





HOW TO BE A TOURIST

BY MEGAN REGNERUS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
BOB NEWHALL

BETTY HATED LYING TO HER BOSS AT the bank about why she couldn't come to work, but hated making Frank mad even more.

"Need you at the store until noon," he'd said, as if it were settled.

Never mind that in Gardiner, a tiny tourist town on the edge of Yellowstone National Park, a co-worker could easily spot her filling in at the gift shop. She just tried to compensate by working harder when she was at the bank, hard enough that no one gave her any trouble about her occasional absences.

Now she was trying to be polite to a customer who needed some old-school parenting lessons.

"But I want both!" the woman's daughter whined, shoving a stuffed toy bison on the counter next to the dream catcher she'd already placed there.

"I understand that. But I told you to choose one and now you're wasting this nice lady's time," the woman said.

The little girl, dressed in the same

"I love Yellowstone!" sweatshirt as her mom, glared at her, then crossed her arms.

The woman pushed the items across the counter towards Betty. "Fine," she said.

"Both of these then?" Betty asked, trying to buy the woman more time to parent, despite the fact that these scenarios were good for sales, as Frank would say.

"I guess so," the woman said, smiling apologetically. Then, "This must be so nice."

"What's that?"

"Working right next to Yellowstone, the slow pace."

Betty gave her standard "talking to tourists" answer: "Yeah, it is pretty neat to be near the park."

And it was unique to live in a place where elk and bison grazed matter-of-factly all over town, when she paused to look. From the store window she could see the mighty ever-churning Yellowstone River and the mountains that either protected her or made her feel trapped, depending on her mood.

How could this woman from some faraway city even guess that she worked 80 hours every week? Full-time at the bank to pay their bills and float the shop during dry spells, then home to make dinner, then bookkeeping every night until her brain got fuzzy. Then fall asleep in front of the TV, get up and go to bed, and start it again every morning by 6:30. Weekends meant inventory and payroll to process, housework, always something.

Now that it was fall it was worse. Most of the tourists had gone home, but they were short-handed because Frank couldn't afford to keep his seasonal help, his beloved Bulgarians.

"I'd sure like to hire Americans," Frank would explain to anyone who'd listen, "But those Bulgarian girls work so hard I swear I get three times outta one of 'em compared to these local kids. I don't know what's happened but kids these days are so lazy. Expect damn near everything handed to them, including them expensive phones you can't pry 'em away from."

Frank had a collection of sentences that began with "those Bulgarian girls" that Betty and Verna, her long-time friend at the bank, would often repeat.

"Those Bulgarian girls, they sure are easy on the eyes," she'd say to Verna when she caught her reapplying lipstick in the back room. Then they'd laugh, laugh at the ridiculousness of their big, soft hanging breasts, their bottoms flattened from years of sitting and their beyond-middle-age, careful hair: their sides would ache from the effort to keep quiet.

"Those Bulgarian girls, they never complain," Verna would say when Betty mentioned her back was hurting.

"Those Bulgarian girls, I swear they don't even need sleep," Betty said to Verna when she caught her yawning.

Despite their amusement with Frank-isms, Verna could spit venom when she actually heard these words come out of Frank's mouth.

"You wanna know who works harder than a Bulgarian?" she'd yelled in his face just the day before, picking up a shot glass intended to remind spirit lovers of the splendor of Old Faithful.

Frank's lumpy nose twitched at Verna from beneath his glasses.

"Your wife!" she said, slamming the shot glass on the counter. The side of the glass cracked and they both stared down at it.

Verna put her purse on the counter and opened it. "I guess I'll take this," she'd said.

"\$7.95," he said, refusing to look at her.

"Would it hurt to show her a little appreciation once in a while?" Verna had asked, grabbing her shot glass as she walked out the door.

FRANK HADN'T MENTIONED THE EXCHANGE, but Verna told her about it. And perhaps it did some good, because for the first time ever he'd said to Betty as she scraped the last of this morning's scrambled eggs onto his plate, "Maybe we should go on a cruise someday."

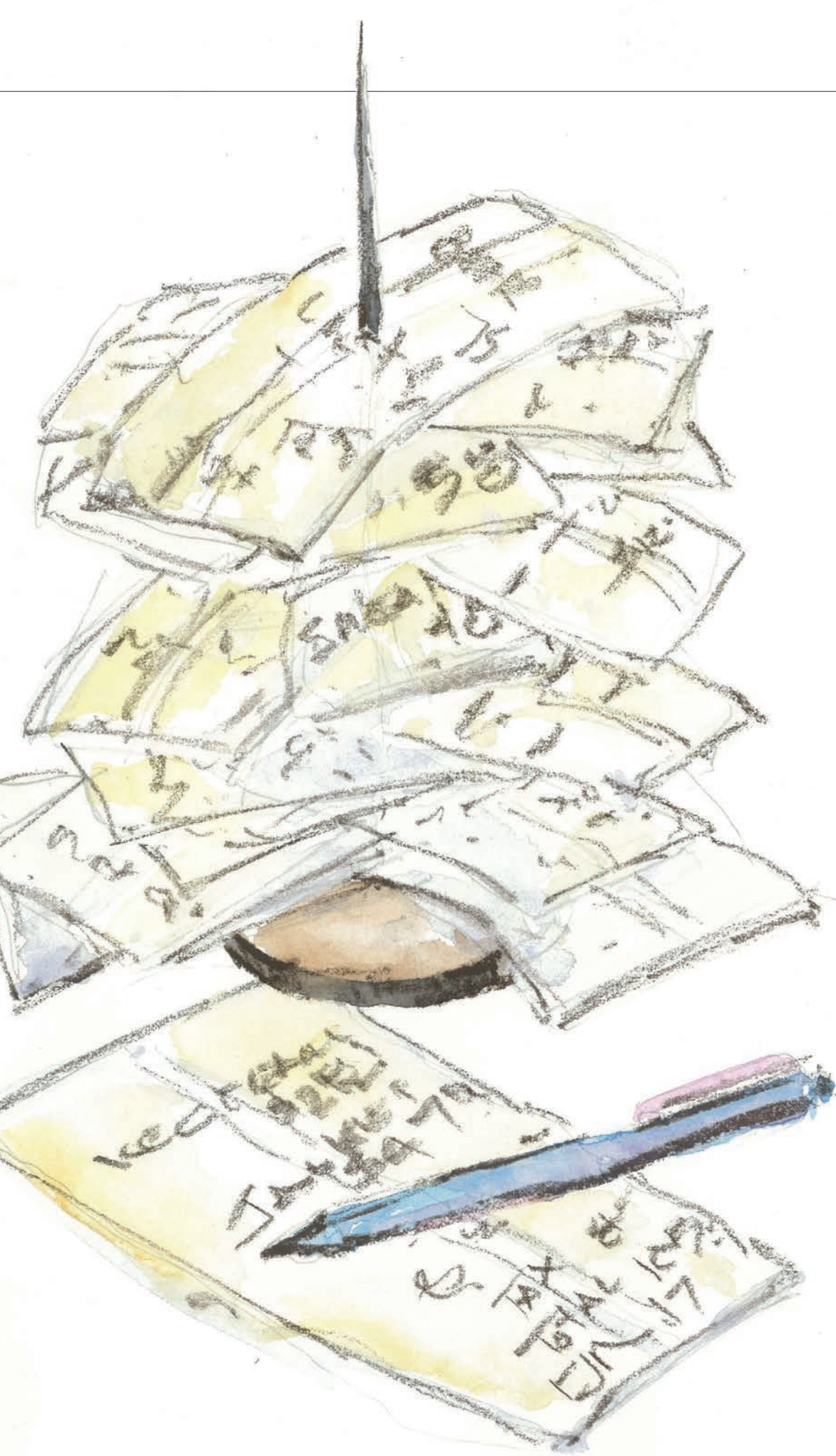
But Betty didn't want to go on a cruise. "A cruise is 10 days, minimum. When are we ever gonna take that?" she'd asked. "What about a Montana road trip? Come on, Frank. We'd only need a couple of days for that."

Frank wiped his mouth and stood up. "Let's talk about it."

Which Betty knew actually meant, "Let's not talk about it."

Was it asking so much? She was tired of tourists all lit up from just having seen Montana treasures like Glacier or Makoshika. The Terry Badlands. Flathead Lake. The Bighorn Canyon. Those places might as well have been on another continent. She was especially tired of living in a place where people just passed through, never staying more than a night or two, on their way to somewhere else.

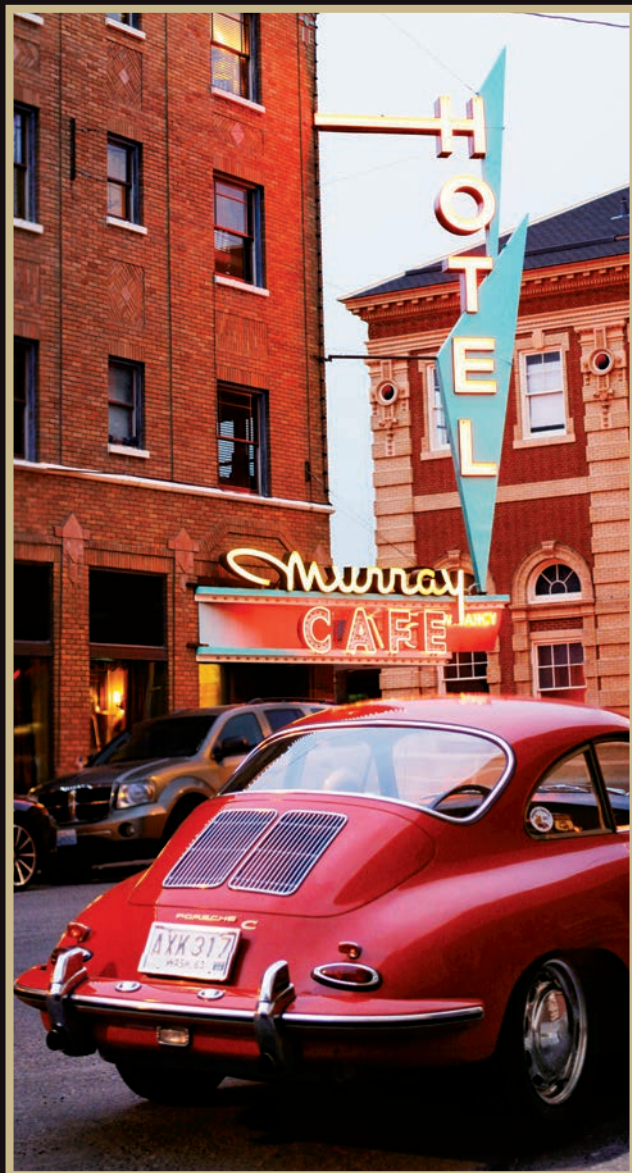
Twenty-one years had somehow passed since they married—a second marriage for Frank and a last-ditch decision not to stay single for her. Frank's wife had left him when he lost his job and couldn't find work. He'd



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never spoken about the marriage, just swore to Betty that he’d never put himself under the thumb of another boss. Marrying at age 39, Betty supposed her eggs were pretty tired, so they hadn’t ever even discussed having kids. Twenty-one years since they’d left South Dakota to work like dogs in Gardiner, interrupted only by an annual Christmas road trip to Rapid City to visit family and a few whirlwind flights alone to see her sister and nephews in Texas.

It dawned on Betty that her marriage, which wasn’t big on spark even when they were both 30 pounds lighter, might not have amounted to much more than a transaction in Frank’s mind. And once she’d had that thought it wouldn’t leave her alone.

Frank put his plate next to the sink and snapped the radio off. “Liberal bullshit,” he had said.

“Not liberal bullshit,” she replied, turning it back on. “I was listening to This American Life. It’s stories about people. There’s no agenda. No plan to overthrow the great Frank Stolnik and his mighty, mighty gift empire,” she’d said.

He’d squinted at her and walked away.

Betty had been engrossed in a true story about a city bus driver from the Bronx. It was 1947 and one day he decided to detour from his route and then just ... kept on driving, for days. He drove away from his job and his life and when he finally parked the bus he was in Hollywood, Florida.

When he got there he told an interviewer that he wasn’t worried about the trouble he was in, the fact that he had just driven away from his life, or any of that. He just felt alive.

After Betty left the shop—or the “doctor’s appointment” she’d had that morning—she drove to the bank to work a few hours before it closed. She thought about the last time she’d talked to Frank about getting away—like normal people do.

It was last winter, during their annual drive to Rapid City. The roads past Billings had been icy and snow-covered, forcing Frank to drive 45 mph, gripping the steering wheel with his head pressed toward the windshield. They’d passed a new sign for Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area, one of the places Betty had always wanted to see.

“Bighorn Canyon, Frank,” she said.

“Mmm?”

“I heard no one hardly even goes there—it’s like a secret—but when you see it it’s like the Grand Canyon. It wouldn’t be that far for us to go sometime.”

“Those places are always overrated,” he said. “You want to see pretty pictures of Bighorn Canyon? Type it in on the Google, it’s cheaper.”

They passed a car that had traced a slippery path across the highway and was now in the ditch. “It’s just Google, Frank,” she said.

“Eh?”

“It’s not called THE Google, it’s just—”

“I can’t talk to you, I need to concentrate,” he said.

She had dozed. She remembered when she woke the snow was blowing sideways and swirling into small hills and drifts; everything was white and it was dizzyingly hard even to tell where the road was anymore.

“You OK?” she’d asked.

“I’m fine,” Frank said.

“I’m tired, Frank.”

“Then go back to sleep,” he said, using his sleeve to wipe at the windshield where the defroster wasn’t doing its job.

She grabbed a rag from the back and helped him wipe a larger hole in the fog. “Not that,” she said, “I don’t want to do the books for the store anymore.”

“What? That’s crazy.”

“OK, well how about I’m tired of working two jobs.”

“Eight more years and the house and the shop mortgage will be paid,” he said.

“Eight more years of this and I’ll be dead.”

Despite her private vow to work extra hard whenever she lied to the bank in order to work at the gift shop, Betty found herself distracted that afternoon, quick to tears.

“Shit,” she finally said aloud, doing her end-of-the-day till count after the bank closed. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Those Bulgarian girls, they’ve got old fashioned manners, the whole lot of ’em,” Verna said.

“My numbers are way off,” Betty said, her vision blurring.

Verna handed her a tissue. “Here, let me count for you. You need a day off tomorrow. It’s Saturday, for God’s sake—tell Frank you need a day.”

Betty sniffed. “I can’t. I have to wake up early tomorrow to drive to Billings to pick up a new cash register or he says he’ll be handwriting receipts on napkins.”

THE NEXT MORNING, the sky was just beginning to stir with streaks of peach and pink as Betty traced her way north, following the Yellowstone to Livingston and then on towards Billings.

She felt tense, her foot insistent on the gas pedal as she climbed from 65 to 75, then finally 85 as she sped past the signs announcing hotels in Billings and exits for Taco Bell, Subway and gasoline. Betty gripped the steering wheel. She held her speed as she noted the exit to the office supply place.

What in God's name was she doing?

Betty eased up on her speed, cracked her window to what seemed an unusually warm fall day, and breathed in the slightly moldy smell of bare earth from the ranches near the freeway, a smell that usually meant everything was waking up; spring in Montana.

She inhaled deep into her belly and exhaled, felt the wind unraveling her careful hair, and glanced at herself in the rearview mirror. She felt strangely calm and focused, suddenly able to see and appreciate the details outside her window: the muddy fields; a barefoot little girl in a nightgown chasing a cat in the front yard of her house, the iron bars across the window of a small pottery store near the Crow Reservation; a house amid carcasses of old cars, hope settling into the earth.

Betty saw the sign announcing the exit information for Bighorn Canyon. As she took the exit and pointed herself towards Montana's very own Grand Canyon she thought I have never, ever, been here before.

When she arrived at Fort Smith, the gateway to the Bighorn Canyon, she stopped at the fee station and swapped money for a pass that confirmed that she was sure as hell doing this. She stopped at the Yellowtail Dam Visitors Center where she learned that despite the fact that Robert Yellowtail, a historic leader of the Crow Tribe, had been against building the dam in 1967, they named the thing after him anyway. She read an overview of the park and asked the ranger questions, felt damn near giddy as he explained that all the things she wanted to see were on the south end of the canyon, a long loop of highway away: Betty was a tourist.

Hours later, when she reached the south end—which was actually in Wyoming—she drove slowly, the windows open wide now to the warming day, all the way to a historic homestead where she walked around and read about a woman who'd bought and run the place all by herself in the 1920s.

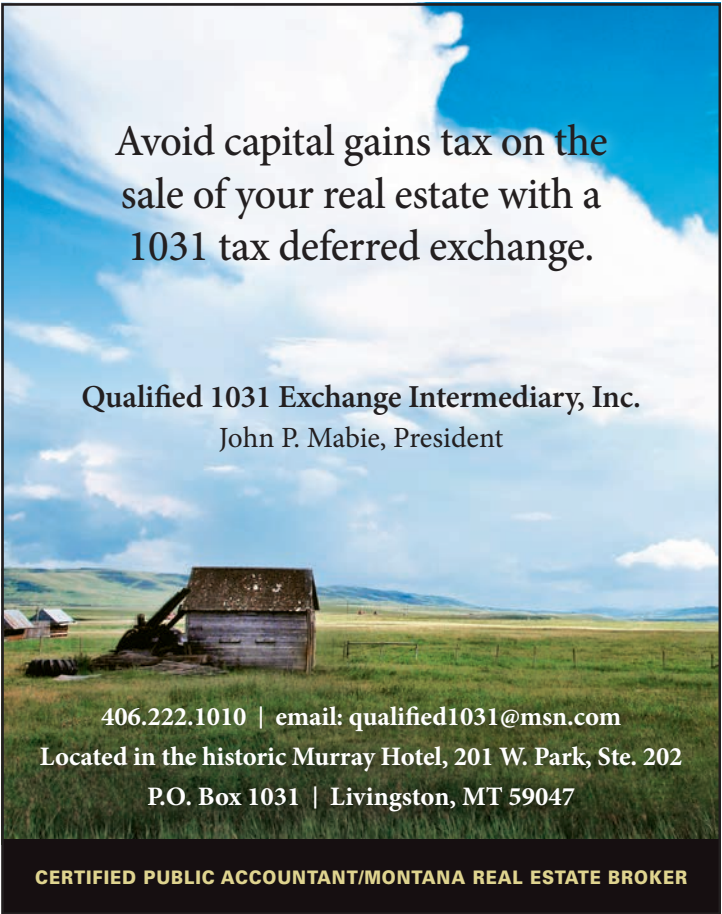
At Devil's Canyon overlook she sat in her car and ate a sandwich and drank the water she'd

packed, famished, but not yet ready to get out and take in what was reported to be the real view. She watched several couples and families pull in, hop out of their cars, let their dogs pee, snap a few pictures and return to their cars.

One couple, in a car that said Just Married! on the back windshield, jumped out separately but were immediately reattached, holding hands and pressing their bodies close in the slight breeze. Betty tried to remember if she and Frank had ever held hands, even while dating.

When Betty finally had the place to herself she grabbed a light jacket and walked to the edge of the overlook. She felt dizzy at first, then held on to the fence railing and tried to focus downward. A hawk coasted on the air currents between the two cavernous walls, a few smaller birds tagging along. A seemingly miniature boat of some sort traced a path in the serpentine length of water 1,000 feet below. She cupped her hands around her mouth, sucked in a great breath of air and yelled, "Hello!" hoping to hear the sound of her own voice reverberating off the canyon walls.

When Betty reached Cody that evening, she pulled out the TracFone that she and Frank kept in the car for



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emergencies and saw that there were messages, but had no idea how to check them. She could imagine the series of calls: first he would've called to ask where the hell she was, impatient for his supplies, followed by a series of angry calls.

"What am I supposed to do without receipts?" he'd say.

"Use napkins," she'd reply, or, "Hire a Bulgarian to get them, Frank."

When she finally called home, she wondered if she'd dialed the wrong number. Frank's voice was gravelly and slow.

"Betty?" he said. "Where are you?"

"I'm on a trip, Frank."

"When will you be home?" he asked, his voice small in a way she'd never heard before. It unhitched something inside her, trapped her words.

"Betty, are you hurt, you sound like you're crying. Tell me where you are and I'll come and get you."

Betty sniffed, reached for a tissue and blew her nose. "I'm fine," she said. "I really am."

THE HOTEL CLOCK SAID 8:45 A.M. WHEN BETTY WOKE THE NEXT DAY—later than she could ever remember waking. She ate breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Cody was another mountainous tourist town on the way to Yellowstone and Betty took no offense at the unsmiling hotel clerk who gave her keys or the middle-aged waitress who needed prompting to refill her coffee. She read the brochures she'd grabbed, started planning the day.

BETTY COULD FEEL SOMETHING INSIDE HER DAMPEN WHEN SHE PULLED INTO THE parking lot at the Heart Mountain Visitor's Center, out north of town. Was it because of the Japanese Americans who were forced here during World War II? Or the fact that she was going to have to return home after this?

She got out of her car and stood silent, tried to imagine what it must have been like for hundreds of Japanese arriving here by train from the West Coast, to this wind-scoured barren land that stretched all the way to Heart Mountain in the distance, the razor wire that kept them there.

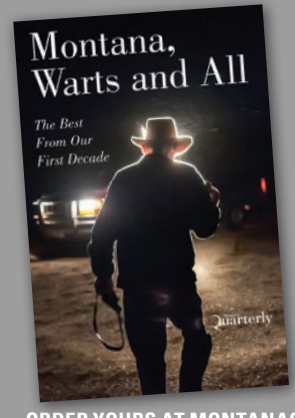
She went inside and looked at giant black and white photos of Japanese men gardening in the harsh summer sun, smiling to the corners of their eyes as they held up bunches of carrots just pulled from the earth. She read about people uprooted from their homes and forced to abandon their property, trying to make a life in crowded barracks, sending their kids to camp school, organizing dances, doing it all under guard. It made Betty wonder if the heaviness that had grabbed her was her own damn fault.

When she made it back to the car the sun was low in the sky, meaning she was going to have to drive home in the dark.

She kept thinking about the Japanese as she drove into the growing darkness, but it wasn't until she reached Livingston and turned for the final stretch towards Gardiner that it came to her. The only Japanese she'd ever seen in Gardiner, Livingston, Billings, or even Cody were just tourists passing through.

Thousands of them had once lived at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center and made the best of it.

And once the fences went down, they left. ■



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1. Publication Title		2. Publication Number	3. Filing Date
Montana Quarterly		0 1 9 - 3 7 0	9-29-17
4. Issue Frequency		5. Number of Issues Published Annually	
Quarterly		4	
6. Annual Subscription Price		7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication (Not printer) (Street, city, county, state, and ZIP+4®)	
\$21.00		P.O. Box 1900 Livingston, MT 59047	
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher (Not printer)		9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor (Do not leave blank)	
P.O. Box 1900 Livingston, MT 59047		Publisher (Name and complete mailing address) Scott McMillion P.O. Box 1900, Livingston, MT 59047	
10. Owner (Do not leave blank. If the publication is owned by a corporation, give the name and address of the corporation, immediately followed by the names and addresses of all stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of the total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, give the names and addresses of the individual owners. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, give its name and address as well as those of each individual owner. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, give its name and address.)		11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None	
Four Quarters LLC Primary owner: Scott McMillion		P.O. Box 1900, Livingston, MT 59047 P.O. Box 1900, Livingston, MT 59047	
12. Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates) (Check one)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months (Publisher must submit explanation of change with this statement)			
13. Publication Title		14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below	
Montana Quarterly		Fall 2017 9-1-17	
Extent and Nature of Circulation		Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	
a. Total Number of Copies (Net press run)		6,619	
b. Paid Circulation (By Mail and Outside the Mail)		3,766	
c. Total Paid Circulation (Sum of 13b (1), (2), (3), and (4))		4,300	
d. Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (By Mail and Outside the Mail)		509	
e. Total Free or Nominal Rate Distribution (Sum of 13d (1), (2), (3), and (4))		2,063	
f. Total Distribution (Sum of 13c and 13e)		6,063	
g. Copies not Distributed (See Instructions to Publishers #4 (page 83))		236	
h. Total (Sum of 13f and 13g)		6,619	
i. Percent Paid (13c divided by 13h times 100)		67.3%	
15. Electronic Copies Circulation		Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	
a. Paid Electronic Copies		4,300	
b. Total Paid Print Copies (Line 13c) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 15a)		6,063	
c. Total Paid Distribution (Line 13f) + Paid Electronic Copies (Line 15a)		6,063	
d. Percent Paid (Both Print & Electronic Copies) (15b divided by 15c times 100)		69.9%	
16. Publication of Statement of Ownership			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> If the publication is a general publication, publication of this statement is required. Will be printed in the Winter 2017 issue of this publication. <input type="checkbox"/> Publication not required.			
17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner		Date	
[Signature]		9-29-17	
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