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THE GREAT MONTANA BAR BOUNCE

BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES

"The culture of drink endures because it offers so many rewards: confidence for the shy, clarity for the uncertain, solace to the wounded and lonely, and above all, the elusive promises of friendship and love." – Pete Hamill

IT'S a subject considerably larger than the sum of its parts. The rows of bottles winking in conspiratorial glee. Dart boards and cigarette smoke and an undersized pool table. Trying to throw my arms around it, it's like clutching a king-size mattress face down, wrestling it alone through the door. I want to write about the glittering possibilities of youth. Back when innocence was a commodity and confidence an easy translation to beauty.

With a beer snugged up cold in your crotch, a twelve-pack floorboarded between your ankles, maybe ambition was the same as destiny and every friend a conspirator for life. Even if you outraced your headlights, the mule deer startling up from the berm were always still half-a-fender behind. I want to write about cheap bourbon and intricate, cherry-wood backbars brought up from Fort Benton, forgotten writers staring into a thousand highball glasses for the one idea of their lives. The freedom and beauty and pure sweet loosening found only between the second and third drinks. I want to contrast this honest integrity against the cancerous shadow it so often throws. Hey, listen: It's no coincidence that the grim white highway crosses bloom thickest around certain laughing roadhouses.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, Livingston had more bars than churches. Self-indulgence had whipped out self-flagellation to the tune of at least two taverns. There was the Guest House and the Pasttime, the Rainbow and the Mint, the Owl and the Hiatt. First among these equals was the Longbranch. A long bar and roomy dance floor, a small stage for good country twang. A friend said, "Never trust nobody that don't like the slide guitar." The railroad was hiring and folks had money to spend. Beef prices were up and hay prices were down. Bankers and attorneys, teachers and doctors, on a good Friday night the Longbranch drew them all. The dance floor bounced in a coordination of mangled jitterbugs. A couple shots, and all of the tiny resentments and petty agendas that gum up a small town's gears were briefly oiled quiet again. Richard Hugo wrote, "Even the light invited you to come in and relax." Livingston's belle époque? The late seventies and early eighties. Back when we were all so skinny and beautiful.

After the Longbranch and its twin the Wrangler closed, they were replaced by ethnic restaurants. The most obvious truths never stop being profound: Things-ain't-what-they-used-to-be. Refried beans and cashew nut chicken instead of good Tennessee bourbon. In ninth and tenth grade, heroes of our own ongoing narratives, we used to sneak in from the alley to shoot pool. As long as you were discrete, as long as you snuck, you were playing by the rules. Once in a while, if somebody left half a drink on the bar, you might grab a gulp. Where else could you create this same sense of accomplishment? Fifteen, sixteen years old and already aligned against the forces of the prim and proper. Living life, by God. Eight ball in the corner and geez, y'know, somehow I managed to get a little messed up.

I MOVED WEST WITH MY FAMILY when I was twelve, two hundred years too late and just in time. Back home in West Virginia, we had crumpled hills and tight, humid valleys, cobbled canopies of oak, poplar, cherry. There was always rain but never wind. Kicking through the fall leaves, you'd find black walnuts and acorns, broken fan belts and bald tires. Fox squirrels scolded from the canopy. Sundays between ten and noon, the faithful would pour themselves into a hundred thousand Baptist churches, emptying the county roads graveyard dead. A lack of formal education plus hard times always equals piety. In this world, if whiskey had a legitimate role it was only as temptation, a mechanism to lead the condemned away from the righteous. This particular place and time, middle class read as privilege, and as a child, I remember often feeling set apart.

In Montana, a thirty-eight hour drive west, the mountains scratched twelve thousand feet and the air was dry and clear. April, we'd hunt bears. Septembers, we'd bugle elk. We lived in town, and were neither poor nor conspicuous. Far from being litmus tests of virtue, we discovered that the saloons were community centers, the places you went to hear the gossip, see your neighbors. I grew first into my feet then into my cynicism, anxious to be both inconspicuous and exceptional. Courtesy of a fake ID, I'd sometimes buy beer for me and my buddies. If there was a keg, we'd wrestle it into a cool backwater eddy up Mill Creek. Somebody would crank up a stereo, build a bonfire,

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and gradually a crowd would gather. The prettiest girls moved always with a languid self-consciousness, dancing bird-boned shoulders to the beat, fingering an earring, twisting a strand of hair up to their mouths.

In the cool darkness on the edge of wilderness, to take a piss you had only to step away from the circle of firelight and tilt your head back, study the random spread of stars. Try to name the constellations. Weaving slightly. Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, look at me now. Up Pine Creek, during our senior keg, the cops threw out a spotlight and an amplified voice said, "Nobody move!" Thirty or forty graduating seniors flushed like grouse, scattering off into the woods. I hid under a juniper, watching as a deputy tackled some poor sumbitch down into an irrigation ditch. The next morning, the few of us that remained came together out of the underbrush, pulling leaves from our hair, grinning, poking up the fire, cracking beers. It felt like we'd just seen the best of all the good times, the pinnacle of some eternal and glorious us-against-them.

The history of Montana is a history of loss. Twenty years ago, say you were in high school, maybe you had a seventh period study hall with a careless geriatric, you could take the afternoon off and go jump-shoot the Yellowstone River. Any damn place you pleased. One of the game wardens was a cynical, self-serving sonofabitch but he could be bought off with Christmas turkeys. The defining notion was freedom. We were children with drivers licenses, magicians with firearms.

Winter weekends, in the long, half-arctic boredom of sixteen-hour nights, there was always Chico. A turn of the century hotel and pool, a bar and restaurant. Summers, it crawled with tourists, but along about November it reverted back to the locals. Seventeen, eighteen years old, we'd laze back in the clouds of steam and sip canned beer. Now and then (after the security guard had made his circuit), one of us might scramble up onto the changing room roof and take a good running start, leap off into a few seconds of freedom, and cheers from down below.

Chico's bar is unremarkable. Set apart only by a few touches of kitsch (souvenir baseball caps on the ceiling), it has nevertheless always felt like a destination. Last time I was there, though, a domestic beer cost three bucks and the cute gal shooting pool wouldn't meet my eye. Dark eyebrows and blond hair, she finally let me buy her a beer. Turns out she was from Livingston, and we knew some of the same people. She did some quick counting on her fingertips. "I was about five years old when you guys graduated from high school."

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The regulars at the bar wouldn't stop giving me suspicious glances. I felt old and out of place; at some point I'd become a stranger again.

BACK WHEN GOD STILL LOOKED AFTER drunks and small children, some buddies of mine left the Chico bar at about one o'clock in the morning, packing themselves into either a compact sedan or the sofa seat of a Ford pickup. Let's say it was the pickup. Driving, they were already passing around a bottle of Beam. In the blank hiss between Metallica songs, the guy on the passenger's door gulped hard against nausea, hand to his lips, going grey as duct tape. He opened the door at speed and leaned out over the blurring macadam, vomiting up twenty dollars worth of good booze. Then he lost his grip. The door banged loose behind him. "Holy shit." It was a dark night, but it must have nevertheless been spectacular. The loose form twisting, bouncing down the soft shoulder. The truck skidded to a stop. "Oh Christ, oh Jesus." They backed up to find him in the ditch. He sat holding a badly bruised elbow, his cheeks and nose a collage of blood and gravel and bird shit. Ten minutes later, the way I hear it, he was back drinking again, grinning around swollen lips, bloody front teeth.

IT'S A FINE LINE TO WALK, and you never stop walking it. How every potential of a life well-lived is tainted by the risk of overindulgence.

College bars, as we soon discovered, are bars the way McDonald's is a restaurant. I never bought a beer in Bozeman's concrete-floored Rocking R, for instance, without immediately aching for escape. The swaying press of bodies, the jukebox with a hundred songs queued up ahead of yours. Ten minutes to order a drink and the prettiest women already hanging off some other football sumbitch. Missoula's bars were better if only because you could walk from one to the other without risking a drive. The Rhino and Red's, the Top Hat with its good blues and the Mo Club with its burgers. Boys still learning to be men, women reluctant to stop being girlish. All of us traveling in packs, sharing a common history of booze and Bridger Bowl, duck hunts and streamer fishing. Unity is best found in the face of a common enemy, and ours came from the ranks of the boring and predictable, the average Joes that had the nerve to eye us with disapproval. Not for us, not ever, the workaday humdrum. We'd show them another way.

Afterwards, dispersed into jobs and marriages, acting your age means needing excuses. A Thursday night pool league, for instance. Healthiest to approach it with some sort of irony. You can take anything seriously but yourself. Picking through the house cues, turning each one in the rack, the good weights (eighteens and nineteens) were always missing or crooked. Ratchet in three quarters and tighten the balls into a cheap plastic rack, break the balls hard. The Murray in Livingston, for a brief period in the nineties, had good-humored bartenders and a decent slate of Friday night bands. A couple of incorrigible drunks as cautionary tales. One of them, a tiny little old man in Carhartts, sat mumbling flatteries to himself. "Good drift, good drift, Hoohah." Then quick as a flipped coin, he'd turn bitter, shouting insults to unsuspecting strangers. "You're no good, no good, no damn good." For some men, the safety mechanisms that should be in place, the breakers that flip when the wires get too hot, they're simply burned out early.

We shot good stick, and often drank for free. We owned the table. Eight ball, double bank, corner pocket. One more beer? Sure hell why not. With the poker machines beeping a never-ending allure of possibility and the first promises of booze never quite having been realized, it felt wrong to give up on a night too early. Twenty-five years old, then twenty-six, twenty-seven, there was still time, still room to find the men we'd promised ourselves we'd become. It was a race against irony, against that point when we would cease to be bright young kids playing at being small town barflies and simply be, alas, small town barflies.

A good Montana road trip has a rhythm to it, its own bass note ring and resonance. Rubber on asphalt and a beer in the cupholder.

A GOOD MONTANA ROAD TRIP has a rhythm to it, its own bass note ring and resonance. Rubber on asphalt and a beer in the cupholder. No jazz improvisation so sweet as that conducted by stop signs and saloons. Escapism plus empty roads equal art. Judging a tank of gas to the half dollar and half mile, accelerating into that familiar, front-end shimmy. Mothers against drunk drivers or drunk drivers against mothers (D.D.A.M.) maybe Ed Abbey had it right. "Freedom, not safety, is the highest good." The narrow strip of asphalt and the paint fresh fifty years ago; a silver, serpentine ribcage of a pivot sprinkler; a swather licking up clean alfalfa and a shifting knot of Angus beeves going to summer pasture. Tipping the last dregs of beer out the window, foam unfeathering along the sidepanels, good lord there's so much color in the world. Canada geese flying in

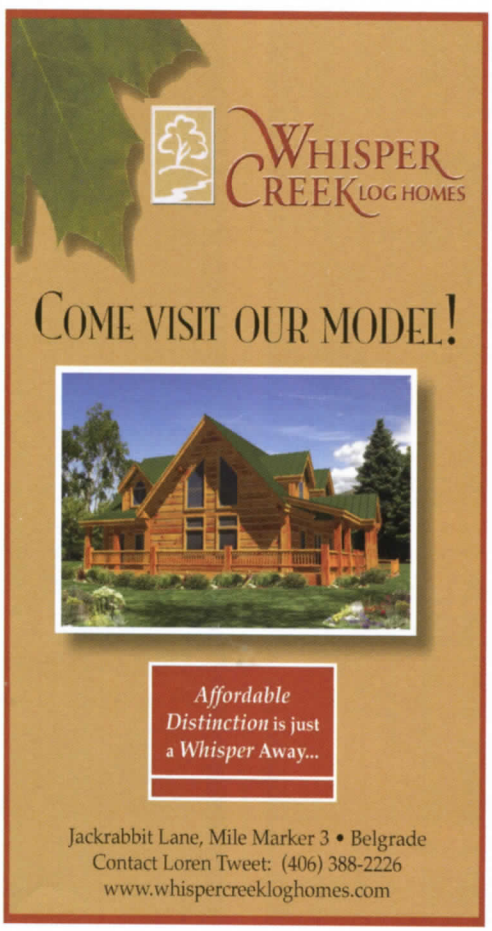
shifting Vees and a coyote mousing behind the swather, maybe a peregrine falcon snatching a barnyard pigeon out of the air in a slow tumbling spray of feathers. And you're reminded again — thank god you're reminded — that of all your possible lives this one isn't so goddamned bad after all.

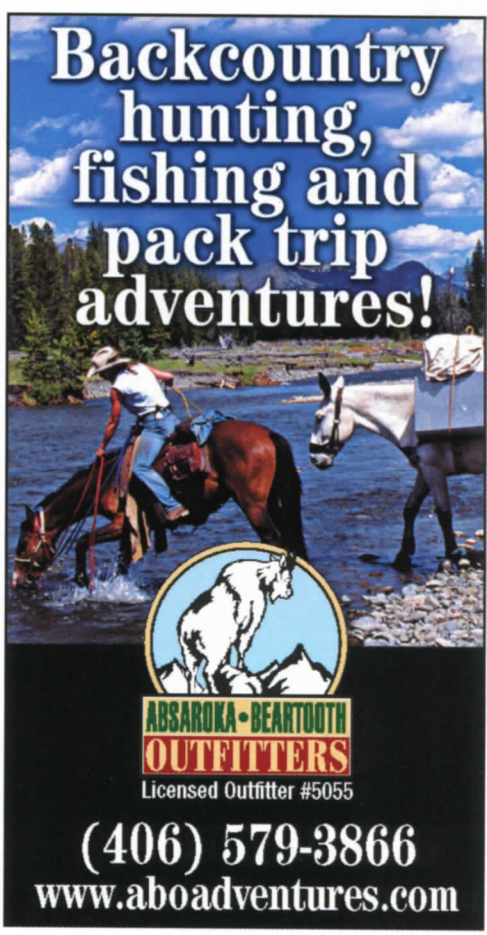
LAST YEAR, HOWEVER, my parents were driving between Billings and Jordan, one of the loneliest stretches of highway in the world. Coming around a tilted corner outside of Winnett, Dad found himself suddenly having to swerve through a scattering of glass fragments, red shards of brake light, chrome pieces of fender. Fifty yards off the highway (having rolled at least twice, somehow bouncing over a barbed wire fence), a three-quarter ton Ford truck sat crooked on bent axles, the roof crumpled down low, the windshield an opaque, starred web. The accident already looked old. With a length of yellow ribbon caught across the sagebrush and no steam from the radiator, the ambulances had come and gone. But then Mom said, no. Turn around. "I just got this feeling."

Dad parked on the shoulder. Walking back, Mom spotted a body. "I thought it must have been a mannequin or something. I thought, this can't be real." A young man sprawled broken, mostly bloodless, lost in the roadside weeds. His head tilted to one side and his torso twisted like a skewed doll. Empty-eyed, he was done with all his life's breathing. "He'd gone out of his shoes." Dad found no pulse at the wrist, none at the neck. He straightened, and said, "There's another one." Closer to the truck, a second man lay on his back in a disconcerting illusion of comfort, ankles crossed, hands composed over his stomach, his face badly lacerated, obscured in blood. He was hyperventilating in quick little sips, a bloody lung-foam spilling down his cheek. Mom took his hand. "It's going to be okay. You're going to be all right."

Dad went to the truck, craning his head in through the crumpled window. It had looked empty, but no. A third man sat slumped behind the wheel, askew in his seatbelt. At the time, Dad had thought him unconscious. "You all right, buddy?" And there had been no response. Later, though, he would remember that there'd been a sound in the cab, a faint, whispering static. "Like the radio was still on, like it had just been knocked off its station." It might have been the driver, whispering. Half an hour later, the EMT technician looked up out of the wreck and said to the small, gathered crowd, "Anybody know anything about his kids? He's talking about two little girls."

The three men, bow hunters, had been camped down on the Musselshell. That afternoon, they'd taken a drive into





Winnett for groceries, leaving the driver's daughters in camp. Groceries, then sure hell why not, a couple beers in the bar. The two men thrown away from the wreck (a father and son from North Dakota) both died. The driver under his seatbelt survived. But to what life? Effectively, a murderer. I can't stop thinking about those two little girls stranded down in the breaks, waiting for a sheriff to find them, watching the day's light fade and the cold begin, knowing already, having a sense of it, that something was wrong, that nothing in their lives would ever be the same again.

I IMAGINE THE FIRST BAR IN MONTANA was probably in Fort Benton. A couple rough boards over sawhorses. A beaver pelt might get you a couple dippers from the keg of homemade Indian whiskey. Or maybe it was a canvas wall tent in Miles City, a hand-lettered sign pounded down into hoof-chopped mud: "Beer, Five Sents. Whiskee, Ten Sents." Trail-gaunt longhorns settling in across the river and a hard-whooping gallop up Main Street. Pistol shots and a tinpan alley piano tinkling. If you're sixteen-years-old and pretending to be a man, having left everything you've ever known and loved two thousand miles behind, they don't make a better excuse than booze. The best thing to do with insecurity is paint it over with a dozen coats of bravado. Give a boy a gun and a greenbroke colt, a bottle of whiskey. Whores naturally followed the booze, then the sheriffs, then the lawyers. Remember Augustus McRae on his deathbed? "Look there at Montana. It's fine and fresh, and now we've come and it'll soon be ruint, like my legs." Maybe the west is what comes after the Mississippi, or maybe it can be defined as a condition of aridity (twelve inches of rain rather than sixteen). Or maybe it's only a state of hope, that place you go when you've run out of other options.

In this late, lamentable age, when the only living to be made in Montana is to be made off its destruction, when the commodity is solitude, being here to take part means you're already taking part in its loss. Weekends, maybe you balance on a wobbly stool and study, over your drink, the gravel streets of a Pony or a Troy or a Jordan. Cast yourself as extra in Montana's ongoing saga of showdowns and shootouts. Consider the amoebic spread of vinyl-sided subdivisions, the dilution of individual value against the press of dull, infinite humanity. Alcoholism and drug abuse, drunk driving and meth ads, everybody complains about the symptoms but nobody addresses the cause. What is this absence in us, this dull pain as conspicuous as missing teeth? Does anyone honestly believe that tomorrow will be better than today?

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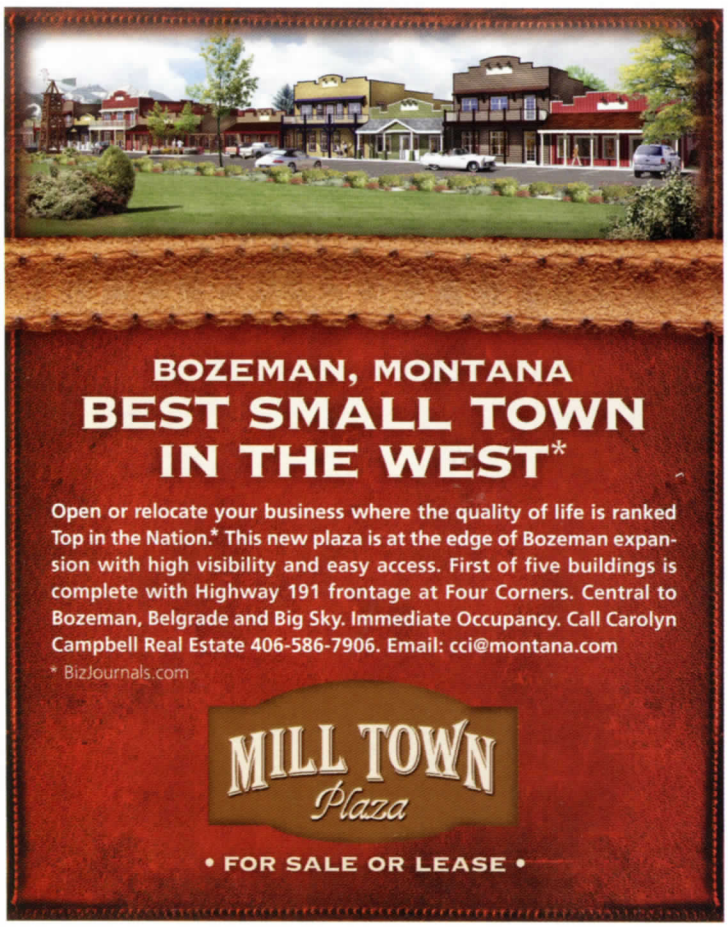
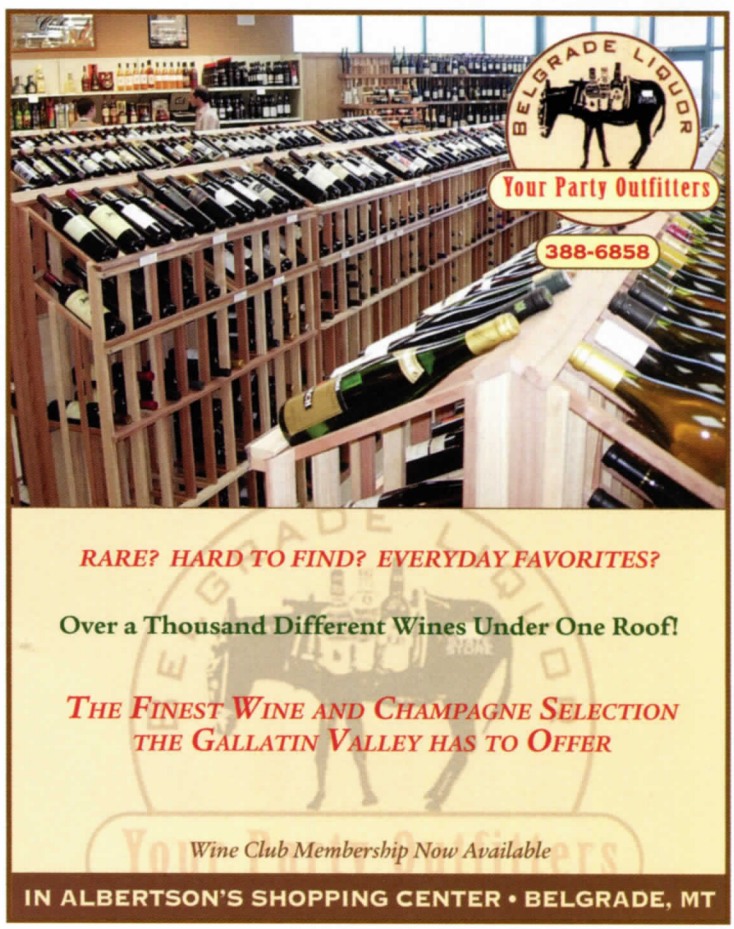
As I WRITE NOW, and just lately, I'm at an awkward moment of melancholy. The friendships I'd thought would last have gradually come unraveled, and the life I'm living isn't what I'd once imagined for myself. But yesterday I bought a tall boy and drove up Swingley Road, rambling around the dial for some good country blues. It's recently illegal in Montana to drive with an open container, but it doesn't yet feel illegal. The first beer still seems honest. Used to be, we'd shoot gophers up Swingley, roll down the windows and rest our barrels on the rearview mirrors. Years ago, up toward the 63 Ranch, a black bear, big as a yearling calf, shambled across the road in front of us, unconcerned. James Dickey, no stranger to the bottle, wrote about wringing his handlebar for speed: "Wild to be wreckage forever." A cold mountain breeze to scrub at the air and hard mountains to scallop the horizon. Behind me, the little railroad town of Livingston fell gradually away, reduced to an insignificant grid of cottonwoods and square lawns. Word has it, there's going to be another subdivision along the Yellowstone. In the back seat, to the tune of my wheezing axles, various ghosts kept offering sympathetic chuckles, low and ironic.

I don't drink so much anymore. Booze is risky for a writer. Something about poking around in the clockwork of ambition and intention, alcohol always feels like a shortcut. No, the last few years it's mostly just red wine with dinner. A piece of elk steak on the barbeque and a little glass to take the edge off the evening. Like a million other middle American bachelors, and in a kind of slow defeat, I've become a connoisseur of ten dollar merlots.

Somewhere, though (I can't help thinking), there's still a saloon waiting, a bar that will fit me like an obvious puzzle piece. Even if I have to open the damn thing myself. I'll study the art forms of retreat and avoidance, healthy handshakes, make it a point to remember every drunk's drink. I'll have a scattering of bumper stickers and a corkboard of party photos, maybe some antique guns just out of reach, deer and antelope heads crowned with cobwebs. A jukebox playing only Patsy Cline and the lone dancers oblivious to everything but each other, their bodies clasped in half-sex. Maybe a wood-burning stove. All my bartenders will read good books and only turn on the TV during the playoffs. "Hey, nice to see you, take a load off, how you been." Here at the corner of melancholy and hope, the first one's always on the house and the things that are wrong with you, brother, they ain't wrong here.

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