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From 1961 until Stanley Frank died in 1994, I wrote him a letter every Saturday morning that changed into this column. This thought caught me by surprise one evening after dark on a solitary ride horseback.

Dear Stanley, as hard as you tried editing all my stuff all those years, datelines and places keep disappearing tonight. Doesn't matter where you are or where I am, come Saturday morning, the deadline falls to send you a column. After you passed on, I felt like nine-tenths of my audience disappeared and all my ambition.

However, forget the rule of time and place for once, Stanley. It's unimportant where the imagery hits at the moment, except the mountains are tall ones streaked in purple and orange-tinged dawn. Maybe it's a flashback from the trip we made to the Martin ranch close to Magdalena. The alkali flats are changing to a cream color splotched by rusty sandstone among the lone tufts of burro grass. I am holding a headstall hanging in the notch of my right thumb and grasping the reins in my left hand. A Mexican cowboy pens the horses. He looks like I think Catarino looked in his younger days on your step-dad's outfit, bringing in all those Aldwell and Johnson bay black mane and tail Thoroughbreds, bucking and crowding through the gate.

Is "Cato" gone, too? Last time I saw him was on the coyote drive on the Rocker B - 10, maybe 15 years ago. After we'd unsaddled, we were so delighted to see each other that we rode into the headquarters on a jeep shod with foam rubber tires. The jeep bucked so much and the wind was so high, we had to shout to hear each other. Wish we could have spent the afternoon together, but "Cato" had to be back at Barnhart for his grandson's birthday party. If he is around, (and I'll try to do the same here,) ask him if he remembers the spring we made so many before daylight and after dark trips the 90 miles to the Sonora ranch that the old red-headed kid of a cowboy Cal hired from East Texas fell asleep on the milk stool one night.

Yes, I know you never approved of my wandering off the subject. But in the opening scene, the horse wrangler smiles and says "*buenos dias,*" shaving 50 years off the script. He looks like "Cato" did sitting up straight in the saddle on "Flagman." The young boys standing around wearing knee high leggings they call "chinks" could be the boys we knew who used to wear "batwings" or "shotguns," but they aren't. We all face the corral and the kicking and back-biting turmoil of a band of loose horses. One thought stays the same, Stanley. The hidden one, you know the one: "Gawd, I hope they don't cut me that fierce brute of a sorrel,

blaze face of a sapsucker." But they don't and they won't cut a graybeard a snuffy horse.

Had I known the privileges of gray hair, I'd have dyed my whiskers 40 years ago. Remember how we laughed about a charter pilot at El Paso who tinted his hair to look older. The pilot you hired to fly us across the Sierras to Hermosillo, Mexico, the first year you flew a twin-engine plane? His name was Art Butterfield.

In those days people had names easy to remember. Sometime or another, folks became hard to place. Maybe the government is to blame for identifying everybody by social security numbers. It's sure aggravating to know a ranch's brand, but not be able to find the owner's name in the phone book. To make more complications, telephone numbers are printed nowadays so an "eight" looks like a "three." When Mrs. Barfield ran the switchboard at Barnhart, I bet there weren't five wrong numbers rang a year over her system, and all five of those wrong numbers were probably the times she visited her sister and left her husband Bud running the office.

Before a horse was ever roped, the scene changed from imagination to the reality of riding down the east fence of the Devil's River pasture at dusk. My pony is a Mexican citizen branded "MR" on his left hip and named "Shineman."

He knows to follow the deer trail skirting the crumbly dirt by the playa lakes as darkness dims our sight. He knows also we have one rocky crossing to make. Knows we have to pick our way through the rocks as we can't chance the rotten ground of the lake bed. As we reach the rocks, Stanley, I kick my feet loose in the stirrups and sing "Crawdad Hole" the way I sang the time you flew us home dodging those big thunderheads on the Plains.

Once over the rocks, we reach good ground. One hundred frames of the past flicker by in the now darkness. I know I am going to write you soon. By the way, I saw old what's-his-name the other day at the barbershop, the hotshot who used to shoot pool at the Elks Club. Fellow at the grocery store from Water Valley looked familiar, but seemed to have a different wife than the one we knew. You sure got us in and out of a lot of jams. I hope you'll forgive me for not keeping the times or the places straight. *Asi no mas,* Monte...