fellow, had worked his way up the ladder until he was now sitting on a pretty serious load of weed.

Having it parked out front on your property wasn’t very comfortable. At least he had North Dakota plates on it, which

made it far less conspicuous, but still, from where you looked out across the front lawn, it appeared radioactive.

You sure had nothing against marijuana or the hippies it supported, but Montana in the Eighties wasn't a place you wanted to be apprehended with a big bag of pot, let alone a truck full. The better part of valor seemed to be to get him on his way as fast as possible.

You showed him all the legal crossings and told him what you knew of them. Also, that you knew the Mounties and presumably their border guards as well were not restrained by niceties like probable cause, which we enjoyed in the U.S. They also used dogs at the major checkpoints, so hoping to casually slip through was wishful thinking.

Gynnie by now was a pro, of course, and so he moved the conversation to more remote spots on the map. Del Bonita, Carway, and Chief Mountain were of interest. You'd used them all, no you didn't recall dogs. Yes, they were very remote and usually staffed by only one, sometimes two guards.

Like the shrewd guy he was, he zeroed in on some of the dirt roads north of Cut Bank that came very near the border. "Who lives up here?" he asked.

"Wheat farmers," you said.

"Is there an actual fence along here?" he wanted to know.

"I leased that property last year. There were a few posts in the ground to indicate the border. No fence, though. Really nice people. Imagine they keep a pretty close eye on things. Not too many strangers come along."

“Whiskey Gap,” he said, tracing the road on the Canadian side of the border. “The name has a ring to it.” Risky gap, the thought occurred to you.

He left the next morning, headed north on 287 up along the foot of the mountains, headed for Browning, then on whatever dirt roads as close to the border as he could get. Thereafter, entrepreneurship, innovation, and some serious balls would hopefully get him across.

The wind was blowing hard that day, and you warned him to take it easy on that stretch of highway. It was a winding, two-lane blacktop with little room for error and the wind coming down the mountain front could be ferocious.

Late that same afternoon, he pulled back into the yard, absent the camper. “About 10 miles south of Browning, the wind blew the camper clear off the truck,” he said. “Bounced it out across the field and scattered the bales all over hell. Really had to bust it to get them picked up. Couple of guys in a truck stopped to ask if they could help. Looked at me funny when I said no thanks.”

He was rattled, even after the long drive back, all the bales of pot piled like sacks of trash in the back of his truck. “I need your help,” he said.

He wanted to stash the pot with us while he went back to Tucson for another camper. “My guy will comp me another one just like it. Can you do that for me? Just stash it here for a week. Please, man, you really gotta help me. Everything I own is tied up in this load.”

“I have to ask Jake what he thinks. He’s an owner here, too.”

You and Jake talked it over and neither one of us was very happy about it. But we didn't feel we could send the guy off on his own with a truck full of pot and no cover. It was like personally sending him to jail.

"Okay, you've got a week."

Damned if he didn't drive all the way to Tucson, get an identical camper to the one he'd lost, and drive all the way back to Montana inside one week's time. He loaded up, headed out, left us a couple of pounds of excellent smoke, and as far as you know, he somehow got over the border and did his deal. You were happy for him that he got it done. The root cellar smelled like marijuana for nearly a year.

In his time, he was one of the guys who hybridized Maui Wowie from Indica seeds and had a hand in the whole sinsemilla revolution that changed the product for the better. The business, too, for that matter. You never heard from him again until shortly before this was written, and then only to ask about a nearby town where he was thinking about buying a summer home to escape the desert heat.



Billy Hillyard came back to visit several times and you always had a great time together. He loved to fish, loved the adventure, most of all loved the image of himself as the gentleman outdoors at play. He was all of that.

One time you both decided to take a tour of some of the distant, lesser known but probably excellent waters in the state. You mapped out a loop that began at the Boulder Hot Springs and moved on to the Wise, Ruby, and Big Hole Rivers, and

Blacktail Deer Creek high up at the edge of the Idaho border, with a turn back to the Beaverhead along that stretch from Dillon to Twin Bridges on the way home.

The generosity of landowners in Montana, as opposed to Wyoming for instance, has always struck you as the essence of Western hospitality. You have never once been refused access to private property on the way to fishing waters when you asked. There are times when the landowner will hop off his tractor, grab a fly rod and say, c'mon, I'll show you some good spots. Most of the ranches provide those wedge gates to let you in and keep the livestock from getting out. A way of welcoming you without having to ask.

One place you and Billy fished the Big Hole River outside Wisdom had a large sign saying: Fishermen Beware! There are Bulls in This Field. Forewarned is forearmed. You both kept your eyes open there but still managed to catch lots of very fat Brook trout.

The entire trip was long on big fish, incredible scenery, and plenty of beer with a shot or two back in the evenings. Amazing, too, was the series of curious places we spent the nights.

Fly-fishing is NOT the glamorous and fashionable sport you see portrayed in Orvis catalogues and slick full-color magazines, where very well-appointed, perfectly outfitted practitioners go forth in neatly tailored costumes with many thousands of dollars of gear in hand. They ply custom, multi-thousand dollars a week fishing zoos where even bozos can't help but catch fish.

There is that aspect these days, which has come to dovetail nicely with the popular glorification of ostentation and

posturing. The boast that money can buy. That's the \$1000 a day version. But real fishing for the most part is pretty damned funky.

Fishing camps are one example. You've stayed in all sorts of them, including a few that were pretty fancy. Most of them, though, were not a place you'd book the queen.

You and Billy stayed at one place with a hot spring inside a downstairs room that was crawling with thick layers of something green and mold-like. "Primordial ooze," Billy said, as both of you settled in for a soak. The rooms were pretty clean though and the beds reasonably comfortable. There were several places along the route very much like that. Basic accommodations, rooms clean enough and beds that got you a decent night's sleep, although it helped that you were both dog-tired and slightly drunk.

Then there was the Metlen. When you rolled into Dillon late one night toward to end of your tour, every room in every motel was taken. The town lies on an interstate highway, so there are more rooms available than its size might otherwise merit. Tonight, it was booked up.

At each place you stopped, the only advice you got was "maybe the Metlen." "You might try the Metlen." "There's always the Metlen." It seemed that each person who said it was swallowing a smirk.

The Hotel Metlen indeed had rooms to let. More than a few, in fact. It was an historic place with a long life hard by the railroad tracks. The bar on the main floor was beautiful, highly

polished hardwood in a vast rectangle within a very large room and a fair number of cowboys bellied up.

The rooms were another matter. When they say a place features original historic furnishings, it may sound like a romantic slice of the Old West. It may mean, though, that the beds and bedding have been in use longer than you've been alive. At the Metlen, the bedsprings were sprung, the mattresses lumpy, the sheets were full of holes from cigarette burns, the chest had unidentifiable stuff crusted on the inside of the drawers, a cluster of rings from many glasses and bottles eaten into the surface, and the paint was peeling from the walls. Otherwise, it was pretty comfortable.

Until you had to use the john, that is. It was down a dark hallway, up two steps, in a tiny room with a light that didn't work, and it really smelled bad. It seemed that someone had failed to flush it. You took the initiative and it gurgled and swirled and nearly overflowed.

You stepped back into the hall, took a couple of breaths, fished a lighter out of your pocket, and took another look. There's no delicate way to describe what you saw, but you are discussing the finer points of adventures in fly-fishing and this was exemplary.

In the badly stained, chipped, and rusted bowl was a singular turd of absolutely unbelievable dimensions. It was so big it was simply incomprehensible that such a thing could possibly emerge from a human being. Not to mention one you were sharing a toilet with. There was no way that thing was going to flush down the john. And you really had to go.

The toilet downstairs at the bar wasn't much more appealing. Urine and water were splattered all over the toilet and the floor. You made a strategic decision, peeled a few paper towels from the dispenser, walked out the back door, across the railroad tracks, into a field and finally relieved your bowels.

Shitting outside is a common occurrence when you're fishing out in the middle of nowhere, but Dillon, Montana is the only place you can recall where you took a dump in the middle of town. If you want to be a fisherman, you have to be ready and willing to rough it.

There were a lot of very tough guys you got to know in Montana, some of whom already have made a brief appearance. But Lyle was the toughest cowboy you've ever known, and anyone who grew up in the West like you did knows that is a pretty profound statement.

Every bit the truth, though. He owned for a while at least the original 7__9 ranch across the creek from the Lodge. How he came by it was a bittersweet and poetic story you told in a novella called Montana Story: the Toughest Cowboy I Ever Knew, where there was fictional space and license enough to be completely forthcoming in the telling.

He raised three boys by himself after his wife passed away tragically at a very young age. He weathered one year after another in this harsh, unforgiving environment and never once complained about the hand he was dealt or the challenges he faced. He didn't always overcome them, but sometimes surviving is the best you can do and that is enough. Lyle was a survivor. In his own way, he was a gentleman, too.

He stood about 5'8" in his best boots, was stocky and bow-legged, as a cowboy ought to be, had a large head, an angular face narrowed by long, thick sideburns, dark piercing eyes without a bit of guile to them, and a soft voice.

He was solid, honest, resolute, stubborn, self-reliant, straight-shooting, hard-working, neighborly, and generous to a fault. Also strong as an ox. There was nothing he wouldn't do for you if he had a mind to, and nothing you could make him do if didn't want to. He taught you by example, one after another, what it took to be a cowboy in Montana in all its simplicity and its complexity both.

He and George and Aggie were your only neighbors. From them, you learned those kinds of life-long lessons that change who you are and how you see things in meaningful ways. They are people who shape who you become and how you go forward. There was so much they taught you and so much to admire about them, each in their own way.

George and Aggie were older, so there was a parental aspect to how you saw them. Elders who were deeply experienced, wise, and comfortable with the way those experiences led them to live.

Lyle, though, was your contemporary and in most ways as different from you as two people could be. Yet he was there for you from the beginning of your time at the Lodge, helpful in so many fundamental ways that it's hard to imagine how you might have fared without him as a neighbor.

For someone with a very set compass, he was remarkably tolerant and accepting of your peculiarities and treated your

spectacular shortcomings as a rancher with good humor. You had enough in your character of what matters, apparently, that he could overlook your prodigious faults. He was so good natured and patient with you that it was easy to forget your many significant differences, particularly your respective background and economic circumstance. You would eventually learn that he dealt with them better than you did. It was one of the roughest, most valuable lessons.

It was a surprising and astonishing encounter you had with him over the several years you lived there. All the more so because it was completely unexpected. There was so much that came to mind when you recalled your time in the last best place, but none of it was more important and more valuable than what your time with Lyle taught you. He was a helluva guy and you were very fortunate to know him.

One day, in late summer when he was struggling and the struggle was becoming more apparent, Lyle asked if you didn't have any friends who liked to hunt. "Got permits for four to hunt the Bob this season," he said. "Pretty fancy setup all the way around. If a guy's looking for trophy elk, you can't do better. Thought you might know some guys who can afford it."

You did. Jimmy came back out from Boston, Jake from Colorado, Bobby from Florida, and you made four. It was a pricey hunt, first class all the way, in one of the nation's wildest, most pristine wilderness areas.

Along the Northern Rockies, there is a stretch of land from just west of the Lodge where you could ride horseback if you were so inclined all the way to Point Barrow, Alaska and cross

only two paved roads, Highway 2 in Montana and the Trans-Canadian Highway in Alberta, in more than a thousand miles of travel.

It began with the Bob Marshall Wilderness, which connected with the Great Bear Wilderness, which was separated by the highway from Glacier National Park. Across the border was Waterton Lakes Park, then Banff, the highway, then Jasper, and onward through the Northwest Territories to Alaska. It is the last great stretch of mountainous wilderness in North America and home to vast numbers of wild creatures, large and small.

Grizzly bears, wolves, wolverines, huge herds of moose, elk, and deer, big horn sheep, mountain goats, cougars, lynx, bobcats, foxes, birds of prey, and all the other animals too numerous to mention live in some proximity to a completely natural environment. And except for the Indians who have treaty rights to hunt there at their leisure, it is disturbed only by the fall hunting season and the few people lucky enough to receive a permit to hunt.

You've never been much of a hunter, but the environment of the endeavor is great right up to just before the killing. You are a hiker, not a hunter. You are in the distinct minority. Montana had then barely 800,000 residents and nearly 400,000 of them get permits to hunt each year, mostly for deer and antelope all over the state. A lucky few get tags for elk. Very few get them for the wilderness areas. Lyle did, and we were going hunting.

Roughing it was a relative term. Along with a couple of changes of warm clothes, and in addition to our rifles, we took

half a case of cognac, a case and a half of wine, three cases of beer, and a small bag of pot.

The horses were saddled and ready to go when we arrived at the foot of the wilderness. The mules were rigged with the supplies and off we went for a week on the hunt. Lyle and the guide whose service we were using anchored each end of the string, Sam in front, his hand Dale somewhere in the middle, Lyle in the rear. You rode just ahead of him.

The horses knew the route and followed Sam's lead with little effort on our part. The scenery was spectacular. Large shelves of snow were settled on the branches of the conifers and thinner streaks of snow lined the bare branches of the deciduous trees. The sun was out, the sky a brilliant blue overhead and in the distance thin lines of sunlight pierced the banks of dark cloud with color that ran from south to north and golden yellow to salmon pink hues.

Along a narrow path high on a very steep ridge, you looked down perhaps 1000 feet or more into a lake only partially frozen over in which the water was so clear you could see fish slowly swimming. "Heart Lake," Lyle said as you passed.

The camp when you arrived some 12 miles or more into the Bob was all set up and ready to go. Four big wall tents, one for the hunters, one for guides, one for dining, and one for supplies. There also was a small tent where the guns were kept between hunts each day so none of you shot yourself or someone else when too much booze had been consumed.

Another tent you didn't notice at first was off by itself at the edge of the camp near the corrals for the horses and mules.

"Jeff's," Lyle said when you asked him. Jeff lived here for the entire season, came to set up before it started and stayed to break it down after it was over. Never left for months.

"Nam," Lyle added to explain. What today is called post-traumatic stress disorder then was just called, "Private. Keeps to himself, mostly." He nodded our direction when he came out to unload the mules, brush down the animals. and feed them. Otherwise, he mumbled a little and said not much else as he dished up the grub he'd prepared for us, some of which was pretty damn good, if limited to meat, potatoes, bread and butter.

It was still dark the next morning when Dale came in to wake us. O dark thirty. Time to get after it. A quick breakfast, into the saddle, and on the hunt. Lyle and the boys led us through all the different strategies to find and flush the elk. After a full day of hard riding, walking, sneaking, stalking, we saw nothing but cows and their calves. Not a bull elk to be seen.

To put that day in perspective, you could bag a trophy elk from my porch at the Lodge and choose the one you wanted among many that grazed through the front yard several times a week, if not daily. But not in hunting season. The minute the flag drops and the hunters disperse, there is a secret message sent by telepathy to every male elk and deer to get thee gone. They simply disappear.

That is why they call it hunting. You have to go find them. And get lucky. Because they don't want to be found.

So, we spent the day in beautiful places where other than us there wasn't a sign of humanity. Several of us would circle around the top of a thicket of trees to the far side while others of

us walked noisily through the forest, chasing all sorts of critters toward the guys waiting in ambush. None of them were bull elk.

Small herds of cow elk, lots of deer, a few other four-legged, cloven hooved animals, and any number of rabbits and squirrels. You even watched a fox dart out of a cluster of bushes to bag a rabbit you had flushed. But no bull elk were seen. Not a one.

You did see more than one substantial pile of bear scat and footprints in the snow larger than your boots, in case you harbored any doubts that grizzlies were about. They seemed to be everywhere. That you didn't see them didn't mean they didn't see you.

Dark came early enough that back at camp evening started actually in late afternoon. All of the hunters stretched out on their bunks, footsore, saddle-sore, bleary-eyed, ready for a little reefer, a quick nap, dinner, and some serious liquor.

Wake-up came again before the sun rose and, in a different part of the Bob, the routine of the previous day repeated itself. Riding, walking, beating the bush, scanning the distant meadows. Nothing. No bull elk.

The evening was pretty much the same, and the next day, too. There was enough about the experience that was spectacular that you couldn't quite call the experience boring, but it quickly became routine. When you have an objective in mind that goes unrealized, the rest of what you do can seem superficial.

You had no real interest in killing anything, so for you it was simply a week in the wild and you were glad of it. For Jimmy and Bobby, who had come a long way, it was wearing just a bit thin.

They were expecting more than a ride in the woods and time was slipping away. Everyone, guides and hunters both, were beginning to feel the pressure. A trophy hunt, after all.

As these things often happen, the last day of the hunt, sometime shortly after lunch, you jumped a herd of elk. There were several males, one a trophy bull, and the guides were all over the situation instantaneously.

Jimmy and Bobby were to get the first shots. Dale was their backup. The herd flushed left behind a stand of trees and Lyle headed them off. They came running back the other direction, which gave a clear shot through an opening they had to pass before gaining more cover.

Jimmy, Bobby, and Dale snapped off a shot each almost simultaneously. The big elk tumbled into a heap. He was dead before we reached him. A twelve-point bull with a spread a good five feet across. There was no way to be certain who among the three had killed him. It really didn't matter. The hunt was a great success. The hunters were pumped. The guides were relieved. You were a little wistful to watch him bleed out.

From out of a pack on one of the mules, Sam produced a small chain saw, cranked it up, and prepared to quarter the animal. Lyle and Dale skinned it out first with big bowie knives. It all happened very fast, while Jimmy and Bobby high fived each other and Dale quietly smirked.

They packed a hind quarter and the head on one mule, another quarter and the hide on the other. Neither of the pack animals was very happy about it. It was a good five miles or more back to camp. The mules carried fresh meat that was

dripping blood through country that was flush with grizzlies. By the time we arrived at camp, they both were drenched with sweat, from anxiety rather than the loads they carried. They were very angry creatures.

The rest of us, though, were feeling good. We stashed the rifles in the gun tent, grabbed the last several bottles of wine, some food, and set about partying. The hunt was done, the boys had bragging rights, the guides had earned their pay, and even Jeff seemed slightly light-hearted. Tomorrow we got to go home, take a shower, change our clothes, rack up the experience in our strong box of tales, and get on with our ordinary lives.

For now, though, we were well on our way to having one helluva time when a blood-curdling shriek snapped us out of our revelry. It was horrifying. Your first thought was a grizzly had attacked one of the guys.

All of you ran for the gun tent, grabbed your rifles, and followed the sound of screaming that continued unabated. At the corral, you were stopped cold in your tracks.

Jeff had been feeding the mules after brushing down them and the horses.

He was bent over, breaking open a bale of hay, when one of the two mules let him know how he felt about hauling that elk home.

When we got there, we saw Jeff in the jaws of the mule, held by his waist, the animal's neck arched high in the air where it thrashed him back and forth, his head tossing violently, the screaming continued, until the mule slammed him over the fence

and onto the ground, turned and walked to the hay, which he began chewing almost nonchalantly.

The next morning before we left, we tried to pay our respects to Jeff. He was having none of it. But we caught sight of Sam dressing his wound, spreading salve over the right side of his body, which already showed a bruise beginning to radiate out from his kidney to his neck and his ankle. Lyle told me that word was three days later he was literally purple from head to toe.



As a rancher, Lyle only grew two crops, hay rich in alfalfa and timothy grass, and Potomac red potatoes. He approached you one day shortly after you moved in with a simple proposition. He'd seed and hay your pastures for half the crop. "Fair enough," you said.

"While we're at it," he said, "that stretch of ground along the railroad tracks is perfect for potatoes. Same deal there?" You agreed.

The potatoes were delicious. After he dug them, you were presented with a dozen gunny sacks full, all but one of which went into the root cellar for use all that winter, spring, and summer to come. The first bag you used in its entirety for a huge feast with steaks on the side that fed the neighbors and their families who came down from Great Falls. It was carbo-loading on a massive scale and all of us enjoyed it tremendously.

When you raise horses, hay is a serious matter. The one summer when you ran low, the price was \$50 a ton from a guy in the big hay fields north of Helena, and you had to haul it. Ten

tons cost a pretty penny, which caused you to look at the herd you were raising a little differently.

The local cowboys looked at horses as a tool of the trade. They either earned their keep, or they weren't worth the feed. Raising horses for fun, which is basically what you were doing, was a curious way to go about things to their way of thinking.

Lyle watched you that fall hauling all that extra hay and pouring it into those pleasure horses. As a rule, he didn't say much and kept his opinions pretty much to himself unless asked. This time, though, he couldn't help himself.

"If you put that same feed into cows, you could eat 'em when you're done."

You smiled, nodded, said, "You could eat these horses too if you got hungry enough."

Mostly, the big hay fields produced enough to keep you both in clover, so to speak. Although you could have ducked out, you made a habit of helping put up the bales after he'd cut and bundled them. Lyle and his three boys, even Little Lyle who was not much past toddler, all worked it, too.

When your daughter, Sarah, came from Portland and spent the summer with you her sophomore year in high school, she was just barely enough older than Laren, the oldest boy, to know she had to keep up. Being already a budding feminist and proudly aggressive in the way she tackled things, there was no way she'd let the boys out do her.

Bucking hay, though, nearly did her in. It's one thing if you grow up doing it but tossing 40 lb. bales of fresh hay onto the

back of a truck when you're not used to it is weekend warrior material of the worst sort.

We got her started by driving the truck through the hay field. Moving very slowly was harder than it seemed. She never had driven a stick shift, and this hay wagon was an old GMC with about 150,000 miles on it and a very balky clutch. She ping-ponged between killing the engine and having to fire it up again, and riding the clutch to the point you could smell it overheating.

"Tell you what. I'll drive and you bale." She kept up with the boys every step of the way, up and down the rows of hay bales, under a very warm sun, through all the itchy dust and biting bugs that kicks up in the process. When we finally finished, she was very proud of herself. Even Lyle gave her a nod and the boys said, "See ya tomorrow." The next morning, she came to breakfast with the muscles above her collarbones nearly touching her ears. You go girl! She did.

Sarah had another moment that gave her pause. There are all sorts of critters about in this part of the world. For a girl from Portland, Oregon, the wilds of Montana were pretty wild, indeed. But she was pretty cool about it. Mostly.

There were birds of prey of every sort, eagles, osprey, hawks, falcons, great snowy owls and their smaller, equally deft kin. There were wild horses, too, who sometimes tried to raid your haystack, elk, deer, and once at least a moose, who tried that, as well. There was a cinnamon grizzly that lived in back of the ranch, cougars, bobcats, lynx, coyotes, all sorts of smaller creatures like possum, skunks, porcupine, squirrels, rabbits, rats, mice, and in the course of a few days or weeks in all but the

winter months you would encounter any of them at one time of another.

There were times down in the river in water up to the middle of your chest and so pretty near eye level with the surface when big fish were swimming between your legs, otters and beavers paddled past, kingfishers plucked fry from the river right in front of you, white pelicans nearly half your size drifted past in neat rows, and you felt like you were merely an aspect of nature in that element.

You felt that way until a bull snake longer than your body came slithering past you a foot or two away, gliding across the surface film in undulating Ss with the sun glistening on the scales of its skin, keeping an effortless, purposeful pace toward wherever it was going. Then you sometimes paused to consider whether you really fit in.

Although some of the creatures were edible, and some of your neighbors didn't hesitate to bag them for dinner, shopping for food was one of the regular chores you had to attend, and it was no small matter. The grocery store was a little more than 45 miles distant and even at high speed up the interstate, a 90-mile round trip was not something you wanted to repeat the same day or the next because you forgot something essential.

So, you made a careful list of everything you needed to pick up, all the staples for a week of dining, plus beer, wine, booze of stronger content, a stop at the Great Harvest bakery for a couple of loaves of that wonderful bread made of Montana's famous hard red wheat, and a couple of dozen plate-sized chocolate chip cookies because you just might need to fatten up.

You also took in whatever needed repair, dry cleaning, if any, scissors to be sharpened, maybe, and things like a few five-gallon cans of gasoline to have on hand and keep the mower running. All of which is preface for that time when you and Sarah were heading up to Great Falls and, just before you pulled away, remembered you needed to fill the gas cans.

"Sarah," you said while the truck engine idled, "will you grab those two gas cans? They're right next to the fireplace near that little shed." You watched her walk purposefully to the shed, scream and jump in the air, come running back at high speed, saying, "Dad, Dad, there's a really big snake!"

"Oh, crap, Sarah," you said to her, "don't be such a wuss." You marched your way up to the fireplace, saw the snake, screamed louder and jumped higher than she had. "Holy crap!" you said. "That is a BIG snake."

It was lazing in the sun where it reflected off the big river rocks of the fireplace chimney, so it was easy enough to grab it behind the head once you regained your composure. That woke it up pretty quickly and it started to flex and curl, but not before you managed to lift it up above your head and note the tail still was tucked on the ground. A seven-foot bull snake just hanging around.

Truth is, they are beneficial to have on site, startling as it was to see one of that size snuggled up against your home. They are not poisonous, are terrific hunters, consume a lot of rodents to maintain a mass that size, and are notorious for driving away rattlesnakes, of which there were plenty in the area, because they can outhunt them. So, with no small effort, you carried him

down past the corrals and released him near the river. He probably was back in place before you got to the highway.

As good a guy as Lyle was, there were plenty of people in the area who projected their own version of Montana tough, which was long on guns, rough talk, Christianity, patriotism, and serious anti-government inclinations. The last two somehow were not in conflict.

It was not long in your time there before you found yourself sharing a beer in this bar or that with people you barely knew, and somewhere a few bottles into the night, one of the boys would nudge you, say, "You're a pretty good guy. You oughta come to one of our meetings."

It happened more than once, and it got your attention. Of course, that was before they found out how many vowels you had in your name. But being white at least got you off on the right foot with them, the far-right foot, such as it was.

Posse Comitatus, the Force of the County, was taken seriously in many parts of the state. Some places folks were brazen about their particular version of law and order. Others were a little more oblique, meaning you had to ask before they'd flat out tell you how it was.

There were the ever-present John Birch Society signs, of course, in fields and pastures everywhere roads passed by. Lots of Jesus signs and crucifixes. That was just rural.

But there were more obvious messages, too. On a trip to Idaho on U.S. Highway 2 in the western part of the state, along the Kootenai River just outside Troy, Montana in 1981 was a big

billboard with a pretty simple message, clear as a bell: If You're Not White, You're Not Welcome!

There weren't a lot of black folks in the state. In fact, if it weren't for the air force base in Great Falls, chances are most people hereabouts might never have seen a black person. But there were plenty of Mexican and Asian people, some of whom were year around residents, who worked the harvest season, and, of course, there were those pesky Indians, who somehow never went away.

People of color, as they're now known, or colored people as they were called back then, were clearly warned. White makes right. Easy as that.

It's not like that attitude was the prevailing one among most of the people in Montana. But where live and let live was the ethos, the aggressive types took hold in many of the smaller towns and people of better character sometimes were slow to speak up against them, if they did at all. Rabble rousing was what they made of it, for the most part. Local loud mouths, neighbors or not, making noise and posturing. Probably felt it had little to do with them and didn't matter.

Cascade, the closest town to where you lived, was clearly but obliquely redneck for most of the time you were there. Deva went to Cascade High School freshman year and had no problems with the local kids. She did raise holy hell about the reckless, high-speed ride the school bus driver took her on along the icy river road each day. But that was another matter.

The politics, such as they were, simmered under the surface. There was a time, though, in the late Eighties, when you shared

a beer with the former sheriff who allowed as how the powers there had really gotten out of hand of late, led by the banker, the few merchants, and some of the local ranchers. "It's anarchy, pure and simple," he said. "It was coming on pretty strong when I was still in office. But nothing like this. My successor now does just exactly as he's told. Legal or not."

Politics of a more visible sort were centered in the staunch influence of the two big ranches that roughly adjoined the 7__9. If you left the Lodge and headed south toward Helena, you would pass two spreads that comprised the majority of private land in the Canyon. Both places and the families that owned them have wielded considerable influence in the state.

First, you pass one edge of the Dearborn Ranch, a modest 90,000-acre spread. For perspective, that's 140 square miles of pristine land. It was owned by Michael Curran, a Butte native and Oklahoma oil & gas pipeliner who acquired the ranch in the 1950s. Curran led and ultimately lost the fight against stream access in the state. He was notorious for running off anyone who tried to fish or float the Dearborn River, most of which lay within the boundaries of his ranch.

Curran was known to have strung barbed wire just below the surface of the river in hopes of ripping the bottom out of any inflatables floating the water. His ranch hands chased off anyone they encountered fishing there, whether from the shore or wading the river. Sometimes they did so with rifles to make their point perfectly clear, reputedly firing warning shots on more than one occasion.

Many a fisherman had fought against restricted access to waterways. The law stated that access to the water and any part of the bank up to the high-water mark was a public right. Curran didn't like it and sued to have the law overturned.

In 1984, the state Supreme Court ruled against him, effectively ending the right of landowners to treat rivers and streams as their private property. He didn't go easily into that good night, though, reputedly still harassing fisherman until he finally sold the ranch in 1997 to Silicon Valley billionaire Tom Siebel for some \$25,000,000. Curran died in 2002 and is buried in the little graveyard on a hill above Craig, a few miles from the mouth of the river he fought so feverishly to keep to himself.

Further south, beginning near where the little town of Wolf Creek sits at the junction of Prickly Pear Creek and the Missouri, and continuing for many, many miles beyond, is the Sieben Ranch, which dates back to the 1860s. The original settler of the property, Malcolm Clarke, came west after being expelled from West Point for fighting. He was murdered on the ranch as part of a dispute between his Blackfeet in-laws and some local whites. He's buried on a rise near the creek.

In the 1890s, a couple of owners and a much larger ranch later, it was purchased by Henry Sieben, whose family grew it further and still runs it today. It is now a vast, productive, extraordinarily beautiful sheep ranch, a full 115,000 contiguous acres of some of the very finest land in Montana, which of course means some of the very finest in the world.

The sheer scale is staggering. There are numerous little settlements of homes, barns, sheds, and corrals located at

various spots on the property, each of which is nearly the size of a small town like Wolf Creek. Uniquely, among any private property you know of, it has its own exit off the interstate highway, a full-size structure just like all the others in the interstate system, except this one takes you nowhere but to and from the ranch.

Maxwell Sieben Baucus was the longest serving U.S. Senator in the history of the state, representing it for six terms from 1978 until 2014, and two terms in the House of Representatives before that. He was an impressive guy and also a pretty regular hand, at least at times, on the ranch. You were one of many people, fishermen mostly, who volunteered to help when they were haying, in exchange for which you were granted visitor's rights to explore the tributaries and headwaters of Prickly Pear Creek, which rose high up on the property. One of the two times you did it, the Senator himself was elbow to elbow with you, putting up the bales and keeping you on task. Politics aside, you liked him.

People in the energy business always talked about how tough it was to work with Indians. "Bottom of the barrel, that Indian work," they'd say. And while it was true that some of the Native people you worked with were pretty difficult and hard to take, as a group the whites you worked with were certainly no better.

In fact, the single most ornery guy you ever leased was a rancher in Choteau, Montana who was just having none of it and wasn't going to bother being courteous about it, either.

"Not interested. Goodbye." That was his first response.

“Don’t be bothering to come around. Told you I’m not interested.” That was his second.

You made several more attempts to talk to him. Each time gained an increasingly hostile reply. Seemed like a waste of any further effort, but your client was insistent.

“You gotta get this done,” he said. “Figure out what it will take.”

Well, good luck. Past a certain point, if you’ve been told “go away” and you keep coming back, you’re trespassing. So, there’s that to consider. And it isn’t like you don’t get it that these guys have legitimate concerns about leasing their minerals to an oil & gas company. That industry has made ranchers and farmers a helluva lot of money. They’ve also pissed them off enough, and done so often enough, that word long since has gotten around.

You’ve always had success in working with people because you hear their concerns and respect their right to say “no.” Most of what people worry about, once you understand it, can be satisfactorily resolved. But yea or nay, it’s still their choice. There’s only so much you can do to try to change their mind.

So, Choteau No, as you came to call him, didn’t leave you much of an opening. You got lucky and ran into him once in town, where the two of you carried on a brief, civil conversation, and he even entertained a few of your arguments about why he might want to talk things over. Not only did he listen a bit, but he actually smiled a time or two.

“The answer’s still no,” he said in the end. “Have a good day,” he added.

At his property, he was even ruder the next time. "How many times do I have to tell you? Not interested. Period. Why can't you figure that out? You don't look like you're stupid." He said it like a question rather than a statement.

"I'm just trying to do my job."

"And I'm trying to do mine. But you're getting in the way. You see? You keep coming around, telling me we need to talk, and I keep telling you no. I got a ranch to run here, and you got nothing to offer me that's gonna help me get that done. Until you figure out something you can do for me that makes my job easier, I'm telling you to get the hell out of here and stay away."

You told your client what he said. The client said, "Sounds like maybe he's thinking it over."

"Yeah, right. I think he's thinking about what gauge shotgun shell he's gonna use on me the next time I knock."

"Ah, don't take that attitude. You're making progress. Just got to keep after him. I can't say this emphatically enough. This deal is *very* important to us. You know we're counting on you to make it happen."

Some time passed. It was getting on to calving season. As always, it seems, the weather was particularly shitty: wet, cold, muddy, snow and then sleet that was close to rain if it wasn't nearly frozen. The wind blew it sideways into your face and through your bones. Miserable time to be out and about.

Or stuck in a calving shed, pulling one balky calf after another out of their mothers, day after day, night after night, while the wind howled through the cracks between the planks

and your muscles *really* started to ache. That's where the ranchers were this time of year. Not like they had a choice.

This is where the business is made or lost. Every one of those newborn critters is potentially worth many thousands of dollars to the bottom line. You either get it done as it comes around to you or you might not be in business still the next time it comes around.

You knocked on the door. His wife answered. "He's calving. You don't want to be bothering him," she said.

"It's really important I see him," you said. She shrugged her shoulders, scowled a bit, closed the door, turned and walked away.

Have you ever seen someone who's really and truly exhausted? Not just tired or worn out. Exhausted. Beat to a pulp. Like a prizefighter in the late rounds of a championship fight. Life and death tired. They're going ahead on sheer willpower alone. Sometimes, the willpower ebbs, too. Then they're in trouble. That is how Choteau No looked.

He was leaned back nearly lying down, his head and a shoulder propped against the post of a pen, sort of dozing and sort of not. He was filthy, unshaven, sleet in his beard, half frozen snot from his nose crusted over his lips to his chin, his clothes smeared and clotted with afterbirth. A pained look on his face and in his eyes began to turn to anger when he saw you. He was too exhausted to do anything about it.

The cow was on her side, looking pretty bad, too, moaning softly, panting, the calf in breech position, stuck, not moving. The chain had drug her about as far as she was going to go, it

seemed, and he didn't have the strength left to do anything about it.

You got kicked by a cow once and it hurt for about a month, so you were careful about approaching her. Needn't have worried. She was too tired to move a muscle. You reached up inside her, put a foot on each side of her butt, dug in your heels, grabbed hold of the sack and pulled as hard as you could. And again. And, then a sound like wet rubber, a tumble backward, and she slid out onto the wooden floor. Just like that! It was sort of stunning.

You got her squared away, her mother after a few minutes revived enough to lick the placenta from her newborn calf, and you were kind of proud of yourself for a city boy, although your back hurt a little and you noticed now that things were calmer it was pretty damned cold in this shed.

Choteau No revived a little, too. Just enough to look at his calf, his cow, then at you with a downturned mouth, said, "Okay, so, you helped me there. Come around next week and we'll talk."

It took another two months of negotiations before he leased you the property, and as it turned out, as it often does in the biz, it didn't matter a lick. None of it. He got paid big bonus money, mid-six figures, and took it to the bank. None of the stuff he worried about, and there was a very long list, turned out to be an issue. Because the company bailed on the project, did nothing more than pay the annual rentals for five years and let the lease expire. Free money, as you said to so many of these guys. Don't look the Santa horse in the mouth. They never set foot on his

land. It came to nothing in the end. Except that when you concluded the deal, he said, "Thank you," and shook your hand.



The commute from the Lodge to your office in Cut Bank you made maybe every two weeks or so, depending on the workload and how much supervision was needed. For a three-hundred-mile round trip, it wasn't a bad one. You'd get on I-15 at the Dearborn exit and head north 120 miles to the exit at Shelby, usually at 90 miles per hour and often without ever touching your brakes. A quick left at the stop sign onto Highway 2 and west another 30 miles, you were there.

There were times when the snow was deep, though, the trip from the lodge up and over the canyon wall on the ranch road to the Dearborn was impassable. Others when it was a helluva ride for that brief four miles and you weren't entirely sure you could make it without getting stuck, or at best, having to back your way to where you came from. The locals had a solution.

On the other side of the bridge and a few miles upstream was a cluster of homes in a relatively flat plain and the interstate highway running through it. If someone was good enough to cut the federal fence that ran alongside it, and damned if they weren't more than willing to, you could roll through the snow up a modest little bank and directly on to the highway. From there it was easy driving.

Of course, it was illegal, too, and the state patrol spent lots of time and effort trying to catch the culprits. Mostly they caught the folks like you who simply had the good sense to use it, and when they did, they always threatened a very big fine. One they

would waive if you could point them to the guy who cut it. Not one or the other ever happened, but not for a lack of effort on their part. For your part, you truly didn't know who did it but were very grateful for his work.

You have to understand the State Patrol in Montana is made up of mostly good guys. Your neighbors. Guys who actually buy into "serve and protect."

In those days, there was no state speed limit on the highways during daylight hours, so you could pass a cop as you roared on down the road and he was not going to take offense. There was, however, a federally mandated 55 miles per hour speed limit, which necessitated the occasional traffic stop where the patrolman would apologetically issue you a citation for wasting gas.

You posted a \$5 bond on the spot. Failure to appear meant you forfeited the bond. That's all. No points on your record. No other hassles of any kind. It was a Montana response to federal intervention. The state continued to receive federal highway funds. The drivers were properly chastened. It also provided the state patrol a chance to break up the monotony of those long stretches of road by having a visit with their neighbors.

One time, you were heading from Cut Bank to Great Falls when a state cop pulled you over. It was dusk, you were doing about 90, running late for a show at the event center where a closed circuit telecast of the championship bout between boxers Roberto Durán and Sugar Ray Leonard was about to begin.

"Jim," he said, "it's getting dark. You got to slow it down a bit."

You told him why you were in such a hurry.

"Wow! You're going to the fight? Man, wish I was. Hold on a sec."

He got on the radio, checked with the dispatcher, said, "Go for it, man. Not another trooper on the highway right now. Clear sailing all the way to town."

Got there just as the boxers were entering the ring. It was a great match.

There was the time one evening coming home from the movies in Helena when you were pulled over by a cop you didn't know. He looked at Linda, then Deva, and said to you, "You're speeding, my friend. That's a no-no after dark."

"Yeah, I'm sorry," you said. "We just saw a great movie and it got us pretty revved up."

"Yeah? What'd you see?"

"ET, it was awesome!"

"Oh, man," he said. "Isn't that a great movie? I've seen it twice already."

"Yeah," you said. "We're definitely gonna go again."

It was the start of a 15-minute conversation about film, Spielberg, extra-terrestrials, spaceships, and trying to get along with strangers, all by the side of the highway. The guy really knew his stuff.

Another time you were just north of Cascade on the way to Cut Bank when another trooper pulled you over.

"How you doing?" he asked you when he approached the car.

"Good," you said. "What's up?"

“Ah, don’t mean to bother you,” he said, “but I’ve never seen one of these cars up close. Just wanted to have a look.”

It was a 1979 Mercedes Benz 280, of which there were not too many in Montana back then. As long as you didn’t need repairs, because there were no dealerships within hundreds of miles, it was a great car for the local conditions. Very comfortable, super safe, even at very high speeds, so well balanced that the traction was exceptional on snow and ice, and it looked pretty damn good.

“This is a sweet ride,” he said, with a look of appreciation. “Wow, will this thing really do 140?”

“That’s what the speedometer says. Never had it above 100 so far. But I’ve got some very high-test gas in it from the refinery in Cut Bank. Supposed to be 100 plus octane. Be a good time to find out.”

“Okay, tell you what. I’ll go up about a mile and put the radar on you. Crank ‘er up and let’s see what she’ll do.”

129 was what the radar said. He was impressed. So were you.

Times like those almost changed your attitude about the police. Not quite, but if they were all like these guys, you could get along.

One particular trip to Cut Bank, Pat Minette asked you to help him appraise the art and furniture in his home for a big estate sale he was planning. Pat had cared for his mother until she died, and he lived in the big old home she had shared with the previously deceased Doc Minette all the years since. Doc was the local dentist and a state legislator. The Minettes were pretty

prominent citizens. Pat's only sister, Tommie Hughes' mother, lived with her husband on the other side of the mountains and no love appeared to be lost between them. Still, they were family and civil.

Pat was notorious for picking up strays. His dog, Lucky, a little dachshund, had appeared at his RV, a big old greyhound-type bus, one afternoon in bumfuck and never left. Now he was an exalted part of the household. So, too, was the previously mentioned Tom Southard, who was plucked from the streets, had his moment, and now was somewhat less than exalted.

A few months back, Pat had picked up a hitchhiker somewhere near Lethbridge, Alberta and brought him home for a meal. Kirk was his name, and he was a mess, a street kid who was shaky, nervous, barely able to string the words of a sentence together, and altogether asocial.

"Just get a steak or two in him," Pat told me, "and he calms right down. Really, really, really! He just needs to know there's another meal to be had and he's okay. Very much so."

And it *was* so. Little by little, Kirk acclimated. Calmed down. Ventured into conversation. Haltingly, but better as the weeks went by. He gained some weight, gained confidence, gained a foothold in Pat's world.

Behind the scenes, there was no shortage of talk about exactly what type of relationship was developing between the two. Nobody said anything to Pat, or to you, for that matter. But apparently a lot of muttering was going on, especially within the family.

Pat had always deeded a fractional interest in his minerals to Tommie as he acquired them. It was a gesture of inheritance to his nephew by a childless uncle. Tommie was a ne'er-do-well type who painted a little and drank a lot. His prospects appeared to be very limited beyond whatever his family provided.

Pat wasn't wealthy by any means, but his mineral holdings in this active oil & gas county were substantial and they generated a steady income. When he started deeding off fractions to Kirk, as well, the family antennae went up.

They went way up when Pat announced he had adopted Kirk, whose name was now Sterling and whose place in the hierarchy of the family drama had been very significantly elevated. He was now to be Pat's heir. Not everyone in Minetteville was standing by to welcome their new relative aboard.

Blood, as we all know, is thicker than water. Money, though, is thicker still. It carries a weight that has torn many a family apart and this would be one. How it happened, though, was ruthless and final.

Pat's estate sale was scheduled for a weekend a couple of weeks hence. You helped him price the furniture, paintings, china, silverware. "Wow, Pat, are you selling everything?" you finally asked. He allowed that he was.

"Then I'm going to sell the house. Sterling and I are leaving this shithole town for good. I'm so done with this place. Really, really, really, very much so."

The estate sale was big news in Cut Bank. You arrived mid-day on Friday to help him get ready and people already were trying to come in. By eight the next morning, a line stretching

more than a block down Main Street was bubbling with excitement. "Doc Minette's home! All those beautiful antiques. I wonder what all they're selling. You don't imagine they'll sell everything, do you? I've always wanted to see the inside of that home."

When the doors opened at nine, the hordes pounced. People poured through the door, grabbing things left and right, shoving money in your hands as fast as you could take it. Pat was working the upstairs; you were trying to handle the main floor.

The traffic in and out was steady, but you couldn't help noticing one guy who came in, took a look around, and left very quickly. "That guy's a cop," you said to yourself.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, he was back with two other guys, badge waved in your face. Immigration and Naturalization Service. They were asking, demanding, "Are you Pat Minette?" "No." "Where's Pat Minette?" You shrugged, "I don't know." The question in your mind was: where is Sterling?

They quickly worked their way through the house and up the stairs. After a minute, they came back down, leading Pat through the throng of townspeople by his arms, which were handcuffed together.

There may be nothing more palpable than the buzz that erupts when a small town lights up with scandal. Pat was always the subject of innuendo and rumor, the nasty little creatures of idle speculation scurrying around in the dark. Now the spotlight was shining on him and all the rodents were lit up, too.

It took quite a while to get everyone out of the house. Some you damn near had to throw out the door, so determined they

were to soak up their full measure of the sordid atmospherics. Finally, you got the doors closed and you were alone.

You sat in a chair, staring at the floor, trying to sort through the things that needed doing. Was it safe to leave the house unattended? All this stuff, all those people just run off, and somewhere upstairs was a large stash of cash, wherever Pat was hiding it. Where was Sterling? What can you tell him? Run? Hide? Turn yourself in? Just tell him what happened and let him decide.

So surreal was all of this that what happened next seemed merely like an extension of the unfathomable. And only if you had lived in Cut Bank, where such things never were encountered, could you possibly appreciate the hallucinatory moment that drew you in.

In that conical window of your vision as you stared at the floor, from out of nowhere there appeared an extraordinarily beautiful pair of legs. Tan, shapely, long, bare all the way to very high on the thigh. You just stared at them, couldn't take your eyes off them, didn't believe they were real, and, so, you simply waited for them to vanish. But they never did.

Single guys in this town were in a world of hurt. There were literally no women worth a second look that weren't already married, and most of them had been engaged before they graduated high school. Attractive girls were few and far between. You had to claim them early or not at all. It was very slim pickings hereabouts. That's just the way it was. Nothing to do about it. Celibacy are us.

Why this hallucination now of all times? What could possibly have brought it to mind? Still, it was lovely to look at while it lasted. But suddenly, it spoke.

"Is the sale still going?" a lilting voice said. You looked up slowly past the top of those legs, scanned the shorts that held them, the flat stomach and full breasts above them, the slim shoulders and long neck, and finally focused on a face of exceptional beauty. A very young one, at that.

"Umm," is all you could say. "Ah," you managed to add.

"I'm Hannah Someone," she said, extending her hand. "Friend of the family. I'm just back from school and wanted to say hello to Pat. Is he around?"

You've always appreciated beauty and this young woman was truly gorgeous. In most environments, she'd be hard to miss. In Cut Bank, she was absolutely disorienting.

"You've come at a bad time," you said when you finally found your voice.

"Why? What's happened?"

"Do you know Pat well?"

"My family and the Minettes go back generations. I've literally known him since I was born. If something's wrong, I want to know."

So, you told her.

"Joanie sent them," she said. "His sister."

"Yeah, I've met her. That thought crossed my mind, as well."

"Take it to the bank. She's been gunning for him ever since their mother left Pat everything. She and Al could barely find time to visit when Mrs. Minette was dying. But they've been on

his case ever since. This thing with Sterling put them over the edge."

"True that. Question is, what to do about *him*? They're after him, too."

"Do you know where to find him?"

"I have an idea. But I'm worried about leaving the house unlocked. There's a pile of cash hidden somewhere upstairs. I should find it and keep it safe. If I lock the place up, I don't have any way to get back in."

"Don't worry about it. I know where Pat keeps the key. First things first. Sterling's hanging by a thread. Let's go find him."

We drove east toward Shelby. Your mind was racing, but the presence of this beautiful woman was a wonderful distraction. She was charming, intelligent, a wonderful companion who was quickly becoming a co-conspirator.

"Are you sure this is okay?" you asked her. "I don't want to get crossways with your parents, you know."

"I'm a big girl," she said. "Besides, they're out of town. They'll never know if we don't tell them."

At Shelby, you grabbed I-15 and headed south to an obscure exit where the Sun River passed under the freeway. There was a dirt road that followed the river east for about five miles to an RV camp. Remote and private was the word for it. Pat told you about it a long time ago. Said if you ever need a place to hide out, it would do.

There were maybe a half-dozen trailers and RVs tucked under the big old cottonwoods and strung out along a path that followed down river, then circled back. No sign of Sterling. We

drove through a second time to be certain and stopped at the entry way to think about what to do next.

"Let's at least ask at the office before we go," she said, which made sense.

The office was a double wide. The guy who came to the desk was pretty gnarly. He acted like he'd been waiting for you.

"What can I do ya for?" he said with a little too much enthusiasm.

"Looking for a friend. I thought he might be staying here. Don't see any sign of him. Figured I ought to ask."

"Name?"

"Minette. Young guy with long hair. About 5'10". Driving a bus."

"That old turtleback? Dirty blue?"

"That sounds right. He staying here?"

"Was. Left this morning. Ain't come back."

"Hmm! Well, sorry I missed him. Thanks for your time."

"Let me ask ya. Any message I can give him?"

"You expecting to see him again?"

"Never know. Why you looking for him, anyhow?"

"Like I said, thanks for your time."

"Just asking case there's any trouble, I can let him know."

You looked at him straight on. Noted he was nervous. Felt another presence nearby. "No trouble I know of. You?"

He shook his head once or twice side to side. Shrugged his shoulders. Had a stupid grin on his face that was turning sour. He was sweating. You left him standing there.

Back in the car, you told Hannah. "Very weird. He was pumping me. I think there was somebody else there. Probably a cop."

"Let's see if anybody follows us," she said. No one did. We drove to a couple of other places, chewed up most of the day, finally realized we had no clue where to find Sterling, had an early dinner at the Wagon Wheel in Choteau, and headed back to Cut Bank.

"One thing for certain," she said. "If he's still driving that RV, it won't be long before they find him,"

"If they haven't already. I've got to believe they were prepared for trouble, though. Why else was Sterling down at that camp? And left in the nick of time. Hopefully, he doesn't stick around these parts."

"Let's hope he's smarter than that."

"Thanks for coming with me. Can I drop you at home?" you asked,

"I'm staying with you tonight," she said.

It had been a very rough day, but the night was a whole lot better. Long, sensual, luscious. Stuff of dreams. But you didn't do much sleeping. There were compensations aplenty.

You woke up later than planned the next morning, reached the attorney Barney Reagan, who was recovering from a hangover, his regular morning exercise. Barney was the proverbial huge fish in this very small, polluted pond, sole heir of the Reagan Oil Field that put Cut Bank on the map in the 1940s and had been pumping out huge sums of cash ever since.

He was a prodigious boozier, like most of the townsfolk, but also a hell of an attorney who was bright, well-schooled, and very well connected. Even drunk he was quick on his feet. Sober he was dazzling.

"Yeah, I heard about it, of course. Who hasn't by now? They took him to Great Falls. There's nothing can happen on Sunday with the courts. Let's plan to meet at the courthouse there first thing tomorrow morning."

He called back a little while later. You and Hannah were having breakfast.

"Tell me about your trip to the RV camp. It seems that INS is thinking about charging you with something or other. They haven't decided what exactly."

You told him about it and added, "Here's my statement. My intention was to let Sterling know what had happened. If he asked, my advice would have been to turn himself in. Tell them that and ask what charges that might merit."

"Don't worry about it. They just want to put pressure wherever they can to find the kid. Illegal alien on the run. Ha! Like they've got nothing better to do. One more question, because they asked. Who was the woman in the car with you?"

"Hitchhiker. Didn't get her name."

Hannah smiled when you said it, finished her coffee, kissed you goodbye, and left. You never saw her again.

Pat looked pretty haggard Monday morning when they released him. A weekend in jail for a 60-year-old man will do that to you. We posted a \$20,000 bond by putting up ten percent with

a bondsman. "I took it from the sale money. I hope that's okay," you told him.

He asked if you found the cash he had stashed upstairs. "No, I looked. Figured if I couldn't find it, neither would anybody who broke in."

"Let's hope not," he said, and that was the last time you two spoke for a while. Pat worked his way through the problem. What happened to Sterling you never found out. He didn't say and you didn't ask. Apparently, he somehow made his way back into Canada and things blew over after a while.

For now, Barney gave Pat a ride back to Cut Bank, arriving about the time the *Great Falls Tribune* hit the streets. Pat and his "son" were front page news. "Son" was repeated every time Sterling was referenced. The entire piece came just short of calling the two of them "fag" and "bitch". It was scurrilous and cruel. You got a little more insight into what Pat's life had been like over the years.

He did in fact sell the house in Cut Bank shortly thereafter and maybe a year later, he and Sterling pulled up at the Lodge in that big old RV. They stayed for a few days, told you they had adopted the gypsy lifestyle and were living in the bus. They seemed to be doing well.

Pat called once again many years later when you had returned to Denver. He and Sterling wanted to come by for a visit the following day. "Great," you said. "Looking forward to it." They never arrived and that was the last you heard from him. He died a few years later, sad to say, and you were pleased to note one day a few years later still in looking at mineral records

for Glacier County, Montana that Sterling Minette of Lethbridge, Alberta held extensive producing properties.



No memoir of life in the last best place could be complete without a story or two about fishing. You don't mean the anecdotes about friends who came to visit and wet a line. You mean tales culled from the hundreds and hundreds of days you put in on the water, learning how to be an excellent fly fisherman in a place where being the best or anywhere near it is a pretty lofty place indeed.

The truth is that anyone who put in the time and effort you did over the better part of a decade and didn't get to be pretty damned good is just a hopeless sort who can't be helped and should be treated gently. You were on the water for some or all of every day more than 200 days a year and maybe closer to 300.

Sometimes it was just an hour or two catching the evening hatch. Many more times it was all day long from sunup to sunset on days when that is an 18- or 19-hour stretch of time. You fished waters all over the state, and in Wyoming, Idaho, and Colorado, too. Mostly you fished your home waters, the Dearborn, Prickly Pear, the Smith, and the Missouri. You got to be very good at it.

George Olds taught you to fish the Missouri the first year or two after you arrived. It was a point of pride when he began to mutter to friends that you had some secret flies you wouldn't share. That's why you caught so damn many fish.

There aren't many things you can say it about, but you're comfortable saying this: you know how to fish. You're damned

good at it. Excellent, in fact. No doubt there are fly fishermen who are better at it. But you haven't met them. You quietly thank George every day you get to be on a river, a stream, or on those mud flats in the Caribbean, fly rod in hand. He gave you something you cherish, something that has given you great pleasure for more than half your life. Teach a man to fish, the Taoist Lao Tzu said. And he did.

Having George praise your fishing by telling people you have secrets you won't share is the highest compliment. You've seen pictures of him with five fish at his feet, lake trout none of which is less than 15 pounds.

You saw him pull a fish from the river whose tail drug on the ground while he held its head against his chest. He'd been fishing the best waters all his life and seen the best of the best come to fish them from all over the world. If George thinks you can fish, you don't need a second opinion.

Another great honor in these parts is having a fishing hole named after you. The place at the bend of one of the big S curves in the river, just below the island and about 50 yards upriver from a huge rock formation that redirects the current flowing toward you from maybe a mile or more down a long, powerful straight away, exactly where your property and his met, was what George came to call Jim's Hole. There was a story, of course, that led to that designation.

You fished that piece of water a lot. It was a terrific spot to work, where rows upon rows of fish lined up to feed on all the bugs washing down river by the millions. There were plenty of

great holding areas radiating outward and upriver, beginning with the very deep pool in front of that rock formation.

A car from a freight train had fallen into it once years ago and even on the clearest day with the sun shining directly on the water, you couldn't see any evidence it was there. Some very large fish lived there, a fact attested to by the many times you saw eagles and osprey sitting on the lowest rocks above it, maybe six feet over the water, staring into the pool.

The hole you fished was just off the dirt trail to the back of your property, across the railroad tracks, under a barbed wire fence, and past the coulee where the bleached-out bones of Lance's goat still lay. The grass grew waist-high to the edge of the bank and there was a nice depression down to a small, flat piece of land immediately at the water's edge. This is the same spot Uncle Billy caught his first big Montana trout a few years back. It was a great place to fish.

One lazy afternoon, the conditions were perfect, the air warm and still, the fish feeding steadily on all the dead bugs in the water and several different hatches that happened over and over again. You had caught a number of trout, mostly fat Rainbows that sun-fished out of the water and fought like hell before you could land them and let them go. A few stout Browns added to the mix, making for a very nice time on the water.

You took a break, set your rod aside, fired up a Camel and watched the fish feeding in the hole. These were good-sized fish, a couple of pounds each and up, so when you saw them suddenly dart away in all directions, it got your attention. A very large

shadow swam into view and circled slowly below the end of the island before beginning to come around again.

“Yow!” you said to yourself. “That’s a helluva fish.” You dropped the cigarette, grabbed your rod, remembered you’d been fishing a size-18 Adams, and had no choice but to begin feeding line into the arc of your false casts and watch the creature coming around.

Hooking big fish in this river is not an infrequent event. Landing them is an altogether different matter. There are lots of very big fish to be had, and if you are pretty good with a fly, you can fool them. When the barb bites, they take off downstream, diving into the deep channels and running with the current. Your reel screams, the line runs out, then some fifty yards of backing, and still it goes. The connection finally comes to the end of the spool, the tippet snaps, and the fish is gone, joining the gangsta crowd of Pisceans with metal jewelry in its lip.

So, when you cast a perfect loop of line into the air, saw the big shadow coming around into the hole again, the tiny fly dropping toward the surface of the water and the big fish rising to snare it, you weren’t surprised. Bam! He hit it hard and headed downstream, like so many big fish before him that you’d hooked. And, again, the reel screamed, the rod bent deeply into a question mark, very powerful jolts of energy shooting from it into your arm, the line disappearing and quickly ripping into the backing, and still it headed down river.

But then, it turned! It moved cross current toward the far bank, and then back toward you. “Yow!” you said, as you began reeling in frantically, wrapping the line back into the reel as fast

as you could, "Yow, I might actually catch this fish." And, eventually, you did.

It faded toward you, ran again, came back with the pressure the rod and reel exerted, ran again with all the strength and power it could summon, over and over again. From up on the Interstate bridge that crossed the river on the way to the Dearborn exit, George Olds saw the battle you were fighting. He pulled over for a minute and looked it over, then got the truck going again and headed home.

Took the exit, up over the rim of the canyon wall on the old ranch road, all the way to where we lived, and still you were fighting to land the fish. Nearly 45 minutes passed from the minute you hooked it until George pulled into his driveway, ran into the garage, grabbed the biggest net he had because he knew you never carried one, and came running across his lawn toward you, just as you pulled the fish to shore.

It was huge! Lying on its side at your feet, the big gills slowly opening and closing as it fanned air through its exhaustion, trying to maintain a life half in and half out of the water at that moment where it might recover or might have met its fate. One eye rolled toward you, seeming to size up what exactly had happened that set all this event in motion and ended up here in the mud.

You grabbed it by the jaw, your arm so tired you could barely lift it, but hooked your little spring-loaded scales into that place and held it in front of your face. It was very still, scarily so, but quiet enough so that you could read the measurement of 12 pounds four and one-half ounces and make a guess that it was

barely 24 inches in length, shaped like a football with a thick neck and body, and a brilliant stripe of rainbow-colored red and pink along the length of its sides.

You returned it to the water and started to move it back and forth, flushing water and oxygen through its gills, trying desperately to revive it before it expired. All the while, George was running toward you with the net, yelling, "Don't let that fish go, DON'T let that fish go. Do NOT let that fish go."

Just when you thought the fish wouldn't make it, it kept rolling on to its side when you tried to release it, the long battle you and he had engaged was taking its toll on both of you and was looking like only you would survive, you slipped on the muddy bank and sat down directly on the fish, who wacked you hard in the balls with its tail and took off into the river like a motor boat making for home.

George arrived at the bank just then, looked at you doubled over and about to pass out from the pain in your privates and the toll of the battle, pursed his lips and turned his mouth down at the corners, shook his head and said, "Jim, *that* was the keeper. You will never catch a trout that big again." And to this day I never have.

The upside was from that day forward George pronounced this part of the water Jim's Hole and told anyone who would listen it was where he saw himself that you landed the biggest Rainbow trout ever caught on a dry fly in this river. And let it go!

All good things, as they say. There came a time too soon when this adventure was coming to a close. The long, true arc of

your time in the last best place had passed its apogee and now was being pulled inexorably back to earth.

There was so much that passed through your thoughts as the end neared, so many people named or unnamed who came to mind, whose faces appeared, smiling, scowling, wistful, amused, or in the case of Francis Spottedeagle, Jr., sporting suddenly a look you never had seen before or since in another human being, one of such power and depth of unfettered anger directed at you that you involuntarily and immediately backed away from him as far as the space allowed.

After your first encounter with him, and the subsequent story Ernie Good told you about the sheriff's deputy whose body was found in a tree near Little Badger Creek, there were a couple of other times your paths crossed. Once his father had invited you to join him, a daughter, and a couple of her kids, for a birthday party on the Spottedeagle Ranch.

While all of you were riding across a field on a side hill toward a place where the little ceremony and cake were to be had, you heard a series of pings beneath the chatter of a car full of people going to a party. It was the sound of bullets striking the station wagon as we passed over some of the disputed land from when the ranch was divided. Junior was firing on Senior and other family members, not to hit anyone but rather placing a few warning shots in the side of the car to remind them what was at stake.

Another time, Junior came to your place in Heart Butte and knocked on the door. It's likely no one else in town would ever let him enter their home but you did. Before the conversation

began, he saw the buffalo rug on the floor and went to his knees beside it, felt the hide, the fur, the beautifully tanned leather, his massive hands holding it with a tenderness you never could have suspected he was capable of. He looked up at you with an expression you took to be one questioning whether you could possibly understand his reaction as a descendent of Blackfeet warriors. The image of that moment has never left you and clouds your memory of whatever it was he came to discuss.

The last time you ran into him, he was leaving a room at the Warbonnet Inn in Browning with a small group of men. "Hey, Francis, how ya doin'" you said to him, apparently a little too glibly for his mood. You have no idea what the meeting was about and suspect that his anger had more to do with whatever happened there than the way you spoke to him. Whatever the case, he shot you a look of such pure hatred from the eyes of a purported killer that you instinctively backed away across the hall as far as you could get from him.

Thinking back on it, you considered again how fortunate you had been to live and work in a place that wasn't yours, among people who had no reason whatsoever to care about your well-being and in fact every reason to resent your presence, simply because you were a white man in the place your ancestors had forcibly put them, what was left of their home. For the most part, they treated you like gold. Or, at worst, left you alone. That was okay, too.

It wasn't like you became friends with most of the Blackfeet that you got to know, but you learned a lot from them and valued what they taught you. The good humor they consistently brought

to their lives in what most people would consider to be a difficult and challenging existence, half in and half out of a culture that is not theirs and yet holds sway over nearly everything they do and every choice they might make, that perhaps is what impressed you most.

As much as anything you experienced there, that they could laugh about their circumstances taught you the foolishness of any complaints you might have about getting on with your own life. Just get over your bad self. That seemed to be the message you were sent daily in so many different ways. This is our life today. Tomorrow may be different.

The way, too, that the tribe could encompass so many different types of people going about their lives in so many different ways, and in that community of squalor and majesty and poverty and the rarest of riches, there was a sense of continuity from top to bottom and near to far that we are Blackfeet.

Think then of the community you come from, the carefully stratified world of the white man in America, land of the free and home of the capitalized, where you either had it or you didn't, and there wasn't very much else to say. Who were the leaders, the warriors, the medicine men and women? Who indeed! What business produced them and in what office building were they housed?

You thought about Alvin DeRoche, who was killed by that car he was working on when you met him. The hoist made of logs collapsed, the V-8 engine block fell and crushed his chest beneath it. Perhaps the largest, fiercest looking human being

you ever encountered, felled by a beater GTO that wasn't even running. Sometimes everything you remember seems like a metaphor.

You never spoke with his brother, Marvin, again. Only saw him once or twice from a distance but heard every so often he told people "that man from Rainbow s'okay. You kin work with 'im."

You thought of Dan Bull Plume, a painter and some said a medicine man who badly wanted the old Caddy Linda brought up from Denver. "You don't need two a them, do ya?" he asked you, and finally convinced you to trade it to him for a dozen very nice paintings. It was a '61 Sedan de Ville that old Dan just could not shake from the first time he saw it. That Caddy jones people talk about sure is true enough and Dan got his right quick.

You saw him hitchhiking home along Big Badger and gave him a ride. All the chrome knobs on the dashboard bedeviled him. The power window he made go up and down over and over as we drove. The radio with buttons that searched for stations, of which there was only one where we were. He'd push the button, the dial would scan through the frequencies, all dead air until: "Howdy to you. This is KBWG-LP, 107.5 on the dial, Indian Country, BROWN-ing, Montana." Punch it again, it whirled through the bands and back to good ol' BWG. The coup de grâce of the Sedan de Ville was when he curiously pushed one button and on the right front fender the chrome antenna telescoped up and down. Finis!

Dan was very proud of that Caddy once he acquired it and rode up and down the reservation highways like a chief astride a

fine pony. Unfortunately, his favorite grandson ran it into a bridge abutment at high speed a few months later. They both survived but the car, that 5,800-pound hunk of inch-thick steel and generous layers of chrome, was wrecked beyond repair. The big bench seats of leather-trimmed velour were mighty comfortable, however, and last you heard a couple of guys still were living in it somewhere back on Dan's ranch.

You remembered how that beauty of a vehicle looked when you parked it in the garage of the bungalow on 5th and Williams Street in Denver back before you headed north, the big, flared fins rising up and sweeping back a half foot or so too far to let the door of that little 1930s structure close completely. It dropped down a little more than halfway and rested on the fins, so the great big Cadillac ass draped in chrome and thick white paint mooned the passersby. Maybe that epitome of post-War American culture looked less ostentatious and perfectly appropriate where Dan finally settled it.

Remembering a trip across a field of sage brush and buffalo grass high above the Two Medicine River to an old log cabin where John Runningfisher stays. He was an original allottee of the Reservation, his age maybe 102 or 103. He spoke no English, you no Blackfeet, and the two of you set about a palaver of little prospect and much humor. At one point, he told you in sign language, clear as could be, that "my name is Runningfisher," and his hand wiggled across his face like a fish swimming past, "but I eat buffalo," cupping his fingers into his mouth, then raising horns to either side of his head. That you understood.



You thought about June Runningwolf, who accused you of rape to cover for the boyfriend who beat her up one night. She let her brother apologize to you. Why should she do any more than that? Women on the Blackfeet Reservation, and on every other reservation where you've been, are treated horribly. Beaten, raped, killed. Simply disappeared. That is fate if you are a young female Indian.

The old ladies gather influence after a time. It is a matriarchal society in the sense that men party, hunt, ride horses, snowmobiles, trucks, roaming the res with no particular place to go. Many of them don't work, drink until they're drunk, raise hell of all sorts, and start all over again the next day, once the fog clears. They do what they want, whenever they want, as long as they can scare up whatever assets are required to get it done, and they do it for as long as they can, until they decide enough is enough and settle down, until they are arrested and put away or, like so many, die prematurely from fights, accidents, diseases. If they make it past the trials of youth, many of them live to tell about it and achieve a ripe old age. There is something like majesty in those who've done so.

But women hold things together. They keep the homes, check in with the Office for all the things that are required, like trust accounts, commodities tickets, annuities or lease payments, manage the money, pay the bills, make certain the family stays together as much as possible in difficult circumstances. You wonder if part of the respect the old ladies command is simply that they've survived the gauntlet and pulled together some semblance of stability in which to have their say. They've earned

a place of influence because they're still there, functioning where so many don't make it. Maybe it has always been so. You don't know.

In your experience, there is no group of people anywhere as oppressed and mistreated as are young Indian women. If feminists want to bring a keen focus on the most egregious example of womanhood's abuse, there is no more horrible example in this country than what Native American women suffer when they are young, impoverished, and completely unprotected.

Neglect takes many forms. Some is that egregious, some is more casual, like the names these people carry on all the pieces of paper foisted on them, the rolls where they are listed, the identification they sometimes carry.

They are approximations of what they called themselves or were called by the others of their clan translated into English. There is poetry in those names at times and absurdity at others, depending unfortunately on who among the Indian Agents originally recorded their name in the books.

The first among those families so named, the ancestors whose names spoke of an event in their life, bequeathed those memories by name to their descendants. You easily can imagine stories that might apply to Long Time Sleeping or Stabs By Mistake or Rides At The Door or Shoots Another or Pretty Blanket Woman. Then you encounter Jerry Prairie Chicken Shoe, often written Prairiechickenshoe, and you wonder what that means.

If you have seen fancy dancers among the Plains tribes, one favorite dance portrays the mating ritual of the sage grouse. These birds are found throughout the plains and their mating dance is spectacular. Commonly called prairie chickens, they can be seen by the hundreds strutting, preening, twirling, hopping with raised wings, doing their damndest to attract a mate.

Among the Blackfeet, they have a profound influence, even to the top knot the birds have that is replicated in the traditional hair style of the men. That creature is important to the tribe, a part of their rituals. Yet someone carelessly corrupted the name of the people who carried it as Prairiechickenshoe, a poor and confusing interpretation of the name for the family descended from these dancers. Prairie Chicken Dancer, Sage Grouse Dancer, Bird Dances in the Field, any of those might do, but translated as Prairiechickenshoe by someone who didn't take time or care enough to know who they really were.

The same even can be said for the Blackfeet Tribe itself, which historically was called the Blackfoot, reputedly from a dance they did around the campfire in only one direction so that the moccasin on the side closer the fire was blackened. A pat story and who knows the truth of it, but the Blackfeet today are quick to point out to you they have two feet and dance in all directions.

There is such poetry and the essence of a personal story in the names the Blackfeet carry. After Buffalo, Aims Back, Arrow Top Knot, Bad Temper, Bead Woman, Bear Child, Bear Medicine, Beaver Eyes, Big Lodge Pole, Bird Rattler, Black Weasel, Buffalo

Runner, Calf Shield, Catches For Nothing, Charges Both Sides, Chewing Black Bones, Chief Top Feathers, Cree Medicine, Curly Bear, Cut Finger, Day Rider, Drags His Robe, Dusty Bull, Everybody Talks About, Fast Buffalo Horse, Fine Gun Woman, Goes In All Around, Good Stabbing, Hairy Face, Heavy Breast, Hits Back, Iron Pipe, Jumping Jack, Kicking Woman, Kills Last, Lame Bear, Last Star, Lazy Boy, Leaning Woman, Lone Chief, Looking For Smoke. You met descendants of most all of them.

And others that you met: Mad Plume, Makes Cold Weather, Middle Rider, Mountain Chief, Night Gun, No Runner, Old Chief, Owl Child, Plenty Butterflies, Poor Woman, Pretty Hawk Woman, Red Head, Rides Behind, Round Man, Running Crane, Setting Behind, She Had A Tooth Before, Short Robe, Strikes Back, Sure Chief, Tail Feather Woman, Takes Gun Both Sides, Tearing Lodge, Two Spears, Under Bear, Under Owl Woman, Wades In Water, Wakes Up Last, Wipes His Eyes, Wolf Plume, Woman Change, Yellow Kidney, Yells In Water, Young Bear Chief, and not a single one beginning with Z.

Not mentioned are all the French names that are carried by descendants of the traders who were among the first Europeans the Blackfeet encountered. So too a variety of other names, including Zeigler, that are found among the tribe. Most of these people you met in your time with the Blackfeet, and you owe all of them to a greater or lesser degree thanks for treating you as well as they did.

You thought about Hill 57. Of all the places you have been in America, it was by far the closest thing you'd ever seen to a true shanty town. On the harsh outskirts of Great Falls, around 1900

or so, landless and destitute Indians began to scrounge together tenuous settlements that came to be called derisively by locals, “moccasin flats.” Most of them are gone now, run off, shut down, burned out, blown away.

Not Hill 57. Eighty years later, it was still a gathering of the poor, landless, truly marginalized people living some in shacks, a few in tipis, but many of them in huts of broken plywood, scraps of lumber, sheets of plastic, cardboard, roofing material, and any other sort of debris cast off by the people of Great Falls that might provide some small measure of shelter.

In Calcutta and Delhi, some of those other “Indians” had these kinds of squalid home sites, and it was shocking when you first saw them. It was a degree of poverty, persistent poverty, complete and utter disenfranchisement that was unimaginable. They too had no running water, no toilets, barely any shelter and only cow manure to burn for cooking and heat. There at least they didn’t have to survive deep subzero winters.

To see that sort of deprivation in America was appalling. It was like a hobo camp of several hundred people, nearly within sight of million-dollar homes. The huts were stacked in jumbles all over the hillside, the residents were peoples from all Montana’s tribes, but mostly Cree, Métis, and Chippewa it seemed from those you spoke to, descendants of peoples who were somehow unaccounted for when America’s natives were subjugated and put on reservations.

There is something humbling at the moment and deeply shameful in the recollection about being offered a cup of coffee from people who acquired it by begging, or maybe with their few

food stamps, brewed it in a percolator over a fire outside their shelter and generously shared it with you, little that they had.

You left them maybe \$20 when you headed back to your car and had to wave away the others of the Hill that came to you hoping for a handout. It was too overwhelming. Where to start? You hadn't a clue.

Those visits epitomized the chasm that stood between you, your culture, and these people from so many different tribes and cultures who had been urged, forced, manipulated into being assimilated. It was never going to happen, hasn't happened still, and we all should be thankful they somehow withstood the indignities and, yes, the horror that was inflicted on them to maintain today some semblance of their ways before the white man came.

There is that essential thing you learn in this life that is among these people so vividly portrayed, that you have to focus on the beauty and the heart that comes your way as much as possible to keep going, that you can't in any way ignore the ugliness, but neither can you let it drive you into hopelessness and despair. That is something you were shown everyday by the way these people lead their lives and manage to push on despite the pathetic environment we offer them. It is truly shameful that we so easily ignore what we've done.

There is shame, too, not only of that presumptuous, racist effort to bring these heathens to the grace of the god enlightening our own blessed way of being, but of what they've been left as a means of existing today, now that all those mad designs for assimilation failed. We never knew who they were,

never made time to understand them, but believed we knew who they should become.

So, you thought a lot about the Indian peoples of Montana, the Blackfeet, of course, but the Flathead, too, the Cheyenne, Crow, Assiniboine, Chippewa, Cree, and Gros Ventre, all of whom at one time or another in those years you met with, parleyed with, even dined and drank with. Like people everywhere, there are the good, the bad, and the ugly among them. You can say without hesitation that most all of those you met were good to you. You can say, too, that they were similar in so many ways to all the other folks you met in Montana. But also, in ways they were very different from anyone else you've ever known.

Tribal culture compares to the Anglo culture of the United States like lacrosse compares to tennis. You can try your best to understand. You can always learn a little more. You can even try to be part of the team for a little while if they let you. But you don't know, maybe never will, what life is truly like for these proud people plopped down in the middle of an alien culture.

You came to Montana as an agent of a business collaboration between the Blackfeet Tribe and a collection of American corporations. It was a plan to generate income and maybe some business opportunities for the Tribe, and to profit the corporations by taking Blackfeet minerals to market. Both sides wanted it to happen. On the face of it, there was that elusive win-win possibility about it. For a lot of reasons, it never happened. All these years later, you still don't know whether that outcome was good or bad. Who are you to say?

It was a venture of good intentions with boatloads of absurdity keeping one and all afloat. Just the mere act of asking the Blackfeet people to “sign” their approval of the deal was on the face of it preposterous. Not because they didn’t understand or were lied to, although the heritage of broken treaties would make that a logical suspicion, but rather that paperwork simply is as foreign to them as stick game is to you.

Handing a Blackfeet a stack of papers to sign, each lease fully made in quintuplicate, one copy each for the various bureaucracies and companies that are making all this happen and none in fact for the signatory who just might have good use of it, maybe to start some kindling perhaps by putting a match to it, is patently absurd. But that is how it was done

If you were “present-ing,” evaluating all of this from today’s perspective, it would be easy to dismiss the intentions of the craven oil & gas industry to rape these sacred lands for profit, probably swindling the Tribe in the process. That isn’t how it was. Don’t sell the Blackfeet short. Don’t patronize them.

The Tribe had its reasons, the BIA had its reasons, all the oil & gas companies had theirs. The Blackfeet people had theirs, too. Each of them likely had a different reason but they knew what it meant to them personally and proceeded accordingly. For some, it meant a lot, some a little, some it meant nothing at all.

Some believed in the need for economic development. Some had big money coming. No problem there. Some wanted to help relatives who would profit even if they didn’t. Some wanted a place in the hierarchy of decision-making. Some wanted to be

entertained. Some wanted a reason to bitch and moan. For many it was just a break in the monotony. Very few of them really gave a damn about oil & gas, one way or the other.

There are signs everywhere online these days proclaiming Blackfeet lands “too sacred to drill” and perhaps they are. The Department of Interior recently agreed to cancel all remaining leases on those lands, as perhaps they should.

You spoke with literally thousands of Blackfeet and people from many other tribes, as well. You heard every manner of concern about this, that, and the other thing, and especially you heard about how “them companies are cheatin’ us.” In fact, in your experience, the terms of the leases the Tribe negotiated were far more favorable than what white ranchers and farmers in the same area were offered. The Tribe and the Blackfeet allottees controlled millions of acres, which gave them a lot of negotiating clout.

In the course of all those conversations with all the Blackfeet and other parties who for whatever reason were part of the discussions, no one ever said to you these lands are too sacred to drill. Everyone had a lot to say about the who, what, where, why, when, but nobody told you they didn’t want wells drilled at all.

Nevertheless, all that being true, you had reservations, so to speak, even then. Not because oil & gas is a dirty business, although it can be. Not because the terms weren’t fair, because they were very fair. Not because you failed to see the need for income, opportunity, any kind of economic boost for this remote, impoverished place. It was sorely, painfully obvious.

Neither did you think in any way whatsoever it was your place to decide what was good for the Blackfeet. It was clearly, rightly their decision. Even the blundering Bureau of Indian Affairs had figured that out.

No, you had reservations about development on Blackfeet lands simply because, like you, the Blackfeet are just trying to get by, to make their way, find a path, a means to an end, that end being self-determination. That takes making a lot of different things come together. But most of all in this world it takes money.

There are ways to get that money. The opportunities come in all sorts of guises from all sorts of places. Sometimes it's very slim pickings. Sometimes it falls in your lap. But it always involves a tradeoff. What you give for what you get. And like the Blackfeet and everyone else who struggle to make ends meet, you know about the reckoning that has to be made.

One example that stuck with you ever since was a lease you took from a Blackfeet woman whose name you'll not mention out of respect for her privacy. It was a pricey lease that netted her \$592,000, paid into her account at the BIA.

You noticed every time you passed her place on the outskirts of Browning up toward East Glacier that there were lots of cars and trucks gathered, seeming to be there night and day. People coming and going, lots of activity, what you'd have to suppose was a full tilt party going on. And on. It was persistent.

After a while, you failed to notice it anymore and really gave it no more thought until nearly a year to the day after you'd

signed the lease with her, she panhandled you on the streets of Browning. That gave you pause.

What to think about it? That she had blown through nearly \$600,000 in twelve months' time at a place where four or five percent of that is maybe as much as most people see in a year. That's probably the way our culture would see it.

How the Blackfeet would see it you can't say. But it occurred to you that her family, her clan, some portion of her tribe to whom she was closest probably gathered to share her good fortune and stayed until it was gone, until the time came to go back. A lot of need for a lot of people was met for a little time.

There's that sort of reckoning, which is different from yours, and who's to say what purpose was served, what better use might have been made of it? A time of plenty at least for a season or two was had.

What it meant to you, what it meant to the people who wrote the check, what it meant to the person who cashed it and those who helped her spend it; for each it was a different matter and a different master being served. Likely it was equally mysterious to one and all. You know it always was perplexing to you.

You also know the power of the people who have the money you need. Those people in your experience are a mixed bag, some better than others, and many not all that bad. But businesspeople, especially at the corporate level, and most especially in highly speculative industries like oil & gas, have one obvious thing in common. There are there to make money. Pure and simple. Everything else is an addendum. How they go about it is the question.

They will share a little of it with you, of course, but they are after the lion's share. And if you are in a position to help them make it, you better believe they know how to work you. They know the value of money and they know the sheer subservience it can engender in those who don't have any.

So, you were never presumptuous enough to think you knew what the right thing was for the Blackfeet to do. But you did know what the decision tree looks like when the issues you are facing are as basic as food and shelter. The chasm between cultures was like the chasm between classes. If you're operating at a survival level, or even a little better, you're in a different ballpark than the people with resources enough to play the long game. Caveat emptor!



One afternoon in a pretty dark room somewhere in Browning you sat with a half-dozen Blackfeet men. A few of them were Vietnam vets. All of them had been around a bit. That means they'd been in cities. Life off the res.

These were very big people. Algonquins. Bigger by far than most Indian people. Fast, too, and very agile. They could run like deer. Powerful physical specimens. Very different from your own race. Strong, weathered, fierce looking. Although you felt relatively safe among them, you never took the liberty of being completely comfortable. Things up here were too unpredictable.

Sometimes, you thought about the image these people held in the mind of the settlers, maybe even your own ancestors, little more than a century ago. Savages, heathens, murderers, butchers, rapists, kidnappers, cunning thieves. That is what the

settlers thought of the native tribes when they tried and then succeeded to encroach on their lands and take it for themselves. They despised them, were frightened of them. They were strange and unimaginably scary.

Sitting there in a loose circle of wooden chairs, looking at whomever was speaking, while he stared at the floor or out the window at something in the distance, the talk turned to you.

"Where you from?" someone asked you.

"Denver," you said.

"Huh. I been there. Indian Center out there on, what's that street? Runs an angle."

"Morrison Road."

"Huh, yeah, Morson Road. Good place, that Indian Center. All them tribes go there. Treat ya good."

Somebody else said, "All a them city reservations. Oakland is the same. Good to have a place you can talk to folks. Give you some directions."

"Huh," said another, "only safe places for us 'skins."

"Huh!" they said. "Huh!"

Nobody said anything for a few minutes, everyone looking at the floor between our feet, remembering those cities, those times.

"Was in a bar one night," one guy said. "Was in Cheyenne." He was better than 6 feet tall, went maybe 250 or better, not a guy you'd want to mess with. "Just having a beer. Not drunk or nothin'. Just sitting there quiet. Some guys was lookin' at me. Talkin' to each other, laughin' 'bout somethin'."

He shifted in his chair, made the joints groan, the floor scrape just a bit, looked briefly at the rest of us, then away.

"Three of 'em come to my table. Ask was I one a them drunk Injuns? Din't say nothin' to 'em. Not even look at 'em. They just got louder, laughin', one of 'em waving his beer around, slop some on me.

"'Smell like a drunk, don't he,' what he said. I was plumb scared. Just sat there wantin' to get out. Couple a other guys come over, tell them guys 'leave him be.' Kinda pushed them other ones back ta the bar. Got out a there right fast. Scary, hin'it?"

"Huh," one guy said. Then it was quiet.

Finally, another guy said, "Them white people is *really* mean."

"Huh," they all said, nodding to themselves. "Huh!"

The Native American experience is far better known and understood today than it was when you were a child. It is still incomprehensible to non-Indians, whatever their interest, however their heart. Whole tribes of people murdered, starved, imprisoned, children taken from their parents, reduced to being wards of the government, their culture taken from them. Conquerors and conquered.

History is written by the victors. What we know about Native America is told to us by whites. Finally, the tribes on reservations, in cities, in the Tribal College system, are beginning to tell their own story. We should listen. What they tell us is their history, but it is our history, too. The true history of North America, Canada, Mexico, and the United States, told by

people whose ancestors were here long before this land had those names.

You were fortunate to know, work with, and eventually live among some of these remarkable people. You learned a lot about them and their ways. Some of what you learned was abhorrent to your culture and casually accepted by theirs. Some of it, you suspect, is common to the tribal cultures formerly traveling in small bands through remote places and holed up through winter storms for long stretches of time. Maybe not so the agrarian communities, you don't know. The inexplicable in what you found was contrasted with the admirable. Thinking about it all, you learned a lot about yourself, too. It was kind of them to have you.

One thing you learned from living with the Blackfeet: don't ever patronize these people. They are plenty smart, very observant, pretty damned well-adapted to very difficult circumstances, good humored in response to all those things life throws in their face that they can do nothing about except shrug their shoulders and laugh them off. They persevere. They are not going away.

Crazy Horse, the Lakota warrior of the Oglala band, dreamed one night in the 1870s that it was raining Blue Coats. Endless waves of soldiers come to take the lands. He told his people "we can't win. There are too many of them. All we can do is die an honorable death. Die in a way that inspires our people to hold fast to our ways, so, in seven generations our people can rise again. It is a good day to die," he said. Thanks to David Casey for reminding me of this story.

As this is written, we are perhaps five generations from those days when the blue coats defeated the Lakota, the Blackfeet, and all the other peoples of the Plains. The peoples are persevering. Perhaps their day will come again.

You thought of Pat Minette and all the racist rants you heard from him when you first arrived in Cut Bank and settled in among his crew. He enunciated all the stereotypes that whites in rural America claim to have observed about people who are different from them. Whether they are black, brown, yellow, or red, whatever the color of these “colored” people whose skin is different, the labels intolerance layers on them are the same. Pat did his share.

Yet he was different, too. A different sexuality, which was a subject not discussed in the polite society, such as it is, in Cut Bank, Montana, and certainly not condoned, except as rumor and innuendo one turns a blind eye to and never blinks. Pat suffered his daily helping of intolerance. Like the oppressed tend to do, he found people of a lower social stature and vilified them in like manner to his own acute sense of being vilified, that twisted way we try to right ourselves.

And when his world finally came together around his relationship with a young man, it was his family that laid the wood to him, that brought him low, put on him and his relationship a vicious public shaming that was truly abominable, but not surprising. The willingness to inflict crass judgments and cruel outcomes on friend, foe, and family alike finally caught up to Pat as it did sooner or later to so many others in this frigid, gaseous, toxic outpost of civilization. Small town suffering is

shared by one and all, some of whom take great pleasure in it while others must endure it and go on.

You thought of Harry Hickel and his family in the caves up the Dearborn, and of Lance Leffel, Kevin with the cougar on a chain, the redneck survivalists, and all the other strange, sometimes appalling, sometimes enchanting people you met. Montana is indeed the last best place, but in many ways, it is just the last place, the final refuge for folks who have played out their hand, exhausted their options, and need to go far away, one last time. Even if they were born here. There is lots of room to roam, an attitude of acceptance to be found, and the quixotic chance to reinvent a more agreeable version of oneself in this place of fundamental needs and limited pretense. Maybe at last you can fit in.

People like Pete Cardinal, Joe Filipowicz, Gary at the fly shop in Great Falls, Ernie Good and Barney Reagan in Cut Bank fit in better than perhaps they would anywhere else. They got to live their lives pretty much the way they saw fit without a lot of interference from anybody else. No doubt each of them had their ways about them that no one else knew or needed to know, but each of them found a place here where they could get by.

Whether like Ernie, Barney, and so many others up there, they drank themselves to sleep each night; whether like Joe they raised a family of three fine girls while working at the gravel pit; or like Pete they spent time tying imitations of insects and lying on the bottom of the Missouri River studying fish; each of them, for you at least, were part of what made it the last best place.

And, of course, you thought of Lyle and his boys, of George and Aggie and their family, who were good and true as any people you've ever known. We refer to decent people, salt of the earth, honest and straight-arrow folks, the kind who have your back and whose motives you never question, and you found them personified in your small group of neighbors.

When you moved in, rumor had it that you and Jake had money, which wasn't true, of course, but matter not. It might have made you more a curiosity than otherwise, but it didn't change the way they treated you. They sized up your character by the standards they kept themselves and, if you passed muster, which apparently you did, they folded you into their social circle and made fast friendships. Once there, you found, you couldn't possibly be in a better place.

Finally, you thought of Linda. She had been your friend, lover, and your partner in that especially outrageous behavior of the Seventies. She was a hippie girl who grew to be a remarkable woman, beautiful, soulful, forever the blissfully naïve believer in love, peace, and the essential goodness of people. Over the years, she had helped you raise your daughters and to this day they love her still. She believed in the enduring quality of love and walked the talk. The firmness of that belief allowed her a surprising degree of courage in living with conditions that defied any illusions of being in control.

You and she used to laugh, maybe a little nervously, about being the only two people on the Blackfeet Reservation, and certainly the only two in Heart Butte, who weren't armed. Didn't have a pistol or a rifle between you. Not even a knife of any

consequence. You went about your lives there trusting in fate. Mostly it was successful.

Like so many people, Linda in adulthood wanted badly to be a mother. Her efforts, prodigious though they were, went unrewarded. After a while, you both assumed it wasn't meant to be and simply wouldn't happen.

That autumn in Heart Butte, far from any medical facilities you would ever entertain and on the very cusp of severe weather that could make any travel treacherous, suddenly she was pregnant. It was disorienting to such a degree that you barely got a mere few weeks beyond confirming the fact, only just began to come to terms with the reality and the need to make plans before it came to an end.

On her way from school to the classroom across the town circle where she taught, one of the boys ran into her hard from behind and knocked her down. "Jokes," is what all the kids said when they roughhoused, or when an awkward moment came up, or when things actually were meant to be funny.

That afternoon, she began bleeding. By evening, you had gone to Myrna for help. She came to the house, held Linda's hand, talked to her softly, while you stood there feeling helpless and not knowing what to do.

You thought of what the old ladies said when the dogs killed Linda's cat. "Big spirits, don't be messin' with 'em." "Sometimes they come for the animals first before they come for you." Maybe this time they came for the two of you. She miscarried later that evening.

Heart Butte was surreal in the best and worst of times. Reality seemed like a free floating, amorphous aspect of the days and nights, sometimes stark and unmistakable but just as often wrapped within a haze of diaphanous, not quite definable mystery. Spirits and spirituality were not necessarily of the same realm.

Maybe you didn't pay enough attention to that sad and disconcerting part of your time there when it happened. Maybe you simply didn't know what to make of it, either too much or too little. Linda went back to teaching, you to your work with the tribe, time passed and not much further was made of it all.

A year or so later, at the Lodge, in a much different part of the last best place, Linda was pregnant again. This had its own surreal aspects, but a more traditional path was followed, an actual doctor at an actual hospital, plans, baby crib, Lamaze classes, that sort of stuff. All of it distant but doable.

David and Mary Rowe came to visit from East Glacier one clear, crisp night in January. They were a beautiful hippie couple, childhood sweethearts who found their way to Montana from who knows where and worked for the Tribe, Mary in social services in Browning and David teaching at Heart Butte with Linda.

He drove in each day in his old Toyota truck on the bumpy dirt road called the Heart Butte Cutoff that skirted the mountain front and, after teaching all day, drove back to the sweet cabin they had by the border fence of Glacier Park off Highway 2 some 25 miles away.

You spent many a wonderful time together, just socializing, swapping lies, riding horses, hiking trails, and you really liked them a lot. You didn't know then, never would have guessed, that within a year of this particular visit, Mary would take ill, be found to have a virulent cancer, and be dead shortly thereafter.

The shock to David was incalculable. He left the cabin, moved to a place in Bozeman, where you joined him for most of that summer. You two roomed together, drank beer, ate pizza, played pool, fished the Gallatin and many of its tributaries, and through it all, David said very little, never smiled, and after you returned to the Lodge that Fall, he disappeared and never was heard from again.

This evening though, the year previous, we were sitting around the room in front of the big river rock fireplace, talking, laughing, thinking about getting dinner started, when Linda's water broke. This was a moment often discussed in the planning you'd done, when the clock started ticking for the very long drive to Missoula, the doctor, and the hospital, a two-and-a-half hour, 160-mile trip in the dead of winter, which had every real possibility of being a harrowing journey.

Instead, the weather was perfect, the drive a breeze, you munched on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches David and Mary made for you while you quickly packed and got ready to depart, and you arrived in plenty of time to let labor take its course, which, of course, it did. There were complications, for sure, everything was far from smooth and easy, but after a few days you delivered mother and child, a boy he was, safely to their home.

The narrative arc sometimes begins before we know it. Thinking back to the genesis of that birth and the role it came to play in Linda's life and yours, and in the lives of all the people who encountered that child as he grew to be a man, it's hard to place a marker in the ground and say, this is where it all began.

It's as though somewhere way back in time on the very farthest shelves of dawn, a mythic archer with a mighty bow lets fly a bright, titanium-tipped arrow that flickers and glints as it passes through the suns of many, many days, almost but not quite catching your eye any number of times as you go about your way, and when it finally lands at your feet, sharp, true, stuck in the ground, quivering with import, however long it may take and however much it has accumulated en route, it is more than you can comprehend for a long time still.

You didn't know then the birth of that child would begin a new chapter of your life. It would become over time the most agonizing, painful, heartbreaking thing that ever happened to you. It was the dividing line between who you used to be and who you became. Not better or worse, but definitely changed.

You couldn't foresee the challenges, the trauma, the damage to your relationship with Linda, the psychiatrists, psychologists, the special schools, the juvenile and later the adult authorities, the police, the courts, the sentences, the time. Finally, there came a day when you couldn't imagine who this person was. Your son.

You were deeply focused on prying him from yet another encounter, one of so many you couldn't keep count, some miasmic situation you thought you could make right, drag him

back across the line to something like acceptability, a place recognizable by all of us oh-so-civilized adults trying feebly to reinsert some semblance of family into this relationship long since gone off the rails.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked you, his frantic brown eyes piercing deeply into yours. He looked frustrated, like his time was being wasted.

"I just want to help you get through this, get past it," you said to him. "Maybe we can put this behind you."

He looked at you with something like compassion, maybe something like contempt, too. His entire head was covered in tattoos, some professional, some prison tats, the teardrop from the right eye, the crown of thorns, all those signs of pleasure and pain, the deeply tortured ink pad, things you'd never understand.

"Don't you get it?" he said. "This is who I am."

That was when the arrow stopped vibrating. A stillness came over the moment that was profound. It was a terrible sense of defeat, of knowing there would be no redemption, that he was lost to you and you to him. It was acutely deflating, that realization, and, strangely, one of relief.

But in Montana at the Cooper Lodge in the last best place in 1983, you didn't know any of that. You and your wife and your neighbors knew only that a baby had been born. It is an experience widely shared and consecrated in the social contract. It is how the race continues. "Oh," they all said, "congratulations!" "A baby." "How wonderful for you!" Those

joyful expressions of support as you and she set off with every hopeful expectation of raising this beautiful child.

"This is who I am," he said. Without apology, shame, any room for debate, certainly none for remorse or regret. For so many years thereafter, you pictured him at that moment, you and he before that final separation, the way he looked, how he carried himself, manic, yes, but settled in that mania, and firmly in the sway of an energy taking him places you knew nothing about and wouldn't understand, no matter how long you continued to try.

You saw in him a cipher, a creature who was part of you and you of him, and yet, you were so very different in the fiber of your being that each of you had reached the point of being incomprehensible to the other.

You thought of that time with the Spottedeagles where Junior put bullet holes in the side of the family car riding to a birthday celebration and wondered what it was like for Francis, Senior, to have that sort of relationship with his son. You and your son were like that, too, without the bullets but the same anger and the distance. At least the Spottedeagles knew what they were fighting over. When you thought of your son, you didn't have a clue. He likely would agree.

Long after that time, when nightmares disturbed your sleep and conscious thoughts brought you no closer to an understanding, there was an amorphous image that came to you. A hint of something you might eventually come to recognize if you thought about it long enough and let the vision linger in the half light of interrupted sleep.

There were tribal people you had seen, ritually scarred, tattooed, and painted, who stared back at you from implacable faces. Unblinking. Undaunted. Inscrutable. There were Blackfeet, Apache, Mohave, Kiowa, Mixtec, Cheyenne, Navajo, Comanche, Nez Perce. Because they were different, you found them fascinating, their ways of interest. You could accept them for who they were and ask that they accept you in like manner.

They were not your son, though. They were not of your tribe, nor you of theirs. Yet there was something in their countenance closer to your son than anything your culture offered as a point of reference. You came eventually to wonder whether the long arc that led to his conception was joined by spirits who infused him with a character you could never know.

That is a measure of how far from sane the relationship between the two of you became, how tortured the path from his childhood you travelled as father and son, how inexplicably the outcome of all that time, effort, and, yes, all that love, came to matter not. You came to see him as a being of a different ethic and a different tribe. A person deeply imbued with spirits you can't understand.

Pain, guilt, anger, doubt, self-recrimination blend into a stew of confusion from which there seems to be no rational exit. You have a role in all of this but not the one that you expected, not what you would like to have imagined. What it is exactly escapes you still, haunts you still, and for all the years you struggled to understand what it is, what went wrong, what the holy hell you could do to make it right, the answer never came. It continues to

elude you. But it finally led you to a place you badly needed to find in yourself. It led you to acceptance.

For years now, when he appears to you, it is only in dreams. And it is only as a child, often just a few years old and never more than ten or twelve, that you see him. He is that person then you believed you knew, or might someday know, when there was still hope and redemption seemed possible. It's only a dream.

Inevitably, you thought about all these people and all these times and thought about what you were doing here in this last best place. The truth as you remember it is that you saw so much of yourself in all these people, and it held you in its sway.

You have stated everywhere at every opportunity your focus on adventure as a motivation for your life. It has been your knee jerk response to any question about why you do the things you do, make the choices that you make, lead this life you've led. It suffices because there's plenty of truth there to be had.

Not for you the conventions of security and stability. Not the common path of college and career. Not a single focus, one vehicle to comfortably ride through life, but rather many of them, junkers and jalopies, sports cars and limousines, private rail cars and very private jet planes. Also, a lot of hitchhiking and long walks from one desolate place to another. That's the way you imagine it.

It occurs to you, though, that running toward things can be running away from things, too. Being off to this or that adventure might well be fleeing from this or that obligation, a flight of high hopes lifting you from the latest failure or fiasco.

Maybe nothing that dramatic, even, but merely something that fails to hold your interest any longer. That grass across the way there looks mighty green.

You started running when you were a little kid, looking for something better than the place you were. Those patterns of childhood imprint deeply on the psyche. The difficulties we all encounter along the way wherever we're going never fazed you all that much. They were what they were, you dealt with them in whatever way seemed best, and you moved on. Lessons learned.

Often it was a matter of cutting your losses. You've been there, done that, learned a lot in the process, and maybe you'd be happier over there somewhere. The adventure was substantial compensation for what was tossed aside.

That's how you always saw it until you finally faced a situation you couldn't walk away from – you don't leave your kids, no matter what – but one you never could come to terms with either. It finally exhausted itself, but after all this time, effort, all the love expended and the heartbreak it brought you, you still don't understand it. Or your role in it, either. You just accept it now because it is. And because there's nowhere to run.

Some think there's a reason for everything. A cause and an effect. A master plan of sorts in which we are only actors. It is comforting to think this way, even if you can't comprehend things as they unfold. There is a higher power that orchestrates this plaything of the gods. That is one perspective.

Some think there's no reason for anything. It just happens. Life unveiling its own self-perpetuating mystery. That is another way to look at it.

But you look for your place in the dynamic of it all, willing probably to accept either of those positions if it offers a sense of understanding.

The people you met in the last best place portrayed all the aspects of the human condition. They did so in a way that seemed especially profound, perhaps because the props were pretty simple, but the stage was huge.

Big Sky Country is very big, indeed. The people who populate it are relatively few. Their lives by big city standards are less cluttered with peripherals and more focused on essentials. They are more basic but no less complex. And mostly they stay in place. There was a lot to learn.

Epilogue

Ephemeral Things

On the second day of May in the Missouri River Canyon north of Craig, Montana, in the unseasonable warmth of a brilliant sun that colors the great river, Ephemeridae dance.

Beneath the shimmer of blue and green, red and yellow, mayflies have emerged from the casings in which they clung to the river bottom, risen through the currents, and popped to the surface, where, in the glimmer of this fine day, their wings break free from the thorax and quickly dry, flightworthy and vested with the urge to fly.

For the brief moment they rest, however, they are terribly vulnerable to the swift, ravenous wild trout upon whose palate the mayfly is pure delight. The water everywhere boils with Rainbows and German Browns. Some explode into the air, nipping the flight of the insect scant inches from where it began; mostly they roll through the surface film, efficiently devouring the emerging mayfly and leaving but the wake of radiating circles where the tiny, hopeful bit of life expired.

Sheer numbers equate to ensure the survival both of the eaters and fliers. Sheer numbers, indeed! A ton of plankton nourishes a pound of insects; a ton of insects produces a pound of fish.

Warmed by three great dams upstream, the river teems with plankton, algae, weed. A fantastic number of insect species deposit their eggs there and a great many of each survive to

dance above the water, breeding in seemingly hysterical bliss before dropping dead in the water, where equally blissful trout sip them literally by the ton.

Big fish are common here. Ten-to twenty-pounders have been landed regularly over the years and monsters estimated at eighty pounds or better are reported by scuba divers below Holter Dam. The usual catch will measure fifteen to twenty inches in length and one to two pounds in weight. They are wild and well fed.

There is another number significant to the moment and that is that amidst all this magnificence for as far as the eye can see the author's is the only boat on the river.

The two sections of a nine and one-half foot, three and one-quarter ounce, Orvis Rivermaster graphite fly rod are joined. A Hardy multiplier reel is seated and lime green, eight-weight, Cortland Rocket 44 double-taper line is fed through the rod eyelets.

The ligature between line and leader is a modified blood knot. First, a butt section of braided monofilament is attached. Next, a seven and one-half foot leader tapering from .021 to .008 millimeter is added by means of a surgeon's knot. Finally, tippet rated at four-pound test is similarly knotted, completing the series of connections. The leader from butt to tippet measures twelve feet.

What remains to be added is the fly. The choice is a Gold Ribbed Hare's Ear, a nymph that imitates the emergent form of numerous types of mayfly and stonefly, depending on its size. As the name suggests, a gold thread ribs an oblong body of rabbit

fur upon which are mounted at the thorax two or more feathers tied flat to represent the wing casing, all of which is composed on the shank of a size sixteen steel hook. Beneath is the glint of a pronounced barb.

Properly manipulated, the Hare's Ear is deadly deceptive to hungry trout. Nymph fishing is conducted in an area from a few feet deep in the water to the surface; as such, it is a necessary part of the fly fisherman's repertoire and an example of the inexactitude of labels.

Dry flies, designed to be buoyant, boosted perhaps by a touch of silicone flotant and the air pockets built into the line to which they are attached, float on or in the surface film of the water. Wet flies, designed to absorb water and dragged down by weighted line, bounce along or near the bottom.

Nymphs enter the trout's conical field of vision at or near the upper reaches of its world, presumably if not actually rising from the bottom of the water. Hence, although the fly is often submerged, nymphing is dry fly fishing.

The fulcrum established between the buoyancy of the line and the saturated weight of the fly is the length of leader. A nymph will float for a period until enough water is absorbed to sink it, then it will drop to a depth of a few feet or less depending on its distance from the floating line. The longer the leader, the deeper it will sink.

Trout may strike as it drifts in the underwater current or at any stage as it is retrieved across and against the flow. The retrieve causes the nymph imitation to rise in a series of jerks. Ideally, the strike will occur when the imposter lurches upward

in sight of a feeding fish, which mistakes it for a nymph emerging from the depths below to the surface.

The author connects the fly to the tippet with a modified clinch knot, drops anchor, and pauses to contemplate the water, savoring the sweet moment of his anticipation and selecting an area to work from the plentiful possibilities.

Many casts will be made this season before the trout retreat to the river bottom for the winter. There will snags and tangles aplenty. Many fish will fill many days.

But this cast will be the first of the season, a scene often envisioned during the cold winter nights past while the snow was deep, and shelves of ice stretched from the banks far out into the river. The cast was often and vividly imagined, and it will be perfect. Not that it needs to be. A hatch is on, the feeding frenzied, and fish will be caught. A poor cast can be corrected for a suitable presentation to those fish not scared away by the unseemly splash or the suspicious drag of the line.

But this cast will be the first of a season long awaited and it will be perfect because honor dictates the fly fisherman aspire to nothing less. Otherwise, his time of dreaming was wasted.

The rod is raised. Its limber tension vibrates in the fisherman's hand. A few feet of serpentine line protrude from the lead eyelet. Abruptly, it accelerates above and behind his head as the rod is lifted to a two o'clock position.

There is a pause as the fly passes over the line, the nearly invisible yards of filament connecting the two turns over, and the fly reaches its backward limit; simultaneously, several feet of line is stripped from the reel with the left hand.

Held as high as he can reach, the rod is thrust forward to ten o'clock and the line, leader, and fly, in that order, are driven ahead. Once again, there's a pause, slightly longer this time as the added length of line works its way into the rhythm, the line reverses itself again, and the fly reaches its forwardmost position.

The arc is repeated, two o'clock, ten o'clock, lengthening line equaling lengthening pauses, until the desired distance is reached. Then the rod freezes at ten o'clock and the fly drops gently to the water.

The current carries the fly toward the feeding fish as more line is fed through the eyelets, a mere hint of slack maintained to prevent the telltale drag that never fails to warn off a wary predator.

Just before it reaches the area of choice, the fly begins to sink. Patience, he reminds himself instinctively, patience for another few feet. The eye of the moment envelops him in calm, while all about the periphery his nerves keep urging now, now! Still, he waits.

When he imagines the fly to be outside of and downstream from the fish, he halts its progress by lifting the rod tip several degrees. The fly rises abruptly, cross current and upstream, and wham! The strike is powerful, bending the rod severely and immediately stripping out yards of line as the fish tastes metal and makes an instinctive dive for safety.

The sting in its lip soon changes the prevailing instinct from flight to fight. From far downstream its run ceases, the screaming reel stills, the line slackens. Suddenly, the water

erupts and a big Rainbow sunfishes through the air, its mouth gumming the fly, its body twisting and vibrating head to tail, the brilliant stripe of red on its side gleaming in the sun.

The fisherman reels in frantically, weighing in his mind what he's seen. Four pounds, maybe five, take in the slack before the hook works loose or the leader breaks, keep the pressure steady, get him. Get him!

The fish hits the water twisting and runs downstream. The slackness in the line disappears in an instant but the leader holds. The reel screams again, line whistling away at breathtaking speed, rod bent into a question mark, sending short jolts rhythmically up his arm and into his shoulder. With his left hand, he tightens the drag of the reel to maximum breaking and still the coil of line shrinks.

Finally, the line spent and the Dacron backing about to run out, the fish turns, moving laterally for a long moment, and heads back upstream. The drag has begun to tell.

He reels again, quickly as the fish permits, thankful for the multiplying gears to hasten the retrieve. The line must be kept taut, just so, not too tight and never loose. The battle now is fully joined and the fish although fully hooked is a long way from landed.

Watching the sweep of the line as it moves through the water, he as always is awed by the power of the trout, its ability to cover vast areas of a surging river, carrying the weight of the line, the drag of the reel, the tension of the rod and the strength of the fisherman, seemingly with ease.

How he admires the creature's mastery of its realm, the skills with which it has achieved such power and endurance. How unlike the creature is he, far from mastering his world, far from accurately measuring its currents, far from wary, far from powerful and enduring.

Unlike the fish, he is often hooked, for he has risen to every artifice that floated by, hungry, foolish, lunging at any opportunity to feed and fatten. Rather, he is like the Ephemeridae: he emerges, he dances, and falls by the way. That too often is how he feels these days.

One week previously, his latest project had ended abruptly. His efforts had survived a downturn in a famously fickle industry, eked out work where others had failed, fought for and won a contract that would keep his team employed where no other opportunities were to be had. During a frenzy of work, with everything going swimmingly, the call came from the office in Texas, two weeks' notice, all projects cancelled, all hope of supporting this current ticket and the life in Montana it supported snuffed out, just like that.

He had the sorry task of informing the crew, many of whom would now return to their previous place in the local economy, mostly construction where it could be found. For others service positions in the tourist trade. Not much to do.

For him, there was nothing available that could generate enough cash flow to service the nut he was carrying. He walked the grounds of his home near the river, wistfully taking in the grandeur of this spectacular canyon where he'd lived the past seven years, smelling the greening grass, the budding Aspen,

Ash, and Elm, reiterating in his mind the pleasure this place had given him, knowing that the time and this adventure were nearly done. Soon enough, he'd have to sell the Lodge and move on to Denver or some other city where economic drivers were more plentiful, diverse, and better paying than what was left for him here.

Sitting between the two big ponds the spring fed from deep Mississippian limestone with water so pure the trout he stocked them with were radiant with color, frolicking in the weeds, resting in the deeper reaches of the pools, feeding lazily on the early hatches, warming to the months ahead. He was an emotional person, that strong streak of Irish prone to rise to the surface at the slightest prodding, and now he is choked with it, certain that this part of his life is passing away, this brief, beloved episode is closing, that he'll not see the saplings he planted grow beyond this summer, that the horses he fed when the snow was waist deep and icicles hung from their bellies for weeks will be sold to neighbors and likely never seen again, that this symbiotic relationship he nourished and was so generously fed by is soon to dissolve into memory, relinquished to the ethers.

Too soon the packing would begin, some of the years of accumulation boxed and readied, the rest of it sold off, the moving van arrive, the long, slow withdrawal from this place of serenity begin, the trip to who knows what is next engaged and purposely accepted bit by bit, mile after mile on the ride to some city where opportunity accrues to the greater density of population, as does the potential for some degree of anonymity,

a quiet personal space in which to let loose the loss and begin to estimate what might be gained.

Another venture would begin from scratch, another cycle evolve, vested at first with that much less enthusiasm because it is so easy once you reach a place of comfort to wish it could be held from any change. The loss seems so great, the future ill-defined and demanding, that you can only draw on your sense of an enduring belief in adventure for its own sake. He reminds himself repeatedly that the place surrendered now was only found because he wandered off some years ago to what was then unknown.

He took a feeble job that summer, the merest needs of supporting one's family to be met, but not as a last-ditch effort to somehow avoid the inevitable departure to come. Rather, it was a means to travel the state one last time, a farewell tour of sorts, to partake of its finest fishing.

Never was water encountered that summer that he didn't wet a line and seldom was he skunked. He caught Cutthroats in high mountain lakes, Brookies, Cuts and Rainbows in mountain streams, Rainbows and Browns in the great rivers of the foothills and Plains, in waters famous and obscure, in sizes from grand to miniscule, on every type of fly, at dawn, dusk, and in between, and never once was he disappointed.

He was an avid fly fisherman that summer and ever after. But that was all ahead of him, a long season of fishing described by old-timers as one of the finest ever for the low, clear water levels, the long, hot, dry and mostly windless days, and the corresponding intensity of the insect hatches.

Not a catch among the many to come, though, compared with the first of that season, when the Rainbow hit the Hare's Ear on the second day of May and fully fifteen minutes of fight found it swimming at his feet, clearly visible in the crystal-clear water of the Missouri, its great gills slowly opening and closing, near to exhaustion, ready to be landed.

Almost reluctantly, he dragged it to the boat, lifted it gently with the blunt hook of the scales inserted under its jaw, and managed to detach the barb from its lip just as the fish lurched free from its captor and hit the water swimming with the vigor of the reborn.

It weighed a little more than three and one-half pounds and, if the dreams of the fisherman who releases his catch runs true, it will add at least a pound or two before it's fooled again.

The End