By Larry McMurtry

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*Boone's Lick*
*Roads: Driving America's Greatest Highways*
*Still Wild: Short Fiction of the American West 1950 to the Present*
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By Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana

*Pretty Boy Floyd*
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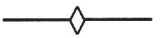
# Buffalo Girls



## Larry McMurtry

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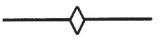
For Diana

# Part I



Darling Jane—

Here I sit, in the evening dews—you'll get some sopping big ones up here on the Yellowstone. I thought I'd write my hope a note before the light goes.

I call you my hope because you are, Janey. I will send your Daddy some money to get you a new dress for school—it's best to look nice, Janey, though I'm a sad one to say it. Last night I got drunk as a duck and rolled down the hill into a puddle—a pig couldn't have been muddier. If it had been later in the year I expect I'd have froze.

I dread the winters now although I've been all over these plains in the worst blizzards without a care. In my young days it would never have occurred to me to worry about such a little thing as the weather. "Powder River let 'er buck!" Blue used to say—I never did know what he meant by it but it sounded good at the time.

Blue showed up at Dora's, in Miles City, otherwise I might have escaped the puddle. Blue brings out the rowdy in me, he has since the day I met him down in Abilene or maybe it was Dodge, those cow-town days seem long ago now, Janey.

Blue fell in love with Dora in Abilene, I expect he is still in love with her but why go into it? It ain't Dora he married. After Blue comes for a little visit—he's a great one for little visits—

Dora will mope around and cry for two or three days. She'll hole up with Fred, that's her parrot, she says Fred's her only true friend but that's mush, Janey, I'm a true friend to Dora DuFran as she is to me.

I'd go to hell for Dora and she knows it, but she forgets about it when Blue rides off, I don't blame her, he is a reprobate. Ha, that's about as big a word as I would ever try to spell in a letter to my daughter, I fear it might upset you how poor your mother spells.

Well, Janey, the light's fading and I don't have much of a fire. I've gotten too lazy to gather much firewood, not that there is much on these plains. It never bothered me to sleep cold, though I will have to make better fires when winter strikes.

Tomorrow I'm heading down to Wyoming, I've heard my friends Ragg and Bone are living with the Shoshone. I wonder what they're living on, it couldn't be much, the Shoshone don't have much.

I miss Ragg and Bone, they've seen me through my life, Janey, them and Dora. I just have to go look for them when they wander off. It was Jim Ragg who finally introduced me to your father—I mean your real father, Wild Bill. I had to buy Jim twenty drinks before he would consent to introduce me, but I could get the drinks cheap and your father was the handsomest man in Dodge, still would be if he'd lived. I bought the drinks gladly but Ragg didn't introduce me gladly, I think he was scared. Ragg was a mountain man and liked to brag about all the massacres he'd seen, but saying hello to Wild Bill Hickok was another matter.

Wild Bill was known to be moody and if his mood turned cloudy he might just set down his drink and kill you. I had no worries, I knew Wild Bill wouldn't kill me, of course I admit that didn't mean he wouldn't have killed Jim Ragg.

Well, introduce is another big word, I think I got it correct though, I better stop this letter before my luck changes. Luck can change any time, it changed for Dora the day Blue met that half-

breed daughter of Granville Stuart's—they say Mr. Stuart was a great man and had done great things but to me he's an old ruffian, he hung those men on the Musselshell and some of them was only boys. Maybe they did steal his damn cow ponies, I don't care, boys that young don't deserve no hanging. I weep every time I think about those boys' mothers, and how they feel.

You will be a mother someday, Janey, and have your sorrows too, who can outrun sorrow? Not me, Janey, and not Dora DuFran, not since Blue married Granville Stuart's pretty little half-breed daughter. I hope no man will do you so, Janey—I don't even want to think about it.

Dora tried yesterday to give me Fred, she says I need a friend and a parrot's better than nothing, but I wouldn't take him. He's not a bad parrot, though he can't say anything except "General Custer"—who taught it to him or why he wants to say it I don't know. You'd think living with Dora all these years Fred would have learned a more interesting stock of words, not that they'd be words I could put in a letter to you, Janey.

It's my pride that I can afford to send your Daddy money so you can be raised among decent people, not the riffraff and ruffians you'll find out here these days. There are people who would include your mother in such a description—in fact most people would.

But I didn't take Fred, I think Dora would miss him, she's the one who should be thinking a parrot's better than nothing, because Fred and nothing's about what she's got. I have Ragg and Bone, they are my true friends. Why they would think there might still be beaver down in the Shoshone country I don't know. It's a sign to me that the boys have drunk one too many rounds—if there were beaver along the old Wind River why wouldn't the Shoshone have eaten them, what else do they have?

What it's really a sign of, Janey, is that people can't give up hoping for what they once had, youth or you name it. When Jim and Bartle come west the west meant beaver—now they're old and the beaver have been gone for twenty-five years but the boys

can't admit it, at least Jim can't. They still think there's a creek somewhere boiling with beaver that God saved for them. It's just how people are, Janey, they cling to foolish hopes.

But you will need to be studying your lessons and not wearing out your eyes reading my old gloomy words.

Don't worry about your mother, Janey, I have always got by. I'm hardy, I scarcely even coughed after sleeping in that mud puddle though I admit if it had been later in the year I wouldn't have been so lucky.

I've got my young horse Satan and my buffalo dog. Satan's a good horse and the dog Cody is a fine hunter, often he'll bring a rabbit and once he brought in a badger. I didn't know about eating badger, I took it to my friend Mrs. Elkshoulder and she cooked it in a hole in the ground, it tasted fine.

I call the dog Cody after Billy Cody—Buffalo Bill, I guess you've heard of him. There's a man with luck on his side if there ever was one, he'd have been dead years ago if it wasn't for luck. He ain't tough, there's hundreds of Indians who could kill him easily but he's still alive.

Billy's been writing lately, he's trying to get me to go with the Wild West show he started but I ain't that desperate I guess.

I *am* the Wild West, Janey, no show about it, I was one of the people that kept it wild, why would I want to make a spectacle of myself before a bunch of toots and dudes?

Not me, Janey, I'd rather sleep in a mud puddle every night and rowdy it up with Blue and the other cowpokes.

Goodnight, Janey, I'll stop I don't want to scribble on and wear out your pretty eyes.

Your mother,
Martha Jane

# 1

JIM RAGG WAS SKINNING A PRAIRIE DOG, WONDERING IF THE fire would last until he got it skinned. A Wind River breeze—a gale, by most standards—surged down the gray canyons and sucked at the fire.

"Let's go somewhere else," Bartle Bone suggested.

"Right in the middle of supper?" Jim asked.

"No, I just meant eventually," Bartle said. "There's grit and then there's Wind River grit. I prefer the first kind."

"I think this prairie dog might have been sick," Jim said. "It moved kind of sluggish, like you do when you're sick."

"Well, if it was sick I'd prefer to go hungry," Bartle said. "I'm not up to digesting a diseased animal tonight."

Bartle was combing his fine beard. Among his few treasures was a fragment of comb he had snitched from a whore in Cheyenne. His beard was another treasure, at least in his view. Many western beards were filled with dirt, grease, and bits of debris, but he strove to keep his immaculate—no easy task in a rough, often waterless, land.

Bartle was determined, though. He also possessed a fragment of mirror, which he had taken from a dead Sioux after the Custer battle. He and his friend Jim had been in the Sioux camp only the day before the battle, and soon heard of it; they had been among the first to observe the carnage. Bartle had taken nothing

but the fragment of mirror, though the battlefield was strewn with the valuables of dead men.

All around them, as they stood stunned amid the bodies, Sioux and Cheyenne, Arapaho and Ree were carrying off their dead, singing as they lashed corpses to horses. Bartle had heard much Indian singing, but there was no precedent for the Custer battle, and the death songs that day were of a different timbre, one he had never heard before and would never hear again.

The singing mingled with the wind as the grass waved over the dead. One of the dead Sioux had a piece of mirror in his hand. Bartle saw the flash of sunlight on the shard of glass and, thinking it curious that an Indian had gone into battle holding a mirror, and then died holding it, had stopped and taken the glass. Then he went on walking among the twisted dead.

"I might be the only one who profited from the Custer fight," he said. "I got this mirror and look what a difference it made to my beard.

"Maybe the man who had it was responsible for flashing signals," he added. After much reflection, he had decided that best explained the mirror.

"That's just a guess," Jim said. "I don't see no reason to move just because you don't approve of Wyoming sand. Or are you telling me that you're ready to adopt the settled life?"

"I sure don't want to adopt it until we get someplace where there's something better to eat than sick prairie dogs," Bartle said, watching critically as his friend fixed the prairie dog to a spit.

Jim didn't answer. He squatted by the campfire and stared into space—the darkening, howling space of the Wind River valley.

Bartle put his comb and mirror away—barbering was a chancy affair, given the poor light and strong wind. The wind from the west howled around them. It whined, it keened, it sang, so strong at times that it was necessary to turn one's back to it in order to breathe satisfactorily.

"This country ain't so bad," Jim said. "The Shoshone like it."

"They may like the country but they don't like us," Bartle replied.

"Why, I never had a hostile word from a Shoshone," Jim said, somewhat startled by his friend's remark. "What makes you think they don't like us?"

"They're Indians," Bartle reminded him. "No Indians like us. The rich Indians don't and the poor Indians don't. The young Indians don't and the old Indians don't. The men Indians don't and the lady Indians don't."

"That's putting it pretty strong," Jim said.

"Even if the Shoshone liked us there would be no reason to stay," Bartle said. "There's no beaver in the river anyway. I doubt one has been here for a hundred years. It ain't the kind of river beavers like."

"There's creeks in those mountains though," Jim said, gesturing to the north. He sniffed at the prairie dog, which so far did not smell rotten. "If we do find beaver it'll be in the mountains, not out here on the flats."

Bartle said nothing. Lately, to Jim's distress, he had become more and more reluctant to talk about beaver.

"I mean to examine ever creek in the west before I give up on beaver," Jim said, as he had many times.

Bartle Bone, usually cheerful, felt a wearying sadness in his breast. The subject of beaver was a sore one, and had been for years. To Jim Ragg, it was a religion. Bartle had once felt the same, but his faith had long since been lost; now and again, though, he felt the sadness of the faithless.

As young men he and Jim had enjoyed three splendid years as beavermen, and several more that were passable, if not exactly splendid. But a quarter of a century had passed since those years. Other beavermen, friends of their youth, had long since died, been killed, or departed to safer lives. Few of the few who were left had any brains to speak of, any memory. Their talk, when they were sober enough to talk, was of the Custer battle, or else of Black Hills gold. Hardly a one could remember back twenty-

five years to a time when millions of beaver still splashed in the cool streams of the west.

Jim Ragg was one of the few. He remembered every river, from the Oregon gorge to the headwaters of the Rio Grande. He remembered the cold ponds, the traps, the pelts. Of all the mountain men left, Jim Ragg was the only one—as far as Bartle knew—whose imagination hearkened only to beaver.

Gold didn't interest Jim, silver bored him, cattle disgusted him. Indian fighting gave him no pleasure, gambling made him restless, even his whoring was brief. Beaver meant more to Jim than women, cards, fortune, or anything else the Wild West had to offer.

But there were no beaver, as there were no buffalo, which meant for a true beaverman such as Jim Ragg that there was really no longer a West. In the flash of their own lives, a flash already dimming, it had been used up. It was a peculiar situation, and a sad one, Bartle felt. The snows still lay on the mountains, the grass still waved on the plains, the sky was still blue and deep as time; only a few details had actually changed—the beaver gone, the buffalo gone, the Indians whipped—and yet, when those things went the glory went also. The last time the two of them had straggled into Denver a bartender had shown them a poster of Billy Cody's Wild West show. Jim Ragg sneered—he had never had any use for Billy Cody—but Bartle had felt rather queer, and retired to a corner to drink a brandy. Halfway through the bottle he figured out what was queer.

"What Wild West?" he said, to a little blonde whore who stopped to tease him. "What Wild West? If Billy Cody can make a poster about it then there ain't no Wild West." At that point the whore skedaddled—she hadn't liked his mood.

Since then Bartle Bone had felt a little lonely, even in company of lifelong friends such as Jim Ragg or Calamity Jane, the problem being that he nursed a truth he knew neither of his lifelong friends could stand to hear. There was no Wild West—that was the truth—but suggest as much to Jim Ragg and there'd be a

fistfight; mention it to Calamity and a gun battle might ensue.

Not being able to discuss the matter with his true companions left Bartle feeling a little sad, but on the whole a little sadness was preferable to fistfights and gun battles, two sports he had lost his taste for.

"I wish you really liked to talk," he said to Jim. "I could improve your education considerable, if you really liked to talk."

"I don't mind talk," Jim said, though in fact an excess of talk did make him nervous.

"I didn't say you minded it, I just said I wished you liked it," Bartle replied. "But you don't, so I give up. Is that rodent cooked yet?"

"I'm doing the best I can," Jim said. "It's a small fire."

"I guess we oughta go look up Calamity," Bartle said. "She'll know the news. Calamity always knows the news."

"She might be too drunk to remember it, though," Jim said. "She needs to wean herself from all that drinking."

The prairie dog looked so unappetizing that he regretted he had even bothered to shoot it, much less cook it.

"There could be a passel of news," Bartle said. "We could be at war with China for all you know. The Chinamen could have captured San Francisco by now, or even Texas."

"I've never been to San Francisco, let 'em have it," Jim Ragg said. Texas was another matter, but it seemed unlikely to him that the Chinese had captured Texas. If there was war in Texas, half the old men of the west would have rushed to the fight.

"Even if there ain't no news I miss Calamity, and I have seen enough of the Wind River to last me awhile," Bartle said. "What's your mood?"

"Hungry, mainly," Jim said.

Darling Jane—

Didn't get far, Janey, I only come down the Tongue River a few miles. The older I get the harder it is to get started. Some days I just don't want to move—there are times when it's hard to see

the point. You have your school and have to help your Daddy with the housework, I'm sure you are busy, Janey, people should be helpful, at your age especially.

Now that the smallpox has died down I don't guess I have any chores. Over in Deadwood when the smallpox hit they said I was the best nurse they had, the boys said they'd never forget me. Their shacks were miserable, some of them didn't even have shacks, just tents and not real tents either, rags would be a better description. Ha, I wasn't just the best nurse they had, I was the *only* nurse, nobody else would go near those dying boys—forty of them died anyway, I couldn't save them. I ain't a Doc, Janey all I could do was cook them soup and hold their hand—I hated to see those boys die, I have been gloomy ever since.

*I may tear this up, why should you read it? I feel I should be* writing you about cheerful things, the prairie flowers or maybe pretty sights I've seen. It's not wise to pass on painful memories, that smallpox up in Deadwood is painful to remember, nothing much worse has happened in my life. Wild Bill getting assassinated by the coward Jack McCall was worse and the Custer battle was worse, I lost many fine friends in the Custer battle. But that's just quick death, it happens—the sickness in Deadwood was slow, I guess that's why it seems worse.

I should just get my mind off it, Janey. I should remember what ripping fun Jim and Bartle and me used to have hauling freight to the forts—they thought they were degraded, mountain men ain't supposed to drive mules, but I loved driving them mules, I'd be driving them still if Custer hadn't took a dislike of me, Mrs. Custer had no better opinion I'm afraid. I thought Custer was a vain fool and look what he did—hundreds of men died because of him, not just soldiers either, newspapermen only count the soldiers, but many Indians died too, you won't find finer-looking boys than some of those Cheyenne, I love to see them ride.

I was never able to get on the good side of a General, Janey—General Crook didn't care for me either but at least he was

polite, Sheridan wasn't polite, he would have hung me right away if he could have found a regulation that allowed him to hang a woman for whooping and hollering.

Janey I like to yell at times, why not? The Indians like to yell too, maybe that's why I get along with Indians, who wants to just sit around and be quiet all the time?

I am not much closer to Ragg and Bone today, ten miles maybe. I can do sixty miles a day if I get up and get started. Satan can't figure out why we're traveling so slow, sixty miles to him is an easy trot. The horse ain't the problem, I'm the problem—if I'm feeling moody I'm hard to hurry. It used to drive Dora crazy, she's feisty, on the move every minute, but I sort of turn into mud, that's what I feel like, old thick mud. When Dora gets nervous Fred gets nervous, parrots are unusual that way—you wouldn't think a bird would care how a person was, but Fred's a bird with a nervous temperment. He used to sit on my arm pecking at a silver bracelet a Mexican gave me and saying "General Custer, General Custer." Fred you're going to say General Custer once too often and I'm going to strangle you, I told him once when I was in one of my mud moods. I guess he believed me, he went back to his perch.

Of course Dora would throw me out if I strangled her parrot—I might do it anyway, I'm hard to predict, Janey, I have done worse things than that. Your mother has not always been able to be good—it's hard if you have no one special to be good for.

Your father Wild Bill was special, they had to wrestle me down and stuff me in jail to keep me from killing Jack McCall after he murdered Wild Bill, I had a good bowie knife then and I was going to cut his liver out and hang it on a tree. An Indian would do that to his enemy and Jack McCall was my enemy, I wanted revenge. Jack McCall was later hung, he's lucky, he would have died harder if I'd been the one to kill him.

I guess such talk will shock you, Janey, I'm sorry, I have not had the advantage of living in a nice town like Springfield, thank God you're growing up in a civilized place. Out here the day

never passes without someone threatening to cut out someone's liver and hang it on a tree—and it's not just all talk, people do it, not just Indians either. Jim Ragg has killed three men, all friends—he's terrible when he drinks, everyone with any sense leaves when Jim starts drinking. The three he killed were too drunk to think or they would have left too.

Bartle is the exception, Jim has never tried to kill Bartle that I remember, I hope Bartle is too smart to let Jim kill him—that would be a terrible thing.

This letter is not exactly about the prairie flowers, is it? I meant to be more cheerful, it was remembering the smallpox that set me on the downward path. I may just throw this letter away. Goodnight in any case.

Your mother,
Martha Jane

# 2

NO EARS SAT BEHIND A LARGE SAGE BUSH, WATCHING SEVEN cranes wade in the small creek. The cranes had arrived in the dark. Because he had no ears, the old man had felt, rather than heard, their arrival. Their great wings disturbed the air sufficiently to wake him from his light sleep.

The fact that it had been dark when the cranes arrived made No Ears suspicious. The cranes had shown bad manners, in his view. In the first place, they belonged in the Platte River, not a small creek in Wyoming. No Ears, an Ogalala, had lived by the Platte River most of his life; he had seen the cranes come in their thousands, year after year, to rest in the wide river.

No Ears had little patience with bad manners, whether in bird or beast. He liked things to behave as they should, and the caprice of the cranes annoyed him. Crazy Woman Creek was not the Platte. What did these cranes think they were doing, straying into such a creek? Even worse, they had arrived at night, a very unmannerly thing. In his more than eighty years, No Ears could not remember seeing birds behave so badly, and he considered marching down to the creek to inform them of his disapproval.

What kept him silent behind his sage bush was the suspicion that the cranes' arrival had something to do with him. It was well known that cranes were spirit messengers. All cranes were thought to have the ability to travel to the spirit place, and the

seven cranes in Crazy Woman Creek were not ordinary cranes of the sort so common in the sandhills to the east. These were the great cranes that whooped—some considered that they spoke the language of souls, seducing tired spirits from people's bodies and taking them away through a hole in the sky.

The hole in the sky was said to be far to the south, near the shores of an ocean whose waters were always warm.

No Ears had never seen an ocean and had little interest in seeing one, but he had a keen interest in the hole in the sky—namely, an interest in seeing that his own soul didn't get snatched by a crane and carried away forever, through the hole.

No Ears thought well of the spirit world; he just wasn't ready to visit it, and it annoyed him that the seven cranes had come to tempt his soul. They were large birds—even the smallest of them could have stepped across the trickle of the creek in a single stride. Such birds could easily carry several souls, which were light things, as easily blown away as thistledown.

He wanted to stand up, march down to the creek, and tell the birds they had made a mistake. He wasn't through with his soul, wasn't ready to die. He had seen many men die—some had feared it, but many hadn't; many had died calmly, almost indifferently. From watching these many passings, No Ears had concluded that he just didn't want to die—calmly, indifferently, fearfully, or any other way.

He wanted to confront the cranes and make that fact known to them, but he knew it could be risky. He was old; his soul was very light. What if it floated out of his body for a moment? One of the cranes might snatch it as if it were a frog or a small water snake, and then carry it south through the hole in the sky. Even if he shot the crane his soul might still float away.

It was too large a risk, No Ears concluded. He had better just stay behind his bush. The arrival of the seven cranes was too suspicious. There was nothing worth their time in the immediate vicinity, except his soul. He might challenge them and scare them off, but there were seven of them. He felt outnumbered—

so he sat, annoyed that birds would behave so badly, and galled that the soul's attachment to the body was such an undependable thing.

When No Ears was ten, his people were traveling on the Red River of the North and had gotten into a fight with some French traders. The traders, better armed, shot all the Indians and cut their ears off. No Ears was shot, but didn't die. He woke to discover that his people were dead and that he had no ears. An old blind woman was the only other person spared. The traders had hit her in the head and left it at that. No Ears led the old woman across the prairie, back to the Platte.

Lack of ears was a severe handicap to No Ears in his youth. Warriors laughed at him and refused to let him fight with them. Girls wouldn't have him. At fifteen he killed a wolf, took its ears, and persuaded a daughter of the old woman he had saved to sew the wolf's ears to his head. This effort earned him a certain respect, but in the end it failed. One night while he slept a dog tore one of the wolf's ears loose. Fleas by the hundreds collected in the other ear—finally, maddened by the fleas, he tore that ear off too. Part of his scalp came with it.

He never again attempted to acquire ears, though for many years he continued to miss them and for a time was haunted by stories of a Yaqui medicine man, somewhere in Mexico, who had medicines that could make missing body parts grow back. No Ears contemplated trying to find the Yaqui, but something always came up, and he never went.

After some fifty summers had passed, by which time No Ears had buried four wives, outlived all but a few of his own people, and survived many close brushes with death, he became comfortable with his handicap and even proud of it. He could hear, of course, but only in a whistly and erratic way; what he excelled at was smelling. Year by year, his capacity to smell had become more and more refined, finally becoming so keen that it brought him renown throughout the west. He could smell buffalo and he could smell rain. He could sniff a woman's belly and tell if she

were fertile, and he could smell babies in the womb within a few days of their conception.

Above all, he could smell death. It was No Ears who walked into camp, a hundred miles from the Little Bighorn, and informed General Crook of the Custer massacre. Bodies rotted quickly in the hot June sun—the smell of hundreds of dead had reached him on the wind. General Crook believed him, too; few men doubted No Ears's nose.

Another thing that worried him about the cranes was that he couldn't smell them—they stood in the water on their long, stemlike legs, as neutral as air.

Also, it was No Ears's belief that death resided in the north. The hole in the sky was supposed to be in the south, but in his view that was only a trick to divert the victim's attention. The seven cranes had come from the north, a sure sign, to No Ears's way of thinking, that they had come on a spirit mission.

Carefully No Ears sniffed his hands. He had often wondered if he would be able to smell himself die, and the presence of the cranes made the question urgent. If his spirit had begun a quiet withdrawal, his flesh would soon begin to smell empty. He had often noticed an empty smell in the extremities of the dying, a sign that the blood was leaving with the spirit. No Ears sniffed his hands carefully and was relieved that they smelled fine. It indicated to him that his soul had no interest in leaving with the cranes.

Then a sound slapped the air. The startled cranes lifted their wings and began their slow, awkward climb into the air. Six struggled skyward and flapped off to the east, but one lay kicking in the stream.

Jim Ragg and Bartle Bone came walking up Crazy Woman Creek toward the dying bird.

"Whoopee, crane for breakfast," Bartle said. He had a bowie knife in his hand. When he came to the crane he stood astraddle of the small stream, grabbed the struggling bird's neck, and whacked its head off.

"This is a big bird," he remarked. "It takes a damn good knife to make that clean a cut on a bird this size."

Held up, the crane was almost as tall as Bartle, though not quite, Bartle being a shade over six feet tall. In his youth the older mountain men had called him Tall Boy and had assigned him the deeper beaver ponds. Jim Ragg, stumpy by contrast, could barely have kept his nose above water in some of the ponds where Bartle trapped.

Jim Ragg set down his gun and blanket and began to look for firewood. He had shot the crane in the head so as to spoil as little meat as possible, but Bartle whacked the bird's head off without commenting on the shot. Bartle could have shot at the crane for a week and not managed to hit it in the head; it was typical that he would compliment his own knife rather than the shot. Bartle liked to be the best at everything, but in fact was only an average shot. Brilliant shots made by others were always ignored.

Jim scanned the barren plain and didn't see much firewood, but both men saw No Ears squatting behind a sage bush fifty or sixty yards away.

"Would you be willing to join us for breakfast, or do you prefer just to sit out there and smell yourself?" Bartle yelled.

Of course No Ears expected to be asked to breakfast. He had known the mountain men since they were youths and had helped them on many occasions when they were less experienced and might not have survived. He had lingered behind the bush merely to enjoy a moment of relief at the departure of the cranes—the birds' behavior had shocked him badly.

He stood up and started toward the creek, but before he had taken three steps Bartle yelled at him again.

"Bring some of that bush with you," Bartle yelled. "There ain't much wood around here."

No Ears ignored this order, as he did most orders. This was another instance of how a handicap could be useful. He could actually hear fairly well but was careful to leave the impression that his hearing was hopelessly damaged. Pretending not to hear

always worked better with men than with women. When women gave an order they didn't care if you could hear it or not, they just wanted it obeyed.

"I wish you'd brought the bush," Bartle said, when No Ears walked up. "Cranes are tasty, but not if you're eating them raw."

"I saw some wood yesterday," No Ears remarked. "It is not too far from here. We could take the bird where the wood is and cook it there. I would have brought the wood with me but I didn't know anyone was in Wyoming."

"How far is the wood?" Jim asked. "How far and which direction? We ain't very interested in traveling south."

"That wood is north of here," No Ears said. "It would not take long to get there if we were riding horses."

"I don't notice any horses," Bartle said.

"No, I don't either," No Ears said. "I don't think there are any around in this part of the country. If there were we could smell them."

"How far's the wood if we walk?" Jim Ragg asked, anxious to know whether the wood was within a feasible distance. Once Bartle and No Ears got a conversation started, securing practical information became extremely hard.

No Ears began to have doubts about when he had actually seen the wood. It seemed to him that he had seen it the day before, but he knew that his mind had begun to jump around, like a frog or a grasshopper. Perhaps he had seen the wood ten years ago, or even twenty. The wood had been part of a wagon that had fallen to pieces, and it lay in a little gully not far from Crazy Woman Creek.

"If we walk we will be there before we piss the next time," No Ears said. "It is about that far, if it is there."

"Oh, if it's there," Bartle said. "I'm not walking two hours on the strength of an if."

"Me neither," Jim Ragg said, gutting the crane.

"Excuse me, I'll go cut off some of that bush," No Ears said.

Darling Jane—

At this rate I'll be a year older before I get south of the Bighorns, Satan is disgusted. If he could he'd take up with somebody who covers ground a little faster.

What slowed me up today was three nervous soldiers, not one of them full-grown men. They didn't used to let boys that young soldier out here, but now that they think they've got the Indians whipped it's anything goes—I guess they'll be signing up little girls next, so watch out Janey, don't be tricked.

The three boys were hauling some goods over to the Crow agency, they had never been there before and were afraid they'd get lost. I told them they might miss the agency but it would be hard to miss the Crow, they're everywhere, they'll be helping you unload the wagon before you can even get stopped.

It's not getting lost these boys had on their minds, Janey, it's the Cheyenne. There's only a few Cheyenne now but they have a big reputation, they've earned it too. These boys don't know their Indians either, they seem to think old Crazy Horse might ride up and scalp them, I mentioned that he was a Sioux, but it did no good. I think some sergeant has been teasing them, telling them Crazy Horse is still alive. I don't know why grown men think it is such fun to scare boys.

The upshot was that I rode over to the Rosebud with them and pointed them on their way, they were sorry to see me go, they all miss their mothers I imagine. Since I had traveled that far out of my way I thought I might as well go visit my friend Mrs. Elkshoulders. She talked a blue streak, mostly in Cheyenne, I didn't understand half of it but she is a loyal friend. When Dora DuFran was all but dead Mrs. Elkshoulders come all the way to Miles City with her ointments and herbs and Dora pulled through, without Mrs. Elk as I call her, Dora would be gone.

The ointment smelled like grizzly grease to me, it was rank, the only thing that smells worse than buffalo hunters is grizzly grease. I have always been scared of bears, anyone with good sense is,

that don't include Blue, one of the best stories about Blue is him roping the grizzly. It was a young one, I guess Blue thought he could handle it, there's no one as cocky as Blue, he thinks he can handle anything but he couldn't handle that yearling grizzly. The bear turned around and killed his horse—Blue had to scamper out of there on foot or the bear would have killed him too. Later Blue went back hoping to find his saddle, he had had the saddle since his Texas days and hated to lose it, but he lost it, the saddle was never seen again. It taught Blue not to rope bears, it may be the one thing he has ever learned in his life, Blue is deadly stubborn.

But now the grizzlies have about left the plains, the plains are too busy now, too many soldiers are running around who like to think they're bear hunters, they're fools, it's no sure thing hunting bear.

Last night I dreamed of you Janey, I often do. It's sad that a mother only gets to see her little girl in dreams, but as Dora would say it's better than nothing. You had won a prize at school for doing your letters graceful. I hope you will develop a good handwriting Janey, not a scrawl like mine. I was proud while the dream lasted, it's a comfort to have a daughter who's good in school or can even go to one, I never did. But then I woke up crying, I cried all morning, it's another reason for the slow start.

Dora DuFran hates it when I cry, she says will you dry up? She knows if I don't she'll start crying too and the two of us will bawl like babies half the day, Dora about her sorrows and me about mine. Hers are mostly the result of being in love with Blue, I can't see that they compare with mine—love a skunk and you're sure to get skunked. But that's my point of view, I'm sure Dora's is the opposite. The other day she told me she was thinking of moving to Deadwood, maybe she thinks Blue will let her alone if she's living in the hills. He won't—hill or plain means nothing to Blue, he'll want his little visits wherever Dora is. She asked me if I'd come with her—we'll always be a pair, she said.

Dora and I will always be a pair, I won't desert her, but life in

Deadwood might be too painful, it's where Wild Bill is buried. He's in Mount Moriah cemetery, on Jerusalem Street. I have paid him many visits there—I visit him just as Blue visits Dora, except Blue's alive and Dora's alive—I guess they find some love amid their troubles. Blue being married elsewhere don't mean he's lost his passion for Dora.

But it's just a grave I'm visiting on Mount Moriah, Wild Bill's grave, he's been in it twelve years—you were already safe with your Daddy Jack when the coward McCall shot your father. I was not about to subject my precious daughter to these rough mining camps.

I think it's a mistake for Dora to move, the climate is healthier in Miles City, but Dora's restless—she's always restless, I expect she'll move anyway and take along Fred the parrot. Maybe Fred will learn some new words over in Deadwood, but what will I learn new? It's painful when your true love dies, that's all I'll learn in Deadwood, and I already know it.

They say Deadwood is civilized now and even has a mayor, I asked who and someone said Potato Creek Johnny, ha! I had to laugh. I knew Johnny down at Fort Fetterman when he was breaking horses for soldiers, nobody would have picked him for a mayor then. I wouldn't pick him for one now, though I count him a pal, he only found one nugget, finding one nugget don't mean he can be a mayor. The first thing he'll do is arrest me and Dora, or maybe he won't, we both know too much about him.

All this old stuff must bore you, Janey, I don't mean to write it, I started these letters thinking you might want to know a little about your mother's life—first thing you know it became a habit. I have no idea what you think about it—you are a bit young to be writing letters yourself. I want my little girl to be proud of her mother—I should have considered better, there's not that much to be proud of, at least it don't seem that way now. I am not a braggart Janey, I just try to be decent—some don't think I am, ladies don't, or women who call themselves ladies, there's a few in every town, how I despise them. I picked one of the old snoots

up and threw her in the horse trough in Dodge City, it aroused a crowd and your father Wild Bill said I ought to vamoose for a while. It made me fighting mad that he told me that, what right did he have to tell me I had to leave Dodge or anyplace? No right, and I told him so, then I left anyway—I am too proud to stay where I'm not wanted, we were a long time making that up, but we did.

Well, this is another letter I might as well throw away, why would a sweet girl like you want to hear all this old stuff? I have wasted six sheets of paper on it.

Good night Janey,
Your mother, Martha Jane

# 3

DORA DU FRAN SAT BY HER BEDROOM WINDOW, WARMED BY a big cup of coffee and all the robes she could find to put on. Skeedle came up to bring her a little more coffee and laughed at the sight of Dora wrapped in three or four robes.

"Why didn't you put on a few more robes?" Skeedle asked.

"Buy me a few more and I'll put 'em on," Dora said. "This was all I could find in the closet."

"You could buy a buffalo robe from an Indian, I bet," Skeedle said. Skeedle was the premiere, and, in fact, the only blonde in Dora's establishment. She had been the premiere blonde for several years, and it was beginning to show. If a younger blonde ever showed up and wanted to work, Skeedle might have had trouble holding her position, but the danger of that happening was not great. With the mining towns still booming in Dakota the blonde population of Miles City was not likely to increase.

"Buffalo robes attract fleas," Dora pointed out. "I don't want to encourage fleas, the customers bring in enough as it is. Thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome," Skeedle said, and left. She was well aware that Dora liked to keep to herself in the mornings.

Dora heard the stairs creak as Skeedle descended to the first floor. Skeedle was not only the blondest whore in Miles City, she

was also the largest whore, but that was fine, she brought in twice as much business as some of the prettier girls.

Fred was not particularly found of Skeedle, being a rather jealous parrot. He kept his back turned while Skeedle was in the room, but as soon as she left he dropped off his perch and came waddling across the floor. Dora offered him her arm and he climbed up it and began to peck gently at the pearl buttons on one of Dora's robes. Fred liked all jewelry, but he was especially fond of pearl buttons. Dora set her coffee cup down and stroked the green feathers on the top of the parrot's head. When she did, Fred turned his beak and took hold of her ring, a cheap ring Blue had given her when they were still talking of marriage.

Out her window Dora could see the gleam of the Yellowstone. Far across it to the west there was a river called the Musselshell, where Blue had his ranch. Dora had never been that far west, had never seen Blue's ranch, but many a morning she had sat in sadness by her window, thinking about it, and about his house and his new wife, a sweet young half-breed woman. Dora had only Calamity's word for it that Blue's wife was sweet, but she was prepared to believe it. Calamity had been a guest in their house and had even gone to their wedding, a fact that had not sat well with Dora at the time.

"Blue invited me, what did you want me to do?" Calamity asked, when Dora challenged her on the point—as Dora, much hurt, promptly did.

"You're my friend, ain't you?" Dora said. "You could have mentioned me, at least. If you was in love with him and he suddenly slid past you and married somebody else, do you think I'd go to his damn wedding?"

"Well, it would be fair enough, if you did," Calamity said. She was a little drunk and had a hard time getting a grip on the complications such matters involved. She knew that Dora was upset because Blue had suddenly popped up married to Granville Stuart's daughter—that was understandable. But her own atten-

dance at the wedding didn't seem to matter one way or the other. Blue wasn't marrying Dora, whoever went to the wedding, or didn't go.

"Blue's been my friend too, since Dodge or before," Calamity pointed out. "Don't you go to the weddings of your old friends?"

"I wouldn't if one of them was jilting my *best* friend!" Dora said. While it lasted, her anger was unrelenting.

"You shouldn't have never counted on Blue, that's the way I see it," Calamity said.

"The way I see it, you had to choose whose feelings to hurt and you chose mine," Dora said. "I'd hurt the man's, if it was me—not that many of them have really got feelings."

"Blue's got feelings, he just wanted a wife to help with the work," Calamity countered, trying to put the best face on it.

"Anyway, next time I get jilted I just hope you'll refrain from attending the wedding," Dora said, just before she burst into tears.

Later, when Dora's anger had drained away, she went looking for Calamity to apologize, but Calamity was in the Elk Belly saloon, well on her way to being vomiting drunk. It was a winter night, cold and sleety. Calamity was as likely to mount up and ride off at midnight as at noon—Dora's main worry was that she might pass out some night and freeze. Soberer specimens than Calamity had been known to pass out and freeze in the Montana winters.

Dora assigned a couple of town Indians to see that that didn't happen. Sure enough, Calamity rode off, fell off, and slept under her horse, but the Indians built a fire, covered her well, and brought her back to Dora the next morning, though in such a shaky state that she had to be carried into the house.

It was not the only quarrel the two of them had had about Blue, and in every instance, no matter how blatant his misbehavior, Calamity took Blue's side or found excuses for him. It infuriated Dora—she screamed Calamity out of the house many

times, outraged because Calamity would never see, or at least would never admit, that she, not the man, was being wronged.

"He didn't mean it," Calamity would always stammer, when Blue stood accused. "You know he didn't mean it."

"I don't care if he meant it!" Dora yelled. "He did it. *He did it!*"

But in the end, when her anger died, Dora would begin to reproach herself, not for Blue, that laughing reprobate who usually knew exactly what he was doing, but for her treatment of Calamity, her sad old friend.

Calamity didn't understand men, or women, or love, or any of it, Dora always concluded, once her sympathies began to operate normally after some wild fit.

What awakened Dora's sympathies was the knowledge that Calamity's life was so peculiar, and so lonely. She dressed like a man, and had lived a life as near to a man's as she could get; it sometimes seemed to Dora that Calamity almost thought she *was* a man. Maybe it came from running with the boys too long. More often than not, she *looked* like a woman, though there was something indefinite in her look, a kind of in-between quality, that no one, man or woman, knew quite what to make of. At times Dora felt that Calamity had not quite made up her mind which sex to be. One day she'd be in a dress or even sport a fancy hat, and the next she'd be back in pants, cussing like a buffalo hunter and bragging about all the generals she'd scouted for, or the rides she had made for the Pony Express.

Blue, who had known her as long as anyone, maintained that Calamity's bragging was mostly just plain bragging, with little basis in fact.

"The drunker she gets, the more she lies," he put it, not unkindly—whatever his faults as a mate, Blue was a loyal friend to Calamity.

"No general would have let a woman scout for him," Blue pointed out. "He'd have been court-martialed, unless he was General Lee, and she sure didn't scout for General Lee. She didn't ride for the Pony Express, either—they shut down the Pony

Express before I was even old enough to ride for it, and I'm older than Calamity.

"What she might have done," he added, in an effort to make their friend seem less of a braggart, "is tag along on a few scouts with Ragg and Bone. I think they took her with them sometimes, when it looked safe."

To Dora what he said just made the matter more sad; it made it seem that Calamity hadn't actually done much of anything except wander here and there on the plains, the little reputation she had the result of invention, or the indulgence of a few kind men; her stories and her story were mainly based on whiskey and emptiness.

Of course, the stories of half the people in Miles City, or perhaps in the west as a whole, were based on pretty much that, whiskey and emptiness; every night Dora's house filled up with braggarts who hadn't done half the things they said they had done. If every man who drank in the saloon had killed as many Indians as he claimed to have killed, there wouldn't have been an Indian left west of the Mississippi; if every miner had found as much gold as was claimed, palaces would stretch down the Missouri all the way to St. Louis.

But the men were just customers—Calamity was a friend. Dora didn't try to be much, but she did try to be truthful, and it made her nervous and a little uncomfortable always to have to suspect Calamity of lying.

"Oh, she just exaggerates," Blue said. "Everybody exaggerates, once in a while."

"You don't," Dora pointed out. Bragging was not among T. Blue's many failings; if anything he tended to understate his achievements as a cowboy.

"Well, you don't know that," Blue said. "I might exaggerate once in a while when you're not around."

"She's been talking about Wild Bill lately," Dora said. "I didn't know she even knew him, but now she acts like they were in love. Do you think he was ever in love with her?"