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TWILIGHT ON THE LITTLE BIGHORN

BY ALLEN MORRIS JONES

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIK PETERSEN

The morning before our slaughter, I fretted: What if it happens that I'm a coward? What if I have to take a shit? In fact, there was little opportunity for cowardice, and I finally clenched up tighter'n a cork in a bottle. We needed to pee, we were thirsty. Poles, bohunks, Irishmen, Dutchmen, we died looking only to make a living. We did not consider ourselves historical. We were not remarkable. God, I was thirsty. That first charge? I went dry as sandstone. We feared nothing so much as embarrassment. Indians flowed up the hill in defiance of gravity, expectation, reason. I prayed, and when prayers fell short, I thought, *Damn you*, aiming the curse not at the heathens who would shortly be gutting us to the man but rather toward the incompetent who had put us in this fix. Custer, I mean.

IT AIN'T SO BAD. At first, there's that sloshy, seasick, jet-lag kind of feeling—a painful decoupling, a sense of simultaneously standing and falling—but after that, yeah, it ain't so bad at all. Absent ambition, hunger, thirst, you can sit at your ease and watch the world ratchet on past. I will admit that I'm the odd man out, though. Others are less pleased.

Take the General, for instance. Or the "general," as some folks like to put it. Courtesy calls for the use of his wartime rank, but there are those among us who are recently running short of courtesy. The man is one hundred and sixty pounds of conceit in a ten-pound bag. One of those who found virtue in scorn, derision, belittlement. It's about such men that history is written. Not me, not us. Rather, those who insist that the story should be about them, and by their insistence, make it so. We always said he was nothing but hot air and now he ain't even that. What keeps him around? It can't be our company. You'll sometimes see him with Lieutenant Cooke or his brother, Tom, but otherwise he keeps to himself, mumbling. Squinting at the horizon. Pretending to scribble notes into his palm. Still trying to piece it all together. His epic ass-kicking. How'd it all go wrong? It's clear to everyone but him.

Bad scouting reports, he says. That's his line. I'm heartily sick of those words. Bad scouting reports. There are days he'll take his Remington rifle—a noble piece of weaponry—and swing it from the stock like a saber, cut at the grasses, clang sparks against the corners of the monument, chop at the dirt itself. *Scouting reports!* he'll shout. Meadowlarks flush, gophers chirp and duck. When he's in a good mood, he'll present himself unbloodied. White buckskin and red scarf, wide-brimmed hat. "Sergeant," he's said to me, "I'll have breakfast in my tent this morning." He'll take off his hat to run a hand over his shorn scalp, a man still adjusting to his haircut. Other days, he don't speak to nobody. You'll see his face curtained in dried blood, bullet holes in temple and breast, naked from the waist down and one thigh slashed to the bone, the wooden shaft of an arrow tick-tocking out of his private parts. He'll stare about, wide-eyed. How'd I get *here*?

I NEVER SAID A WORD TO MITCH BOUYER IN LIFE—the scouts kept to themselves, by and large—but we fell on the same patch of grass. His arm over my knees, my blood in his trousers. I knew him by his piebald vest. In the early years, when the battle still raged around us—before the most ardent of us were the first to fade—back when you'd glance up to see a charge of Indians galloping bareback down the ridge, whooping, heels kicking hard, back when the Garryowen boys were still shooting their own horses to make bulwarks, again and again, Mitch and me would sit with ankles crossed, take in the show.

That first time, he spat tobacco, eyed my stripes. "We're dead, ain't we, Sarge. *Nous sommes mort*?"

I buried a finger in my bullet hole. "*Mort* as hell."

"Them others don't know it yet."

"I don't believe they do."

"*Pauvres bougres*."

Bullets whined, arrows thunked into flesh, horses screamed. Somewhere in the haze, a man sobbed for his mother. The smells of gunpowder and dust, sweat and the tang of fresh blood. I said, "Where'd you come by tobacco?"

He cocked up on one hip for his twist. "Help yourself."

"Obliged. Where'd you get it?"

"Always had it, is all."

I arrived with my clothes, my Springfield, a letter from Nancy. Three pages of uncertain, blocky hand describing how William was just a few days from crawling. "He kan role over," she wrote, "grab a kob doll if I put it out afore him." She signed her letters with her full name. "My love, Nancy de Rasqaille." Our shared surname a fiction, changed after that mess down in Alabama. Nancy took to it willingly, bless her heart. I did love her. Heavy-nostriled and thick-lipped though she was, she was good hearted. She lived with a misery in her teeth but never let the pain show. I keep her memory like a candle you protect room to room. I cannot consider how she must have taken my death. The thought hobbles me.

EVEN AS I WAS SHOT, I locked eyes with my killer, a red heathen crouched not fifty yards away, his ancient muzzleloader still smoking from barrel and breach. Blood pulsed warm over my fingers. I coughed up iron. A ragged hole bubbled air, and bone grated against bone. *Why?* Why me and not some other? I saw no justice in it.

He wore turkey feathers and black grease paint up the left half of his face, red on the right. For the Lakota, the colors of a brave man. A breach clout and a quill breastplate. His name, as I learned, was Counts Enemies, and he met his own reward not long after introducing me to mine. Catch him at a distracted moment, he'll let you see the ropes of intestine swinging out through the hole in his stomach.

Indians are standoffish. You'll hear them more than see them. They're fond of their dirges. The low, keening, vowel-heavy laments. Is it the wind or an eagle or what? Took me sixty or seventy years, but I finally reached out. It's harder to get to know people these days: Everybody's got their own afterlives, everybody's so busy. I come up to Counts Enemies and said, "Charlie de Rasqaille. They call me Rascal. Company B. I do believe you're the one what kilt me."

Would he show resentment or anger? Maybe an aw-shucks kind of grin, maybe some of that *bonhomie*? No. Only skepticism. He squinted at me like I was a page he was trying to decipher.

"You speak English?"

He pushed out his lips. Finally said, "English ain't what none of us been speaking here white bread."

"Ohhkay…"

He pointed his lips toward Custer, toward where the General was putting on one of his shows, taking the high ground, declaiming, gesturing, ordering troops into position. "Any chance you could get him to shut the hell up?"

"Well, he's my commanding officer. My … you'd say chief, I reckon."

He spat dryly. "You think I don't know what a commanding officer is?"

"I, uh …"

"Jesus, you *wašíču*, all alike. Nobody knows shit but you."

"Sorry. I'm sorry."

Custer was reeling now between clumps of sagebrush, stumbling, fading in and out. Singing, "Old Susannah, don't you cry for me."

Counts Enemies watched him resentfully. "That guy creeps me out, man."

LAST BEST
EST. ★ NEWS ★ 2014

PHOTO BY JOHN WARNER

Founded by Ed Kemmick, a newspaper reporter, editor and columnist with 30 years of experience covering Montana, **Last Best News** brings you stories about the people and places of Montana, with an emphasis on the eastern half of the state. You'll find in-depth news, neglected views and a few beneficial servings of humor and satire. No hassles, no fees. Just go to **lastbestnews.com** and check it out.

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FLORETS GREW TO THISTLE, flowers ballooned into seeds. Tourists scrolled through like shadows thrown by a magic lantern. We picked up the news of the day in faint echoes, gossip, snippets of radio through open car windows. Sheets of newsprint catching on the grass. The fall of the Hapsburgs and the rise of the Bushes. Wars and assassinations, genetic engineering, cameras on phones. A moon landing, a Mars Rover. We saw biplanes growl low, then, in an instant, the sloppy stitchery of passing jets. Bouyer described again how it was to first take the full measure of Sitting Bull's village. The heat-wave mirage of tepees across the river bottom. "We seen that herd of ponies, and we told the General, even before we seen the tepees, we said, *big* ass village. We *told* him. So then what's he go and do? Hell, he divides his troops. I mean, *shrewd*, right?"

Counts Enemies appeared above us, ignoring Bouyer. "I been thinking, white bread."

"Oh?"

"I been thinking, I do believe you may be the first white man who ever said sorry to me. Ever apologized. For … *any*thing."

"Huh."

"Think about that for a minute."

"Yeah, I mean, wow."

He grabbed my shoulder, used it to ease himself to the ground. "You ain't so bad. Rascal, you said?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe you can answer me a question, there, Rascal."

"Shoot."

Counts Enemies found this funny. He bared his teeth and cocked a finger, dropped the trigger. Bouyer snorted, let a breeze roll him on down Greasy Grass Ridge. A Lakota breed married into the Crow, Bouyer's had it rough. *Pauvre* Mitch. Lonelier than me.

"Why ain't you moved on?"

I hid my ignorance. "Why ain't *you*?"

"The battle." He showed his teeth again, a grin or a snarl.

"Eh?"

An Indian strode by with a fresh scalp held high, dripping; bashful with his success. Counts Enemies watched him fondly. "Who'd *want* to leave?"

"Me? I don't know."

"We are made to fight." He thumped his chest. "Our blood was so hot, our bodies couldn't hold it in."

"My wife was pregnant when I left."

"Regret's a hungry little mouse in your chest. It gnaws, white bread."

"His name was William."

"What do you want, an apology?"

"We did what we had to do."

He accepted this somberly, in the manner of a great truth. "We *did*, man."

WHAT COMES NEXT? We become birds, is one hopeful theory. Or, less happily, ghosts to ghosts. Or we simply disperse into grass, wind. I don't mind that thought. Is it regret that keeps us here? Fear? We all have our ideas.

Counts Enemies and Bouyer became friends the way tree bark grows around barbed wire. Animosity degrades first to tolerance then to fondness. Counts Enemies sat combing through his long black hair, picking out grass seeds. Bouyer sucked on his teeth and told us about Custer. They were a stove I held my hands to. I talked about Nancy, our boy. "Did he ever live to his manhood? I think about it." I told them about how my pap died at First Manassas, how my older brother, Clyde, finished the raising of me. "Nancy was cousin to my cousins." I did not share, will *never* share, how Nancy had begged me to stay. "We'll start over with my people down in Georgia." Leaving the yard, I'd pried her fingers off my ankle. This choice rather than that, left rather than right, guilt like a boot on my throat. Who the hell did Custer think he was, to take all this from me?

WE WAVERED, we flickered. Cheat grass twisted up through crumbs of dirt, unfurled, flourished, wilted. Snow blew. Butterflies scratched out of cocoons only to be snagged

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at first flap by robins. We cheered for the birds. A mule deer doe, ribs showing, picked at grass grown through my bones. I felt her teeth. The tourists gained weight and became fond of tattoos, left their air-conditioned cars only reluctantly. A Catholic priest, florid above his clerical collar, tipped over by the monument. He arrived with one corner of his mouth pulled down by his stroke, smelling of piss and Dentyne. Hiking boots and a black blouse tucked into his Wranglers. "Ish that really Cusshter?"

We assured him it was. "What's in your fanny pack there, Father?" Turns out, a flask; a good Scotch. We toasted the priest's health, and passed his booze along, and along, and along.

The priest was a Custer enthusiast. "This wash my sixth trip to the battlefield."

"You don't say."

"He wash a schoolteacher, you know. Seventeen yearsh old, he taught school."

"I might have heard something."

"Monaseeta? Raped her, gave her an illegitimate child. Randy old basshtard, your general."

"Ain't *my* general," Bouyer mumbled.

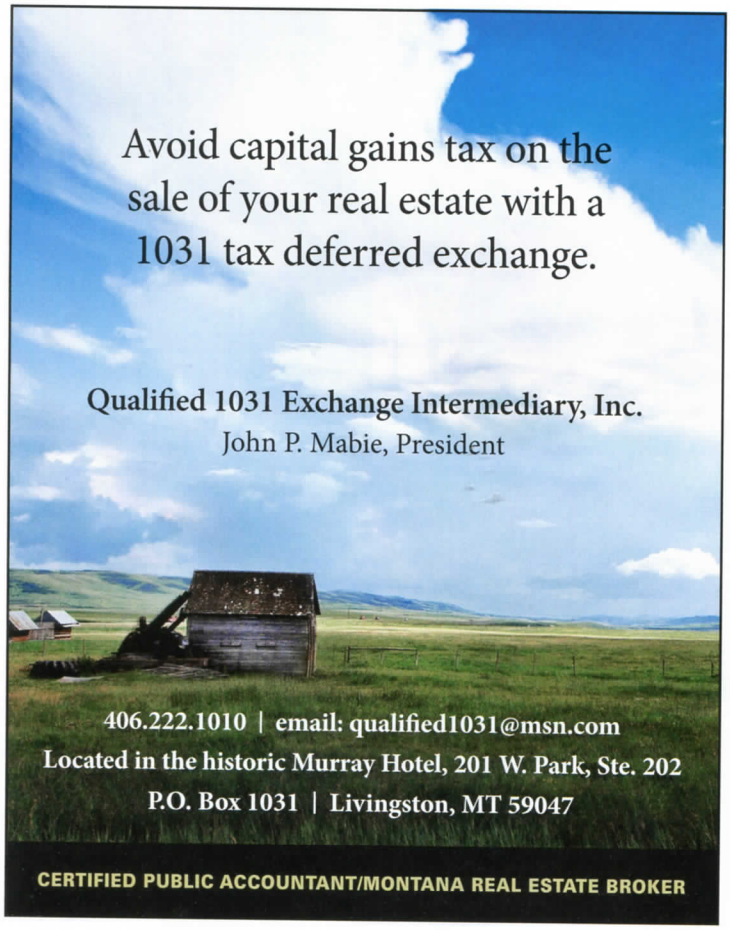
I said to the priest, "You'll fit right in. Ain't a one of us can stop talking about the man."

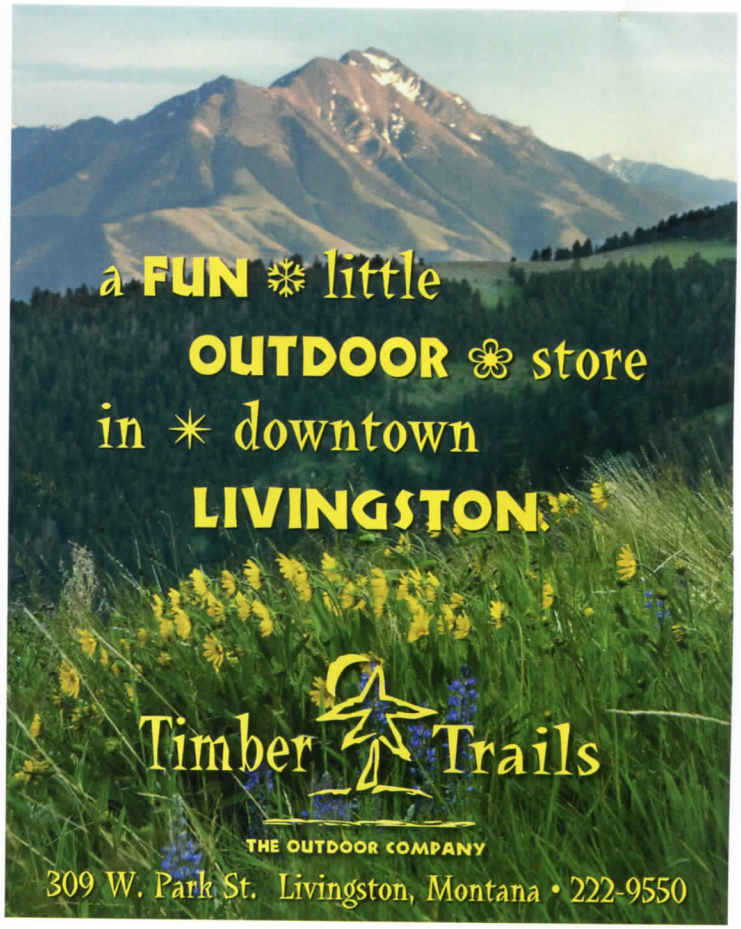
The priest wore a sardonic half-smile. Sardonic or his stroke. He stared sidelong at our Seventh blues and blood. The Lakota in his feathers. Bouyer the breed, his face broad as a baseball glove. Custer, at a distance. "Bad scouting!" the General cried, pointing at Bouyer, glancing about for affirmation. His eyes found the priest. Eh now? A fresh audience. He drew close, squatting. I'd forgotten how the man could wound with his gaze. How you tilted toward his judgment. He touched his mustache, stroking it flat, and stared at Bouyer. Something vibrated between them. Bouyer was the weaker, and looked away first.

"Incompetence," Custer said. "Killed us all."

I must've made a noise, for his gaze fell on me. "Sergeant. I'm still your commanding officer. You ever want to leave this rat hole, you need to think about that. Think about loyalty. *Rascal*."

I had grown accustomed to my resentment. Learned to





let it slumber. But it awakened again, hissing up from its coil. "Yes*sir*."

The General snorted, left us to find his horse. We watched him lead Vic down toward the water. The slow, echoing clop of hooves. Bouyer said, "He needs to quit talking to me like that."

"He does, he *does*." I reached back for the flask. "But I got no ideas."

The flask was gone, and the priest with it. Loss is the water in which we swim.

Counts Enemies scratched at his belly. "Me, I been thinking about it."

Bouyer fixed on him.

"Yeah," Counts Enemies inspected his fingernails for blood, fat, fascia. "I got ideas."

WE SPENT OUR WINTER AMONG THE HEADSTONES, drifting. Gift shop to Entrenchment Trail, riverbank to ridgeline. We looked for agreement, and found not one dissenting soul, not one who refused our invitation. Even the General's own brother, Tom—that sad man sitting with a dismembered testicle in each hand, a feminine absence where his manhood used to be—even Tom was nodding before we were finished. "Sure. Yeah. I'll do it."

WE FRETTED THAT WE MIGHT FINALLY LOSE our collective will. Bouyer said, "What if I don't have the guts? *Les couilles*. It's the *General*, man." I was sympathetic. "You'll be fine." Counts Enemies, the opaque slab of his face oddly vulnerable, shorn of just enough skin to show uncertainty, repeated it. "We'll be fine."

We found Custer at twilight, posed on the slight knoll he'd come to claim as his own, an unremarkable wrinkle in the long slope of grass. Just the same as all the other grass, save for the fact that it had received the blood of a man who'd felt himself worthy of ordering other men to their deaths. Flurries, and the sky dully aglow with snow and setting sun. Custer stood, hat in hand, taking the measure of the wind.

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Bouyer drew himself up from the grass.

"You!" Custer said, offended by the incursion. He squared his hat on his head. "You miserable, incompetent. ..."

The rest of us rose behind Bouyer, flanking him.

Counts Enemies' notion? Nothing wounds an ego so much as scorn; there's no greater fear for a bully than being set apart. The only civilized response to arrogance is laughter. We were Lakota and Cheyenne, warriors and women, a handful of desolate children. And the men of the Seventh Cavalry, elbow to elbow with the cousins of Sitting Bull, the nephews of Crazy Horse. The scalped and the dismembered united in common cause with the men and women who had gleefully taken their fingers, ears, nuts.

Bouyer raised one heavy arm. Pointed a finger, and, with a visible wrench, began to laugh. Simply laugh. A grating parody of a giggle, a chortle filled with gravel. Within a few breaths, however, it had warmed to genuine mirth. Perhaps Bouyer was considering, as I had, our own absurd predicament, how we'd spent our small eternities held hostage to this self-important popinjay.

I tried out my own laughter. How long had it been? A century and more. It was rust in my throat. Rust. Then the dam let go. Behind me, around us, the dead of the Little Bighorn laughed, God we laughed. We held our knees, we fell on each other, we pointed, we cried.

In the face of this onslaught, Custer's arrogance wavered. He turned to each of us, faster and faster, bouncing within the circle, frantic. Brothers to lieutenants to confidants, he sought some measure of accommodation. Anything, please. But it wasn't there. His scorn segued to panic. He beseeched us with open palms. What's funny, what's the joke?

Finally, he bent at the waist, dropped to the ground; held his ears, hugged his knees. Rocked. Around him? The mutilated, manifest works of his ambition. Look at us. See us.

God, that was a fine moment. Custer, humbled.

WE CONSIDERED EACH OTHER. Compatriots. Within the crowd, a few unfamiliar faces, uninvited strangers. The priest, for instance. He produced an iPhone and snapped a selfie. I noted uniforms from wars separated by generations. It took Custer to draw us together. A private in digital camo from Afghanistan stared out from the ruined landscape of his skull. A young lieutenant in the tigerstripes of Vietnam held one of his own arms over his shoulder. Then I saw, I saw ...

I saw my son. His mother's nostrils, my own flat cheeks. I'd have known him in a riot. Late forties, and dressed in the sour brown wool of WWI infantry. Heavy pockets on his chest, a flattened steel helmet. Worn sergeant stripes on his shoulder. A careerist, then. Had I influenced him? His father, the fighter. I flinched at the notion.

My son.

His left cheek, flickering in and out, was swollen with the heavy yellow blisters of mustard gas. His eyes were black specks lost in the folds of drooping skin. There were twenty yards between us. Twenty yards, plus or minus an age. His father, me. Father and son, slain by the frustrated impulse of men trying to impose their wills on other men. Stepping toward him, I saw the sweat beaded on his face, noted the labor it took him to stay fixed in this place, so far from his own patch of French mud. He raised a hand heavy with blisters. He smiled, and even as he smiled he faded to sepia, blurred at the edges, crumbled flat in the manner of a suit falling from a hanger. Where he had stood, only a more complicated swirl of snow.

Counts Enemies, at my shoulder, said, "He looked like you."

"That was my boy. Pretty sure that was my boy."

"Lucky."

I considered the word. "I think he was tired. Didn't he seem tired?"

WE DID NOT FINALLY FEEL LUCKY, nor historical, nor vindicated. We simply were. We considered the grass, we watched Custer regain his swagger. Bouyer was no longer a ready mark, and so, like every frustrated bully, Custer sought easier prey. At one point, he fell on the Arikaras, pointed to the small group of them hunkered by the Indian memorial. "Scouting reports!" he cried. To a man they showed him their fists, then raised their middle fingers.

Counts Enemies said, "Everybody's got to feel good about themselves."

"True, true ..."

"That's why wars are fought, man. Everybody's working their asses off, trying to feel good about themselves."

I put a blade of grass in my teeth. "Should we get on with it, then?"