

"Scared of her own shadow."

"Well, all right, but you'll have to clear out if there's a squaller."

We would cross that high water when we came to it. Meanwhile the crying room, a small soundproof cubicle next to the projector booth where a parent or two could sit with a squalling baby, was all ours. Unseen by the audience below, we could watch the show in royal privacy and make cracks about it out loud to our heart's content. Zoe was already nearly giddy with our fortunate spot and I was glad to have my mind somewhat off my absent father.

"Outstanding, Rusty! Hunnerd percent ~~and then some!~~"

"Almost." I ran back down to where Charlie Hooper doubled as clerk at the candy counter and bought us each a roll of Necco wafers. This was pure kid instinct. The thin candy discs of a variety of flavors, all of them faint, were kind of like sucking on nickels, but I had a hunch Zoe would be as crazy for them as I was.

"Boy oh boy, Ace," Zoe grinned a mile as she crackled open her Necco roll, "this hideout is the best idea ever."

One thing about a movie called *The Alamo*, there was no doubt about how it was going to come out, so instead of following the plot very closely we could sit back sucking Neccos and aloofly concentrate on the actors and the funny way they were dressed. Laurence Harvey was Colonel Travis, in charge of the mission fortress threatened by the Mexican forces of Santa Ana, and whatever anyone in Texas was actually wearing in 1836, this version of the colonel raced around in tight white pants and a really big hat. It was headgear so wide-brimmed it wouldn't have lasted a minute in Montana wind, and we couldn't help snorting laughs whenever a camera angle caused it to dwarf the head under it. It seemed like in every scene Colonel Travis was in the same bad mood. For the whole first part of the movie, he and Jim Bowie, played by Richard Widmark with the trademark knife--about the size of a dozen X-Actos--strapped to his hip, were so mad at each

other the Mexican foe somewhere out there seemed an afterthought. History, if that's what this was, certainly moved slowly.

As things dragged along at the Alamo, Zoe said impatiently, "Isn't John Wayne even in this?"

"He must be waiting for something to happen before he shows up," I rolled what was left of a mint Necco around in my mouth. "Guess what, that's not his real name."

"You're making that up."

"Not either," confident of what I'd read somewhere: "Marion Morrison."

We both snickered at the sissy sound of that, or as it would have been in the schoolyard, the thithy thound.

"You suppose, back then," Zoe giggled her way into a lisp, "when someone asked what his name was, he didn't like to have to thay 'Morrithon'?"

"'Marion' ithn't tho hot either, ith it."

Finally the supposed star of the show showed up onscreen. However he came to be John Wayne, he sure was a-talkin' slow when he came on the scene as Davy Crockett, coonskin cap and all in the Texas sunshine. A ragtag bunch with him were his Tennesseans, and promptly enough they were in a big drunken fight scene in a cantina, the most action yet in the movie. Then a busty senorita appeared, whose main role seemed to be to stand sideways so John Wayne could get a good look.

"Woo, how about the front porch on her," said Zoe, which freed me to grin appreciatively.

The movie slowed down drastically after that--after all, it *was* a siege--and we spent more of our time peeking down at the audience to see what was going on. Attendance at the late show ran heavily to couples on dates, so there was sometimes

some interesting behavior in the dark. It must have been some of the more evident necking that brought the question to mind in Zoe.

"Rusty? What if"--it was eerie to hear her say my most haunting two words there in the dark--"what if your dad met somebody he liked on one of these trips? A Canadian lady, maybe? Would you want a new mother?"

"Huh-uh." That did not even take any thinking about. A new wife for Pop would not be my mother, she would be a step-mother. And I'd had enough of being a stepped-on child in the Phoenix part of my life. "You said it yourself, remember? One parent is plenty."

"I know."

"Then why'd you bring it up?"

She rattled out a Necco before answering. "That was real dumb of me, wasn't it," she said in a contrite small voice. "Excuse me all over the place." She did her best to erase all doubt. "Besides, your dad is too swift to do that to you."

"Right," I said, giving him credit for that even if I was monumentally sore at him for his damnable Canada trips.

In the course of time, with a lot of preachy dialogue along the way, things were building to a climax at the Alamo, and the arrival of Mexican soldiers onscreen by the apparent thousands for the attack was really something, we had to admit.

"This is kind of like Custer, isn't it," Zoe observed, both of us back in movie-critic mode.

"Reckon so, ma'am," I responded John Wayne-like. "It don't look good for the Texans."

The Alamo battle scenes were serious blood and guts; heaven help the human race if war ever ceases to be sobering, even at its most make-believe. And yet, right there amid the explosions and bodies falling everywhere, the scriptwriter and the director included a scene where two mortally wounded Tennesseans are

pinned against a wall and one of them asks, "Does this mean what I think it do?" The other one answers, "It do," and they both expire.

And we had something new for our vocabulary of the summer.

The next night was another story. I went to bed at Howie and Lucille's in hopes of a call of "Hey, kiddo" rousing me. It didn't happen. The third day came, and Pop didn't show up and didn't show up. Zoe did her best to cheer me up--"Maybe he has to look real hard to find anybody to buy the snake boots, is all"--but by nightfall, I knew I was in for another spell in that tomb of a bedroom.

Breakfast the next morning with Howie and Lucille had me downcast about as far as I could go. As they ate their stewed prunes and took their pills, I fed on toast and jam and watched the clock. Theoretically, I was free to come and go now that it was broad daylight, but I didn't want to miss Pop when he came for me, if that ever managed to happen. From the concern on Lucille's kindly face and Howie's crabby expression--awfully early in the day for that--I was not the only one wondering why he hadn't shown up long since. I had some more toast and jam and stayed sitting there waiting.

At last came what we had all been straining to hear, the Packard's heavy crush of gravel in the driveway.

I was outside before Pop had time to climb out of the car. "Hey, where's the fire?" he sounded like always, but didn't look it. His shiner had finally gone away, but there were dark pouches under his eyes, and the deepened lines in his face told how tired he was. He had been driving with the window rolled down, I saw, something a person does to stay awake at the wheel.

I babbled a greeting of some kind, cut off by the slam of the screen door behind me. Unexpectedly, Howie had followed me out.

"You're stretching it some, Tom. The boy was getting awful worried."

"I'd just as soon that didn't happen," Pop said levelly, looking from one of us to the other. "Anyhow, here I am, right? Climb in, kiddo."

He drove home as if the huge old car knew the way by itself, his mind elsewhere, and for the first few blocks I didn't say anything. The streets that had been whited out with snow the last time now were a tunnel of leafy trees, the dappled green that happens when a breeze stirs a column of cottonwoods. Every house lazing in the shade possessed a carpet of lawn or at least grass outdoing itself to be green, from the moist spring and summer. Lilacs were blooming like big purple bouquets left at porches. If there ever was a market for momentary Americana, a day like this was the time to sell off the town of Gros Ventre complete and entire. My mood didn't match the pleasant scene, however, emotions going every which way in me. I was dizzily relieved Pop was home in one piece, and at the same time I was so mad at him I could taste it. Something needed saying, even if I wasn't sure what.

"Did you get a lot of money from the loot?" I asked sullenly.

He looked at me from the corner of his eye and then back to the road. "I made enough. Don't sweat it."

"What, did you have trouble selling the things this time?"

"I got it done."

"How come it takes longer every time?"

"I hadn't noticed."

"It's longer. Every time."

"If you say so."

"Even Howie thinks so."

He let out a sigh of ages. "This is one of those days. Right away Howie takes an ornery fit, and you don't seem to be in the absolute best frame of mind either." One hand on the steering wheel, he knuckled the bags under his eyes

with the other. "How about letting me catch a couple of hours of sleep and then we'll tackle the joint, would that suit you?"

I looked at him blankly.

"It's Saturday, remember?"

That had skipped my mind entirely--this summer every day was Zoe day, I wasn't keeping track of much else--but I stiffly maintained: "Howie and I were going to do the setting up and the swamping by ourselves, if you didn't get back."

"St. Peter will put you both in the book," he said wearily and aimed the car into our driveway where Igdrasil waited with its top reaching to heaven and its roots watered by seasons of fate.

"Imagine that," Pop stepped into the saloon, still yawning after the few hours of sleep he'd snatched but with his bowtie in place and his apron on, "the place didn't fall down without me." While that was true enough, the bar room definitely had missed his presence, glasses mouthdown in the breakfront slightly out of line from usual, stools not quite squared up to the bar, ashtrays emptied but not washed clean, and so on--Howie had his own way of doing or not doing things. Somehow the long old room welcomed its proprietor back, as an empty theater changes when an actor strolls onstage. Even the familiar gallery of taxidermed heads around the walls appeared more inviting with my father, with his black-and-white mane, on the premises. Why couldn't he just stay here forever and tend to the business of bartending instead of vanishing off when I least expected? I already had one vanished parent, didn't he understand my fear of two?

In that kind of mood, I'd trailed him into the bar room with broom and mop and bucket, ready to get at my swamping job, but he circled the floor a

couple of times, looking around at things, lost in thought, having a leisurely cigarette.

"I wish you didn't smoke so much," I complained for the sake of complaint.

"That's funny, I wish that sometimes, too," he said, taking a deep drag. "Usually between cigarettes." Taking philosophy further, he mused: "If you're in the habit, you might as well stay there. Saves confusion." He glanced my way. "Hey, didn't I tell you to go down to Shorty's and get your ears lowered while I was away? You look like a beatnik." We wouldn't have known a beatnik if one thumped his bongo drum at us, but it was what he customarily said when I needed a haircut.

"I forgot."

"That's what I do about quitting smoking." He squinted at me critically. "Cripes, Rusty, don't tell me you just sat around being down in the mouth to your eyeteeth all the time I was gone."

"No-o-o," I dragged it out to the fullest extent of indignation. "Zoe and I went to the show."

"Yeah? Good for you, I guess. Get all the training you can in dealing with females." Next came one of those grownup pronouncements as hazy as the blue nicotine cloud following him around this morning. "You'll need it."

Now that we had thoroughly gotten on each other's nerves, he turned back to contemplating the bar room. I couldn't sweep with him there stargazing like that, so I hinted heavily: "Aren't you going in the back and pay bills?"

"Right away," he said, showing no sign of going. Finishing his cigarette, he tossed it in a spittoon, then cocked a look at me different from any yet. "Tell you what. We need to do something else first. I'll help you at it. Get out the stepladder."

"What for?"

"It's time to shine the eyes."

Time to what? I goggled at him, then around at the ever-staring eyeballs of the stuffed heads. "Theirs?"

"Hell yes. We don't want the deecor going dim, do we?" He gazed up at the one-eyed buffalo over the front door as if it might nod in agreement. "Better get at it. I'll hold the ladder for you."

Feeling vaguely foolish, I fetched the stepladder. "Start with him." Pop still was in communion with the cyclopean bison. "Break you in easy."

"I've never, uh, shined eyes before that I know of. What do I use?"

"Tickle your brain a little," he advised. "Didn't some fancy writer say eyes are the windows of the soul?"

I went and got the Windex bottle and a rag.

While I climbed up and positioned myself beside the huge bearded head, Pop steadied the ladder and watched the procedure critically. The buffalo's single eye, like a sizable black marble, could use some help, I had to admit; however lifelike it may have looked when the taxidermist inserted it, over the years it had gone dull and cloudy from cigarette smoke and other tolls of mid-air life in a very active saloon. Rather tenderly I spritzed the bulge of glass and wiped with the tip of my finger wrapped in the rag until a gleam came up. It was uncanny, the feeling that grew in me as that dark eye brightened almost to life. In that situation you know perfectly well the shaggy old beast has been dead for an eon, not to mention decapitated, yet there is the odd illusion that its gaze matches yours. The buffalo in fact had the advantage with that staring eye and the other socket squinted closed in a shrewd piratical way.

Curious about that, I wondered out loud: "What happened to the other eyeball?"

"It's somewhere in the back room."

"Really? It fell out, you mean?"

"Hell no," Pop answered offhandedly, "I had it taken out, long time ago.

You'd be surprised how hard it is to find a taxidermist who'll do that.

Professional ethics or something. I had to pack that head all over Great Falls before I found one who would agree to it."

I felt a little dizzy, not just from altitude of the ladder. Unreal! Wait until Zoe heard this!

"Okay, Pop, I'll bite. Why'd you have poor old bruiser here operated on like that?"

"Think about it," he said as if telling me I had missed a speck of dust.

"Isn't a customer gonna be more interested in a one-eyed buffalo than one with 20/20 vision? Maybe he'll get to speculating about where that eye went, like you just were, and order another drink while he's at it." He shrugged. "If the guy doesn't care how many eyes a buffalo has, we don't want the ass of a bee for a customer anyway."

I couldn't argue with any of that. Pop and I moved on from the twinkling buffalo to the elk, with the coyote and deer and bobcat and the others beadily waiting their turn, every eye in the joint starting to shine, mine included. Every little while I looked down at the lord and master of the Medicine Lodge, this father of mine with his bag of secrets like chicken guts and one-eyed animal heads and who knew what else. Damn, he was difficult to ever stay mad at.

3

Was it that spirit of imagination, which seemed to cling to the Medicine Lodge like the smell of fresh bread to a bakery, that accounted for the next turn of events? Whatever was in the air, Zoe and I found our calling in life that heady summer of 1960, no small achievement for twelve-year-olds.

She's always claimed she was the one who spied the story in the *Weekly Gleaner* unfolded on Pop's desk, and I've always maintained I was the first to spot it. There is no argument whatsoever that we both reacted unsurely at first to that headline lying in invitation on the desk, SHAKESPEARE TO VISIT GROS VENTRE.

"You want to go?"

"I dunno. Do you?"

"I guess. If you do."

We went. Even if all the world's a stage, it still was something of a surprise that our own scanty public park in an elbow of English Creek qualified. Or at least a patch of grass there large enough to hold a dozen or so actors and

actresses in full raiment. Drama students from the university in Missoula, they were spending the summer traveling around the state in a repainted schoolbus with *The Bard On Wheels* on its side. The play, cleverly, was "As You Like It," which let the troupe get away with any kind of outdoor setting; the creekside cottonwood grove that the park sat amid served just fine as an eventual forest of exile. Zoe and I settled in a shady spot out of the afternoon sun to spectate. The audience wasn't numerous, and pretty much predictable: high school teachers, library staff, some women's clubs, key members of the Chamber of Commerce that had put up sponsorship money, Bill Reinking from the newspaper, and even his wife Cloyce, who generally held herself above civic doings.

The play commenced with a herald stepping from behind the bus and announcing, "We begin our revels in the garden of Sir Oliver." A pair of actors strutted out speaking in round tones, and the world changed for two twelve-year-olds.

Miracles sometimes come in disguise, and certainly this one came in costume, wearing pumpkin pants and puffy dresses long enough to step on and speaking a language such as we had never heard. "As You Like It" is wordy Shakespeare, if that's not redundant, much of the ornamented dialogue was over our heads, although lines about copulation of cattle and laughing like a hyena were not. Yet we could catch the strangely wonderful melody of it, issuing out of the characters like spoken music. And things didn't drag along at an Alamo pace, everybody was always coming, going, thinking out loud to one another.

Zoe sat entranced, as did I, soaking up every gesture and straining to take in every curlicue of language as the student actors exclaimed "How now!" and snapped their fingers grandly to summon or dismiss one another. Under the phony beards, drawn-on mustaches, and lopsided wigs, the cast was miles too young for the parts they were playing, but in some strange way the obvious makeup made

them all the more convincing. I am going to say it hit both of us at the same time, like forked lightning. The realization that living breathing figures, with a sprinkling of greasepaint and a few ruffs of wardrobe, could not only imitate people of centuries before; they could mimic life. Life with anything imagination could add onto it, even.

The disguised identities and all the costumes the Bard always had up his sleeve clinched it for us. After Act Two began with the herald intoning as if it were a cue for the cottonwood grove, "This is the forest of Arden," Zoe's eyes shined as she watched Rosalind come out and strut around bossily in men's clothes. I wanted to be Orlando, the suitor dressed to the hilt like a gentleman. Or possibly the chamois-shirted shepherd Silvius--I certainly knew a lot about sheepherders--driven hilariously cross-eyed by love for Phebe. Better yet, maybe, the fast-talking clown Touchstone in crazy floppy rags.

"We will begin these rites," the rosy-cheeked actor with a scruff of beard that made him a duke proclaimed in forming up the dance after all the lovers finally got their identities sorted out, "as we do trust they'll end, in true delights."

Truer words were never orated. The play ended, but not our state of excitement as we left the park.

"So let's get this straight, he was proposing to her even though he didn't know it was her--"

--sure, silly, because she was pretending to be a man--"

--who he thought all the time was just rehearsing him--"

--for when he proposed to her for real. Wild, huh?"

"Weren't they great at talking that stuff?"

"Wow, their tongues must be tired."

Hearing us at this, the Reinkings slowed down in front of us until we caught up to them. "Vox populi, I believe I hear," Bill addressed us gravely but

with a glint behind his eyeglasses, "just what an overworked editor needs to fill space. So tell me, as patrons of the thespian art"--despite the jokey way of putting it, he appeared to be professionally curious--"what did you think of the play?"

"Swift!" we cried simultaneously.

His mustache twitched. "I'll have to try to work that plaudit into my column."

"I've never heard of anything you couldn't, Bill," his wife twitted him puckishly, if that was the word, as Zoe and I fell in step with them. Cloyce Reinking was generally known around town for being as frosty as her silvery hair--the story was that she came from a family that made movies in the early days, and Gros Ventre was a longer way from Hollywood than a map could measure--but even she seemed to have liked "As You Like It," although that didn't stop her from assuming the role of drama critic. She went over the finer points of the performance to her patiently listening husband while we drank it all in, until she came to Silvius, the cross-eyed shepherd, when she had to outright laugh in tribute. "The business with the eyes, wasn't he good at it, Bill? That goes back to Ben Turpin, before talkies. Remember? It's been years and years since I've seen anyone do that bit."

Those last three words went off with a bang in twelve-year-old minds. Instantly Zoe was looking at me, mouthing a silent *Ooh* and I must have done the same. What a revelation, that when we did gangster talk or mimicked sheepherders or any other of our fooling around, it wasn't just kid stuff of trying to be funny--we were doing bits! Performing little tricks of stage magic as old as Shakespeare and we hadn't known it! Then and there, the two of us entered into the honorable company of Groucho Marx wiggling his eyebrows like caterpillars and Bette Davis dropping the words "What a dump" like a stink bomb and the rest of history's glorious virtuosos of lasting gags. How those careers got started we had no idea,

but for us, we had just been given a license--learners' permit, of course--to dream up the performing mischief that went under the great old honorable theatrical name of shtick.

After the Reinkings turned at their street to go home, Zoe and I jabbered about the play and the performers' bits, as we now knew those, all the way back downtown. Still in the spell, one of us finally dared to say it.

"We could be like them, I bet. Be actors, I mean. When we're a little bigger."

"Yeah. Wouldn't that be neat?"

"Traveling around that way--"

"--dressing up like that--"

"--doing bits all the time--"

"--getting paid for it and everything."

It was decided. Out front of the Top Spot, Zoe sighed a gale at having to part with Shakespeare and me. "See you at supper."

Never let it be said of me that, at such an opportunity, I did not do my bit. Goofily I crossed my eyes, more or less, and gabbled, "How now?"

She stifled a giggle and snapped her fingers bossily. "Be gone!"

My mind going like an eggbeater, I cut through the alley to the rear of the Medicine Lodge. The back room seemed newly magical to me, the biggest costume trunk imaginable. I seemed to float up to the desk on the stair landing. Eagerly checking through the vent, I was in luck. The saloon was empty except for Pop, who was on the phone. "No, that's okay, I appreciate it, really.... Yeah, g'bye." As soon as he hung up, I raced down the stairs and into the front to tell him.

"Pop!"

Startled by my outburst, he pivoted from where the phone silently sat. Evidently he had been lost in thought, looking at me now as if trying to think what to say. I wasn't waiting. "Guess what, I'm gonna be an actor!"

His brow cleared a little, then clouded again. I knew I was not supposed to be in the bar room when the saloon was open and wouldn't have been except for my uncontrollable excitement, but he simply looked at a loss about how to deal with me. "Rusty, listen, kiddo--" He stopped, whatever he was about to say eclipsed by the gleeful shine on my face. ⁹ "Actor, hey?" he switched to, flicking his lighter a couple of times to start a cigarette. "Better drink an orange and tell me about it." Digging the bottle of pop out of the cooler and handing it to me, he studied me with a deep squint. "Like the shoot-'em-up guys in the movies?"

"No, in plays! Shakespeare and stuff!" As I rattled on about the performance in the park, he smoked and listened.

"That's really something," he provided when I finally ran down. He gazed at me a moment more, then started busying himself at the sink under the bar. "An actor has to memorize a lot, you know." I nodded nonchalantly; he himself said I had a memory that wouldn't quit. "And learn how to walk around without knocking over the scenery." That hadn't occurred to me in the acreage of the park. Still making conversation with his head down, he went on: "Slick work if you can get it, I suppose. Spend a couple of hours pretending to be somebody else and get paid for it. Not bad. Beats running a joint, I bet." He cleared his throat and looked up from the sink work. "Speaking of that, it's business hours and you better scoot into the back before some ess of a bee reports us." He made enough of a face to soften that and I grinned my way out of the bar room, each of us drifting back to our clouds of thought.

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I spent days after that in that same stage-struck haze, sneaking off to a mirror every so often to practice crossing my eyes and other actorly expressions. I know Zoe was doing the same when we weren't prancing around the back room dressed up in rainslickers and cowboy hats and other costumes Shakespeare surely would have approved of if he'd had the chance. Fingersnapping announced many a new bit as our imaginations kept on at fever pitch.

Suppertimes at the Spot, we had to behave ourselves like civilized people but that didn't stop us from whispering up a storm about what life as actors would be like, all the while secretly watching the cafe customers for bits to do later. The tourist couple from somewhere unimaginably South, for instance, who had to ask Zoe's mother three times whether there was a grudge in town where they could get their tar fixed before she figured out to direct them to a garage that fixed tires. Or the Double W hayhand, a little worse for wear from stopping at the Medicine Lodge first, blearily holding the menu so close it appeared he was about to kiss it. Pickings were good and the two of us were gliding along in our amateur mischief until the mealtime when Bill Reinking came in, which was unusual in itself, and went straight to the counter to lean over and say something to Zoe's mom and they both headed into the kitchen to talk to Pete.

Watching, Zoe groaned in concern. "I hope my dad didn't stiff him on this week's ad in the paper." Aw, crud, was my own reaction to the kitchen conference; now my milkshake was going to be lumpy and my cheeseburger burned crisp as a shingle.

Directly, the gray-mustached editor emerged from the kitchen and startled us by coming in our direction even though there were plenty of empty places to sit. "May I join you?"

"Help yourself," we blurted in chorus. Zoe must have read my eyes, because hers grew large and lustrous. In my surprise, I was trying to think what

we had possibly done to attract the attention of the Gros Ventre *Weekly Gleaner*. The saying was that a newspaper was the first draft of history, and the *Gleaner* week by week told the story of Two Medicine country to a remarkable degree. Far and wide, people read it to catch up on the doings of their neighbors across the distances of benchlands and prairie and mountainslopes, and for perspective on the world beyond. A life could be changed by those words in ink, because an article in the *Gleaner* meant that some set of ambiguous circumstances had been distilled by Bill Reinking or one of his rural correspondents into recorded fact, replete with those basic ingredients of truth, five W's and an H. Zoe and I then had only a beginning grasp of this, but we understood that a very important grownup was pulling up a chair to our table for some reason.

"You're no doubt wondering why I called this meeting," our visitor joked seriously to start with. Taking off his glasses, he breathed on each lens and polished them with a paper napkin as he deliberated to us. "I've checked with the powers that be"--we understood that to mean Zoe's folks and evidently Pop--"to see if it's all right to offer the two of you a job."

I was about to say "Sure, when do we start!" but Zoe with her Butte smarts asked first: "What kind of a job and what would we get?"

"It's one well suited to junior thespians," Bill Reinking was saying gravely as he fitted the specs on one ear at a time. Zoe and I traded glances, did that mean what we think it do? Evidently, as the *Gleaner* editor, who was said to be smart as a dictionary, now invoked Shakespeare. "The play's the thing, and all that. Cloyce"--catching himself, he cleared his throat significantly--"Mrs. Reinking, as you may or may not know, sometimes performs with the Prairie Players in Valier when the proper role comes up. There's one such now, and she needs someone to help her with her lines before rehearsals start. This has created a crisis." Glancing around the cafe as if the three of us were conspirators, he

lowered his head and looked at us over the tops of his glasses, confiding: "The crisis is, if you don't do it, I'll have to."

Naturally we were wild to, and the dab of pay he named for each session of thespianism or whatever it was didn't hurt.

"You've spared me," he smiled with relief and told us the curtain would go up, so to speak, at ten the next morning at their house. "If you want to stay on the good side of Mrs. Reinking," he cleared his throat again, "be on time."

"How are we doing?" Zoe asked anxiously.

I was carrying the pocket watch, complete with a Benevolent and Protective Order of the Moose tooth fob, that someone must have dug out of a father's or grandfather's trunk to hock and Pop had let me borrow from the back room for the occasion. It was raining torrents again and I had to wipe the watch crystal to read the time.

"Three minutes till. Slow up, there it is at the end of the block."

The Reinkings lived on the west side of town. Houses were nicer there, the ground a little higher, the view to the mountains more grand. Coming up the front walk to their big generously windowed house at a robotic pace dictated by my sneaked looks at the watch, we arrived at the door at the ten straight up.

At our knock, it swung open to Cloyce Reinking, regal and bone-dry and eyeing the dripping pair of us as though wondering whether to mop us down before she let us in. I was wearing the rainslicker Louise had cut down for me, although it was still voluminous, and Zoe simply looked aswim in more ways than one in the long gabardine coat her mother had foraged from somewhere.

"This weather," the rather forbidding woman in the doorway said as if we had brought it with us. "Well, let's hang your wet things over the cat box, that's what I do with Bill's when he's been traipsing around getting soaked in the name

of higher journalism. Sheba can't complain too much." Maybe not, but the fluffy black Siamese or whatever it was meowed and scampered off when it saw the ominous cloud of clothing over its bathroom spot.

"That's done, come on in," Mrs. Reinking briskly led us to the living room, the kind with a rug that almost tickles your ankles and chairs too nice to sit in comfortably and pictures certainly not painted by Charlie Russell. I tried to take it all in without staring impolitely, while Zoe couldn't help making a little O with her mouth.

"Now then," we were being addressed with a mild frown, "I suppose the Svengali I'm married to told you why you're required?"

We nodded in mute unison. Cloyce Reinking did not appear to lack requirements of any other sort in life. Tall and straight, with prominent features that on a man might have been horse-faced but looked distinguished on her, natural frost in her perfectly kept hair, she seemed to us the living picture of a rich lady, although Pop had said that wasn't entirely so. 'A little more money than most of us, maybe. She just wears it different.'

"This may be foolish of us, of Bill and myself, I mean," she surprised us with. "All I said was something about not knowing what to do with myself in this awful weather, and he said he knew just what it took to change the climate and rang up the director in Valier. And here we are. But I don't know." All of a sudden she was looking like she wished she had shooed us back out into the rain. "Today may be a waste of all our time. It's been so long since I was on a stage."

Zoe and I traded looks of dismay. This did not show signs of being longterm employment. I stammered, "We thought you acted with the Prairie Players all the time."

"Years and years ago, yes," she waved the past off. "*Arsenic and Old The Man Who Came to Dinner* ~~Lace. Blithe Spirit.~~ All the old warhorses that audiences find funny. Speaking of which," she said doubtfully, "we may as well give this a try."

Busying herself setting three straightback chairs around a coffee table as we stood there awkwardly being no help, she asked over her shoulder: "Bill didn't say--have you both been in school plays and such?"

"Sure," I vouched for myself, "every Christmas. I'm always a shepherd because I have my own sheephook."

"The Innkeeper's wife every time," Zoe similarly reported her theatrical experience. "In Butte, the Catholic girls were always Mary."

"I see. Well, sadly enough, there are no Nativity scenes in this."

Sitting us down and then herself, she handed us each a playbook with a cover of that bubblegum color which boys at least called pantie-pink. Zoe studied the author's name.

"Oscar Wil-dee?"

"'Wild,' my dear."

I was looking at the title, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "Is that how that name is spelled?"

"You're getting ahead of the play," she cautioned me with a little lift of her eyebrow. "Now then, how to begin." She gave us a gaze that seemed to estimate our capacity for inspired nonsense, although little did she know. "I'll just read a straight runthrough," she decided, putting on glasses, the newer hornrim kind rather than her husband's type of wire frames, "until we reach the pertinent part. It'll give you some idea of the play."

It did, all right, although that was not the same as understanding it. Some of the first act, such as the butler who didn't think it was polite to listen as his master fooled around on the piano, was funny enough, and some of it went right

over us, cucumber sandwiches and high-toned exchanges about going to the country and so on. Regardless, while we followed along in the script Mrs. Reinking read all the parts, Algernon and Jack and the butler, in distinct voices, and Zoe and I shifted more and more uneasily in our chairs. If this woman could perform Oscar Wilde's witticisms all by herself, what did she need us for?

Then she reached the section with the lines 'Ah! That must be Aunt Augusta. Only relatives, or creditors, ever ring in that Wagnerian manner' and our part, or parts, in this began to come clear.

"Now we get down to business," she said, fanning the scriptbook in front of her a few times as if clearing the air. With a tightlipped smile she turned to me. "You are no longer Rusty, but Algernon, and occasionally Jack also known as Ernest."

Zoe giggled.

"And you, child, are Gwendolen now and Cecily later." That sobered Zoe right up.

"And I," said our star performer, "am Lady Bracknell."

The part seemed to fit. Cloyce Reinking was famous for her New Year's Eve parties, where everyone who was anybody in the Two Medicine country showed up. We were never invited, Pop being busy with one of his most profitable nights of the year. Not that we would have been anyway, I suspected, mentally comparing the housekeeping here with our approximate sort. Zoe's folks probably shouldn't hold their breath until they received a New Year's invitation, either. Telling myself that was neither here nor there or in between, with a feeling of mild panic I scanned the swaths of fancypants talk Algernon and Jack/Ernest were responsible for, trying to figure out how to say it anywhere near right. Zoe's lips were moving uncertainly too as she encountered Gwendolen going on for half a page at a time.

Mrs. Reinking was paging ahead, marking her pieces of dialogue with a red pencil. "This ought to come back to me more than it is," she said with quite a sigh, in character or not I couldn't tell. "I've played Lady Bracknell before, during the war."

Zoe began to ask "Which--?" before I shot her a warning glance.

"Nineteen forty-three doesn't seem that long ago," the silver-haired woman whom I estimated was no older than my father knitted her brow over some paragraph that took a lot of marking, "but I'm not as young as I was."

Why grownups always said that was beyond me. Zoe stated what seemed to us logical: "That's okay, neither are we."

"What?" Putting the pink playbook face down on the coffee table, the lady of this house took off her glasses and twirled them in one hand while rubbing the bridge of her nose with the other. "I didn't have to wear these things then. They say the eyes are the first to go." Still rubbing the place on her nose, she shut her eyes tiredly. "The gray cells aren't what they used to be, either."

It began to dawn on Zoe and me why Bill Reinking had enlisted us, if his wife was going to approach this play as if it was the clap of doom.

"Well, that's why we're here," I sang out, Zoe bobbing her head like a bouncing ball to back up my bit of phony cheer.

"So you are." Straightening herself up, Mrs. Reinking turned back to the page where she had stopped reading aloud. "Let's take it from the start of this scene."

Shortly I was alternating back and forth between Algernon and Jack, telling Gwendolen she was smart and quite perfect, and Zoe was trilling back she hoped she was not that, it would leave no room for developments and she intended to develop in many directions. Then Lady Bracknell's part began in full

gale force, with her recounting the call on a friend whose husband had recently died: “I never saw a woman so altered; she looks quite twenty years younger.”

The grand manner Mrs. Reinking put into this made the other two of us snort little laughs. Her lips twitched a bit. “Don’t get carried away. I gave that line too much. Farce has to be played straight.”

We sobered up, and went on feeding her lines that produced Lady Bracknell’s wacky pronouncements. Most were reasonably funny, although I could have done without this exchange between her and Jack as I was at the moment:

“Do you smoke?”

“Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.”

“I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind.”

By the time Jack told her he had lost both his parents and she responded that to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune, but to lose both looked like carelessness, Zoe and I were cutting glances at each other. If we were in over our heads, though, Cloyce Reinking showed no sign. At the end of Act One, she whipped off her glasses again. “That’s enough stretching of the brain for one day,” she said with a wintry smile apparently intended for herself. Zoe and I waited anxiously to see if there was going to be another one. She hesitated, seeing the look on our faces. “Well, we’ll take it from the top again tomorrow and see whether my memory held up overnight.”

“What’s this play about, again?”

Pop lounged against the doorjamb trying to fathom Oscar Wilde, which I had to admit was not easy. I sat up higher in bed and patiently explained that one character was using the phony name Ernest when in town and his real name of

Jack in the country, and there was all other kinds of sleight-of-hand as to who was a guardian to whom and who was left as a baby in a handbag, but it all worked out in the end with Jack, now Ernest for good, free to ask for the hand of Gwendolen and Algernon entitled to woo Cecily, with Lady Bracknell presiding as loftily as imaginable.

"That's pretty deep for me," Pop said and asked what he really wanted to know: "How'd you get along with Cloyce Reinking?"

"Pretty good, I think." He caught my slight hesitation. "I mean, she's kind of hard on herself about gearing up to be Lady Bracknell. She doesn't sound like she's sure she can do it any more. And that seems to really ^{bug} bother her."

He considered that in silence, then shifted his weight on the doorjamb. "Let me tell you a little something about her so you don't get yourself in hot water, okay?" He ran his hand through his hair. "Don't repeat it, this is just some skinny between us."

That flustered me. "But Zoe's there with her just like me, too, and if there's gonna be any trouble--"

"All right, you can tell your partner in crime," he granted. He drew the kind of breath needed to begin the story. "Cloyce Reinking started off with all the advantages in life, down there in Hollywood. As I heard it, her folks made a pile of money in the movie business in the early days. But, these things happen," he shrugged fatalistically, "she lost out on all that somehow and she ended up here, with Bill. You couldn't ask for a better human being than him, but she's, how would you say, never taken to the town the whole way. Some people are like that, they like a bigger pond to swim in. Get what I mean?"

"I think so."

"She's not my all-time favorite person," he stuck his nose in the air indicatively, "and I doubt that she thinks any too highly of a rundown bartender."

None of that matters. My guess is, getting up in front of an audience and being Lady What's-her-name means a lot to her. You don't want to mess that up for her, you wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you." I shook my head that I certainly wouldn't. He made himself clearer than clear: "So even if she has to gripe her way into it every inch of the way, just lay back in these rehearsals and give her some rope, right?"

"I will, honest. Zoe, too."

"Okay, that's that." He shoved off from the doorjamb and headed for his bedroom. "Don't let the ladybugs bite."

"Pop?" I called after him.

"Yeah, what now?"

"What's a Svengali?"

"It's a Swede who says 'Golly' a lot." His voice grew muffled as he went on down the hall. "Although you might check that against a dictionary."

"Let's take it from the top again. There has to be a better approach to this."

We were in the third or fourth straight day of Cloyce Reinking despairing at doing Lady Bracknell theatrical justice. Practically ramming her glasses into the bridge of her nose, she faced down into the script and tried in a fluting voice:

"I have always been of the opinion that a man who desires to get married should know everything or nothing. Which do you know?"

The script said Jack should hesitate before answering, so I did. "I know nothing, Lady Bracknell."

"I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance."

Zoe patted her hands together in silent applause, but Mrs. Reinking wasn't having any. With a groan, she pulled off her glasses. "It would help," she was back to her own throaty tone, "if Oscar Wilde were less clever and more substantial." She eyed the script as if feeling sorry for it. "This is such a flimsy piece of work in the long run, isn't it," she reflected. "There's an old saying that there are only two stories that last and last. A mysterious stranger rides into town, and somebody goes on a big journey. There you have it, from *Shane* to *The Odyssey*."

Truthfully, that did seem to match up with the experience of two twelve-year-old drama critics, recalling John Wayne cantering into the Alamo and the entire cast of *As You Like It* transported in the turn of a phrase to the Forest of Arden. For that matter, Zoe's magical arrival was the story of my summer so far, and her parents' consequential migration from Butte to the Top Spot was hers.

"But it's funny," I felt I had to stick up for *The Importance of Being Earnest*. "Isn't it?"

"Very well, Rusty," Mrs. Reinking granted with a twitch of her lips, "it has its moments. I wish I had mine any more." She snapped her fingers like a shot, both Zoe and I immediately envious. "The time was when I could absorb a script like that and know by instinct how to play it. Now?" She shook her head in that way that made us afraid she was about to say we were going to call it quits. Instead she just murmured, "Well, let's take a break."

Maybe to make it up to us for the play's lack of reward, this day she had fixed a pitcher of Kool-Ade of some strange flavor, persimmon maybe, and set out a plate of tired macaroons. I went right at a couple of the cookies while Zoe took one for politeness and after licking off a shred of coconut, put it aside.

With an eyebrow arched in curiosity, Mrs. Reinking watched this. "Child, do you ever touch food?"

"Y-e-esss," Zoe said back. True as far as it went; I had seen her move it around on her plate like a card trick artist. Mrs. Reinking was getting to know us, but she still had a lot to find out, such as how fast Zoe could change ^{the} a subject.

"Did you really live in Hollywood?"

"Of course," the surprised answer. "Why?"

"What was it like?" Zoe said eagerly, and I followed up with, "Who was there?"

Cloyce Reinking shifted restlessly. "You really want to know, do you. All right, my parents were among the pioneers, you might say, in the film business. Movies were silents then, so at parties, there might be Charlie Chaplin She twirled her glasses while thinking back to that time. and Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, people like that! Everyone had mansions, including us--I sound like Lady Bracknell, don't I," she laughed slightly in spite of herself. "But it was true. I suppose," she looked uneasily at us and our circumstances, "it made me a little spoiled. For instance, my parents let me use their roadster whenever I wanted when I was only a few years older than you." Zoe and I goggled at that. "Of course I couldn't drive in public quite yet," she went on as if even the rich faced certain drawbacks, "but up and down our orange groves, I probably was a holy terror."

Plainly, living in Gros Ventre was small potatoes after that. But that's where we all were, and Zoe now brought matters back to earth.

"Boy oh boy, those were some parents. What ever happened to them?"

The woman in the chair opposite us went still, as if she might not to answer. But then: "They were killed in a car wreck. Right after Bill and I were married. We were young, still teenagers really, and the movie company fell into other hands." She made a gesture as if brushing all that away. "These things happen in real life."

"Wow," one of us said softly, it may have been me.

"Well," she stirred uncomfortably and picked up her script but didn't open it. "Back to *The Importance of Being Earnest*." The dubious expression had returned to her. "Or not." ~~abruptly~~ Suddenly she threw her glasses down on the coffee table. "Bill must be out of his mind, pushing me into this," she said angrily. From Pop's guarded remarks, I had gathered their marriage was sometimes rocky, yet had gone on practically forever. Zoe and I traded looks that said we wouldn't want to be the *Gleaner* editor coming home to this right now. All too plainly, this was not simply a wife getting it out of her system, but a woman at the point of deciding enough was enough. "I'm sorry, children, but I really think we're not getting anywhere and had better give this up as a bad--"

We had talked this over and agreed it would be best to come from Zoe. "Mrs. Reinking?" she interrupted. "Before we start again," just as if we were going to. "Can you do that bit for us? The Ben somebody one you told us about after Shakespeare that day?"

She frowned, taking a minute to remember. "The crossed eyes? No, why should I fool around with that?"

I leapt in. "Don't you think it might be kind of funny if somebody as, uh, ~~stuck up~~ snooty as Lady Bracknell did that? Not all the time, but every once in a while?"

Drawing farther into her chair as if backing away from the suggestion, she looked askance at our eager faces. "Children, I don't think that's in my repertoire."

"Just try?" we pleaded.

~~With considerable reluctance~~ Reluctantly she did, slowly directing her eyes as if trying to see the end of her nose. Her attempt was more wall-eyed than cross-eyed, but it altered her looks fantastically, pulling her strong features into a comical prune face.

Zoe and I grinned, giggled, outright laughed. "You should see yourself."

"You two." She shook her head, but looked around for a mirror. Getting up swiftly, she led us into the hall, interrupting the cat at its business in the box.

"Scat, Sheba, that will have to wait." Posting herself at the mirror beside the hatrack, she drew herself up, took a breath to compose herself in the reflection, and said: "Give me a line, please."

Zoe recited in her Cecily voice: "Mr. Moncrieff and I are engaged to be married, Lady Bracknell."

"I do not know whether there is anything peculiarly exciting in the air of this part of Hertfordshire," even the dowager voice sounded better, "but the amount of engagements that go on seems to me considerably ^{above} the proper average that statistics have laid down for our guidance."

The three of us gazed into the mirror as she held the expression leading up to the finish of that. Her try at crossing her eyes at the climax of this did not actually yield dueling eyeballs, but it did produce a classic caricature of a snooty lady looking down her nose.

Letting her face relax, Mrs. Reinking nodded slowly to her reflection and the pair of us. "It has possibilities."

Giddy with the assured prospect of further rehearsals--"Ten sharp, remember," we had been reminded with a smile that was at once tart and sweet--Zoe and I practically sailed back downtown, talking a mile a minute. As we rounded the corner to the Medicine Lodge, however, I caught sight of something that made me tighten inside. Howie's bald head ^{instead} of Pop's dark one showing through the plate glass window. Zoe was so busy chattering she didn't notice, and I managed not to say anything beyond our usual "Later, gator" as she sashayed off to her chores at the Spot.

Hurrying around to the back of the saloon, I checked across the alley. The Packard was parked where it always was, so at least Pop wasn't loading up for another trip. Yet.

I charged into the back room and there he was, idly rambling around the room to no clear purpose that I could tell, hands in his hip pockets, gandering at this and that like a museum goer. "Hey, how'd it go today?" he greeted me, still looking around. "Did Cloyce Reinking need much help being theatrical?"

"What--what are you doing? Why's Howie here?"

"Just kind of looking things over," he said, gruff at having been caught at it. "Howie's doing a shift while I take a little inventory, up here." He tapped his temple, circling the room some more. "Cripes, there's stuff tucked away here I'd forgot about."

I watched him, not knowing what to think. He looked the way he had lately, as if there was a lot on his mind. Maybe the weather was getting to him. There hadn't been a chance to go fishing yet this crazy year. That was the least of it, though. Summoning my courage, I sneaked a look at the tarp. To my surprise, it didn't appear to have any surplus under it. Still, I asked suspiciously: "You're not gonna make a trip again already, are you?"

By now he was over at the shoebox of cigarette lighters, burying a played-out one to the bottom and trying out a shiny ACE IN THE HOLE type. When it flamed on first try, he grunted and closed the lid, tapping the lighter in the palm of his hand contemplatively as he looked at me. "Naw, not right away anyhow, you don't have to worry your hair off about that." He held his gaze on me. "Guess what. If and when I do, it'll be a short one, maybe a day," he made this sound casual although it was anything but. "Down to the Falls, most likely."

Was it possible? My worst nightmare gone away, just like that? I could scarcely get the words out.

"Not Canada any more? Ever?"

"That's about the size of it," he said, resuming his inventory stroll again.

"Tell me about the rehearsal."

—————

It was amid this run of luck that I stepped out of the house one morning to the strangest sight. All over town, the cottonwoods were suddenly snowing, the fluffy seed filaments they were named for drifting down like the most tardy flakes of the thirty-year winter, and there in the heart of this soft storm out of old wrinkled Igdrasil and fellow trees, a rainbow was glowing through. I stopped amazed, as if the mighty seasons of this year were colliding in front of my eyes. Glimmers of rainbows had not been uncommon after all the rains, but this was a true one, a hypnotic arch stretching from somewhere beyond the Medicine Lodge and the other downtown buildings to the far hayfields of the creek valley. I watched, riveted, its full band of colors from red through yellow to violet phenomenally mixed with the snowwhite fluff, until it gradually faded, and I think of that signal morning whenever I look back to that time now half a century ago. In the rhythm of existence, a rainbow's splash of color does not last long; yet it always comes back. Like pigments of that many-hued year.

Still under the spell of that spectacle, I went on my way across the alley to the Medicine Lodge to await Zoe as usual, for our next session of being Ernest and Algernon and Cecily and so on. The beer truck with GREAT FALLS SELECT blazoned on its side in big red letters--and below that, that immortal slogan *When you Select, it's a pleasure!*-- was backed up to the rear door as it did every week. The beerman Joe greeted me like an old comrade as he rattled a last case of empty bottles into the truck, while Pop was occupied in reading something that must have come with the usual invoice. I noticed that the more he read, the more his eyebrows climbed. Finally he could not contain himself:

"No bee ess? This on the level, Joe? They chose this joint?"

The beerman laughed and thumped him on the back. "Says so right there in the letter, don't it? You've been an A-one customer all these years, Tom, it's

only fair. Have a helluva good time in the Falls.” Climbing into the truck, he gave us a beep of salute and pulled out. Pop kept standing there reading over the piece of paper, looking as pleased as I’d ever seen him. I almost didn’t want to interrupt the moment.

“Who’s it from, Pop?”

“Some bigwig at the brewery, no less. Guess what, kiddo. The Medicine Lodge is the Select”--he drew it out into *See-lect*--“Pleasure Establishment of the Year. It beat out every other joint in the entire state. How about that, hey?”

“Wow! Is there a big prize?”

“Let me see here,” he ran his thumb down the letter. “A twenty-five percent discount on next week’s beer order--that’s better than a kick in the pants, anyway--plus a tour of the brewery, an award luncheon, and guest seats in the company box at the Selectrics game this Sunday.”

“Outstanding, Pop! Can I--”

“Don’t sweat it, you’re along. It says right here ‘honoree and family.’”

“Can Zoe come with us?”

“What am I, an adoption agency?” That did not sound promising, but if I played my cards right it might not be the last word, I sensed. Seeing my face fall and stay that way, he reconsidered. “Just the two of us, I guess we are a little short on family. If her folks say it’s okay, I suppose she can come.”

I couldn’t wait and sped down the street to the cafe with the news. Predictably, Zoe was eager enough for the trip to hop up and down, her mother benevolently said with Pop to keep an eye on her there was no reason she shouldn’t go, and her father darkly instructed, “You behave.”

When the big day came--it even dawned bright and clear like stage lights turned high--I was in heaven, Montana division. With more grace than Lady Bracknell ever dreamed of, Cloyce Reinking had excused Zoe and me from

rehearsing and ordered us to have a good time. Dressed to the teeth as Pop and I also were, Zoe sat in the middle in the car, because that's what females did in those days of front seats that held three people. The drive to Great Falls felt like a storybook journey, the polar crags of the Rockies beyond, the nearer fields so unbelievably green the color needed a new name, the creeks and rivers running high, wide, and handsome in a countryside usually starting to gasp for moisture this time of year. Pop declared he could not remember a summer quite like this, and Zoe and I could readily believe it. He was in an expansive mood as our route stepped us down from the altitude of the Two Medicine country to the broad valley geogaphy where Great Falls was located, pointing out for my benefit a landmark square butte that Charlie Russell had painted any number of times, and for Zoe's, the skyhigh smelter smokestack, visible from thirty miles away, where copper mined in Butte ended up. Never mind the Pyramids, the Alps, the topless towers of cities of legend, we had sufficient marvels to behold as the Buick gunboat sailed us along.

As the name implies, Great Falls has a river at its heart, the renowned Missouri, and the broad powerful current was brimming almost into the bankside brewery, as though the water could hardly wait to become beer, when we pulled up to the front of the big brick building. The brewery looked disappointingly like a factory, one from long ago at that. There could not have been anything more up-to-date, however, than the gigantic electrical sign up on the roof spelling out GREAT FALLS SELECT, with that vital last word blinking bright red every few seconds.

"This seems to be the place," Pop said with a straight face as we got out. While he bent down to adjust his bow tie in the reflection of the car window, Zoe and I gawked around. Both of us had trouble keeping our eyes off the hypnotic

sign. Suddenly the thought hit Zoe: "Mr. Harry, is this the beer they call Shellac?"

"The exact same one, princess," he replied, straightening up to his full height, "although none of us are going to say that word again today from this minute on." He looked at her forcefully, then the same at me. ^{Got that} "Right?"

We bobbed our heads like monks in a vow of silence, but you know how difficult it is when you deliberately try to put something out of your mind.

Shellac, Shellac, Shellac, the huge sign registered in its every blink despite my effort not to look at it nor think about it, and knowing Zoe, the mischievous word surely was stuck in her, too.

Checking his watch, Pop hustled us into the brewery. Waiting for us was a well-dressed man of large girth, who introduced himself as the vice president in charge of brewing operations. "I see to it the barley comes in and the beer goes out," he gave an encompassing sweep of his hand as if that explained everything. With a mental apology to Pop, I had to think of him as the vice president in charge of Shellac.

Talking every step of the way, he led us off on the tour of the brewery. The manufacture of beer, it turned out, was full of words Zoe and I thought we knew but which took on evidently far different meanings when spoken by the vice president, such as *malt* and *mash* and *hops*. There was a bewildering variety of vats and boilers and other equipment strung throughout the building, with an army of workers reading gauges and adjusting dials and opening and closing valves and so on. It was like being in I didn't know what, the engine room of a battleship? Zoe seemed as impressed as I was, her eyes roving over everything. As this, that, and the other were explained by our indefatigable tour guide, Pop kept nodding his head knowledgeably and murmuring *mm hmm* at the right time; I

couldn't tell whether he knew all about how beer was made or was simply looking wise by listening.

Naturally the brewery had an intoxicating aroma, a heady odor that seemed to go up the nostrils farther than other smells. While the vice president gabbed to Pop with us trailing behind, Zoe couldn't resist crossing her eyes as if she was drunk, and I had to make myself not dissolve in giggles. I got back at her by whispering, "Don't look so shellacked." She dramatically puckered up at the forbidden word, and now we couldn't help it, both of us laughed through our noses as if sneezing.

Pausing in his discourse to Pop, the vice president turned and smiled indulgently at the sunny pair of us. "Cute children you have, Mr. Harry." Curious about us appearing to be the same age, he asked, "What are they, twins but not the identical kind?"

Pop shook his head and gave the kind of wink that passes between men of sophistication. "Different mothers, if you know what I mean."

"Oho," said the vice president, not entirely as if he knew what that meant.

When at last we had been shown everything there was about beermaking, our host leaned toward Pop as if confiding a business secret.

"Of course, we can brew our product until it runs out our ears, but we can't sell one drop without superb skill such as yours behind the bar. That's why we here at Select were so pleased to"--he chuckled--"select your establishment for this year's award."

Pop took this as imperturbably as a captain of industry. Nodding gravely to the activity in every precinct of the brewery, he responded: "I'm glad to see I've got your crew working Sundays to keep up."

"That's saying a mouthful!" the vice president acclaimed that. He thumped Pop on the back as Joe the beerman had done with the delivery of the

award letter; I mentally tucked away the bit of behavior as the Great Falls Shellac--whoops, Select--salute. "Well, onward to the luncheon," our host exclaimed. "I'll meet you at the Rainbow." He smiled tolerantly at Zoe and me again. "I hope you brought your appetites with you."

Sedminster

Like the brewery, the ~~Rainbow~~ Hotel--I almost couldn't believe the name, but the historic hotel went with so much else of this summer, why not?--was a place Pop and I and for that matter Zoe might never have encountered in the ordinary course of our lives. Classy enough to invert itself into the Hotel Rainbow in the terra cotta name on its facade, it also made sure to boast *Great Falls' finest!* in a banner over the front entrance. The marble lobby and overstuffed furnishings and potted greenery showed that it was not merely claiming that honor by default, and in those surroundings I'm afraid our threesome looked like just what we were, Sunday visitors who were in over our heads in a fancy hostelry. Not a thing in the brewery excursion had seemed to faze Pop, but he looked nervous about this.

A desk clerk a lot better dressed than we were coolly directed us to the banquet room. Pop, though, halted outside the big oaken doors and jerked his head for Zoe and me to follow him down the hallway. "Anybody who has to take a leak, now's the time." Zoe did not yet have the skill of blushing on cue, but she otherwise acted ladylike enough as she minced into the properly labeled restroom while we went to the one marked GENTLEMEN.

The Hotel Rainbow had restrooms deluxe. More of that marble on the floor, and sinks that nearly snowblinded a person. Even the places to pee gleamed, and thinking of my dreaded latrine duty at the Medicine Lodge, I wished out loud its facilities were as nice as this.

"Sure," Pop muttered as we lined up side by side to do our business, "just what the joint needs, a Taj Mahal toilet."

"Pop? Are you worried about something?"

"What do you think? It's an award ceremony isn't it, so they're going to expect me to get up and say something, aren't they. And I'm no public speaker, am I."

"Can't you just say, 'Gee, thanks,' and sit right back down?"

"What the kind of an ess of a bee wouldn't have any more manners than that?" He zipped up, and checked me over to make sure I had done the same.

"Okay, let's collect Zoe and go get this over with."

Stepping into the gathering in the banquet room was like entering a forest of business suits, with a few of the dignitaries' wives sprinkled in to coo down at Zoe and me. The vice president from the brewery greeted Pop and ourselves like old friends and led the trio of us around to be introduced. The roomful was quite an assortment--the slickly dressed mayor of Great Falls and sunburnt farmers from the barley growers' association and up-and-comers of the local Chamber of Commerce and burly beer distributors from all over the state; names flew by us in bunches as Pop shook hands endlessly. With his height and the silver streak in his hair, he stood out like a cockatoo in the crowd, and I could tell he was uncomfortable with the marathon of one-sided conversations people were making with him; this was one of those occasions where much was spoken, but very little was actually said. Zoe and I were asked over and over how old we were. It was a relief when the vice president clattered a spoon against his beer glass and announced it was time to take our seats.

Thanks to Pop's eminence, ours were at the head table, and with a roomful of people in front of us to be spied on just by looking, Zoe and I now were in our glory. We sat watching, keen as magpies, as the grownups socialized

variously. I was storing away the tongue-tied expression on the barley farmer who had ended up next to the mayor's wife, when I heard a fingersnap under the table, a signal either from the ghost of Shakespeare or Zoe.

Leaning toward her in response, I whispered, goofy as a bumpkin, "How now?"

She giggled, but whispered back with concern: "Your dad looks awful serious. Isn't he having a good time?"

"He has to get up and make a speech of some kind."

"So? He doesn't have stage fright, does he?"

"He doesn't have a speech."

"Ooh, that's not good." She thought for a moment. "Maybe he can tell them it fell out of his pocket back at the brewery and went into one of those big vats and so the next time they have a beer, they'll have a taste of what he meant to say."

"I don't think he'd go for that."

As if by radar, Pop turned from ^{valiantly}manfully keeping up a conversation with the vice president and said under his breath, "Don't get carried away, you two." We obediently straightened up, mute as puppets.

Waiters in white jackets flocked into the room, and the food came. I studied my plate to learn what a banquet consisted of. Mashed potatoes, no surprise there. String beans, harmless enough. Roast beef, pink in the middle. Very pink. In Gros Ventre, someone would have been sure to joke that they had seen critters better off than this get well.

I had never seen anything yet I couldn't eat, so I went right at my meat. Zoe, though, only tweaked hers with her fork.

Observing this, Pop told her out the side of his mouth, "Dig in, princess."

"It's not cooked," she whispered to him.

"It's rare, is all. Give it a try."

"I can't. The color turns my stomach."

"Better chew with your eyes closed, then. Come on, people are watching. Saw some off the edge and eat it."

"Do I have to?"

"Hell yes," he said, giving her a look. "It's good manners."

I knew that look, and braced for trouble. The last thing we needed in a roomful of important people was a contest of wills between my father and Zoe over a chunk of meat. But miracles do happen. Swallowing hard before the really hard swallowing, she cut a bite and ate it. Then another. I was amazed; in our suppers together in the cafe, I had seen her throw a fit over an undercooked pea.

Thus the banquet proceeded without warfare, and after sufficient beer had been served to the grownups, the vice president rapped his glass with a spoon again to draw everyone's attention.

He introduced the mayor, who said a few pleasantries and doubtless won some votes by promptly sitting down. The vice president got to his feet again and talked on for a while about the long and warm relationship between the brewery and establishments such as Pop's; I noticed the word "saloon" never crossed his lips, let alone "joint." In conclusion, he said it gave him the greatest of pleasure to present this year's award to "an owner and bartender known as one of a kind, Tom Harry, for an establishment which also has no equal, legendarily the first place of business in the town of Gros Ventre and still its leading one, the Medicine Lodge!"

At that, Pop had to stand up and receive a copper plaque that surprised him with its size and heft. As he wrestled it into security in his arms, Zoe and I craned for a look at the thing. Besides the fancy inscription, it was a representation of that scenery around Great Falls we'd seen on the drive in--the river valley, the

Charlie Russell square butte, the mountain background--but where the smelter stack would have been, a gigantic Select beer bottle loomed over everything.

Pop studied the engraved scene for a few moments, then said as if thinking out loud: "I have a customer this bottle is about the right size for." That drew a laugh--Earl Zane would never know he had been his own best joke--and I felt relieved for Pop.

However, he looked not too sure about what he was going to say after that as he gingerly deposited the award onto the table and faced the waiting audience. He ran a hand slowly through his hair as if trying to comb his thoughts into place. "Something like this comes as quite a surprise, although I guess it's a long time in the happening. Down through the years, I've sold oceans of Shel--"

"OOH!" Zoe squealed in the nick of time, as if I had goosed her.

"Kids these days," Pop recovered hastily, giving her what amounted to a grateful frown. He cleared his throat and started again. "Like I was saying, I have sold oceans of *Seelect*"--he all but buttered the word and handed it on a plate to the brewery vice president beside him--"down through the years. Years of beers, hey?" he said as if just noticing the rhyme. Now he squinted as he followed one thought to the next. "My, ah, establishment, the Medicine Lodge, does go way back. I'm kind of getting like that myself." He shook his head as if thinking about the passage of time. "According to this nice piece of metal"--he tapped the plaque, making it ring--"all the days and nights behind the bar maybe do add up to something."

There, that did it up perfectly fine, I silently congratulated him. Proudly I waited for him to say "Thanks" and sit down.

Instead he said:

"It reminds me of a story."

What? Since when? My father who would not tell the least tale about anything? The man who made an art of listening, not shooting the breeze? I wanted to disappear under the tablecloth. I just knew the banquet room would become a tomb as people grew bored. Zoe caught my stricken look and immediately got worried herself.

I will say, he did the familiar man-walks-into-a-bar cadence as if it was second nature when he began:

“A bartender whose time is up goes to heaven.

“St. Peter is sitting there on a cloud with his goldleaf book,” Pop pantomimed the celestial gatekeeper. “‘Hmm, hmm, remind me--what did you do in life that brings you to heaven?’ The visitor scratches his head over that, he’s a little embarrassed.” Deliberately or not, Pop acted this out sufficiently. “‘I’m a bartender,’ the visitor finally comes right out with it, ‘and I have to tell you, I’m surprised to be here.’ ‘You’re right about that,’ says St. Peter, ‘we haven’t had one of your kind in quite some time.’”

You never know. That hit the funnybone of the brewery vice president, who started chuckling and had trouble stopping. Encouraged, Pop squared himself up and continued:

“‘Come in, come in,’ says St. Pete. The bartender follows him through the Golden Gate, and there are all the angels, sitting up to a beautiful bar that’s so long it goes out of sight off into the clouds. The spittoons are made of gold, and the bar grub in jars on the back shelf”--Pop sketched this with his hands rather longingly--“is caviar and hearts of beef. Everybody is having drinks, but this being heaven, no one gets out of hand.”

A more general murmur of laughter around the room at that, with Pop wagging his head about the comparative behavior of drinkers. He resumed:

“‘Come along and meet the Proprietor,’ St. Peter says now, and leads the

bartender over to where the saints are sitting in the booths. One booth is bigger and grander than all the others, and he realizes it's the Throne and there's God Himself sitting there bigger than life.

"This is the bartender I was telling you about, Lord," St. Pete says by way of introduction.

"God's voice is the size of a thunderclap, of course. 'Welcome,'" Pop imitated to the best of his lung capacity. He did it again. "'Welcome. We've been waiting for you.'" I still rated it a miracle, but a lifetime across the bar from storytellers now paid off in his delivery of the ending:

"God turns to the person sitting there in the booth at his right hand. 'Jesus, have this fellow show you a thing or two about wine.'"

As laughter swelled, led by that of the vice president who seemed to think it was the more hilarious thing he had ever heard, Pop modestly said "Thanks," and sat down.

"This is so much fun. I could spend forever with you and Rusty."

"Don't get too carried away, princess." Pop himself was looking pleased with life, though, as he navigated the Buick across the Missouri River bridge to the ballpark, the final instalment of our honorific day. The vice president had given him a congratulatory smack on the back after his speech, if that's what it was, at the hotel, and said he would leave word at the ticket office for us to go right in to the company's box seats and he'd meet us there. I was keyed up, more than ready for this. During the drive to the stadium, as Zoe chattered I stayed mum, dreamily sitting there looking ahead to actually seeing the Selectrics, those phantoms of the radio, play baseball, even the hazardous way they historically played it.

Naturally, then, the instant we set foot into the grandstand I fell under the dazzling spell of the emerald-green outfield and the inset diamond of infield. With the usher escorting us as if we were the most important people in the park, Zoe danced down the steps in the lead and Pop shook his head, saying aside to me: "She has more energy than an atomic bomb. How you holding up, kiddo?"

As laughter swelled, led by that of the vice president who seemed to think it was the funniest thing he had ever heard, Pop modestly said "Thanks," and sat down.

→ "This is so much fun. I could spend forever with you and Rusty."

"Don't get too carried away, princess." Pop himself was looking pleased with life, though, regally puffing on a cigarette as he navigated the Buick across the Missouri River bridge to the ballpark, the final instalment of our honorific day. The vice president had given him a congratulatory smack on the back after his speech, if that's what it was, at the hotel, and said he would leave word at the ticket office for us to go right in to the company's box seats and he'd meet us there. I was keyed up, more than ready for this. During the drive to the stadium, as Zoe chattered I stayed mum, dreamily sitting there looking ahead to actually seeing the Selectrics, those phantoms of the radio, play baseball, even the hazardous way they historically played it. 4 So, inevitably, the instant we set foot into the grandstand I fell under the dazzling spell of the emerald-green outfield and the inset diamond of infield; I was an American male, after all. An usher instantly escorted us as if we were the most important people in the park, Zoe prancing in our lead. Watching her bound down the steps ahead of us, Pop shook his head, saying aside to me: "Isn't she a heller. How you holding up, kiddo?"

"Hunnerd percent and then some."

He looked at me oddly. "Since when did you start talking like a shepherd?"

There at the roped-off box, the vice president met us with a glad cry and we took our seats, almost in the third base coach's back pocket, only to hop right back up as the tinny public address system played the national anthem. Then the Selectrics bounded onto the field, and the leadoff hitter for the other team, the Fargo Fargonauts, scuffed his way into the batter's box and it was unmistakably baseball, slower even than fishing.

Like me, Zoe had never been to a game before, and I could tell she was fiendishly finding bits to store away, such as the coach's signs to the batters, which had him touching himself in surprising places and tugging at his earlobes and nose as if keeping track of his sensory parts. I concentrated on what was happening on the field, which was instructive in a way, some of the Great Falls fielders proving to be about as athletic as the recess bunch of us playing Horse.

Chatting away next to Zoe and me, Pop and the vice president shook their heads every so often at the local version of the national pastime. Surprisingly, however, Fargo did not manage to score, inning after inning, despite all the chances the Selectrics handed them.

Then, in the bottom of the fourth, the first Great Falls batter let a pitch hit him in the butt, the sharpest play of the day by the home team. ("Ouch!" Zoe let out a little mouse cry that drew her a look from Pop.) There followed what passed for a rally on a team of anemic hitters, the lineup scratching together a pair of runs out of the hit batsman and some walks and bloop singles. GREAT FALLS 2 VISITORS 0, the score flopped into place in the slots of the centerfield scoreboard, and hope sprang eternal that the Shellactrics, such losers on the radio, might actually reverse that in person.

Not for long. In the top of the fifth, errors produced baserunners, a couple of Fargonauts hit three-run homers, and that was obviously that--another shellacking, to put it disloyally--although there were still four innings to go.

Zoe was starting to shift in her seat on a regular basis, and I confess I was losing interest in every ball and strike. The vice president noticed we were turning into wiggleworms.

"Say, how would you like to see a little of the game from the press box?" He checked with Pop. "If it's all right with you, I'll get the traveling secretary, he can show the kids a good time for a couple of innings." He chuckled meaningfully. "We can have some of our product to keep us company."

Pop eyed the pair of us squirming hopefully and okayed the proposition, telling us in full fatherly fashion to mind our manners while we were there, and the vice president shepherded us through the grandstand all the way up to the press box, then went off to find the traveling secretary.

This was more like it, Zoe and I agreed without having to say so, luxuriating in our lofty new seats. The press box was like a long low shed hanging from the grandstand roof. At the far end was the glassed-in radio booth where the sportscaster could be seen gamely trying to milk excitement from the proceedings on the field. Also at that end of the booth from us, a few sportswriters were occasionally pecking at typewriters, but mostly talking among themselves in bored tones. Which left the two of us in splendid isolation to take in everything now below us, the pool-table green of the ballfield, the players in harmless miniature, the beer vendors going through the stands shouting "Seeelect," the Sunday crowd a universe of details we could peer right down onto, even the bald spots on men and women's hair roots under bleach jobs. We grinned at each other, smug as spies atop the Empire State Building.

"Rusty, what if"--how something like this is possible I still can't explain, but I swear I knew Zoe's mind was about to go some direction not on any compass--"a person couldn't see any of this?"

My heart beat faster. "You mean do a blind bit?"

"I bet all I'd have to do is--"

"Hi there, I'm Irv," fate announced itself to us in a cheery voice. "Glad to have you as guests of the Great Falls Selectrics."

The traveling secretary was a chubby young man with the hearty attitude that so often substitutes for genuine ability; if I didn't miss my guess, he was the son or nephew of someone in the team's management. Smiling broadly, he asked what our names were, and how old we were, and where we were from, right down the list. We answered by rote, Zoe giving him a unblinking gaze throughout this, until he confidently wanted to know if we were having a good time.

This caused her to stare, still as blank as a fish, toward the ballfield and sigh heavily. "I suppose so."

Irv's heartiness diminished somewhat. "What's wrong?" he asked me.

"Nothing. She's blind, is all."

"Oops. I wasn't told that."

The crack of a bat and the groan of the crowd interrupted things. Zoe did a good job of gaping vacantly at the sky. "What was that? Lightning?"

"Don't be afraid, Sis," I provided in my best phony faithful manner, "it was only Fargo hitting another home run."

"Ooh, I wish I could see one of those just once."

By now Irv was glancing around nervously at the circumstances of the press box where a person could fall out and a foul ball could fly in. "Your folks don't mind if you're up here by yourselves?"

"It's just our dad with us, and he's busy with the brewery man." I took the opportunity for a fantasy of my own. "Mom"--Zoe perked up her ears at that unexpected word from me--"is home, tending bar."

"She is? I mean, well, your family is really dedicated to selling beer, isn't it."

"The Select Pleasure Establishment of the Year," Zoe recited. "When our dad read those words to me, I cried, I was so happy." She sniffled a little at the memory of it.

"Well, ah," Irv cast around for anything to head off tears, "would you like a hotdog?"

A swift inrush of breath by Zoe. "I've heard of those! I'd love to taste *just once* one."

"You haven't ever--?" Irv looked at me. I meekly shook my head.

"We'll fix that, right now. Sit tight, don't move." He bounded out of the press box to hunt up a vendor.

Zoe blinked about twenty times and rubbed her eyes. "Whew. All that staring is hard."

"But it's working! Anybody would think you're blind as a bat."

"If my eyeballs fall out of my head from this, I will be."

"Shh. Here he comes."

Irv came hustling back bearing hotdogs. Mine he handed me without trouble, but Zoe's he couldn't decide what to do with as she sat there staring into space. "Let me," I said tenderly, lifting her hand into mid-air like a marionette's and then depositing the hotdog into it.

"Mmm. Mmm." Actually munching away at the roll and weiner, she was really giving this her all. Talking with her mouth full, she wondered:

"You're the traveling secretary. Do you go all around the world?"

Irv laughed, although not much. "Only to Canada, actually. Saskatoon and Medicine Hat." The Saskwatches and the Toppers, two more teams that habitually trounced the Selectrics, I knew those were towns of, not far over the border.

"I bet it's nice," Zoe said dreamily, "flying everywhere, stewardesses bringing you pillows and stuff to eat."

"Actually, we go everyplace on the team bus," came the uncomfortable admission.

"Mister Irv?" She dabbed at some mustard on her chin and deliberately missed, which I thought was overdoing it somewhat. "I was too embarrassed to ask around the brewery man--but what are they doing out there? I mean the baseball players. It sounds like one side throws the ball for a while trying to hit the other side, then the other side gets to throw the ball at them. Doesn't it hurt, all that getting hit with the ball?" She gave me an apologetic stare. "My brother tried to explain the game to me, but he has trouble figuring it out, too."

More perplexed than ever, Irv asked me: "You haven't even heard baseball on the radio?"

"There's a lot of static where we live."

He turned back to Zoe and her big blank eyes. "Well, see--oops, I mean, if you can visualize," he pursed up with the effort of this, "the field is made up of the infield and the outfield, and there are nine players on the field--"

"Lined up, but not very straight, I bet," Zoe put in knowledgably. "I heard somebody say the Selectrics don't have a very good lineup."

"That's," Irv stopped to muster, "that's actually not what a lineup means. The players are more like--scattered around," he summarized as if just noticing this. He was spared further attempt at description by another crack of the bat and one more muted groan from the crowd.

"What was that?" Zoe asked excitedly. "Another home run for the Fargoes?"

I deferred to Irv to see what would happen. "A ground ball to the shortstop," he reported for her benefit.

"Isn't it mean to call him that?" she scolded. "How short is he?"

"What? No, he's only called that because the position he plays is between second base and third, it's, ah, a shorter space than the other infielders cover."

"That doesn't sound fair to the other players. Do they get to take turns at being shortspot?"

"Shortstop, as in he stops the ball from getting through the infield--"

"Aren't they all supposed to? Rusty," she pouted as if betrayed, "you told me the players run all over the place after the ball, but now it sounds like there's only one in charge of stopping it."

"It's a funny game," I said.

Searching around for help, Irv had a sudden inspiration. "You know what," he confided it to me, man to man, as though Zoe were deaf as well as sightless, "this is a terrific human interest story, your sister at her first ballgame. I'll get the Trib writer over here and--"

"NO!"

My outcry set him back on his heels. "No, please don't," I rattled out desperately while Zoe sat frozen, "our dad feels too awful about her being blind. It would ruin his day." Ruin a pair of smart-aleck twelve-year-olds along with it, for sure. I could already hear, drumming in my head, Pop's everlasting admonition: *Don't put beans up your nose*. And from her paralyzed look, Zoe knew as well as I did we had gotten ourselves into a noseful of trouble. What were we thinking--what was *I* thinking--in pulling a stunt like this, today of all days?

"Well, gee," Irv stood on one foot and then the other, "I sure don't want to upset anyone. It's a shame to pass up such good publicity, though. Why don't I go and try talk your dad into--"

Just then a Selectrics batter was called out on strikes, ending the inning. A leather-lunged fan below the press box hollered: "That was ball four if there ever was one! You're blind, ump!"

"Ooh!" Zoe came to life and clapped her hands. "They hire blind people in baseball? That's so kind of them."

While she furnished that distraction, I wildly tried to think of how to get Irv to evaporate. It would take a miracle and I couldn't think how to produce one.

"Could you get me a job here," Zoe was improvising like a trouper but she couldn't keep it up forever,"when I grow up? As a, what is it, umper?"

"Ah, chances aren't good," Irv equivocated. "See, I mean, you can imagine that to be an umpire you have to be able to--"

All of a sudden, as if the entire stadium of people had decided to give up on the Selectrics and go home, people in the grandstand below us and out in the bleachers were getting to their feet, but only standing and rubbing their tired behinds and working various kinks out, and I realized we were saved.

"Sis, remember? It's the seventh inning stretch--"

"All right." Staying in her seat, Zoe stretched her neck like a languid swan, although telepathy told me she was as ready to bolt as I was.

--and we're supposed to go back down to where the brewery man and dad are, aren't we. Let's hurry."

"I'd better go with you," Irv prepared to spring into action. "Miss, if you could manage to take my arm and we'll--"

"That's okay, I'll lead her, I do it all the time at home," I babbled and beat him to Zoe's side by a whisker.