

LETTERS FROM WHEATFIELD

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BOOK ONE

The Big Loaf

CHAPTER 1

The Talk of the Town

TO: Mrs. Amelia Kashfloh
29 Bentley Tower
Park Avenue
New York City, NY 10000

Dear Amelia:

I think you misunderstood what I was trying to say in my last letter. Of course Sarah and I are thrilled that you want to write a book about rural life in Montana, and yes I will send you all the information you want about our little town. It's just that... well, what I was trying to tell you is that I don't know if Wheatfield is typical of the rest of Montana. You may get a very skewed view of things. You see, this place... the people here... well, they're... *special*.

It's not just that our material environment is different from yours in New York—you know, no Rolls-Royces; our only high-rise buildings are grain

elevators—that goes without saying. You may live in the Big Apple, but we’re in the “Big Loaf.” The major difference is that, here in Montana’s Golden Triangle, our towns are at over-the-horizon distances from each other. They’re like little islands in a vast sea of wheat fields and cattle ranges. And this situation forces people to rely on their own resources for entertainment; to focus more on what’s happening in their community than on the outside world; to concentrate on other people’s business. Here, among our 2,000 merry souls, this has been elevated to an eccentric art form. So when you read what I send you, please keep in mind what I’m about to say.

Amelia, this place is... oh, what’s that word from the movie I saw? “Pixilated!” That’s what this place is, Amelia, “pixilated.” Most of the people here are of Scandinavian and German heritage, but I’ll swear there were Irish pixies at work in the stories I’m going to tell. Sometimes Sarah and I get a little exasperated with it, but I have to admit it certainly isn’t dull here. Actually it’s kind of fun.



You thought we were out of our minds when we gave up on New York and moved here two years ago. Well, when we first arrived it seemed you were

LETTERS FROM WHEATFIELD

right. Culture shock. Our entire frame of reference, our whole value system, had to undergo a complete overhaul—and quickly.

Folks here have a whole different take on what's important and what's not. Things that concern people in big cities just don't crop up here, while things that city folks wouldn't bat an eye at become hot items on the busy Jungle Telegraphs of intimate communities like ours. Stuff like this:

“I see that Helen Swenson is showing off the Hair Stylist daughter from Billings again.”

“Yes, you'd think she had something to do with it.”

“Isn't it always that way when a plain person has a brilliant child?”

“Oh yes, so true.”

Or this:

“Well, did you see the Arnstrom's new pickup? I wonder what they've got going on the side, with all the low prices on wheat and everything!”

“I hear they're personal friends of

the Schwan's guy who delivers to the gardener who takes care of the yard of the Private Secretary to the guy who's the Administrative Assistant to Senator Conroy.”

“Ahh, well! It sure helps to know people in high places, doesn't it?”

That kind of thing.

With everyone involved in everyone else's business, it doesn't take much for minor events to be blown into scandalous proportions, as Sarah and I were to find out.

As you know, we're quiet and private people. We're friendly and cheerful to everyone, but our lives are lived at home with each other, with our creative pursuits, and our gastronomic interests. We enjoy creative cooking and so, as soon as we settled in, we went on the lookout for ingredients a little above the ordinary. One of the first things we did was buy a freezer so we could stock up on better grades of meat that aren't always available in the local market. Makes sense, doesn't it? I thought so. Anyway, we discovered that the Standing Rib roasts our IGS market puts on sale, two or three times a

LETTERS FROM WHEATFIELD

year, are pretty good. Everybody calls them Prime Ribs, knowing that they really aren't prime, but they are definitely in the "Pretty-Darned-Good" category. So when IGS advertised some in the paper a while back, we rushed to the store. Wanted four of them to chuck into the larder.

We found that we had been a tad too slow in responding to the ad. We'd been beaten at the starting gate. Other Wheatfieldians—more streetwise, more aggressive—had been there before us. We stared into the bin, marked "Pretty-Darned-Good Rib Roasts, \$4.99 per pound," and saw the last three of them left in all of Wheatfield—perhaps in all of Pondera County. (That's pronounced like "Ponderay", Amelia.)

I whipped around, pulled the cart between us and the aisle, spread my arms wide and yelled over my shoulder to Sarah: "Grab those suckers!"

We concealed them in the cart under Sarah's purse and my jacket, and calmly completed the rest of our shopping, humming nonchalantly as if to say: "We don't have any roasts in there."

Don't get me wrong. We weren't feeling guilty about possessing them. We were just defending them against rustlers.

After what we thought was a reasonable time, we headed for the safety of the checkout stand.

Now understand, Amelia, that in our IGS it isn't merely a checkout stand. It's a gathering spot. It's a hanging-out place for people who traffic in the really important news of our fair hamlet. It was there, as our roasts rode the conveyor slowly towards the cashier, that we found ourselves at the eye of a whirlwind of controversy. We became the Talk of the Town.

A rather stout woman had been gabbing with the cashier, and she spotted our approaching Prime Ribs. Exclaiming in a real loud voice, so even the folks outside could hear and come in to see, she said, "Wow! Someone's gonna have company."

Sarah responded in a weak, I-wanna-fall-through-the-floor voice. "No, they're for us."

"*Three* Prime Ribs? You're gonna eat *three* Prime Ribs. All by *yourselves*?"

Now we were feeling guilty—downright felonious, in fact—and we stumbled over each other offering excuses:

"Not all at the same time!"

"See, we've got this freezer."

"They're not on sale very often."

"We really, really like them."

In the Meat Department at the back of the store, a customer approached the butcher. "Where are the

LETTERS FROM WHEATFIELD

Prime Ribs you advertised? I don't see any.”

“There were only three left, and Fred and Sarah Moore took ‘em all.”

“They bought *three* Prime Ribs?”

The girl from the Deli Section sidled up. “Yeah, they wanted four, but there was only three left.”

The customer raised her eyebrows. “They havin’ company or something?”

The Deli girl was more than equipped to handle that question. “I dunno. He’s got brothers in California and Texas, you know, and she’s got a sister in Las Vegas. Of course, it could be his cousin. She just got back from Taiwan. Can you imagine?”

The lady customer let all that information sink in for a few seconds. “Well, if they’re gonna feed that many people, they’ll *need* three Prime Ribs.”

The Cashier surveyed our roasts sitting on her conveyor belt and then looked up at us. “So, when’s your company coming?”

We beat a hasty retreat to the parking lot to cram our groceries into the car and get the hell out of there. But we had been spotted by the old Zimmerman twins, Carla and Darla, watching from their observation post on the bench at the front of the store.

“Look Darla, it’s Fred and Sarah Moore. They’re the ones bought the last three Prime Ribs.”

PATRICK SHANNON

“Yes, Carla, but the poor dears are having all their relatives over from Taiwan.”

“Really? I didn’t know they were Japanese.”

There are only 2,000 people in Wheatfield, Amelia, but it took us forever to stop them from bowing at us. One guy still says, “sayonara” when he sees me.