

longer living. These were not ghosts to her, nor for that matter to me, simply interrupted existences. My grandfather died long before I was born, but I heard the wise words of Pete Blegen many times as though he were standing close beside her. Straightening herself as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, she managed a trembling smile and a last pat to my packed clothes.

“That’s that, the suitcase is ready and I hope to high heaven you are.”

By now I didn’t want to look at her and couldn’t look away. My mother’s face was legible in her drawn one at times like this, women without any extra to them to start with and hard luck wearing them down even more. It was showing every sign of being a family characteristic, if I didn’t dodge it.

Call it luck or not, but right then I had an inspiration. An impulse on top of an inspiration, more like. “Can I run up to the house for a minute? With my autograph book?”

“Not unless you want Sparrowhead’s,” she dismissed that out of hand. “And you know how he is. Sometimes I think that man has a wire down,” a particularly unflattering saying from her collection which meant a brain on the blink. Adding as if I had forgotten, “He’s the only one there, with Meredice away.”

“Yeah, well, that’s sort of what I had in mind,” I fumbled out. “It’s just, you know, I have everybody else’s.”

Gram’s pursed expression questioned my good sense, judgment, and maybe other qualities, but she only said, “Child, you get some of the strangest notions.”

Biting her tongue against saying more on that score, she checked the clock. “All right, I suppose if you have to. But make it snappy, pretty please. You need to catch your ride to town with the vet as soon as he’s done in the cow shed.”

My mind buzzed as I crossed the grassless packed earth of the yard, so called, that separated the cook shack and bunkhouse and horse barn and sheds and corrals and the rest of the sprawl of the Double W from the stronghold of the Williamsons, the house. Rather, of the Williamson men who had ruled the huge ranch for three generations, while the Williamson wives of equal duration had as little as possible to do with the baronial dwelling poking up out of the prairie.

"I don't blame Meredice for scooting off to California every chance she gets," Gram sympathized wholly with the current lady of the house, "it's like living in a hide warehouse in there." That may have been so, but the house with its dark wooded rooms and manly leather-covered furniture and bearhide rugs and horned or antlered heads of critters on the walls--most spectacularly, that of the bull elk shot by Teddy Roosevelt on one of his visits to the ranch before being president took up his time--held a sneaking allure for me. Cowhide furniture and trophy heads can do that to you when you've lived the bare-bones style Gram and I were stuck with.

I went in the kitchen door without knocking, as the kitchen and the adjoining windowed porch where the ranch crew ate at a twenty-foot-long table were Gram's domain, where I hung around to lick the bowls and such when she was baking and even did small chores for her like taking out the ashes and filling the woodbox. Pausing in the familiar surroundings to gather myself, I gazed around for possibly the last time at the cookstove of the old kind cooks called a hellbox and the creaky cupboards and the rest of the tired kitchenware Gram had made do with, three times a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, as the latest in the succession of Double W cooks fending with a shortage of modern conveniences and a surplus of Wendell Williamson, classic tightfisted employer. I swallowed hard. What I was about to do was a gamble, but I was a hundred

percent sure it would work. Well, fifty percent sure, the rest maybe the kind of hope only a twelve-year-old can have. "Hunch up and take it" was good enough advice if you were willing to go through life like a jackrabbit in a hailstorm, but I was determined to try for better than that.

Gettrng ready, I smoothed open the autograph book. A memory book, was another name for it, because collecting autographs really was an excuse to get people to dab in some indelible bit of wisdom, humor, or simply something supremely silly along with their signature.

What would I have done, in that difficult period of life, without the inch-thick cream-colored album with the fancily lettered inscription YE WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES embossed on the cover in gold or at least gilt? Autograph books were one of those manias that sweep through a student population, and at our South Fork one-room school it started when Amber Busby, as spoiled as she was curly-haired and dark-eyed, showed up with a fancy leatherette one she'd been given for her birthday and began cornering all of us to write in it. Immediately everybody, from the littlest kids just able to print their names to the seventh and eighth grade galoots edging up on the fact of a world half filled with girls, had to have an autograph book; it's a miracle how something ceases to be sissy stuff when everyone does it. Like other schoolyard manias, this one wore itself out in a week or two, but I kept at it, away from school as well as in. Gram, always desperate to keep me occupied--over time I had worn out enthusiasms on jigsaw puzzles, pen pals, board games, and things since forgotten--wholeheartedly encouraged this particular diversion, not that I needed extra motivation. The variety of things people came up with to be remembered by appealed to the grab-bag nature of my mind, and by now I had a good start on filling the pages. I felt there was a long way to go, though, because I wanted to set a record. This was because I loved

the Ripley's Believe It Or Not! panel in the Sunday funnies of the Great Falls *Tribune* that the Williamsons passed along to us when they thought of it, with its incredible facts that a North Dakota man ate 71 pancakes in one sitting and that the Siamese twins Eng and Peng shared a total of six wives in their lifetime and so on. I could just see myself in a full-color drawing, Donal Cameron--my name correctly spelled and everything--the Montana boy who collected more autographs and their attached memories than any other known human being. What that total was, of course, remained to be determined, but I was working at it. And this next autograph request counted double, in a sense.

Flipping past the scrawled sentiments of my classmates and the other schoolkids--*When you see a skunk in a tree/Pull his tail and think of me* was pretty typical--I picked out a nice fresh page, holding the place with my thumb, and approached the office down the wood-paneled hall. The door was open, but I knew to knock anyway.

When he saw it was me, Wendell Williamson sat back in his swivel chair behind the desk which Gram claimed was the only thing on the ranch he knew how to operate. "What can I do you for, Buckshot?"

This was new territory for me, as I had only ever peeked in when he was not there, taking in with all due curiosity the large Charlie Russell painting of riders wrangling cattle with a picturesque square butte opportunely in the background, the many years of maroon ledgers shelved along the walls, and the surprisingly rickety mahogany breakfront where whiskey surely was kept. The room smelled of tobacco and old hides like the mountain lion skin and head draped over a cabinet in one corner, enough to set a visitor back a little upon walking in, but I advanced as though life depended on it. "Hi," I said, my voice higher than intended.

The man behind the desk, no taller nor heftier than average, had a kind of puffy appearance, from his fleshy hands to a pillow-like girth to an excessive face, his hairline in deep retreat until a cluster of curly gray in the vicinity of his ears. Gram called him Sparrowhead behind his back because of what she believed was the quality of birdbrain under that jag of hair. Or sometimes her remarks about her employer were more along the line that he was the sort of person who'd drown kittens to keep himself busy. Regardless of what she thought of him, or he of her, they had maintained a prickly standoff, the boss of the ranch reluctant to fire the tart-tongued cook because of her skill at feeding a crew on the cheap, and the often-disgusted mealmaker who ruled the kitchen putting up with his stingy ways on account of me.

Gram's bad turn of health was about to bring all that to a crashing end, if I couldn't do something about it. Wendell--I didn't dare think of him as Sparrowhead just then--was examining me as if he hadn't seen me every day of the past couple of years. "I hear you're getting a trip to Minnesota."

"Wisconsin."

"Nuhhuh." This strangulated utterance was habit of his. Gram said it made him sound like he was constipated in the tonsils. "It amounts to about the same, back there." I suppose trying to be civil, he drawled, "Come to say 'Aw river,' have you?"

The joke about "Au revoir," if that was what it was, went over my head. "Uh, not exactly," I stammered in spite of myself. "It's about something else." He waited expressionlessly for me to get it out. Heaven only knew what rash requests had been heard in this office down through the years by one poker-faced Double W boss or the next. None quite like mine, though. "What it is, I want to get your autograph."

Suspicious I was making fun of him for booting us out of the cook shack, he gave me a beady look. I quickly displayed the autograph book. "I've already got Mered--Mrs. Williamson's."

That did not seem to cut any ice with him. Before he could say anything, I hurriedly added: "And the Major's."

That, now, registered on him. The old gentleman, as Gram called the elder Williamson, showed up from New York only a time or two each year, but his presence changed the feel of the ranch, as if Wendell's wiser father--actually his uncle--had taken charge. Silver-haired and tailored to the last thread, with the limp of a wounded war hero, a handsome man even with age on him and tragic story trailing him--the bunkhouse gossip I managed to pick up on was that he lost the love of his life to a famous colored singer, no less--he had smiled through his white mustache when I waylaid him with the autograph album. Confiding that he was a collector of the written word himself and welcoming me to the club, he jotted a quote in a firm hand, the one about the pen being mightier than the sword, and signed his name with a flourish. Wow, I thought, my eyes big at the beautifully written passage he handed back, complete with *Wesley Williamson, in fellowship.*

"You landed Unk, huh?" Thinking it over to the very end, the current Williamson reluctantly put out a paw-like hand. Taking the autograph book from me, he splayed it on the desk with the practiced motion of someone who had written out hundreds of paychecks, a good many of them to cooks he'd fired. I waited anxiously until he handed back what he wrote.

*In the game of life, don't lose your marbles.*

*Wendell Williamson*

*Double W ranch*

*June 3, 1951*

“Gee, thanks,” I managed. “That’s real good advice.”

He grunted and fiddled busily with some papers on his desk, which was supposed to be a signal for me to leave. When I did not, he frowned.

“Something else on your mind?”

I had rehearsed this, my honest reason for braving the ranch boss in his lair, over and over in my head and even so it stumbled out.

“I, uh, sort of hoped I could get a haying job. Instead of, you know. Wisconsin.”

Wendell could not hide his surprise. “Nuhhuh. Doing what?”

I thought it was as obvious as the nose on his face. “Driving the stacker team.”

This I could see clear as anything, myself paired with the tame old workhorses, Sadie and Irish, just like times on the hay sled last winter when whoever was pitching hay to the cows let me handle the reins. The hayfield job was simpler yet, merely guiding the team of horses back and forth pulling a cable that catapulted a hayfork load onto the stack. Kids my age, *girls* even, drove the stacker team on a lot of ranches. And once haying season got underway and gave me the chance to show my stuff with Sadie and Irish, it all followed: Even the birdbrain behind the desk would figure out that in me he had such a natural teamster he’d want to keep me around as a hayhand every summer, which would save Gram’s spot as cook after her recuperation, and the cook shack would be ours again.

I waited expectantly for the boss of the Double W to say something like, “Oh man, great idea! Why didn’t I think of that myself?”

Instead he sniffed in a dry way and uttered, “We’re gonna use the Power Wagon on that.”

*No-o-o!* something inside me cried. The Power Wagon for *that*? The thing was a huge beast of a vehicle, half giant jeep and half truck. Talk about a sparrowheaded idea; only a couple of horsepower, which was to say two horses, were required to hoist hay onto a stack, and he was going to employ the equivalent of a Sherman tank? There went my dream of being stacker driver, in a cloud of exhaust. I was always being told I was big for my age, but I couldn't even have reached the clutch of the dumb Power Wagon.

"Cutting back on horses, don't you see," Wendell was saying, back to fiddling with the papers on the desk. "Time to send the nags to the glue factory."

That did that in. If charity was supposed to begin at home, somehow the spirit missed the Double W by a country mile. Apprentice cusser that I was, I secretly used up my swearing vocabulary on Wendell Williamson in my defeated retreat across the sun-baked yard to the cook shack.

Gram watched in concern as I came back in like a whipped pup. "Donny, are you crying? What happened? Didn't the fool write in your book for you?"

"Got something in my eye," I alibied. Luckily, the veterinarian's pickup pulled up outside and honked. In a last flurry, Gram gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Off you go," her voice broke. "Be a good boy on the dog bus, won't you."

A reminder  
enormous

fact

To my intense relief, I found the autograph book safe and sound in the jacket and simply huddled in my seat with an arm wrapped around them both as if they might get away again, until the bus finally trundled out of the last of St. Paul and its troublesome twin and the tires were making the highway humming sound.

Naturally the other passengers had gawked for all they were worth when I came aboard and ducked into the first vacant set of seats--where I was sitting before was occupied by a mother with a fussy baby, I saw with a pang--so I wouldn't be pestered by a seatmate about the whole experience that started in the mesmerizing pages of *Photoplay*. From the tone of remarks that followed my adventurous arrival, I could tell that my fellow riders were divided between thinking I was lucky beyond belief in catching up with the bus the way I had or practically a menace to society for missing it in the first place. I wasn't going to argue with either point of view. Until dog bus life settled down a great deal more, I was not budging from my seat, the autograph book would have to go into early retirement, I would stay quiet and still and have nothing to do with anybody. *Paint it red*, fatherly advice drummed in me, put the bus-missing episode out of mind, concentrate on something else like, well, anything but that.

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I reckoned without the elderly couple across the aisle from me.

“Tsk,” first I heard the woman. “It just makes me want to take and shake him. Imagine doing what he did.”

“Dang right. Must have been a star pupil in fool school, is all I can think,” her husband pitched in.

I shrank inside. Now this, to add to the day. It was bad enough to have behaved like a stray and ended up on the wrong side of the beetle-browed driver, let alone scandalizing my nearest bus neighbors to such an extent. Donkey school, fool school--so much for the Tetonia prairie schoolhouse and the other one-room stops of my bouncing education through six grades, the Greyhound world graded harder.

From the corner of my eye, I apprehensively studied the couple, way up there in years, clucking their tongues about me now. Both of them were short and sparely built, like a matched pair that had shrunk over time. Actually the woman reminded me of Gram, even to the skinny wire eyeglasses emerging from the cloud of grey hair bunched in no particular identifiable hairdo. She had on what looked like a churchgoing dress, the darkest blue there is with touches of white trim and what looked like a really valuable carved ivory rose brooch, which she wore with about the same authority as the Glasgow sheriff did his badge. Her husband also was dressed in Sunday best, a baggy brown suit and wide green tie with watermelon stripes. Bald and smallheaded and with his skinny glasses perched on the knobby end that old noses sometimes form into, he didn't look like much, a Palookaville grocery clerk or something. But when he leaned forward to scrutinize me further through the tops of his glasses, I glimpsed the hat line where his forehead turned from suntanned to pearly pale. Ranchers and farmers had that mark of lifelong weathering, and I didn't know any others who did. This added another hayload to my mortification. People who ought to have recognized me for

what I was, if I only had been wearing my rodeo shirt instead of slopping syrup on it, were against me. My best hope was that the *tsk tsking* pair of old busybodies was getting off at the next stop, Palookaville or not.

“I tell you, a soul can’t simply sit by after seeing that without saying something,” the woman was definitely saying, in that henyard voice. “It runs contrary to common decency.”

“You’re right as rain,” her husband vigorously bobbed endorsement to that. “Speak your piece, it’s entirely called for in this dang kind of a situation.”

With that, here she came like a shot, scooting across the aisle with surprising agility into the seat next to mine as I cringed back to the window at the prospect of being taken and shaken for wrecking common decency. Oh man, did she look mad, her eyes down to slits behind the lenses of her glasses.

“We want to let you know,” she leaned right in so close on me I could smell Sen-Sen on her breath, “we think it was downright awful of the fool up there in the driver’s seat to go off and leave you like that.”

I sat up like a gopher popping out of its hole. “Really? You do?”

“Bet your britches we do,” the man chipped in, sliding over into her seat on the aisle and sticking his head turtle-like across toward us. “It was uncalled for, that dang kind of behavior when it’s up to him to be on the lookout for his passengers, is what I say.”

I barely resisted contributing “Well, yeah, he’s a dickhead,” but condemnation of the guilty party hunched over the steering wheel seemed to be going along just fine with *dangs*. All of a sudden, the dog bus was the top of my world again, given these unexpected backers. Fortunately, the three of us were far enough from the driver that he couldn’t make out what we were saying about him, although he was watching us plenty in the rearview mirror, looking sore that the commotion back and forth across the aisle plainly involved me one more time.

My newfound defender riding shotgun beside me gave him a snakekilling look right back, shaking her head the way that's another method of saying *tsk tsk*, and her husband added his two bits' worth, as he put it, to the effect that the Greyhound Company ought to examine its hiring procedure. I tell you, it was almost like having Gram, a double helping of her, there to stick up for me.

In the burst of introductions, they made themselves known to me as Mae and Joe Zimmerman, and I recited by heart Donal without a *d* and how it dated back to Scotland and Cameron kilts and buck-naked Englishmen, which seemed to interest them no end. They in turn lost no time filling me in on the Zimmerman clan as they called it, three boys with children of their own, one son who ran what they referred to as "the ride" at the place they were going to, Wisconsin Dells, and another they had just visited who was a doctor in Yellowstone Park, treating people who fell into hot pools or were mauled by bears. Wow, I thought, talk about being famous, he must be the talk of the park every time he patched up some dumb tourist like that. A third son, it turned out, ran the family farm in Illinois--somewhere called Downstate, which from my fuzzy geography I guessed had nothing to do with Chicago--while, as Mrs. Zimmerman said, she and Joe "trotted around having the time of our lives."

Trotting around by dog bus for the fun of it was a new notion to me, and as I listened to one and then the other peppily telling of their travels, I longed for the cushion of family that was theirs, in contrast to Gram and me on our own with only the distant relatives--literally--that I was being packed off to like a shipped fruitcake at Christmas.

Something of this must have shown through in me, because Mr. Zimmerman interrupted himself to ask, wrinkled with concern, "Now where is it you're going, Donal?"

"Manitowoc."

The Zimmermans glanced at each other as if their hearing had failed.

I repeated the tricky word, adding "It means, uh, 'Where ghosts live' in Indian," which didn't seem to help.

"Don't know it at all. You, Mae?"

"Not a bit. Where in heaven's sake is it, somewhere far? Back east?"

The other somewheres of my trip--Pleasantville, Decatur, Chicago--the map dots of my imagination, my protection against the unknown that awaited me in one last bus depot where I was to give myself over to strangers, glimmered for a wistful moment and passed into simple memory. These two honest old faces could not be fibbed to nor did I want to, hard truth the destination I had to face now.

"No, no, it's in Wisconsin, honest. See, I'll show you." Producing the autograph book from my jacket pocket, I took out the precious piece of paper with the Manitowoc address and so on, Mrs. Zimmerman peering at the writing through her bifocals very intently before passing it across to Mr. Zimmerman, who studied it with a squint of concentration identical to hers before handing it back to me. And more than that, I told them the whole story, Gram's scary operation and my parents killed by the drunk driver and the summer ahead of me in the hands of relatives who might as well be ghosts for all I knew about them, and the dog bus proving out Gram's prediction that it gets all kinds, the huffy little sheriff who thought I was a runaway and the slick convict who had almost made off with my suitcase--it spilled out of me in a flood, although I did hold back being soundly kissed by a vagabond waitress with *Leticia* stitched on her breast.

"Whew," Mr. Zimmerman whistled when I finally ran down, "you're a trouper for not letting anything throw you," and Mrs. Zimmerman added a flurry of *tsks* but the good kind that marveled at all I had been through. They put their heads together and figured out where Manitowoc must be from my ticket that

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#9

showed I'd have to change buses in Milwaukee and ride for only a couple hours beyond that, which indicated the place must be on Lake Michigan, and assured me that made them fret somewhat less. As Mr. Zimmerman put it, the town didn't sound like it was off at the rear end of nowhere.

Time flew in their company, comfortable as they were with a boy from having raised three of their own, and I felt practically adopted as our chatter continued across the miles. I could just see their prosperous farm with a few horses still on the place for old time's sake and what it must be like living somewhere with no Power Wagon, no Sparrowhead, to ruin a summer. The saving grace of a uncorked imagination such as mine was that it always carried me away, as Gram all too well knew, waking dreams that I could more than halfway believe in if life would only correct itself in the direction of good luck instead of bad for her and me. I knew with everything in me Joe Zimmerman would have given me a chance to harness up a team of workhorses and prove myself in the fine fields of Illinois instead of running me off like a twelve-year-old hobo, and Mae Zimmerman would never be a tightwad about kitchen matters. In my trance during the valuable time with this sage little age-dried couple--wizened must have had something to do with wisdom, mustn't it?--I could hardly bear not to ask if they needed a teamster and a cook.

But then Mrs. Zimmerman looked out at some Palookaville the bus was passing through and exclaimed, "Can you believe it, we're almost to the Dells," and that bubble popped. I came to with a start, realizing I hadn't had them write in the autograph book, and they chorused that they'd fix that in a hurry.

"A memory book," Mrs. Zimmerman said wistfully as I handed her the album and pen. "Why, I haven't seen one of these since our children had theirs." I watched over her shoulder, a growing lump in my throat, as she penned in a neat hand:

*When twilight drops a curtain  
and pins it with a star,  
Remember that you have a friend  
Though she may wander far.*

He took a lot more time with his, a mischievous twinkle in his eye as he wrote and wrote. When his wife told him for heaven's sakes hurry up, he shushed her with "Never you mind, this is man talk between me and Donal," using my name with exquisite courtesy. When he passed the book back to me, along with a big grin, I saw he had composed:

*Here's to the girlfriends,  
you'll have them in numbers,  
you'll have them in plenty,  
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,  
11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.*

The Wisconsin Dells stop was so brief I didn't get off, merely pressed my nose against the window as the Zimmermans waved to me and were met by their family. Whatever dells were, I goggled at what appeared to be a lake turned into an amusement park, with a fleet of landing craft like my father's at Omaha Beach, except these advertised on their sides, WISCONSIN DUCKS--FUN! ADVENTURE! ON LAND AND WATER! That was not the most thrilling thing, though, as rising over the water like a railroad that had decided to jump the lake was a swooping roller coaster track--sure as anything, the "ride" operated by the Zimmermans' son. I ached to stay there, just once in my life be a member of that world of pleasure. For as the bus pulled out, I knew in my heart of hearts nothing like that awaited me in some hard-to-spell town with not a thing going for it except the Indian explanation that it was where ghosts lived. Dead, in other words.

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Milwaukee. The last hazardous place I had to get through appeared to me endlessly gray and runny, drizzle streaking the bus window, as though the church steeples every block or two caused leaks in the clouds. Either a very religious spot or one in serious need of saving from its sins, this big city looked old and set in its ways, streets of stores alike from neighborhood to neighborhood even when the spelling on the windows was foreign. Hunched there trying to see out to the blurred brick buildings set tight against one another, I was as bleary as the weather. Ever since Wisconsin Dells, I kept going over my all too adventurous day, the close calls with the badly dressed master criminal and the wild ride to catch up with the bus in St. Paul--luck on my side but only barely until the Zimmermans came along to stick up for me when I most needed it--my imagination zigging and zagging to what could have happened instead of what did. Yet, already those things seemed farther past than they were. In some way that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around, distance messed up time, the miles accumulating since I climbed on the dog bus in Great Falls putting me

unfathomably farther from life up until that point than just the count of hours could show. I had to think what day it was--Monday?--and from that it, it hit me with full force that while I was going through a day of scares not enough to kill me, Gram had gone into the hospital for her operation.

That thought ballooned my imagination almost to bursting, my head crowded with doctors and nurses and nuns clustered around one familiar frail form, talking their hospital talk in tones as hushed as any in the gloomy Milwaukee churches the Greyhound was nosing past. Determined as I was not to cry, my eyes were as blurry as the watery bus window by the time the dumb driver called out the announcement about the depot's conveniences and so forth.

Jumpy at having to change buses at what was bound to be another overwhelmingly busy terminal, I scrambled out directly behind the driver and seized my suitcase as soon as he heaved it out of the baggage compartment, packing it protectively to the rest room with me. Done there, I headed straight for the long bank of swinging doors with arrivals and departures posted beside them, not even pausing at the newsstand and its lure of Almond Joys, my stomach losing out to what happened in Minneapolis. Only a complete moron would miss the bus a second time, right? The challenge, though, was to find mine in the listings of dozens of stops, until way down at the end of the doorways past ST. LOUIS and KANSAS CITY and even BEMIDJI, I finally spotted a sign like a string of letters in alphabet soup.

SHEBOYGAN MANITOWOC WAUSAU EAU CLAIRE

Out in the boarding area, I planted myself beside the still empty bus. When the new driver showed up, burly and black-mustached and still settling his company crush hat on his head, he looked me over enough that I was afraid he'd heard about me, the entire Greyhound fleet alerted about the stray whom trouble followed like a black cat's shadow. But he only remarked, "Early bird, aren't

you," and stuck the wicker suitcase safely in the baggage compartment. I went up the steps right at his heels, and for quite some time we were the only ones on the bus, me securing a window seat partway down the aisle but away from the bumpy ride over the back tires, and him behind the steering wheel dealing with paperwork.

Waiting there like that, one stop from my destination, something came over me, a feeling sort of like the start of a cold, but in this case recognizably homesickness about to happen. The funny thing about it, though--odd funny, not funny funny--was that what I was about to miss in the way a person does when familiar surroundings are gone was not the Double W cook shack, nor even the ranch nor Montana itself, but the bus. Sitting there in a usual window spot that my fanny by now knew as well as the seat of my pants, the long aisle somehow invisibly crowded with fellow passengers who had come and gone, the whole Greyhound-grey upholstery of seat cushions and backrests as comfortable around me as a traveling living room, I wished for the first time I could stay on, keep on going, ride the dog bus on through the challenging summer. Half wished, rather, the other part of me, the more-or-less wised-up traveler one, all too aware that I had lucked out of tough situations, and if I knew anything about life by then, it was that there did not seem to be any limit on tough situations. Imagination and a lot else had carried me this far, but I reluctantly knew deep down that Manitowoc was the end of the line for all that, in more ways than one.

Finally more people dribbled aboard, but to my puzzlement, fewer than at any point of the trip since passengers dwindled away into the void of North Dakota. Was Manitowoc such a ghost town no one wanted to go there? Soon enough I'd know, wouldn't I.

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Time had  
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Time passed, or rather, didn’t, and I was growing antsy, willing the driver to start us rolling, when I heard him say to himself, “Hoo boy, here they are,” and watched as he climbed off one more time to do his baggage job. I turned to the window, and gasped.

A disorderly line of kids, snaking from side to side like one of those Chinese dragons in a parade, was pouring out of the depot, each with a suitcase in hand. There was an absolute mob of them, and worse than that, entirely boys, and even worse yet, the worst I could imagine, they all were about my age and there were enough redheads among them to confuse anyone.

They stormed onto the bus laughing and pushing and talking at the top of their voices as I watched this pandemonium sort out. A couple of fretful adults were in charge, or trying to be, but they were no match for the stampede. The kids swarmed as they pleased through the aisles, claiming seats and instantly trading. The bus filled up, and the next thing I knew, three boys descended on where I was sitting, one of them flopping down next to me. As sharp-featured as if he’d been whittled, he had a natural nose for poking into other people’s business, eyeing me with squinty curiosity. “What’ja do, get on the bus early?”

“Sort of. Yesterday.”

“Yeah? Where ya from then?”

mixed  
feelings -  
but  
comptrol

I told him, his pair of chums across the aisle nosily listening in. If the new bus riders were impressed by my distant point of departure they had a funny way of showing it. "Montana? Know any cowboys? Like Gene Autry?" They snickered roundly at the idea.

What to do? Lay it on them about the past two years of hanging around the bunkhouse with the Double W riders every chance I got, sometimes even being allowed--if I could catch Gram and Sparrowhead both in the right mood--to saddle up and help move cows and calves to a new pasture, riding right next to cowboys as genuine as they come, as shown by their adventurous cussing? These kids, not a freckle from the outdoors on their milkwhite faces, did not seem like the audience for any of that. For once, I figured I'd better tone matters down.

"Well, sure, I couldn't help but know the ranch hands, could I," I said offhandedly, "my grandmothers's the cook, see, and we all eat together at a table as long as this bus." That did stretch the matter a little, but not unreasonably so, I thought.

"Long way to reach for the butter," my seatmate cracked, but if it didn't get any worse than that I'd be fine.

The way kids will do, we gingerly got around to names. The one sitting next to me was Karl, with a K, he informed me, as though that made him something special and not just a poor speller. The other two were Gus and Nick. They looked like brothers but didn't act like it, Gus nervous as a pullet and Nick the kind who would stare you in the eye as he took your lunch. Karl was the leader, I was sure. Leaders always sat by themselves, or in this case by the seatfiller I happened to be. I wished I had drawn the set of kids directly behind us, who were quietly reading comic books.

Still trying to figure out this many twelve-year olds being transported somewhere in one clump, I couldn't help but ask. "Is this a school trip?"

more?  
dialogue?  
Mammie  
Mammy  
tag?

pair across, aisle  
wider +  
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much  
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"Where'ja get that?" Karl looked at me like I was crazy. "School's out. We're goin' to camp."

"Sleep outside?" Why on earth would anyone with a home and a bed, as these milksop kids surely had, spend the night on the cold ground? "What for?"

"Outside, nothin'," Karl made a face at that. "We're goin' to Camp Winnebago. It has cabins and everythin'."

Hope flickered in me for the first time since this pack of kids speckled with redheads showed up. If they were not all to pour off at the Manitowoc depot in a sea of confusion, maybe the aunt and uncle who had never seen me would find me after all. Cautiously I asked, "H-how do you get there? To Camp Winnebago, I mean."

"How do you think?" Karl sneered. He crossed his eyes at me like one moron talking to another, while Gus and Nick rolled theirs. "What goes down the road like sixty but always turns around to chase its tail?"

"Bus," I exhaled the answer, relieved at the thought that the driver would dump this bunch off at some Palookaville that called itself a camp--before or after Manitowoc, I didn't care which.

"Give that man a dicky bird." With that, Karl pinched the back of my wrist black-and-blue.

"OW! Hey, quit!" Trying to shake the sting out of my hand, I at least had the consolation that Karl was groaning as he rubbed his ribs and complained, "Hey, you gave me a real whack," which, in all justice, my elbow automatically had done when he pinched the bejesus out of me. Somehow it seemed to make him think better of me.

"So, Don"--I had prudently trimmed mine to that in the exchange of names when theirs were as short as bullets--"where you goin', anyhow?" he asked almost civilly.

But when I told him, he snickered, while across the aisle Gus, or was it Nick, jeered, "Ooh, old Manitowocce, couldn't make it to Milwaukee."

Swallowing hard, I changed the subject. "What do you do when you get to dumb camp??"

"All kinds of stuff!" They were all too glad to tick off activities to me. "Swimmin'... Makin' things with leather...Tug o' war...Archery..."

It was Gus, the fidgety pullet one, who interrupted the litany with, "Don't forget singin'," causing Nick next to him to hoot out "You betcha!" and before you could say *do re mi*, all three of them were laughing like loons and raucously chorusing:

*Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,*

*Mutilated monkey meat.*

*Dirty little birdie feet.*

*Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,*

*And me without my spoon.*

That was impressive, I had to grant, as did the harried grownup who came rushing down the aisle and told them to quit showing off. As one, they snickered at his retreating back. The candy company should have put the three of them on the Snickers bar, like the Smith Brothers on cough drop boxes. I didn't have much time for that kind of thinking, however, as they turned their attention back to me, the Nick one looking particularly hungry for a crack at me.

"So," I blurted the first thing that came to mind, "you guys shoot bows and arrows, like Indians. That's real good."

"You betcha butt it is." Unable to resist showing off, Karl drew back archer-style with an imaginary *twang*, the other two loyally clucking their tongues to provide the *thwock* of arrow hitting target.

"How about guns?"

My question silenced them for a full several seconds. Nick was the first to recover and break out a sneer. "What, cap pistols? Little kid games ain't for us."

"That's not what I mean," I responded, innocent as the devil filing his fingernails, as a Gram saying best put it. "Remington single-shot .22s. Like I use, at the ranch."

"Yeah?" Karl sat up and a little away from me. "Use on what?"

"Magpies."

"Yeah? What's those?"

"Birds. Big black-and-white ones that would just as soon peck your eyes out as look at you." He flinched back as I spread my hands in a sudden gesture. "With tails about yay long. Don't you have those here?"

"Naw, I don't think so." He looked across uncertainly at Gus and Nick, who were shaking their heads in slack-jawed ignorance of one of the most common birds in Creation. Talk about having a wire down; if any of these three had a brain that worked, it would be lonesome.

"Then how do you make any money?" I pressed my advantage, Karl still leaning away as if his ass might get shot off from my direction. "See, there's a bounty on magpies, on account of they eat the eyeballs right out of calves and lambs and things, and"--I had a moment of inspiration-- "they really do gobble down gopher guts." At that, my audience was agog, if slightly green around the gills. "So what you do," I continued in expert style, "after you shoot them, you cut off their legs with your jackknife and turn those in for the bounty. Fifty cents, just like that. They're pretty easy to shoot, I got seventeen so far this year," I concluded as if dead magpies were notches on my gunbelt.

By now I was being looked at as if I was either a gunslinging hero of the twelve-year-old set or the biggest liar on the face of the earth. But it was totally true that Wendell Williamson, tightwad that he was, ponied up for dirty little birdy

feet, magpies being the hated nuisance they were on ranches, after Gram vouched that my father had taught me how to shoot and she swore I was responsible enough to hunt along the creek willows without endangering the cattle.

My listeners stirred uncertainly. Gus's lips were moving as he worked out fifty cents times seventeen, while Nick gauged me more warily than before. It was up to Karl to rally the campers. "Yeah, well, bows and arrows can kill stuff, too. Like, uh, frogs. We're goin' frog huntin' the first night at camp, ain't we, guys."

"Sure!" and "You betcha!" from across the aisle backed that up as if hunting hopping amphibians in the dark, Indian style, was a tried-and-true camp activity, which I seriously doubted.

Now even the would-be frog hunters fell still as an announcement came from the driver that we were not stopping in Sheboygan as scheduled, because no one was ticketed to there and no more passengers could be taken on. Actually, I suspected he was in a hurry to get rid of the mess of campers. No doubt to put minds at rest, so to speak, about a rest room, he added, "Manitowoc in fifteen minutes."

Really? The comprehension began to sink in that finally I was nearly there. Fifteen minutes sounded like no time after all the long hours on the bus, the encounters I'd had, the close calls. In an odd way, I started to miss all that, the bits and pieces of my journey coming to mind while my latest companions thought it was a big deal to go up the road a little way to the same stupid camp year after year. But the mind does funny things, and half listening to their razzing back and forth about which of them was most likely to shoot himself in the foot with an arrow, I had a sudden itch toward the autograph book. After all, here was my last chance on the dog bus for who knew how long, and three candidates right here

handy. So what if they behaved like complete morons, when they knew stuff like that campers' song. Goofiness had its place in the pages of life, too.

Impulsively I pulled out the album, its cream-colored cover a little smudgy from so much handling but overall a good deal less the worse for wear from its trip than I was, and showed it off to Karl.

"Yeah?" his answer to almost everything. He fanned through the pages like a speed reader. "So you want us all to put somethin' in it." I said I sure did, about to hand him the Kwik Klik and explain how it worked, when he clapped the book shut and held it out to show Gus and Nick. "Gotta better idea. We'll take it to camp and everybody there can write in it for ya. The counselors, even." All three of them snickered at that. "Don't blow your wig," Karl, the sneak, said as if I shouldn't have a care in the world, "we'll send it back to you in Montana when it's full."

"Hey, no! I need to keep it, I just want you guys to write in it."

"We'll get around to it," he breezed by that. "Letcha know how the frog huntin' goes."

I started to panic, and made a grab for the book. With a laugh, he tossed it across the aisle to Gus, who whooped and shoveled it to Nick as if this was a game of keepaway.

In desperation, I shoved the heel of my hand into Karl's surprised face and kicked my way past him--he didn't amount to much of a barrier compared to the braided Indian or the man in the bad-fitting suit--and launched myself onto the giggling pair across the aisle, calling them dickheads and sons-of-bitches and whatever other swear words came to my tongue. It was two against one, but they were underneath and I was all over them with flailing limbs. In the scuffle, I elbowed Gus hard enough to take the giggle out of him. Nick was chanting "Uh

uh uh, don't be grabby!" when I got on top of him enough to knee him in a bad place and snatch the album back.

By now the grownups who supposedly were in charge of this band of thieves had floundered onto the scene and were pulling me off a howling Nick, while the bus driver bellowed, "Everybody siddown!"

Still cussing to the best of my ability, I was grappled by one of the adults into the seat across the aisle, Karl having retreated to the window as far as he could get from me. "We wasn't gonna keep it, honest," he whined, the liar, as I furiously checked things over. The autograph book miraculously had survived without damage, but my shirt was ripped up the seam to the armpit, a pocket was dangling almost off--fortunately not the one with the money pinned to it--and a number of buttons had popped off. I gave Karl another murderous look, not that it repaired anything but my feelings, and he kind of whimpered, the fearless frog hunter.

While I was trying to take inventory and catch my breath, the bus abruptly slowed and steered off to one side. I reared up, blinking, looking around for Manitowoc. But no, we were braking to a halt on a roadside pullover, the parking lot for a picnic area, and the driver had something else in mind. Climbing out from behind the steering wheel with grim determination, his mustache practically bristling, he stalked down the aisle to the four of us dead-still in various states of apprehension.

"You," he pointed a finger at me and then jerked a thumb toward the front of the bus. "Up there, where I can keep an eye on you."

My ears burning, I followed him to the seat nearest the steps, swapping with some unlucky camper about to have Karl inflicted on him. I guess by the same token, the kid in the window seat next to my new spot shrank away from me like he'd been put in a cage with a wild beast.

Actually, I discovered much, much too late, I'd been banished to the best seat on the bus. Why didn't I think of this at, say, Havre? Up there with nothing in front but the dashboard and the doorwell, I could see everything the driver could, every particle of road and scenery, clear as if the bus-wide windshield were a magnifying glass. I sat entranced as the world opened ahead of me, no longer sliding past a side window. And so it was that in the next minutes I had the best possible view of my destination from the outskirts on in.

By then I had seen sixteen hundred miles' worth of towns, from Palookavilles to the Twin Cities, but at this first sight of Manitowoc, I didn't know what to think. Houses looked old, on streets with flower gardens but not many trees. Nothing was remotely familiar except the Chevies and Fords dotting the streets and they were strangely pulled in sideways--parallel parking had not converted Montana. My eyes were busy, my mind trying to keep up. As the bus approached the downtown section and rumbled over a bridge across a murky river, I caught glimpses of a lake that spilled over the horizon, and a gigantic ship in the harbor, although just one. I was especially on the lookout for places with an S&H Green Stamps sign hung out, but all those I spotted seemed to be furniture stores. Beyond that, the storefronts were somewhat mystifying. We passed a business calling itself a Schnapps Schop, which looked like a bar, and the bars I could recognize all had a glowing blue neon sign in the window saying Schlitz, while what looked like restaurants commonly had the word Schnitzel painted on the plate glass.

Then the bus was lurching into the driveway of the depot, and the next thing I knew, the driver killed the engine, swung around in his seat with relief written on his face, and announced:

"Manitowoc, the pearl of Lake Michigan. Everybody off."

marie  
water

I was thunderstruck, but not for long. "HEY, NO, EVERYBODY SIT TIGHT!" My outcry froze the driver and probably everyone else on the bus. "You're taking them to Camp Winniegoboo!" I instructed the open-mouthed man at the wheel. "They told me so!"

He recovered enough to sputter, "What're you yapping about? A camp bus picks them up here." I went numb. "They're off my hands," he briskly brushed those together, disposing of me at the same time. "Besides, what do you care? You're the Mannie ticket, aren't you? End of the line, bub. Come on."

I nodded dumbly, and followed him off the bus into the unloading area. There still was a chance, if I could grab my suitcase and hustle into the waiting room ahead of the throng of campers. But of course at Milwaukee mine had been the first suitcase stowed in the baggage compartment, and as infallibly as Murphy's Law that anything that can go wrong is bound to go wrong, every camping kid received his bag and filtered into the depot before the wicker suitcase was reached. Directly ahead as I slogged in dead last, Karl and his gang looked back and gave me various kinds of the stink eye, but stayed a safe distance away.

Inside the depot, it was just as I feared. The waiting room was jammed with the camp kids swirling around until their bus arrived, everything in confusion, redheads everywhere in the milling herd, and I knew, just knew, picking me out of the mob was impossible. Tucking in my shirt tail as best I could and trying to cover the torn seam with an elbow, I stood there, wildly looking around, but while there were all kinds of grownups mixed in with the crowd, for the life of me I couldn't see anyone I imagined to be an Aunt Kitty or an uncle named Dutch.

There was only one thing to do. Resort to the slip of paper with their phone number. Not that I knew squat about using the instrument evidently hidden

You're  
Not The  
Yet!

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in the forbidding booth with GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE on it, all the way across the terminal. Payphone? Like a jukebox, was that, where you stuck coins in and a bunch of machinery was set in motion in the guts of the apparatus, or what? Everywhere I had lived, the construction camps, the ranch, phones were a simple party line where you merely picked up the receiver and dinged two longs and two shorts or whatever the signal was for whoever you were calling. This was not the best time to have to figure out strange new equipment, especially if you were as close to the edge of panic as I was. Then I slapped my pants pocket, remembering. I'd spent the last of my loose change topping off lunch in Minneapolis with an Almond Joy, hadn't I, like a complete moron. I would need to break a ten-dollar bill from the stash under my remaining shirt pocket, undressing even further right here in the most public place there was, where anyone like the convict in the suit and tie could be watching as I unpinned the money, because I didn't dare retreat to the men's room to do it out of sight--that was a guaranteed way to miss Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch should they show up looking for me. This was becoming like one of those nightmares in which the predicament gets deeper and deeper until you think you never will wake up back to sanity.

Trying to fight down the jitters, I cast another wild gaze around the teeming waiting room hoping for salvation in the form of anyone who might resemble Gram enough to be her sister. But no such luck. I was stuck. There was no help for it, I was going to have to throw myself on the mercy of GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE. Setting down my suitcase to try to get things in order, especially me, I first of all reached out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and flipped through the pages to find the slip of paper with the phone number. Then again. My fingers began to shake.

The piece of paper was gone. It must have fallen out when the campers, the bastards, were tossing the album around.

Distress became panic, like an instant fever, as an awful omission caught up with me. Worse, what might be called the commission of an omission. Stupidly I hadn't bothered to so much as glance at the phone number or street address even when showing those to the Zimmermans. If I had any excuse-- which I glaringly didn't--it was that those would be right there written down in case of emergency. But here was the emergency, landing on me with both feet, and I did not have a clue in the world to the existence of people called Kitty and Dutch except that their last name was Schmidt. And if the alphabet meant anything in this crazily named city where nearly every store sign spoke whatever language Schlitz and Schnapps and Schnitzel were, I dimly understood that Schmidts similarly were probably beyond number.

I had hit rock bottom and I knew no way out of it. This was my absolute lowest point since Gram had apprized me I was being shipped to Wisconsin for the summer. Unmet, my clothing half torn off, as good as lost in a strange city, with night coming on and not even the dog bus as a haven any more. I was dissolving into utter despair, tears next, when I heard a melodious voice behind me.

"So here you are, sweetie pie."

I whirled around to the woman and man who evidently had appeared from nowhere. "How do you know I'm me?" I blurted.

The woman trilled a laugh. "Silly, you look just like Dorie, two peas from the same pod." Gram and me? Since when?

Meanwhile the man was giving me a bucktoothed expression of greeting, like a horse grinning. "Looks run in the family, hah?" he said in a voice as guttural as hers was musical. "Hallo," he shook hands, mine swallowed in his, "I

am Herman.” Not Dutch? Seeing my confusion, he grinned all the more. “You are thinking of my other name, I betcha. Herman is me, more.”

Blinking my way out of one surprise after another, I simply stood in awe and stared at the two of them, one tall and stooped, the other nearly as broad as the fat lady in a carnival. Longfaced and with that horsy grin and glasses that made his eyes look larger than human, with an odd glint to them, he was quite a sight in his own right, but it was her I was stupefied by. I could only think Gram hadn't spelled her out to me to save the surprise. *She* was in our family, what there was of it? I almost couldn't believe it, but the more I looked, the more excited I became. I would have known her anywhere, an unmistakable figure in more ways than one, big around as a jukebox, jolly double chins, wide-set doll eyes, hairdo as plump as the rest of her, the whole picture. The face from the cover of LIFE magazine and from the opening credits of the flickery *American Parade* instructional movies that I had watched projected on schoolroom walls the length and breadth of the Two Medicine country, and the pretty voice that soared out of the radio regularly in those years. My Aunt Kitty was clearly none other than Kate Smith, the famous singer of “God Bless America” and every other song worth singing.

At last, I had it knocked.

could. Straining to take in the exact place where Kate Smith slept, even in the dimness I was convinced I could see a telltale sag in the near side of the double bed.

Hurrying so as not miss anything in this remarkable household, I dispatched my needy shirts into the laundry chute and followed promising sounds into the kitchen. Aunt Kate was fussing with cooking pots when I presented myself, fully buttoned and untornd. "Now then. We're having a Manitowoc specialty," she beamed at me to emphasize the treat as she put on an apron twice the size of any of Gram's, "sauerkraut and franks. I know you like those. Boys do, don't they."

Not really, in my case, because Gram viewed frankfurters--weinies by any other name, right?--with dire suspicion whenever she was forced to boil up a bunch to feed a crew toward the end of a month's kitchen budget, convinced that the things were made from leavings laying around the butcher shop. "Tube steak," she'd mutter as she plopped weinies by the handful into the pot, "you might as well be eating sweepings from the slaughterhouse." But my stomach and my hunger had no time to debate that, as I was shooed me out of the kitchen, told I was free to look around the house while dinner was being fixed.

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had something to show me and he would bring it, you betcha. Meanwhile I edged into the living room and onto a pea green shag rug so thick I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A long white leathery couch sat prominently in front of a bay window, the sill crammed with potted plants, green but also sort of leathery as if they had caught something from the couch. On an end table rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters.

Whatever else this strange new territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

Across the room from all this, on either side of a fancy cabinet radio but pretty far apart, bulked his and her recliner chairs, the kind with a lever on the side that tips a person back as if getting a shave from a barber. Over what was more than likely his site hung that picture of dogs playing poker, while over hers, cross-stitched in a way Herman no doubt would have called old-timey, was a framed sampler with a skyline of a town--largely steeples--and a ship on the lake with a spiral of thread for smoke, and underneath those, a verse in red and blue yarn, MANITOWOC--WHERE MAN HAS BUT TO WALK, TO HEAR HIS BLEST SOUL TALK.

Passing that by, I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of Kate Smith singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn't it be great if she went on one of those singing trips and took me along, to Scotland or somewhere! But the walls held only framed scenes of dairy cows and countryside in what appeared to be plain old Wisconsin, so I concluded she kept mementos of her singing career somewhere special, probably at the radio station.

While I was endeavoring to take in these new surroundings, I had to take care of something else, and retreated to the kitchen to ask. "Aunt Kate, I have to use the convenience."

Parked at the stove where the pot of supper--dinner, rather--was on, she gave me a funny look.

"Uhm, rest room, I mean. Toilet. Bathroom," I finally hit on the word appropriate in a setting that wasn't a Greyhound depot.

"It's through there," she pointed to the end of the hall. "Remember to wash your hands, won't you."

sewing  
room

*If I should die before I wake*

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal if you got on your knees right, unhinged me so badly that if someone had written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out. As things were, I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the praying boy as Aunt Kate crooned around the confined quarters instructing me where to put things, while Herman stood well back out of the line of fire.

“There now,” she said when I was installed to her satisfaction, “and you know where the bathroom is.” Yeah, about a mile downstairs. “Nighty-night, sleep tight,” and away she went, clumping down the stairs one by one. Kate Smith would not have left me with anything that babyish, I knew with a sinking heart, but at least Herman came through with “Have a good shuteye” and another of those half cockeyed man-to-man glances as he followed her into the stairwell.

Cusswords failed me as my new circumstances stared me in the face.

How did I land in this fix, which made a bus seat look good? The Double W cook shack had been the opposite of elegant, and some of the construction sites lodgings where I had lived with my folks could not be called much more places to get in out of the weather, but never had I been stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. It seemed vastly unfair. I had ridden the Greyhound halfway across the entire country like I was supposed to, doing my best with the limited resources a twelve-year-old has to cope with all kinds of utter strangers and unforeseen situations--a trouper, no less, whatever that amounted to--only to end up in a condensed version of Palookaville.

In that mood, I undressed for bed, slung away the decorative pillows, tried to pound some life into the squashed one, positioned the moccasins at

Bunkhouse  
vocal

Qms?

clamped shut, pinching the bridge of her nose, "and then we are going to eat dinner with no more interruptions." That last, I sensed, was spoken as much for Herman's benefit as mine.

"Lambie," once more she made the effort to be nice to me, handing back the autograph book before heaving herself off the couch and marching to the kitchen, "we'll be sure to write in it for you, but it can wait. Come to the table, we'll eat as long as we're able," she summoned the other two of us with an obvious lift of mood, improving with every step toward the dinner pot.

Dinner in Manitowoc made me homesick for supper in Montana. First of all, the table cloth was spotless white linen instead of oilcloth, and I was scared of spilling on it. Then there was the meal itself, the sauerkraut so sour it actually made the weinies not bad in comparison. My stomach was finding Wisconsin to be a state of confusion. But then came dessert, something I now realize was a classic sachertorte, a chocolate-frosted chocolate cake with jam between the layers and a mound of whipped cream on the side. Pretty much a meal of sugar and chocolate in itself, that was more my kind of eating, and when I praised Aunt Kate to her face for her baking, Herman chuckled slyly and said Schultz's Bakery would be surprised to hear that. "Hush, you," she told him, but not as sharply as in her earlier exchanges with him.

No sooner was dessert ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, "Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip," which I didn't think I did, <sup>but she</sup> and topped that off with the message impossible to miss, "Your room is ready for you." The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound's long gallop through the dark, but zingo, just like that, I was climbing the stairs <sup>tripping up</sup> behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase--"You are the guest,

you get the best, hah!"--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one stair tread at a time.

To this day, that room is engraved in me, a cluttered chamber of this, that, and the other that memory stands no chance in this world of ever clearing out.

The first thing to strike my eye was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO. Peeking from the bottom of the pile was a depleted pillow of regular size, which I could tell too many heads had rested on before mine. The top of the cheap fiberboard dresser similarly was snowed under, enveloped in white doilies starched to a stiffness that defied a person to set anything down on them. A rickety straight-backed chair amounted to the rest of the furniture. As to the clothes closet in the partition that closed off the area from whatever was in back of it, it was so crammed with winter clothing and coats and, I very much suspected, dresses that Aunt Kate no longer could fit into, that she grunted with the effort of forcing apart the solid wall of garments enough to scrunch in anything of mine worth hanging.

But what made me gulp hardest while moving in, to call it that, was what hung above the bed. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

in process  
to read

I then  
here it  
was,  
later t...  
my home  
day  
summer

*If I should die before I wake*

*I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal if you got on your knees right, unhinged me so badly that if someone had written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out. As things were, I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the praying boy as Aunt Kate crooned around the confined quarters instructing me where to put things, while Herman stood well back out of the line of fire. "There now," she said when I was installed to her satisfaction, "and you know where the bathroom is." Yeah, about a mile downstairs. "Nighty-night, sleep tight," and away she went, clumping down the stairs one by one. Kate Smith would not have left me with anything that babyish, I knew with a sinking heart, but at least Herman came through with "Have a good shuteye" and another of those half cockeyed man-to-man glances as he followed her into the stairwell.

Cusswords failed me as my new circumstances stared me in the face.

Aunt Kate could call the makeshift space a room if she liked, but that did not change the fact it was an attic, bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works. How did I land in this fix, which made a bus seat look good? The Double W cook shack had been the opposite of elegant, and some of the construction sites lodgings where I had lived with my folks could not be called much more places to get in out of the weather, but never had I been stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. It seemed vastly unfair. I had ridden the Greyhound halfway across the entire country like I was supposed to, doing my best with the limited resources a twelve-year-old has to cope with all kinds of utter strangers

and unforeseen situations--a trouper, no less, whatever that amounted to--only to end up in a condensed version of Palookaville.

In that mood, I undressed for bed, slung away the decorative pillows, tried to pound some life into the squashed one, positioned the moccasins at bedside for the middle-of-the-night descent to the bathroom, turned out the light, and slipped under the dank covers in my shorts and undershirt. Like my father, I was never a believer in dressing head to foot to go to bed.

I lay there, trying to stay as still as possible because the least little movement made the bed creak like it was going to fall apart. Sleep was nowhere to be found. What was on the wall above my head would not leave my mind. The stupid plaster kid, perfectly happy to die because he thought he had a sure ticket to heaven. My guess was they didn't even give Green Stamps on that trip.

The more I thought about the thing on the wall, the more I stewed. Did people such as that, the sunny kid on his knees and whoever wrote the catchy verse, even know anyone who died? They ought to ask me. I could tell them how white crosses on the shoulder of the highway cost far more than any hey-diddle-diddle rhyme about heaven could ever make up for, and what agony it is to wait for the result of something happening in a distant hospital with a white cross out front. Already I was missing Gram so mightily I felt half sick every time she crossed my mind, the cook shack years with her a separate life beyond the inventiveness of even my imagination, not an easy existence in any way yet worth it to have one last guardian to put up with my redheaded thinking. What was going through me, truthfully, was a new and different fear of losing her, if the day's operation proved not have turned out all right. Queerly, the overwhelming dread I'd had before parting with her there at the ranch, that one way or the other--death and the poor farm went together in my mind--this troubling summer might remove her from my life by the time the dog bus brought me back to Montana,

that original anxiety now gave way for a more immediate one. Ending up back there as a ward of the county and thrown to chance as a foster child would be awful enough. Yet what if, instead, the only future I had was under jailbar-like rafters in Wisconsin? Captive to an aunt who not only was not Kate Smith, but thought I was missing a part between my ears?

Nor could I see any clear way out if Aunt Kate as my last remaining blood relative--I wasn't sure what Herman, formerly Dutch, counted as--decided to keep me if Gram no longer was in the picture. Three perforated ten-dollar bills wouldn't carry a person very far in running away, would they? I'd have to think about that a lot more, but for the time being, the only advice I could find for myself was that bit whispered from those interrupted existences Gram kept in touch with. Hunch up and take it.

Everything churning in me that way, I lay there like the corpse promised in the thing on the wall if Manitowoc did me in before morning, until finally the exertions of the day caught up with me and I drowsed off.

Only to shoot awake at a tapping on the door and Herman's hoarse whisper:

"Donny? Are you sleeping?"

"I guess not."

"Good. I come in."

Furtively he did so, closing the door without a sound and flipping the light on, grinning at me from ear to ear. "Soldier pachamas, I see," he noted my undershirt when I sat up in bed wondering as a person will in that situation, Now what?

"The Kate is in the bath," he explained as if we had plotted to meet in this secret fashion. With the same odd glint he'd had at the Greyhound station, he

scooted the chair up to my bedside, displaying the book he'd been paging through earlier, thumb marking a place toward the middle. "What I wanted to show you."

This was a case where you could tell a book by its cover--*Deadly Dust*, with cowboys riding full-tilt while firing their six-shooters at a band of war-painted Indians chasing them in a cloud of dust. At first glimpse it might have been any of the Max Brand or Luke Short or Zane Grey shoot-'em-ups popular in the Double W bunkhouse, but the name under the title was a new one on me. Recalling my earlier encounter with the kind of Karl spelled with a K, I asked warily, "Who's Karl May?"

"My' is how you say it," said Herman. "Great writer. All his books, I have. *Flaming Frontier*. *The Desperado Trail*. Lots others. Same characters, different stories," he bobbed his head in approval. "You don't know Winnetou and Old Shatterhand?" He tut-tutted like a schoolteacher. "Big heroes of The West," I could hear his capital letters on those last two words.

Maybe so, but when he opened the book in evidence, I saw it was in squarehead language of some kind, fancy lettered like in an old Bible, not a single word recognizable to me. That didn't matter a hoot to Herman as he proudly showed me the illustration he had hunted down in the middle of the book, translating the wording under it.

"On the bound-less plains of Montana," he read with great care, adjusting his glasses, "the tepee rings of the Blackfoot, Crow, and Ass-in-i-bone tribes--"

"I think that's Assiniboine," I suggested.

He thanked me and read on. "'--are the eternal hunting tracks of following the buffaloes, the be-he-moths of the prairie.'"

Triumphantly he turned the book so I could not miss the full effect of the picture, which looked awfully familiar, similar to a Charlie Russell painting seen

on endless drugstore calendars. It depicted Indian hunters in wolf skins sneaking up on foot to stampede a herd of buffalo over a cliff, the great hairy beasts cascading to the boulders below.

“There you go, hah?” Herman whispered in awe at the spectacle. “Such a place, where you are from.”

I didn't let on that a school picnic at the buffalo jump on the Two Medicine River amounted to my total knowledge of the kind of hunt shown in the book.

“Can I tell you something? It's Mon-TANA, not MONT-ana.”

“Funny things, words. How they look and how they say.” He broke off, glancing to his feet. Letting out an exclamation I couldn't decipher, he reached down and picked up one of my moccasins. “I stepped on it,” he said as if he had committed a crime. “I hope I didn't break it none.”

The beadwork had survived, I could tell by a quick look and reassured him, meanwhile scooping the other moccasin out of range of his big feet.

“Beautiful,” Herman said under his breath, pronouncing it *bee-you-tifle*. “You got from Indians?” he asked in wonder, lovingly turning the deerskin footwear over and over in his hands.

“You betcha.” I perked up. Naturally I wasn't about to pass up a chance to repeat the tale I'd told the ex-convict about the classy moccasins having been made for a great Blackfoot chief and so on, temperately leaving out the part about my having won them in a roping contest at a dude ranch and instead circling closer to the truth by saying Gram had lucked onto them on the reservation. Herman did not need to know they'd been hocked at a truck stop by a broke Indian, I figured.

“How good, you have them. You are a lucky boy.” Maybe so, if the rotten sort was counted along with the better kind. He fondled the moccasin one more time and carefully put it side by side with the other one. “So, now you know about Winnetou and I know about Red Chief. Big night!” He grinned that

horsy way and clapped *Deadly Dust* shut. Evidently gauging Aunt Kate's bath was about done, he rose from his chair. "We talk more tomorrow, yah?" he whispered from the stairwell as he sneaked back downstairs.

I sank onto the swayback pillow, wide awake in the darkness of a summer that was showing every sign of being one for Believe It or Not.

once this must be the sewing room, even before I spotted the shiny electric Singer machine. Who would have thought Kate Smith sewed her own clothes, right? But everyone needs a hobby, I reminded myself, or maybe in her dress-size situation, doing it herself was a necessity. Any fat girl at school got teased about her clothes being made by Omar the Tent Maker, and while I felt guilty about that uncharitable thought, there was the fact that Aunt Kate was a much larger woman than clothing stores usually encountered.

While I was endeavoring to take in these new surroundings, I had to take care of something else, and retreated to the kitchen to ask. "Aunt Kate, I have to use the convenience."

Parked at the stove where the pot of supper--dinner, rather--was on, she gave me a funny look.

"Uhm, rest room, I mean. Toilet. Bathroom," I finally hit on the word appropriate in a setting that wasn't a Greyhound depot.

"It's through there," she pointed to the end of the hall. "Remember to wash your hands, won't you."

I most certainly did remember, but even over the rush of the faucet, all of a sudden I could hear singing. Distinct as anything, from the direction of the kitchen. A solo, to keep her voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but *the* song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

*"God bless America,*

*Land that I love.*

*Stand beside her*

*And guide her*

*Through the night with a light from above."*

I tell you, that singing went right under my skin and raised goose bumps. The one-of-a-kind beautiful voice, the words every schoolchild--every parent,

insignificant  
thing to  
me  
mug-  
room  
day bed

could. Straining to take in the exact place where Kate Smith slept, even in the dimness I was convinced I could see a telltale sag in the near side of the double bed.

Hurrying so as not miss anything in this remarkable household, I dispatched my needy shirts into the laundry chute and followed promising sounds into the kitchen. Aunt Kate was fussing with cooking pots when I presented myself, fully buttoned and untornd. "Now then. We're having a Manitowoc specialty," she beamed at me to emphasize the treat as she put on an apron twice the size of any of Gram's, "sauerkraut and franks. I know you like those. Boys do, don't they."

Not really, in my case, because Gram viewed frankfurters--weinies by any other name, right?--with dire suspicion whenever she was forced to boil up a bunch to feed a crew toward the end of a month's kitchen budget, convinced that the things were made from leavings laying around the butcher shop. "Tube steak," she'd mutter as she plopped weinies by the handful into the pot, "you might as well be eating sweepings from the slaughterhouse." But my stomach and my hunger had no time to debate that, as I was shooed me out of the kitchen, told I was free to look around the house while dinner was being fixed.

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had something to show me and he would bring it, you betcha. Meanwhile I edged into the living room and onto a pea green shag rug so thick I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A big long leathery davenport, also green but <sup>dark + lime</sup> more like the shade of lime Kool-Aid, sat prominently in front of a bay window where the sill <sup>was</sup> crammed with potted plants. Pretty interesting, I thought, going over to the davenport, that as funny green as it was, here was furniture made from cowhide or something like it. I touched the surface and sure

enough, it had that clammy feel like the seat of a saddle when you settle into it on a chilly morning. So I figured at least a person's fanny would be cooled down by plopping on the davenport on a warm day, somewhat like Kool-Aid does for the tummy.

Continuing my inspection of the new and and unusual, on an end table next to the arm of the davenport rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters. Whatever else this strange territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

Across the room from all this, on either side of a fancy cabinet radio but pretty far apart, bulked his and her recliner chairs, the kind with a lever on the side that tips a person back as if getting a shave from a barber. Over what was more than likely his site hung that picture of dogs playing poker, while over hers, cross-stitched in a way Herman no doubt would have called old-timey, was a framed sampler with a skyline of a town--largely steeples--and a ship on the lake with a spiral of thread for smoke, and underneath those, a verse in red and blue yarn, MANITOWOC--WHERE MAN HAS BUT TO WALK, TO HEAR HIS BLEST SOUL TALK.

Passing that by, I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of Kate Smith singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn't it be great if she went on one of those singing trips and took me along, to Scotland or somewhere! But the walls held only framed scenes of dairy cows and countryside in what appeared to be plain old Wisconsin, so I concluded she kept mementos of her singing career somewhere special, probably at the radio station.

What really had me interested now, though, was the cubbyhole room off the far end of the living room. <sup>curious art</sup> When I poked my head in out of curiosity and saw piles of cloth of different colors atop a table and spilling onto a chair, I knew at

What  
Decorated

tucked away

I most certainly did remember, but even over the rush of the faucet, all of a sudden I could hear singing. Distinct as anything, from the direction of the kitchen. A solo, to keep her voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but *the* song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

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And guide her  
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I tell you, that singing went right under my skin and raised goose bumps. The one-of-a-kind beautiful voice, the words every schoolchild--every parent, even--knew by heart. And here I was, the lucky audience to this performance by the most famous singer in America, maybe in the world. This settled it. I absolutely had to ask for the autograph as soon as the song was over, it was bound to please the performer in the kitchen as well as me. Out of the bathroom like a shot, I sped to where my jacket was piled atop my suitcase, grabbed out the album, and scampered back to the kitchen.

Herman had reappeared, sitting at the table paging through a book and not even particularly listening, he evidently was so used to the glorious sound. Rocking ever so slightly side to side to the rhythm, Aunt Kate stood at the stove with her back turned to us, as if it was nothing to be pouring out the best-known song since “Happy Birthday” while cooking ’kraut and weinies. I stood entranced there at the other end of the kitchen, listening to her sing just for me. Then as the most soaring part rolled around again, the beautiful voice reaching its height--

*“To the prairies,  
To the oceans white with foam,*

*God bless America,*

*My home sweet home.*

--she turned around, her mouth full of the half-cooked weinie she was munching.

For a moment I was only confused. But then when as I saw her take another bite, eyes half-closed in pleasure at the weinie taste or maybe food in general, the inside of me fell practically to the floor. Meanwhile the song played on a bit more, until there came a burst of applause in the living room and a man's silky voice doing a commercial for La Palina cigars.

When I recovered the ability to speak, I stammered, "You're--you're not Kate Smith? On the radio?"

She swallowed the last of the weinie, fast. "Dear Lord, that," she groaned, frowning all the way down to her double chins.

"I telled you, too many sweets," said Herman, licking his finger to keep on turning pages.

Ignoring him, she scrutinized me. "Where in the world did you get that idea?" she asked suspiciously, although I didn't yet know about what. "Didn't Dorie tell you all about us?" I shook my head. "Good grief," she let out this time, shutting her eyes as if that would make this--and maybe me--go away.

Herman spoke up. "The boy made a notcheral mistake. It could happen to Einstein."

"Another country heard from," she snapped at him. Worry written large on her--there was plenty of space for it--she studied me again but not for long, her mind made up. Whirling to the stove, she set the pot off the burner and turned back to me, with a deep, deep breath that expanded her even more into Kate Smith dimension, in my opinion. "Sweetiekins, come." She marched into the living

room, killed the radio, planted herself on the couch on an entire cushion and patted the one beside her. I went and sat.

She looking down and me looking up, we gazed at each other in something like mutual incomprehension. Dismayed as I was, she too appeared to be thrown by the situation, until with a nod of resolve she sucked in her cheeks, as much as they would go, and pursed her lips to address the matter of me.

“Now then, sweetie pie, there’s nothing to be ashamed of,” her tone became quite hushed, “but has your grandmother or anyone, a teacher maybe, ever said to you there might be a little bit something”--she searched for the word--“different about you?” Another breath from her very depths. “Just for example, do you get along all right in school?”

“Sure,” I replied defensively, thinking she had figured out the shirt-shredding battle royal with the campers. “I’m friends with kids in more schools than you can shake a stick at, back home.”

“No, no,” her bosom heaved as she gathered for another try at me. “What I mean is, have you ever been set back in school? Failed a grade, or maybe even just had teensy weensy trouble”--she pincerd her thumb and first finger really, really close together to make sure I understood how little it would be my fault--“catching on to things in class?”

I understood, all right, shocked speechless. She figured I had a wire down. Aghast at being classified as some kind of what Letty termed a mo-ron, I sucked air like a fish out of water, until my voice came back.

“Me? No! I get straight A’s. Honest!” I babbled further, “I heard Mrs. Petrie”--my latest teacher, at the Noon Creek school--“say to Gram I’m bright enough to read by at night.”

My panicked blurts eliciting the throaty response “I see,” although she didn’t seem to, Aunt Kate tapped her hand on her thigh the jittery way she’d done

when I assumed singing to all of America was upmost on her mind. Before she could say anything more, Herman stuck up for me from the kitchen doorway.

“Notcheral, like I telled you,” his guttural assertion made us both jump a little. “Donny is not the first to find the resemblance, yah? If it bothers you so great to look like the other Kate, why do you play her music on the radio?”

“When I want your opinion, Schmidt, I’ll ask for it,” she flared, giving him a dirty look. I breathed slightly easier. If they were going to have a fight, at least that might put me on the sideline temporarily.

Not for long. Aunt Kate shifted a haunch as she turned toward me, a movement which tipped me into uncomfortably close range. “Honey bear,” she tried to be nice, the effort showing, “if you’re that intelligent, then you have quite the imagination.”

“Maybe a little bit,” I owned up to.

My modest admission, she rolled over like a bulldozer. “You mustn’t let it run away with you,” her voice not Kate Smith nice now. “You know why you’re here, because of Dorie’s--your grandmother’s operation. We can’t have you going around with your head in the clouds while you’re with us, we all just need to get through this summer the best we can.” Another glare in the direction of the kitchen doorway. “Isn’t that so, Schmidt?”

Looking almost as caught as I was, Herman protectively hugged the book he was holding. “Donny and I will be straight shooters, you betcha.”

From the look in her eye, she was making ready to reply to that reply when I pulled the album out from behind my back. “All I wanted was your autograph when I thought you were You-know-who.” I knew to put as much oomph into the next as I could, even though the same enthusiasm wasn’t there. “I still want it, for sure. And Herman’s.”

“I see,” she said a little less dubiously this time. She certainly helped herself to an eyeful of the creamy little memory book as she took it from me, her lips moving surprisingly like Gram’s in silently reading that cover inscription, YE WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES. “So that’s what this is about,” she said faintly to herself in flipping to one of the entries, I hoped not the Fort Peck sheriff’s about keeping your pecker dry.

On pins and needles, I waited for her reaction as she dipped into the pages until she had evidently seen enough. “I need an aspirin,” she spoke with her eyes clamped shut, pinching the bridge of her nose, “and then we are going to eat dinner with no more interruptions.” That last, I sensed, was spoken as much for Herman’s benefit as mine.

“Lambie,” once more she made the effort to be nice to me, handing back the autograph book before heaving herself off the couch and marching to the kitchen, “we’ll be sure to write in it for you, but it can wait. Come to the table, we’ll eat as long as we’re able,” she summoned the other two of us with an obvious lift of mood, improving with every step toward the dinner pot.

Dinner in Manitowoc made me homesick for supper in Montana. First of all, the table cloth was spotless white linen insted of oilcloth, and I was scared of spilling on it. Then there was the meal itself, the sauerkraut so sour it actually made the weinies not bad in comparison. My stomach was finding Wisconsin to be a state of confusion. But then came dessert, something I now realize was a classic sachertorte, a chocolate-frosted chocolate cake with jam between the layers and a mound of whipped cream on the side. Pretty much a meal of sugar and chocolate in itself, that was more my kind of eating, and when I praised Aunt Kate to her face for her baking, Herman chuckled slyly and said Schultz’s Bakery

would be surprised to hear that. "Hush, you," she told him, but not as sharply as in her earlier exchanges with him.

No sooner was dessert ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, "Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip," which I didn't think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss, "Your room is ready for you." The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound's long gallop through the dark, but zingo, just like that, I was climbing the stairs behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase-- "You are the guest, you get the best, hah!"--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one stair tread at a time.

To this day, that room is engraved in me, a cluttered chamber of this, that, and the other that memory stands no chance in this world of ever clearing out.

The first thing to strike my eye was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO. Peeking from the bottom of the pile was a depleted pillow of regular size, which I could tell too many heads had rested on before mine. The top of the cheap fiberboard dresser similarly was snowed under, enveloped in white doilies starched to a stiffness that defied a person to set anything down on them. A rickety straight-backed chair amounted to the rest of the furniture. As to the clothes closet in the partition that closed off the area from whatever was in back of it, it was so crammed with winter clothing and coats and, I very much suspected, dresses that Aunt Kate no longer could fit into, that she grunted with the effort of forcing apart the solid wall of garments enough to scrunch in anything of mine worth hanging.

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It made perfect sense to me. Although the mention went in one ear and out the other at the time, hadn't Gram herself spoken of her little dickens of a sister--although that description was a quite a few sizes too small any more--as "the great Kate," in saying the two of them just could not make music together from girlhood on? Well, who could, with a singer whose voice carried her to the very top of fame and fortune? Back then, I could not have defined palpitations, but did I ever have them, so excited was I to possess this tremendous woman for an aunt. Great-aunt, but close enough. I gazed raptly up at her, top-heavy as she was with that mighty chest but as cool and composed there in the hubbub of the bus station as if posing for her picture in a magazine. And wasn't she smart to digest "Schmidt"--no insult intended to husband Dutch or rather, Herman, standing there grinning his face off, but that last name sounded sort of like sneezing into your hand--to good old condensed "Smith" to sing under? Believe It Or Not! disclosed this kind of thing all the time, you could hardly read the Sunday funnies without learning that Patti Page before she reached the hit parade with songs like "Tennessee Waltz" was plain Clara Ann Fowler, a name switcheroo if there ever was one. Besides, as Red Chief myself, I was naturally in favor of sprucing up what you called yourself in any way possible.

So the great Kate Smith, dressed in a peach-colored outfit that made her look like a million dollars, monumental in every way as she peered down at me

with a perfectly plucked eyebrow arched, represented rescue, relief, reward, a miraculous upward turn in my luck.

And I needed whatever I could get, ragged in appearance as I was. Her expression turned to concern as she tallied my missing buttons, dangling pocket, and big rip in the side of my shirt. "Heavens, child, you look like you've been in a dogfight."

Well, yeah, that was pretty close to scuffling with the campers, and there was a story that went with that, but this did not seem like the time for it. I looked down as if apologizing to my shirt. "It got caught on something, is all."

"We'll have to get you changed"--she noted the heavy traffic into the men's rest room, and frowned--"later." A new note of concern crept in at my general disarray and the suitcase which itself was looking the worse for wear, "You do have something presentable, I hope?"

"Sure," I defended my and Gram's packing, "I have a clean shirt left. My rodeo one sort of needs washing, though," I prudently skipped past the syrup explanation.

"Road-ee-oh," came a guttural expression of interest from her silent partner, up to this point. "Not ro-day-oh, hah?"

Paying no attention to that, she seemed to make up her mind to smile at me, the extra chin and the famous chubby dimples involved. "If you're ready, honeybunch," she was saying in that voice so melodious I was surprised she could pass herself off in public as Aunt Kitty at all, "we may as well go." I nodded eagerly. Herman--somehow I had trouble applying Uncle to him, without Dutch to go with it--insisted on taking my suitcase, remarking on the wicker, "Old-timey, you betcha."

Out we went, he and I trailing her as she plowed through the depot crowd, drawing second looks every step of the way. At the curb, I was glad to see, an

idling bus that wasn't even a Greyhound was filling with the campers, the poor saps. If there was any justice, Karl, Gus, and Nick were in there watching and eating their weasel hearts out at my royal welcome.

Herman hustled ahead to the car, not the limousine I was looking forward to but a big old roomy four-door DeSoto, I supposed because someone the size of Kate Smith required a lot of room.

I fully expected her, and if I was lucky, me, to establish in the back seat, the way rich people did. But while Herman was putting my suitcase in the trunk, she drew herself up by the front passenger door and stood there as if impatient for it to open itself, until I realized I was supposed to be the one to do it.

When I did, she enunciated, "That's a little gentleman," but still didn't budge until I caught on further and scrambled in to the middle of the seat. She followed, the car going down on its springs on that side under her weight, until Herman evened things up somewhat by settling himself behind the steering wheel.

Doing so, he slipped me a sly grin and I heard him say <sup>what sounded like</sup> clear as anything, "Welcome to Manito Woc," as if the town were two words, although it hadn't been that on any of the signs I read from the bus.

I was about to ask if that really was the pronunciation when the Kate Smith voice hit a note of warning. "Schmidt, don't fool around. Look at the time--we have to go to the station."

"Yah, Your Highness," he answered as if used to being ordered around, and the DeSoto came to life after he pulled out the throttle a little and the choke farther than that and stepped hard on the starter and did another thing or two.

Meanwhile, it was all I could do not to bounce up and down with delight at her pronouncement. The station! This was so good. The dog bus, that loping mode of transportation full of starts and stops and disruptions and tense connections, somehow had delivered me right in time for the radio show. "Kate

Songs  
to  
camp

Lake Winnepigott

Manito

Smith Sings," all anyone needed to know about it. I glanced at her hopefully. Maybe she even could slip into the program some hint that I had arrived, and Gram would hear it in her hospital room and know I had come through my harrowing journey safe and sound. I didn't want to ask that yet, shy about bothering someone getting ready to perform for a national audience. I would not have been surprised if she exercised her vocal cords right there in the car, but the only sign she gave of impending performance was tapping a hand on the round rise of one thigh as steadily as a telegraph operator in a shoot-'em-up western. Well, she was entitled to a few jitters, I figured. What had that first seatmate of mine, the stout woman on the Chevy bus, said? "*I'd be such a bundle of nerves.*" And that was merely about my supposed journey to Pleasantville, nothing like facing a radio microphone and a live audience and singing for the thousandth time "God Bless America" the way everyone was waiting to hear. If I was a trouper like Joe Zimmerman had said, the famous entertainer sitting right here at my elbow was the biggest example imaginable. It must run in the family.

"How is Montana?"

Herman's question out of nowhere jostled me out of that line of thought, and somewhat nervously--maybe it was catching--I responded, "In pretty good shape for the shape it's in, I guess."

"Yah, I betcha." His laugh came from the bottom of his throat, like his words. While his broken English surprised me, it didn't bother me, accustomed as I was to hired hands in the bunkhouse or the barracks at a construction camp who were called Swede or Ole or Finnigan if from Finland, and spoke more or less the way he did. Squarehead, was the catch-all term for such types. Admittedly, I couldn't see any real resemblance between Herman, at his size, and someone like Dutch Pete, a longtime shepherd in the Two Medicine country so squat and blocky he stood out like a stump, but I figured nationalities must come

in all sizes and sounds. Literally over my head, Herman's choppy voice now reached a wistful register as he declared, "Out in cowboy land, you are lucky."

"Pretty please"--from the other direction came a prompt response with not the usual sweet intonation on that phrase--"don't be filling the boy's mind with nonsense."

"No, it's fine," I spoke up, trying to sit tall enough to be a factor between them. "I'm around those all the time, see. On the ranch. Cowboys, I mean. I'd be there in the bunkhouse with them right now if Sparrowhead, Wendell Williamson I mean, had let me work in the haying crew like I asked to."

It took them each a few moments to put that together, and I'm not sure he ever did get there. She, though, said as if thinking the matter over, "But instead you're very much here, dumpling."

"Yeah!" Only minutes before I would have had to fake this kind of answer, but landing in the spacious lap of Kate Smith, in a manner of speaking, I had no trouble whatsoever being enthusiastic. "This is so much better than there, it knocks my socks off."

Just then the DeSoto pulled off the street, Herman steering with his hands wide apart like the captain at a ship's wheel, and I craned for the first sight of the radio station. But he had only stopped for gas, and went inside to use what he called the man's room while the attendant filled the tank and checked the oil and wiped the windshield, *whistling all while on it*

With only the two of us in the car, I couldn't help feeling this was a great chance. It was all I could do not to yank the autograph book out of my coat pocket and ask her to write in it, right then and there, in the greenish yellow glow of the gas station's pump lights. Whatever she put on the page, it would be so good, I just knew. And of course I would want her to sign it *Kate Smith*, not something like *Your devoted Aunt Kitty*, to elevate the autograph collection

toward true Believe It Or Not! territory as I kept adding to it. I bet she knew all kinds of other celebrities who would write their famous names in it for me, too. Talk about a jackpot! <sup>9</sup> Tentatively I sneaked a peak at the illustrious figure next to me. Speaking of writing, if she wanted there was enough room on her bosom to sew not only her name but something like, *America's favorite singer and sweetheart of the airwaves.* <sup>wanting to sign</sup>

Letting that thought pass, I cleared my throat to make my request. "Can I ask you for a big favor?"

She jumped a little at the sound of my voice, nerves again, understandably. Glancing down at me, she composed herself and said, not entirely clearly to me, "That depends on how big is big, doesn't it."

The autograph book was practically burning a hole in my pocket, but something about her answer stayed my hand. Quick like a bunny, I switched to:

"Can I call you Aunt Kate? Instead of Kitty, I mean."

"Why, of course you can, adorable," she nodded into her second chin in relief. "Most people do. It's only that sister of mine who hasn't got over childish names."

Such as Dorie, did that mean? I squirmed at anything said against Gram, but maybe that was the way sisters were.

Herman returned, having paid for the gas and taken care of the other business, and went through the dashboard maneuvers and what else it took to start the DeSoto. "Home to the range," he sang out, earning a sharp look from Aunt Kate.

As we pulled out of the gas station, I felt dumb as they come. Obviously I had the wrong night about the radio show. Now that I thought about it, back at the Greyhound terminal Aunt Kate most certainly would have said something like, "We have a surprise for you tonight, dear," if I was going to be part of the

audience for "Kate Smith Sings," wouldn't she. Sheepish, I fell back to the early bus habit of "Uh-huh" and "Huh-uh" as Herman tried to make conversation on the drive to their house.

It was dark by the time the DeSoto rocked into a bumpy driveway. The house, painted white as sugar and with a peaked roof and lit sort of ghostly by the nearest streetlight, appeared big as a castle to me after the cook shack, although looking back, I realize that only meant it had an upstairs as well as a downstairs.

As we went in, Aunt Kate instructed Herman to leave my suitcase at the foot of the stairs to be dealt with after dinner. Since it was pitch black out, I deduced that must mean supper, another Wisconsin mystery like schnitzel and schnapps and going to camp with a bunch of boy hoodlums.

"You can change your shirt in our bedroom," she told me, definitely more than a hint. "Just drop that and your other one in the laundry chute, I'll do them with our washing in the morning." Herman showed me the chute in the hallway. Oh man, these people knew how to live--when their clothes got dirty, they mailed them to the basement.

I stepped in to the indicated bedroom, adult territory where kids usually set foot at their own risk, and too timid to put the light on, swapped shirts as fast as I could. Straining to take in the exact place where Kate Smith slept, even in the dimness I was convinced I could see a telltale sag in the near side of the double bed.

Hurrying so as not miss anything in this remarkable household, I dispatched my needy shirts into the laundry chute and followed promising sounds into the kitchen. Aunt Kate was fussing with cooking pots when I presented myself, fully buttoned and untornd. "Now then. We're having a Manitowoc specialty," she beamed at me to emphasize the treat as she put on an apron twice

the size of any of Gram's, "sauerkraut and franks. I know you like those. Boys do, don't they."

Not really, in my case, because Gram viewed frankfurters--weinies by any other name, right?--with dire suspicion whenever she was forced to boil up a bunch to feed a crew toward the end of a month's kitchen budget, convinced that the things were made from leavings laying around the butcher shop. "Tube steak," she'd mutter as she plopped weinies by the handful into the pot, "you might as well be eating sweepings from the slaughterhouse." But my stomach and my hunger had no time to debate that, as I was shoed me out of the kitchen, told I was free to look around the house while dinner was being fixed.

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had something to show me and he would bring it, you betcha. Meanwhile I edged into the living room and onto a pea green shag rug so thick I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A long white leathery couch sat prominently in front of a bay window, the sill crammed with potted plants, green but also sort of leathery as if they had caught something from the couch. On an end table rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters.

Whatever else this strange new territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country. Across the room from all this, on either side of a fancy cabinet radio but pretty far apart, bulked his and her recliner chairs, the kind with a lever on the side that tips a person back as if getting a shave from a barber. Over what was more than likely his site hung that picture of dogs playing poker, while over hers, cross-stitched in a way Herman no doubt would have called old-timey, was a framed sampler with a skyline of a town--largely church steeples--and a ship on the lake with a spiral of thread for smoke, and

underneath those, a verse in red and blue yarn, MANITOWOC--WHERE MAN HAS  
BUT TO WALK, TO HEAR HIS BLEST SOUL TALK.

Passing that by, I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of  
Kate Smith singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn't it  
be great if she went on one of those singing trips and took me along, to Scotland  
or somewhere! But the walls held only framed scenes of dairy cows and  
countryside in what appeared to be plain old Wisconsin, so I concluded she kept  
mementos of her singing career somewhere special, probably at the radio station.

While I was trying to take in these new surroundings, I had to take care of  
something else, and retreated to the kitchen to ask. "Aunt Kate, I have to use the  
convenience."

Parked at the stove where the pot of supper--dinner--was on, she gave me  
a funny look.

"Uhm, rest room, I mean. Toilet. Bathroom," I finally hit on the word  
appropriate in a setting that wasn't a Greyhound depot.

"It's through there," she pointed to the end of the hall. "Remember to  
wash your hands, won't you."

I most certainly did remember, but even over the rush of the faucet, all of  
a sudden I could hear singing. Distinct as anything, from the direction of the  
kitchen. A solo, to keep her voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but  
*the* song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

*"God bless America,*

*Land that I love.*

*Stand beside her*

*And guide her*

*Through the night with a light from above."*

I tell you, that singing went right under my skin and raised goose bumps. The one-of-a-kind beautiful voice, the words every schoolchild--every parent, even--knew by heart. And here I was, the lucky audience to this performance by the most famous singer in America, maybe in the world. This settled it. I absolutely had to ask for the autograph as soon as the song was over, it was bound to please the performer in the kitchen as well as me. Out of the bathroom like a shot, I sped to where my jacket was piled atop my suitcase, grabbed out the album, and scampered back to the kitchen.

Herman had reappeared, sitting at the table paging through a book and not even particularly listening, he evidently was so used to the glorious sound. Rocking ever so slightly side to side to the rhythm, Aunt Kate stood at the stove with her back turned to us, as if it was nothing to be pouring out the <sup>most famous</sup> most famous song since "Happy Birthday" while cooking 'kraut and weinies. I stood entranced there at the other end of the kitchen, listening to her sing just for me. Then as the most soaring part rolled around again, the beautiful voice reaching its height--

*"To the prairies,  
To the oceans white with foam,  
God bless America,  
My home sweet home.*

--she turned around, her mouth full of the half-cooked weinie she was munching.

For a moment I was only confused. But then when as I saw her take another bite, eyes half-closed in pleasure at the weinie taste or maybe food in general, the inside of me fell practically to the floor. Meanwhile the song played on a bit more, until there came a burst of applause in the living room and a man's silky voice doing a commercial for La Palina cigars.

When I recovered the ability to speak, I stammered, "You're--you're not Kate Smith? On the radio?"

She swallowed the last of the weinie, fast. "Dear Lord, that," she groaned, frowning all the way down to her double chins.

"I telled you, too many sweets," said Herman, licking his finger to keep on turning pages.

Ignoring him, she scrutinized me. "Where in the world did you get that idea?" she asked suspiciously, although I didn't yet know about what. "Didn't Dorie tell you all about us?" I shook my head. "Good grief," she let out this time, closing her eyes as if that would make this--and maybe me--go away.

Herman spoke up. "The boy made a notcheral mistake. It could happen to Einstein."

"Another country heard from," she snapped at him. Worry written large on her--there was plenty of space for it--she studied me again but not for long, her mind made up. Whirling to the stove, she set the pot off the burner and turned back to me, with a deep, deep breath that expanded her even more into Kate Smith dimension, in my opinion. "Sweetiekins, come." She marched into the living room, killed the radio, planted herself on the couch on an entire cushion and patted the one beside her. I went and sat.

She looking down and me looking up, we gazed at each other in soemthing like mutual incomprehension. Dismayed as I was, she too appeared to be thrown by the situation, until with a nod of resolve she sucked in her cheeks, as much as they would go, and pursed her lips to address the matter of me.

"Now then, sweetie pie, there's nothing to be ashamed of," her tone became quite hushed, "but has your grandmother or anyone, a teacher maybe, ever said to you there might be a little bit something"--she searched for the word--

“different about you?” Another breath from her very depths. “Just for example, do you get along all right in school?”

“Sure,” I replied defensively, thinking she had figured out the shirt-shredding battle royal with the campers. “I’m friends with kids in more schools than you can shake a stick at, back home.”

“No, no,” her bosom heaved as she gathered for another try at me. “What I mean is, have you ever been set back in school? Failed a grade, or maybe even just had teensy weensy trouble”--she pinched her thumb and first finger really, really close together to make sure I understood how little it would be my fault--“catching on to things in class?”

I understood, all right, shocked speechless. She figured I had a wire down. Aghast at being classified as some kind of what Letty termed a mo-ron, I sucked air like a fish out of water, until my voice came back.

“Me? No! I get straight A’s. Honest!” I babbled further, “I heard Mrs. Petrie”--my latest teacher, at the Noon Creek school--“say to Gram I’m bright enough to read by at night.”

My panicked blurts eliciting the throaty response “I see,” although she didn’t seem to, Aunt Kate tapped her hand on her thigh the jittery way she’d done when I assumed singing to all of America was upmost on her mind. Before she could say anything more, Herman stuck up for me from the kitchen doorway.

“Notcheral, like I telled you,” his guttural assertion made us both jump a little. “Donny is not the first to find the resemblance, yah? If it bothers you so great to look like the other Kate, why do you play her music on the radio?”

“When I want your opinion, Schmidt, I’ll ask for it,” she flared, giving him a dirty look. I breathed slightly easier. If they were going to have a fight, at least that might put me on the sideline temporarily.

Not for long. Aunt Kate shifted a haunch as she turned toward me, a movement which tipped me into uncomfortably close range. "Honey bear," she tried to be nice, the effort showing, "if you're that intelligent, then you have quite the imagination."

"Maybe," I owned up to.

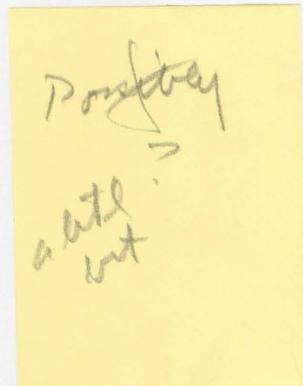
My modest admission, she rolled over like a bulldozer. "You mustn't let it run away with you," her voice not Kate Smith nice now. "You know why you're here, because of Dorie's--your grandmother's operation. We can't have you going around with your head in the clouds while you're with us, we all just need to get through this summer the best we can." Another glare in the direction of the kitchen doorway. "Isn't that so, Schmidt?"

Looking almost as caught as I was, Herman protectively hugged the book he was holding. "Donny and I will be straight shooters, you betcha."

From the look in her eye, she was making ready to reply to that reply when I pulled the album out from behind my back. "All I wanted was your autograph when I thought you were You-know-who." I knew to put as much oomph into the next as I could, even though the same enthusiasm wasn't there. "I still want it, for sure. And Herman's."

"I see," she said a little less dubiously this time. She certainly helped herself to an eyeful of the creamy little memory book as she took it from me, her lips moving surprisingly like Gram's in silently reading that cover inscription, YE WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES. "So that's what this is about," she said faintly to herself in flipping to one of the entries, I hoped not the Fort Peck sheriff's about keeping your pecker dry.

On pins and needles, I waited for her reaction as she dipped into the pages until she had evidently seen enough. "I need an aspirin," she spoke with her eyes



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On pins and needles, I waited for her reaction as she dipped into the pages until she had evidently seen enough. "I need an aspirin," she spoke with her eyes clamped shut, pinching the bridge of her nose, "and then we are going to eat dinner with no more interruptions." That last, I sensed, was spoken as much for Herman's benefit as mine.

"Lambie," once more she made the effort to be nice to me, handing back the autograph book before heaving herself off the couch and marching to the kitchen, "we'll be sure to write in it for you, but it can wait. Come to the table, we'll eat as long as we're able," she summoned the other two of us with an obvious lift of mood, improving with every step toward the dinner pot.

Dinner in Manitowoc made me homesick for supper in Montana. First of all, the table cloth was spotless white linen insted of oilcloth, and I was scared of spilling on it. Then there was the meal itself, the sauerkraut so sour it actually made the weinies not bad in comparison. My stomach was finding Wisconsin to be a state of confusion. But then came dessert, something I now realize was a classic sachertorte, a chocolate-frosted chocolate cake with jam between the layers and a mound of whipped cream on the side. Pretty much a meal of sugar and chocolate in itself, that was more my kind of eating, and when I praised Aunt Kate to her face for her baking, Herman chuckled slyly and said Schultz's Bakery

would be surprised to hear that. "Hush, you," she told him, but not as sharply as in her earlier exchanges with him.

No sooner was dessert ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, "Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip," which I didn't think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss, "Your room is ready for you." The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound's long gallop through the dark, but zingo, just like that, I was trooping up the stairs behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase-- "You are the guest, you get the best, hah!"--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one tread at a time. And as the stairs kept gong, quite a climb by any standard, the suspicion began to seep in on me as to where we were headed, even before Herman shouldered open the squeaky door.

To this day, that 'room', up where the hayloft in a barn would be, is engraved in me. A slapped-together chamber cluttered with this, that, and the other that memory stands no chance in this world of ever clearing out. Aunt Kate could call it what she wanted, but I had bounced around enough with my parents in makeshift quarters to recognize that this was nothing more than the attic. Bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works. Correction: less than half the attic, with a plywood partition walling off the rest, whatever else was stashed behind one of those outdated doors that open with a skeleton key. Trying to take in the situation, I had the dizzy sensation of slipping into the past, back to Gram's cramped upbringing among shacks of the homestead days as testified by the voices of the departed that spoke through her in terms like *You couldn't cuss a cat in that place without getting hair in your mouth.* That about summed it up for me.

As I tried none too successfully to sort out this conglomeration that was supposed to be my home for the summer, the first thing to strike my eye was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as *IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO*. Peeking from the bottom of the pile was a depleted pillow of regular size, which I could tell too many heads had rested on before mine. The top of the cheap fiberboard dresser similarly was snowed under, enveloped in white doilies starched to a stiffness that defied a person to set anything down on them. A rickety straight-backed chair amounted to the rest of the furniture. The remainder of the space was taken up with stacks of storage boxes labeled in ways such as *Xmas tree lights & curtain material* and some stray outmoded suitcases, although none seemed as old and well-traveled as mine. As to the clothes closet in the partition that closed off the area from whatever was in back of it, it was so crammed with winter clothing and coats and, I very much suspected, dresses that Aunt Kate no longer could fit into, that she grunted with the effort of forcing apart the solid wall of garments enough to scrunch in anything of mine worth hanging.

But what made me gulp hardest while moving in, to call it that, was what hung above the bed. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:

*Now I lay me down to sleep,*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*

Adone &  
printed out  
to here

## 9

I was an old hand at waking up in new places, worlds each as different from the last one as mysterious planets visited by Buck Rogers while he rocketed through the universe in the funny papers. In fact, when my father's series of dam jobs landed us at the Pishkun reservoir site, we were quartered in an abandoned homestead cabin wallpapered with years' worth of the Great Falls *Tribune's* Sunday funnies. The homesteader must have had insulation on his mind more than humor, randomly pasting the colorful newspaper sheets upside down or not. Little could match the confusion of blinking awake in the early light to the Katzenjammer Kids inches from my nose going about their mischief while standing on their heads. But that first Manitowoc morning, opening my eyes to attic rafters bare as jail bars, the thing on the wall hovering like a leftover bad dream, my neck with a crick in it from the stove-in pillow, I had a lot more to figure out than why Hans and Fritz were topsy-turvy.

Such as how to get on the good side of the Kate, as Herman tellingly designated her.

And so, determined to make up for last night and mistaking her for Kate Smith--although was it my fault they both were the size of refrigerators and shared jolly numbers of chins and dimples and other characteristics?--I dressed quickly and headed downstairs. *Nice manners don't cost anything*, Gram's prompting followed me down the steps. C'mon, Donny, Donal, Red Chief, I pulled myself together, it shouldn't be all that hard to remember to be polite and to speak mainly when spoken to and to not mix up when to look serious and when to smile, and similar rules of the well-behaved. Hadn't I gotten along perfectly fine with the strangers on the dog bus? Well, a couple of drivers, the ex-convict, and one fistfight aside. Surely those didn't count toward the main matter, which was to survive for the time being in a household where Aunt Kate seemed to wear the pants and Herman tended to his knitting in the company of beings with names like Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. If I knew what was good for me, I had better fit somewhere in between, tight as the fit might be, and strolling into their day with a sunny "Good Morning!" and the white lie "I slept real good" ought to be the place to start.

Only to be met, before I even was out of the stairwell, by raised voices.

"Will you kindly quit playing with your food? How many times have I told you it's disgusting."

"Same number I telled you, it helps with the digestion."

"Toast does not need help!"

"Hah. Shows what you know. More to it than feed your face like a cow."

Whoa. I backed off to the bathroom, out of range of that, in a hurry. Staying in there a good long while, I ran the faucets full blast and flushed the toilet a couple of times to announce my presence, and finally cracked the door open to

my dumb  
(error)

Instinct  
I had  
decided  
the light was  
morning it  
was clear to  
me

test the atmosphere. Silence. That was at least an improvement, and mustering my bravery again, I approached the kitchen.

Aunt Kate was sitting by herself there, in a peppermint-striped flannel robe and fuzzy pink slippers that would never be mistaken for part of Kate Smith's wardrobe, drinking coffee while reading the newspaper spread open on the table. "There you are, sugar plum," she looked up as if reminding herself of my existence, before I could say anything. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh, sure. Like a log."

There may have been a surprising amount of truth in that, because sunshine was streaming through the window at quite a steep angle. I checked the clock over the stove and was shocked to see it was nearly nine. On the ranch, breakfast was at six prompt, and no small portion of my shock, beyond sleeping in halfway to noon, was that she and Herman started the day so late and casually. Their plates, one littered with dark crusts of toast, still were on the table. I was no whiz about schedules, but I doubted that time zones alone accounted for such a difference.

"Now then," Aunt Kate said with no urgency, turning a page of the *Manitowoc Herald Times*, "what in the realm of possibility can we get you for breakfast?"

In Gram's domain, that question never came up. I simply took my place at the long table along with Meredice Williamson and Sparrowhead and the riders and the choreboy, and ate what a ranch cook cooked, mush and hotcakes and fried eggs and bacon or sidepork and cinnamon rolls if a person still had room. There was no reason to think past the end of a fork. Surprised to be asked such a thing, I answered with more manners than good sense, "Oh, just whatever you've got."

Aunt Kate barely had to budge to honor that, reaching to the counter for a cereal box I had not seen in time. Puffed rice, the closest thing to eating air.

Swallowing on that fact, if not much else, I found a bowl in the cupboard as she directed and a milk bottle in the refrigerator and did what I could to turn the dry cereal into a soup of milk and sugar. A parent would have jumped right on me for that, but she paid no attention. Evidently the kind of person who did not have much to say in the morning--although that was not what it had sounded like from the stairway--she kept on drinking coffee and going through the paper, occasionally letting out a little hum of interest or exasperation at some item, as I spooned down the puffed-up cereal. The scatterings of crust on what must have been Herman's plate seemed like a fuller meal than mine. Finally I saw no choice but to ask, polite or not. "Suppose I could have a piece of toast, please?"

That drew me a bit of a look, but I was pointed to where the bread was kept and warned about the setting on the toaster. "He likes it incinerated," Aunt Kate made plain as she pushed off to answer the phone ringing in the living room.

"This is she," I learned a new diction while attending to my toast. That voice of hers turned melodious even in talking on the phone, rising and falling with the conversation. "Yes. Yes. You're very kind to call. That's good to know." Wouldn't it be something if people sounded like that all the time, halfway to music? "I see. No, no, you needn't bother, I can tell him." Her tone sharpened. "She did? Oh, all right, if you insist." Industriously buttering my toast, I about dropped the knife when I heard:

"Donny, come to the phone."

Like the first time of handling the reins of a horse or the gearshift of a car, things only grown-ups touched previous to then, I can still feel that oblong plastic pink receiver as I tentatively brought it close to my mouth. "Hello? This is... he." A

"I am Sister Carma Jean," the voice sounding exactly like a nun's would come as crisp as if it was in the room, instead of fifteen hundred miles away at Columbus Hospital. I was dazed, unsure, afraid of what I might hear next.

“Your grandmother wished me to tell you yourself”--echo of *last wish* in that; I froze tighter to the phone--“she has come through the operation as well as can be expected.”

I breathed again, some.

“Of course, there are complications with that kind of surgery,” the sister of charity spoke more softly now, “so her recuperation will take some time. But we have her here in the pavilion, where she is receiving the best of care. You mustn’t worry.”

Aunt Kate hovered by the bay window pinching dead leaves off the potted plants while I strained to believe what was being recited by the holy sister in Great Falls. “She says to tell you,” the nun could be heard gamely testing out Gram’s words, “you are not to be red in the head about things, the summer will be over before you know it.”

“Can--” My throat tight, I had trouble getting the sentence out, but was desperate to. “Can I talk to her?”

“I’m sorry, but she’s resting now.” That sounded so protective I didn’t know whether it was good or bad. “Is there something you would like for me to tell her?”

I swear, Aunt Kate was putting together everything said, just from hearing my side of the conversation, as snoopy as if she was the third party on the line. Why couldn’t she go back in the kitchen, or better yet, off to the bathroom, so I could freely report something like *I’m stuck in an attic, and Aunt Kitty who isn’t Kate Smith and Herman who isn’t Uncle Dutch turn out to be the kind of people who fight over the complexion of a piece of toast.*

“I guess not,” I quavered, squeezing the phone. Then erased that in the next breath. “No, wait, there is too. Tell her”--I could feel the look from across the room--“the dog bus worked out okay.” Mentally adding, *But Manito Woc or*

however you say it is even a tougher proposition than either you or I ever imagined. So please get well really, really fast.

As soon as I clunked the phone into its cradle, Aunt Kate squared around to me from patrolling the potted plants and trilled as if warming up her voice, "Wasn't that good news. Mostly."

"I guess." That word *complications* rang in my ears, and no doubt hers, as we faced each other's company for an unknown length of time ahead. She chewed the corner of her lip a little, and mine probably received the same.

"Well, now, we must keep you entertained, mustn't we." Her next remark made my heart drop as much as it would have soared had she really been Kate Smith. "I know you like to be busy, so I set up the card table and got out a jigsaw puzzle. Those are always fun, aren't they." Maybe I was not the absolute shrewdest judge of character, but I had a pretty good hunch that habit of agreeing with herself covered up her desperation at not knowing what to do with a kid. This household didn't have so much as a dog or cat, not even a goldfish. By all evidence so far, Aunt Kate was only used to taking care of herself and the war with Herman, if that's what it was.

Right now she was at her most smiling and dimpled as she led me over to the card table stuck as far out of the way as possible in the corner and the puzzle box. MOUNT RUSHMORE-- KNOW YOUR PRESIDENTS and in smaller type, 1,000 PIECES. Worse yet, it was one I had already done in my jigsaw period when Gram was the one trying to keep me occupied. "Yeah, swell," I managed to remark, although more honestly the comment would have been, "Fuck and phooey."

Ready to leave me to the mountain of puzzle pieces and my cold toast, Aunt Kate headed for the basement to see if the laundry was finished yet. "Oh, just so you know," she sang out as she started down the cellar stairs, "I put your

Gram

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snapbutton shirt in with our washing, but the other was torn so badly I threw it away."

"Doesn't surprise me," I called back. Catching up to the fact I hadn't bothered to remove my stash from the ruined shirt the night before, what with everything else going on, I inquired for the sake of keeping current, "Where did you put my money?"

The footsteps on the stairs halting, her voice came muffled. "What money is that?"

"It was pinned to the back of the good pocket, Gram did that so a pickpocket couldn't steal it and--"

For someone of her heft, she came up out of those cellar stairs in a terrific burst of speed, turned the hall corner at full tilt and barreled through the kitchen and out to the garbage can at the top of the driveway, flannel robe billowing behind her, me at her heels. Her backside was too broad for me to see past as she flung open the lid of the can and looked in, and I was afraid to anyway.

"Too late," she moaned, "it's been picked up." Rounding on me, she asked furiously, "Why didn't you tell me it was pinned there?"

"I-I didn't know you were going to do the wash so soon," I blurted, which was not the real answer to the real question.

That was coming now, as she drilled her gaze into me and started in, "More than that, why didn't you--"

But before she could rightfully jump all over me for forgetting to rescue the money myself before dropping the shirt in the laundry chute, she stopped and pinched between her eyes in that way that signaled she needed an aspirin. After a moment, eyes still tight shut, she asked as if she could not face any more of this, "How much was it?"

mend  
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more?  
texture

“Th-thirty dollars, all I had,” I said as if it were an absolute fortune, which to me it was. As I’ve said, no small sum in those days, to someone like her either, according to the groan she let out. “See,” I tried to explain, “I was supposed to buy my school clothes with it, and whatever comic books I wanted, and go to a show once in a while if you said it was okay, and--” I looked at her angrily flushed face, twice the size of my merely red one, and abjectly tailed off-- “wasn’t supposed to be a nuisance to you about money.”

“That didn’t quite work out, did it,” she fried my hide some more as she stomped back into the kitchen, still mad as can be. I shrank behind her, keeping a cautious distance. “Now this,” she declaimed, “on top of everything else,” which seemed to mean me generally. “And I have all these things to do,” she further declared, just as if she had not been sitting around drinking coffee and reading the newspaper half the morning.

I babbled another apology to try to make amends, although I wasn’t getting anything of the sort from her for failing to go through my pocket before junking my shirt and costing me every cent I possessed, was I. “Why don’t you start on your puzzle,” she said darkly, starting for the basement again.

“Maybe later.” Even if I was in the wrong, I didn’t think I was the only one that description fit, and was not going to let myself be sent to the permanent dunce corner, which the card table with Mount Rushmore in a thousand pieces amounted to. It occurred to me that with this woman as mad at me as a spitting cat, it would really help to have someone on my side, or at least another target to draw her fire. “Where’d Herman go?” I wondered, hoping he might show up any moment to get me off the hook.

No such luck. Gone to “work,” where else, she huffed, the quotation marks speaking loudest. Then when I asked what his job was, she sorted me out on that in a hurry. “Job?” She drew the word out mockingly as she clattered

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stray breakfast dishes into the sink in passing. "That will be the day. The old pooter"--that bit of Gram's language out of her startled me--"is out in that greenhouse of his again." My mention of him did change matters, though, because at the cellar stairs she whipped around to me, with a different look in her doll eyes.

"You can go help him, dearie, wouldn't that be nice?" she suggested, suspiciously sweet all of a sudden. "Make yourself useful as well as ornamental." Which might have been a joke, although it did not register that way on me. Gesturing around as if chores were swarming at her and I was in the way, she exclaimed that life was simply too, too busy. "After I deal with the laundry, I have to get ready." She didn't bother to say for what, and from the set of her chins, I could tell she did not want to hear anything more out of me but footsteps as I scooted for that greenhouse.

Right away, I was leery. One thing you learn on a ranch is to not let stray tasks be loaded on to you, such as feeding bum lambs and calves on a bottle or tending the vegetable garden. Gram's response when Wendell Williamson once tried to put her in charge of the garden about took his head off: "Do you want a cook, or a choreboy? You're not getting both on the kind of wages you're paying me." Helping in the greenhouse sounded dangerously close to choreboy territory, unpaid at that. However, Aunt Kate was looking at me forcefully enough to budge a pillar of stone my size.

"Maybe I'll go say hello," I mumbled, and trooped out to the back yard where the odd shed of glass gleamed in the sun. Already at that time of the morning the air felt heavy to me, as if it could be squeezed out like a sponge, and I plucked at my one wearable shirt of the moment and unbuttoned my sleeves and

rolled them back onto my forearm for a bit of ventilation as I crossed the lawn, Herman's big footsteps ahead of me fading with the last of the dew.

I had been curious about the mysterious structure when the DeSoto's headlights reflected off it as we pulled up to the house the night before, which now seemed another lifetime ago. Halfway hiding in a corner of the hedge at the rear of the yard, the greenhouse, as I now knew it, seemed like it ought to be transparent but somehow could not actually be seen through, whatever the trick of its construction was. It did not reveal much more about itself in broad daylight as I approached it past a neatly marked out vegetable patch, the small windows splotchy as if needing a good washing. Funny way to grow things, the soot smears or whatever they were blocking out full light that way, I thought.

"Knock knock," I called in, not knowing how to do otherwise when everything was breakable.

"Hallo," issued from I didn't know where in the low jungle of plants, until Herman leaned into sight amid the greenery where he was perched on a low stool while spooning something into a potted tomato as if feeding a baby. "Come in, meet everybody."

There certainly was a crowd of plants, all right, and according to their names written on markers like popsicle sticks in the clay pots, several kinds you could not grow in Montana in a hundred years, green peppers and honeydew melons and such. I also spotted, at the other end of edibility, a miniature field of cabbage seedlings, sauerkraut makings.

Properly impressed with his green thumb, I stood back and watched Herman fuss over his crop, pot by leafy pot. Pausing to tap the ash off a smelly cigar that undoubtedly would not have been allowed into the house, he made a face that had nothing to do with the haze of cigar smoke that had me blinking to keep my

Stamps?  
face?

eyes from watering. "You have escaped with your scalp, yah? I heard the Kate on the warpath again."

"Yeah, well, she's sort of pee o'd at me," I owned up to, making plain that the feeling was mutual. Herman listened with sympathy, as best I could tell behind his heavy glasses and the reeking cigar, while I spilled out the story of the torn shirt and the fatally safety-pinned bills. He tut-tutted over that, saying throwing money in the garbage was not good at all. But he didn't lend me any encouragement as to how I was supposed to get through the summer stone broke. "The purse is the Kate's department," he said with a resigned puff of smoke. Reflecting further, no doubt from a lot of experience, he expressed effectively: "She is tight as a wad."

I must have looked even more worried, if possible, for he added as if it would buck up my spirits, "Sometimes she barks worse than she bites. Sometimes."

By way of Gram, that was the kind of statement I had learned to put in the category of free advice and worth just what it cost. At the moment there was nothing I could do about an aunt who either barked or bit, so I took a look around to see what "helping" Herman in the greenhouse might consist of. Except for possibly scrubbing the blotchy windows, nothing suggested itself, inasmuch as he had turned the glass shed into a greatly more cozy place than, say, my rat hole of an attic. Long wooden shelves along either side handily held not only the miniature forest of plants he had started in pots, but garden trowels and snippers and other tools and a colorful array of fertilizer boxes and so on, a coffee thermos, a cigar box, and a stack of books by Karl May, who evidently had more *Deadly Dust* up his sleeve after that Montana buffalo hunt.

I nonetheless made the offer, the lukewarm way--"Uhm, anything I can do?"--a person does just to be polite.

“Yah, keep me company.” He dragged out a wooden fruitbox from under the shelf for me to sit on. “Tell me about Montana,” he pronounced it pretty close to right. “Cowboy life.”

That got me started, almost as if I was back on the dog bus telling yarns free and easy. For Herman’s benefit as well as my own longing for the Double W, I visualized the crew as they sat up to the long table laden with Gram’s cooking, everyone taking the same place every meal strictly according to longevity in the bunkhouse or higher rank in running the ranch, Wendell Williamson of course by inheritance at the head of the table in spite of the fact, as I made perfectly plain to an intrigued Herman, that the cows had more brains than he did, then Meredice doggedly next to him when she hadn’t managed to scoot to California, and beside her, Gram’s spot, when she was not on her feet hustling food dishes to and from on the table. At Sparrowhead’s other side presided the foreman with a drooping gray mustache, Cal Petrie, who actually divvied out the day’s orders to the crew, then came the choreboy, always some old hand too crippled up to ride horseback any more, slowgoing Thurl Everson the current one. By some kind of ranch creed strict as the Bible, those five all rated chairs, and the bunkhouse men lined themselves out on backless benches down both sides of the table. Cowboys such as them were a shifting picture, honesty compelled me to stress to my one-man audience, with somebody like the oldtimer Joe Henty, bowlegged as a pair of pliers, practically spending his life riding the range where cattle with the Double Dub brand roamed hither and yonder, while someone else--a widely known wrangler of recent vintage called Runaway Shea came to mind--barely mussed the blankets on his bunk before blowing his wages in town on a weeklong drunk and moving on to the next ranch that would take a chance on his corral skill with its ponies.

Puffing away on his stogie and babying his plants with spoonfuls of fertilizer and careful irrigation from a long-necked watering can--a couple of times I interrupted myself to go and fill it for him from the spigot at the back of the house--Herman listened to all that as though I were a storyteller right up there with his idol who wrote the pile of books about cowboys and Indians, encouraging me with an occasional "Hah!"

In the end, my try at telling about life on the Double W naturally led around to the whole thing, Gram and I being chucked out of the cook shack and her into the charity ward and me onto the dog bus, when I could just as well have been in the hayfield driving the stacker team the whole summer, and while I couldn't quite bring myself to lay out my full fear about the poor farm looming in her future if medical things did not go right and ward of the county starkly in mine, he grasped enough of the situation to tut-tut again.

"A fix, you are in," he said with a frown that wrinkled much of his face. "The Kate didn't tell me the all."

Somehow I felt better for having poured out that much of the tale, even if it went into squarehead ears, so to speak. Whatever his background, Herman was the one thing about Wisconsin that I felt vaguely comfortable with, despite his evident quirks and odd appearance. In most ways, he was homely as a pickle. That elongated face and the prominent teeth, taken together with the cockeyed gaze magnified by his glasses, gave him the look of someone loopy enough that you might not want to sit right down next to, although of course there I was, planted beside him like just another potted plant. Together with everything else in the humid greenhouse, he himself seemed to have sprouted, his stooped shoulders topping my head as he stretched from his stool here and there to reach into his menagerie of vegetation, his big knuckles working smoothly as machine parts in

crimping a leaf off a tomato plant near its root--"Pinch their bottoms is good for them," he told me with a naughty grin--or tying a lagging beanbush stem to a support stick. The dappled light streaming through the glass ceiling and walls brought out the silver in his faded fair hair, which I suspected made him older than Aunt Kate, although there was no real telling. I'd have bet anything gray hair did not stand a chance on her; she would rather, as not much of a joke had it, dye by her own hand.

About then, as I was yammering away with Herman, I noticed a smudge of some sort on the back of my hand. Dirt is to be expected in a greenhouse, so I went to brush it off, but when that didn't get rid of it, I peered more closely. Then gasped. A ghostly scrap of face, an eye clear and direct, feminine eyebrow and ladylike cheekbone distinct in outline, had scarily materialized on my skin.

Yanking my hand away as if burned, I sent Herman one hell of a look. Whatever this stunt was, I didn't like having it pulled on me.

"Surprises your daylight's out, yah?" he said, unperturbed. "They do that." He pointed upward with the cigar between his fingers. "Photographic plates," he spoke it as three words.

I tipped my head back and must have gaped, my eyes adjusting even if my brain was lagging. When looked at closely, reversed faces spookily gazed down from every glass pane, eyes and hair empty of color while the rest of the countenance was dark as night. Bygone people, for I could make out old styles of men's collars and women's hairdos--the lady who appeared on my hand again when I hesitantly put it out and held it at the right distance to bring her portrait pose into full miniature was done up in marcel curls, her probably black tresses tumbling ever so neatly down the sides of her head. Agog, I kept looking back and forth from her image there on me to the shadowy section of glass overhead, still not seeing how this worked. "These--these things were in cameras? How?"

Patiently Herman explained, enlightening me that photographic plates made to fit in large box cameras that stood on tripods were the way pictures used to be developed, before there were film negatives. "Old-timey, but they last good and long," he concluded. That was for sure, the gallery of little windows faithfully saving for posterity milk-complexioned women and bearded men and sometimes entire families down to babies in arms, everyone in their Sunday best, sitting for their portraits way back when and now turned into apparitions keeping company with the pair of us and the vegetable kingdom.

"So, Donny," the master of the house of glass went on with a squint that was all but a wink. "When Schildkraut's Photography Shop went *pthht*," he made the noise that meant kaput, "these are for the dump but I get there first. The Kate thinks I am crazy to do it, but glass is glass, why not make a greenhouse, hah?" He tapped his forehead, then pointed to the plates pintoed dark with people. "Makes it not too hot in here." He had a point. Without those clever dabs of shade and a pair of hinged windows that let some air through, the greenhouse would have been an oven by the afternoon.

Along with me, Herman gazed around at the ranks of panes of glass with their memories showing. Picking up a box lid large enough to catch more than a single phantom photo from overhead, he now showed me that the smoky blotches turning into recognizable pictures like the one on me were a trick of the brightening sunshine as the day went along, the rays hitting the photographic substance a certain way like a darkroom developer. I more or less grasped that, but still was spooked enough to ask in practically a whisper:

"Who are they?"

"Manitowocers," he said around the stub of his cigar. At the time, I assumed he merely meant those who had but to walk around town to hear their blest souls talk, according to the cross-stitched sampler hanging in the living

room. I was disappointed the figures preserved in glass were as ordinary as that, but maybe that was Manitowoc for you.

Just then, the back door of the house banged like a shot, making me nearly jump out of my skin, Herman reacting with a jolt too, the ash spilling off his cigar. A dressed-up Aunt Kate was advancing on us with quick little steps, high heels tricky on a lawn. Again my heart twinged, that someone who was such a perfect mirror reflection of Kate Smith was not the real thing. I didn't have time for much of that kind of regret, as she minced right up to the doorway of the greenhouse but plainly was not setting foot in the place, and announced, "I'm going to canasta."

At first I took that to mean another town with one of those Wisconsin names, Kunazdah or something, until Herman said without a trace of expression, "Play honest," and I realized she was off to a card game.

Tugging at her lemon-colored outfit, which was as tight on her as fabric would allow, she addressed me on my fruitbox as if having sudden second thoughts about dispatching me to the care of Herman and the greenhouse. "I hope he isn't talking your ear off about cowboys and Indians, sweetie. He has them on the brain."

"Oh, no, he's been introducing me to the vegetables, is all."

That drew me a swift look from her, but her attention reverted to Herman. "Don't forget, Schmidt, you'll have to fix lunch," she told him as if he'd better put a string around his finger.

"We will eat like kings," he answered, puttering with a tomato plant.

"Just so it isn't like jokers wild," she deadpanned, which I had to admit was pretty good. "Toodle oo, you two," she left us with, "I'll be back when you see me comng," another echo of Gram that took me by surprise.

I watched her pick her way to the DeSoto, and drive off speedily. Showing less interest in the tomato plant now, Herman peered at me through his specs. "The Kate thinks we can't feed us. Puh." Given what the woman of the house had put on the table so far, I was perfectly willing to try bachelor grub if it came to that.

"Now then," he luxuriously mimicked that word combination of hers that made less sense the more you thought about it, patting around on himself to find his matches and light up another cigar, as if in celebration of the Kate being gone. He gave me a man-to-man grin. "So how do you like Manito Woc?"

There it was again. "How come you say it that way?"

And again the bucktooth grin turned ever so slightly sly. "It is where Manito walks, you don't think?"

I shrugged, although I could feel something about this conversation creeping up on me. "Who's Manito?"

"To be right, it is Manitou," he amended, spelling it. "You don't know Manitou?" I couldn't tell whether he was teasing or for real. "From Indian?"

I was hooked. "Huh-uh. Tell me."

He blew a stream of smoke that curled in the heavy air. "Gitche Manitou is the Great Spirit."

"Gitchy," I echoed but dubiously, wondering if my leg was being pulled.

"Yah, like Gitche Gume, from the poem?" He looked saddened that I was not up on Hiawatha. <sup>7</sup>"By the shore of Gitche Gume," he recited, his accent thumping like thunder. Again, I had to shrug. "By the shining Big-Sea Water," he persisted. I shook my head, wishing he would try me on something like "A flea and a fly flit into a flue..." Despairing of my lack of literary education, he held up crossed fingers. "Longfellow and Karl May were like so. Poets of Gitche and Winnetou."

what  
had to  
tell me

“Good for them,” I tried faking hearty agreement to clear dead poets out of the growing crowd of specters in the greenhouse, and get to what I saw as the point. “Then where are any Indians in Manitowoc?”

“Gone.” He waved a hand as if tossing a good-bye. “That is why it is said the spirits walk, hah?”

Supposedly it takes one to know one, and right then and there my own sometimes overly active mind, red in the head or however the condition of seeing things for more than they are can best be described, was forced to acknowledge that this odd bespectacled yah-saying garden putterer and henpecked husband, fully five times older than me, had a king hell bastard of an imagination. Possibly outdoing my own, which I know is saying a lot. Wherever Herman Schmidt got it from, he'd held onto the rare quality that usually leaves a person after a certain number of years as a kid, to let what he had read possess him. I saw now why Aunt Kate was at him about taking to heart the writings of Karl May in what seemed to be, well, squarehead Westerns. Not that I wanted to side with her, but from my experience of his mental workings so far, notions Herman had picked up out of books did not appear to be condensed from their imaginative extent, let alone properly digested.

Put it any way, this was getting too thick for me, people dead and gone but still strolling around in my cigar-smoking host's telling of it, as well as shadows on glass flaring to life like lit matches, Manitowocers here, Manitou walkers there--a lot more than potted plants flourished in this greenhouse of his. I shifted uncomfortably on my fruitbox. “Spirits like in ghosts? Herman, I'm sorry, but I don't think we're supposed to believe in those.”

“We can believe in Indians.” He had me there. I could see him thinking, cocking a look at the dappled shed’s glassy figures and as it turned out, beyond. “So, paleface cow herders, you know much of. How about--?” He patted his hand on his mouth warwhoop style, mocking the Kate’s charge that he had cowboys and Indians on the brain.

With an opening like that, how could I resist?

“Well, sure, now that you mention it,” that set me off, “I’ve been around Indians a lot,” skipping the detail that the last time, I’d slept through most of a busload of them. Trying to sound really veteran, I tossed off, “I even went to school with Blackfoot kids most of one year at Heart Butte.”

“Heart? Like gives us life?”

“Yeah, you betcha--I mean, yes, you bet.”

Herman leaned way toward me, cigar forgotten for the moment. “Beautiful name. Tell more.”

I didn’t bother to say that was the only thing of any beauty at the remote and tough little Blackfoot Reservation school where, around Louie Left Hand and Johnny Rides Proud, I wisely kept my trap shut about my Red Chief nickname and endured being called Whitey and Brookie for the freckles that reminded them of the speckles on Eastern brook trout. That Heart Butte schoolyard was at least as educational as the schoolroom. But if Herman was gaga about things Indian, here was my perfect chance to confide the Red Chief monicker to him.

He was impressed, more so that he really needed to be, I noted nervously. “Up there with Winnetou, you are,” he exclaimed, slapping his knee. “Young chiefs. No wonder you got the fancy moccasins.”

“Yeah, but”--I stole an uneasy glance at the pile of Karl May books-- “who’s this Winnetou anyway? What tribe he’s from, even?” If he was

more?

Blackfoot, my Red Chief tag might as well shrink back to Heart Butte invisibility in comparison.

Herman puffed on his cigar, maybe seeking smoke signals, as he thought how best to answer. Finally he said, "An Apache knight, he was."

I tried to sort that out, never having heard of an Indian clanking around in a suit of armor, and said as much.

Herman laughed. "Not iron clothes, hah. Leather leggings and a hunting shirt, he dressed in, and, you betcha"--he nodded approvingly at me--"fancy moccasins." Turning serious again, he went on, "Karl May calls him a knight because he was honorable. His word you could trust. He fought fair. Like a chief swoosed to, yah." He nodded at me gravely this time.

"Uhm, Herman, you better know." In all this Indian stuff, I didn't want to end up chewing more than I could bite off. "I haven't had much practice at any of that, see. I mean, with me, you can tell where the Red came from"--I flopped my hair--"but the Chief thinger is just from my dad. Sort of kidding, in a way, is all."

"Maybe not all," he gave me one of his cockeyed glances through the thick glasses. "Maybe he thought the name fit more than"--he kept a straight face, but it still came out sly--"your scalp."

One thing about hanging around with Herman, time went by like a breeze. That noontime, with Aunt Kate gone to canasta, the house was without commotion as Herman assembled lunch, laying out the kind of store bread that came sliced and without taste, but cutting into a loaf of what I figured was lunchmeat. In the living room trying to find jigsaw pieces of Lincoln's beard, knowing I had better show some progress on the damn puzzle or hear about it from Aunt Kate when she came home, I didn't pay much attention to what he was

making until he called me to the table. "Meal fit for an earl." When I looked blank at that, he said, "Earl of Sandwich, invented guess what."

I peeked under the top slice of bread at the gray slab pocked with gelatin and colonies of what I knew were certain pig parts. "It's headcheese, isn't it."

"Yah. A treat." Herman took a horsebite mouthful of his sandwich. "The Kate won't eat it," he said, chewing. "She calls it disgusting, if you will imagine."

I was pretty much with her on that, for I had seen the ingredients of headcheese, each more stomach-turning than the next, come off the hog carcass at butchering time when the animal's feet and head and bloody tongue were chucked in a bucket for further chopping up. But at any mealtime Gram's voice was never far distant, *If it's put in front of you, it's edible at some level*, and by not looking at the jellied pork rubbish between the sandwich bread, I got it down me.

This Wisconsin incarceration evidently requiring digestive juices of various kinds, I stayed at the table stewing on matters, trying to assimilate what all had happened since my arrival into this unnerving household, while Herman pottered at washing up our few dishes. When he was done and hanging up the dish towel in a fussy way not even the Kate could criticize, I ventured: "Can I ask you a sort of personal thing?"

"Give it the try," he responded agreeably enough, saying "Shoot" as he pointed a finger and cocked thumb at me like a pistol, which I figured must be something he picked up from a squarehead western.

"Right. How come you don't go by the name 'Dutch' any more?"

He pursed his lips in and out a couple of times as if tasting the inquiry, then came and sat at the table with me before answering, if that's what it was. "It drowned."

He seemed to be serious. Oh man, I thought to myself, first the Gitchy thinger, walking around dead, now this. Was this a squarehead joke, to the effect that Dutch was a word that never learned to swim?

“Sounds funny, yah?” Herman conceded. “But when the *Badger Voyager* sanked, my name ‘Dutch’ was no more, after.” Again he made the *pthht* kaput sound. He folded his big hands on the table as he looked straight across at me in that uneven gaze of his. “On shore, ‘Herman’ got new life.”

I still didn’t get it, and said so.

Looking pensive, the former ‘Dutch’ reached for the sugar bowl. “You know about ore boats any, Donny?” At the shake of my head, he instructed, “This is ore boat. *Badger Voyager*, pretend. Table is the Great Lakes. Gee-oh-graphy lesson, hah?” Plotching a hand here and there across the table top, he named off the bodies of water--Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, Ontario--while I paid strict attention as if about to be called on in class. Done with that, he steered the sugar bowl toward me. “Where you sit is Duluth. Much iron mines. How it works, *Badger Voyager* comes, loads ore, takes it maybe here, maybe there”--he maneuvered the sugar bowl in winding routes to various ports of call where he told me the ore was turned into steel, Chicago, Cleveland, all the way to Buffalo.

“But what about--”

“‘Dutch’, yah. Coming to that.” He peered at the sugar bowl through his strong glasses as if encouraging me to have a close look, too. “He is on the ore boat, see. Me, I mean. Twenty years.” Pride shown out of him as he sat back and made the pronouncement, “I was a stoker.”

I puzzled over that. Like stoking a stove? A cook’s helper, like I sometimes was in kitchen chores for Gram? He pawed away that supposition, explaining a stoker’s job in the boiler room of a ship. “Mountains of coal, have I shoveled.”

"But you don't do that any more," I said, thinking of Aunt Kate's mocking response when I asked about his job.

"Hah, no. I am on shore, so 'Dutch' is no more. No shipmates to call me that. I change to 'Herman', who I was before."

This was a whole lot more complicated than my Red Chief nickname coming and going at will, I could see. Still, something had been left out of the story, and my guarded silence must have told him I knew it had. Herman, who looked to me as if he could still stoke coal all day long if he wanted to, read my face, studying me with that unsettling cockeyed gaze. <sup>91</sup> "The Kate did not blabber it to you? Something wrong. Her tongue must be tied up." He sat back and folded his arms as if putting away the hands that fit a <sup>cool</sup> shovel. "I have a settlement."

Thinking the word through, I took it apart enough to ask hesitantly, "Wh-- what got settled? Like a fight?"

"I show you."

He navigated the sugar bowl back to the Lake Superior territory of the table, then wobbling it so vehemently I thought it would spill. <sup>91</sup> "Straits of Mackinac," he pronounced it *Mackinaw*. Bad place any old time, but big storm comes up. Worst I was in, ever. The *Badger Voyager* <sup>10</sup> *sunked*, like I say. Big waves broke her in half." Abruptly he lifted his hands and mimicked snapping a branch. "Raining and wind blowing like anything when order comes, Abandon ship. I go to climb in the lifeboat, and a pulley swings loose from the davit and hits me, like so." All too graphically, he clapped a hand over his left eye and I couldn't help wincing. <sup>91</sup> "Hits 'Dutch', yah?" he made sure I was following all the way. Now he removed his glasses, set them aside, and took the spoon out of the sugar bowl. Reaching up to his left eye with his free hand, he held his eyelids apart. My own eyes bugged as he tapped his eyeball with the spoon handle, *plink plinkety-plink-plink plink-plink* distinct as anything.

"Ace work!" Wowed, I let out loose with "Holy crap, Herman, doesn't that hurt at all?" Grinning and even winking with that false eye, he shook his head.

"That's really something! Do it again!" He obliged. I couldn't get over the stunt; the carnival sideshow that set up camp in Gros Ventre at rodeo time didn't have tricks nearly as good as playing *shave and a haircut, four bits* on an eyesocket. Still overcome with enthusiasm, I pointed to that left eyeball or whatever the substitute ought to be called, politeness gone to hell. "What's it made of?"

"Glass," he said drily, donning the eyeglasses again. "Like a greenhouse of the head, hah? Only it grows this, from the ship company." He rubbed his thumb and fingers together, which with a penniless pang I recognized meant money.

That was Herman in the ways most meaningful that first adventurous day, or so I thought. I can't really say a glass eye he could play a tune on sold me on spending a stifling summer in Wisconsin, but he did make things more interesting than expected.

Aunt Kate was another matter, a sizable one in every way. After the morning's disaster with my money and our general lack of meeting of minds--if she even thought I had one--I didn't know what I was going to be up against when she came home from canasta, but suspected it probably would not be good. So, after lunch when Herman went off for a nap --"Shuteye is good for the digestion," he surprised me yet again--I figured I'd better show at least a bit of progress on the jigsaw puzzle, boring as it was to even think about it.

I had quite a stretch of the sky-blue top edge pieces fitted into place, strategy recalled from having done the damn thing before, working my way down onto George Washington's acre of forehead, when I heard the DeSoto groaning up the driveway and then Aunt Kate's clickety high heels on the kitchen floor, instantly stilled when she reached the plush living room rug.

"Yoo hoo," she called as if I wasn't just across the room from her.

"Yeah, hi." Figuring it couldn't hurt, could help, I tried a slight initiative that might be construed as politeness. "How <sup>was</sup> as the, uh, card game?"

"A disaster," she moaned. "Of all the bad luck, why did this have to happen on top of everything else?" Continuing the drama, she dropped into the recliner beneath the Manitowoc sampler, rotated it to face me where I was at the card table, and cranked the chair back until she was nearly sprawled flat. In the same stricken voice, she addressed the ceiling as much as she did me: "It's enough to make a person wonder what gets into people."

Apprehensively listening, a piece of George Washington in my hand, I contributed, "What happened? Didn't you win?"

Now she lifted her head enough to sight on me through the big V of her bosom. "It's ever so much worse than that," she went on in the same tragic voice. "Years and years now, the four of us have had our get-together to play canasta and treat ourselves to a little snack. Religiously," she spiked on for emphasis, "every Monday. It starts the week off on a high note." To think, Kate Smith might have uttered those exact words. But this was not her, with me as the only audience trying to take in the canasta catastrophe. "And now, can you believe it, Minnie Zettel is going off on a long visit," Aunt Kate said as if Minnie Zettel was also going off the rails. "Why anyone would traipse off to St. Louis in the middle of summer, I do not know. The other girls and I are beside ourselves with her."

Having been beside herself with me not that many hours ago, she was having quite a day of it, all right. I made the sound you make in your throat to let someone know they have a sympathetic audience, but maybe I didn't do it sufficiently. Still practically flat in the recliner, Aunt Kate regarded me narrowly through that divide of her chest. "Donal," she startled me by actually using my name, which I think was a first time ever, "do you play cards?"

W/a  
M/g

“Rummy, a real little bit,” I said very, very carefully. All I needed was gambling added to the rest of my reputation with her. “Gram and me at night sometimes when there’s nothing on the radio but preachers in Canada.”

“I thought so,” she mustered the strength to nod her head. “When we were girls, Dorie was always one to haul out a deck of cards when nothing else was doing.” She swelled up and exhaled in relief. “Good. Then you can learn canasta and fill in for Minnie.”

I reacted to that as if she had said I was to put on a girdle and a dress and sit for hours on end at a card table with three gossiping women. Rummy, poker, cribbage, the bunkhouse pastimes I had soaked up by looking on as the Double W crew gambled matchsticks or purely poker chips in games that didn’t count for anything but bragging rights were, I foresaw with awful clarity, child’s play compared to the so-called amusement I was being dragged into. To today’s ears, canasta may sound as distant and out of date as a songbook singalong around the upright piano. But let me tell you, new means modern in any day and age, and the freshly conceived card game swept like a craze into the living rooms of mid-century America. This I knew only in the vague way a kid picks up on the odd doings of grownups, but it left the definite impression that canasta was something played to the fullest by dried-up old ladies with nothing else to do. Aunt Kate was the opposite of dried-up, for sure, yet the rest of the canasta mandate was written all over her, in voice and manner, to an extent that spooked me silly. Anyone with a brain bigger than a pea should be able to catch on to a dumb card game, right? However, the same panicky feeling I’d had those first moments on the dog bus when confronted with rows of people as strange to me as if they had been dealt off the bottom of life’s deck now gripped me again: What was I getting myself into, none of it my own accord?

manufactured a sort of smile. "It will help take your mind off your imagination, hmm?"

Feeling vaguely traitorous but instinctively trying to save my own skin, I asked, "Why can't Herman? Play cards with you, I mean."

"Him?" The one word did that idea in, but she added for good measure, "He calls our little canasta parties the hen roost. You can see he'd be impossible."

What I could see was that I was being drafted to fill in at something where impossibility was in the air. Talk about a disaster. "Gee, Aunt Kate, it's nice of you to ask," I tried to wiggle out of it, "but I just don't think I'm slick enough at cards to--"

"It won't hurt you to do it one time in your life." I knew that look from her. Gram had one just like it whenever she prodded me into some task I didn't want to be within a mile of. True, there was about a hundred pounds of difference behind the gaze, but it was all in Aunt Kate's favor. <sup>4</sup> Knowing when I was licked, I mumbled, "I guess I can try."

"Now then. It's too bad, but we need the card table." Before I could react, she was crumbling the sky-blue edge and George Washington's forehead and scooping the pieces along with the rest of the jigsaw puzzle into its box.

"Don't worry, sweetheart, you can start over on it once you've learned canasta."

wanted  
a hand

just so you know," she sang out as she started down the cellar stairs, "I put your snapbutton shirt in with our washing, but the other was torn so badly I threw it away. It wasn't worth mending."

"Doesn't surprise me," I called back. Catching up to the fact I hadn't bothered to remove my stash from the ruined shirt the night before, what with everything else going on, I inquired for the sake of keeping current, "Where did you put my money?"

The footsteps on the stairs halting, her voice came muffled. "What money is that?"

"It was pinned to the back of the good pocket, Gram did that so a pickpocket couldn't steal it and--"

For someone of her heft, she came up out of those cellar stairs in a terrific burst of speed, turned the hall corner at full tilt and barreled through the kitchen and out to the garbage can at the top of the driveway, flannel robe billowing behind her, me at her heels. Her backside was too broad for me to see past as she flung open the lid of the can and looked in, and I was afraid to anyway.

"Too late," she moaned, "it's been picked up." Rounding on me, she asked furiously, "Why didn't you tell me it was pinned there?"

"I-I didn't know you were going to do the wash so soon," I blurted, which was not the real answer to the real question.

That was coming now, as she drilled her gaze into me and started in, "More than that, why didn't you--"

But before she could rightfully jump all over me for forgetting to rescue the money myself before dropping the shirt in the laundry chute, she stopped and pinched between her eyes in that way that signaled she needed an aspirin. After a moment, eyes still tight shut, she asked as if she could not face any more of this, "How much was it?"

more  
reaction  
hantic

save Gram's spot as cook after her recuperation, and the cook shack would be ours again.

I waited expectantly for the boss of the Double W to say something like, "Oh man, great idea! Why didn't I think of that myself?"

Instead he sniffed in a dry way and uttered, "We're gonna use the Power Wagon on that."

*No-o-o!* something inside me cried. The Power Wagon for *that*? The thing was a huge beast of a vehicle, half giant jeep and half truck. Talk about a sparrowheaded idea; only a couple of horsepower, which was to say two horses, were required to hoist hay onto a stack, and he was going to employ the equivalent of a Sherman tank? There went my dream of being stacker driver, in a cloud of exhaust. I was always being told I was big for my age, but I couldn't even have reached the clutch of the dumb Power Wagon.

"Cutting back on horses, don't you see," Wendell was saying, back to fiddling with the papers on the desk. "Time to send the nags to the glue factory."

That did that in. If charity was supposed to begin at home, somehow the spirit missed the Double W by a country mile. Apprentice cusser that I was, I secretly used up my swearing vocabulary on Wendell Williamson in my defeated retreat across the sun-baked yard to the cook shack.

Gram watched in concern as I came back in like a whipped pup. "Donny, are you crying? What happened? Didn't the fool write in your book for you?"

"Got something in my eye," I alibied. Luckily, the veterinarian's pickup pulled up outside and honked. In a last flurry, Gram gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Off you go," her voice broke. "Be a good boy on the dog bus, won't you."