Last Bus to Wisdom

by Ivan Doig
What is that feeling when you’re driving away from people
and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing?--
it’s the too-huge world vaulting us, and it’s good-by.
But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies.

--JACK KEROUAC

On the Road
The town of Gros Ventre was so far from anywhere that you had to take a bus to catch the bus. At that time, remote locales like ours were served by a homegrown enterprise with more name than vehicles, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line and Postal Courier, in the form of a lengthened Chevrolet sedan that held ten passengers besides the driver and the mailbag, and when I nervously went to climb in for the first time ever, the less than ample bus was already loaded with a ladies’ club heading home from an outing to Glacier National Park. The only seat left was in the back next to the mailbag, sandwiched between it and a hefty grayhaired woman clutching her purse to herself as though stage robbers were still on the loose in the middle of the twentieth century.

The swarm of apprehensions nibbling at me had not included this. Sure enough, no sooner did we pull out for the Greyhound station in Great Falls than my substantial seatmate leaned my way enough to press me into the mailbag and asked in that tone of voice a kid so much dreads, “And where are you off to, all by your lonesome?”
How things have changed in the world. I see the young people of today traveling the planet with their individual backpacks and weightless independence. Back then, on the epic journey that determined my life and drastically turned the course of others, I lived out of my grandmother’s wicker suitcase and carried a responsibility bigger than I was. Many, many miles bigger, as it turned out. But that lay ahead, where fame sometimes led the list of attractions and sometimes was cruelly crossed off, and meanwhile I heard myself pipe up with an answer neither she nor I were ready for, that my destination was none other than Pleasantville.

When she cocked her head way to one side and said she couldn’t think where that was, I hazarded, “It’s around New York.”

To this day, I wonder what made me say any of that. Maybe the colorful wall map displaying Greyhound routes COAST TO COAST--THE FLEET WAY, back there in the hotel lobby that doubled as the Gros Ventre bus depot, stuck in my mind. Maybe my imagination answered for me, like being called on in school utterly unready and a whisper of help arrives out of nowhere, right or not. Maybe the truth scared me too much.

Whatever got into me, one thing all too quickly led to another as the woman clucked in concern and expressed, “That’s a long way to go all by yourself. I’d be such a bundle of nerves.” Sizing me up in a way I would come to recognize in people, as if I was either a very brave boy or a very ignorant one, she persisted: “What takes you so awful far?”

“Oh, my daddy works there.”

“Isn’t that interesting. And what does he do in, where’s it, Pleasantville?”

It’s funny about imagination, how it can add to your peril even while it momentarily comes to your rescue. I had to scramble to furnish, “Yeah, well, see, he’s a digester.”
"You don’t say! Wait till I tell the girls about this!" Her alarming exclamation had the other ladies, busy gabbing about mountain goats and summertime snowbanks and other memorable attractions of Glacier National Park, glancing over their shoulders at us. I shrank farther into the mailbag, but my fellow passenger dipped her voice to a confidential level.

"Tries out food to see if it agrees with the tummy, does he," she endorsed enthusiastically, patting her own. "I’m glad to hear it," she rushed on. "So much of what a person has to buy comes in cans these days, I’ve always thought they should have somebody somewhere testing those things on the digestion—that awful succotash about does me in—before they let any of it in the stores. Good for him." Bobbing her head in vigorous approval, she gave the impression she wouldn’t mind that job herself, and she certainly had the capacity for it.

"Uh, actually," maybe I should have but I couldn’t let go of my own imaginative version of the digestive process, "it’s books he does that to. At the Reader’s Digest place."

There was a story behind this, naturally.

I lived with my grandmother, who was cook at the Double W, the big cattle ranch near Gros Ventre owned by the wealthy Williamson family. One of the few sources of entertainment anywhere on the ranch happened to be the shelf of sun-faded Reader’s Digest Condensed Books kept by Meredice Williamson in the otherwise unused parlor of the many-roomed house, and in her vague nice way she permitted me to take them to the cook shack to read, as long as Gram approved.

Gram had more than enough on her mind without policing my reading, and lately I had worked my way through the shipboard chapters of Mr. Roberts, not so condensed that I couldn’t figure out what those World War Two sailors
were peeking at through binoculars aimed to the bathroom on shore where nurses took showers. Probably during that reading binge my eye caught on the fine print Pleasantville NY in the front of the book as the source of digested literature, and it did not take any too much inspiration, for me at least, to conjure a father back there peacefully taking apart books page by page and putting them back together in shortened form that somehow enriched them like condensed milk.

"Why, I have those kind of books!" my fellow passenger vouched, squeezing her purse in this fresh enthusiasm. "I read The Egg and I practically in one sitting!"

"He’s real famous back there at the digest place," I kept on. "They give him the ones nobody else can do. What’s the big fat book, Go Like the Wind--"

"Gone With the Wind, you mean?" She was properly impressed any digester would tackle something like that. "It’s as long as the Bible!"

"That’s the one. See, he got it down to about like yay," I backed that up with my thumb and finger no more than an inch apart.

"What an improvement," she bought the notion with a gratified nod.

That settled matters down, thanks to a war-time story cooked down to the basics of bare-naked nurses and a helping of my imagination. The spacious woman took over the talking pretty much nonstop and I eased away from the U.S. mail a bit in relief and provided uh-huh or huh-uh as needed while the small bus cruised at that measured speed buses always seem to travel at, even in the widest of wide open spaces like Montana’s. There we sat, close as churchgoers, while she chatted away the miles in her somber best dress that must have seen service at funerals and weddings, and me in stiff new bluejeans bought for the trip. Back then, you dressed up to go places.
And willing or not, I was now a long-distance traveler through time as well as earthbound scenery. When I wasn’t occupied providing two-syllable responses to my seatmate, this first leg of the journey was something like a tour of spots of my existence since I was old enough to remember. Leaving behind Gros Ventre and its green covering of cottonwoods, Highway 89 wound past the southmost rangeland of the Two Medicine country, with Double W cattle pastured even here wherever there were not shepherders’ white wagons and the gray sprinkles of ewes and lambs on the foothills in the distance. Above it all, the familiar sawtooth outline of the Rocky Mountains notched the horizon on into Canada. There where the South Fork of English Creek emerged from a canyon, during the Rainbow Reservoir construction job my folks and I crammed into a humpbacked trailer house built for barely two. I had to sleep on the bench seat in back of the table, almost nose to nose with my parents squeezed into their bunk. But the thrill of being right there as bulldozer operators such as my father--the honest-to-goodness one, I mean--rode their big yellow machines like cowboys while building the dam that bottled the creek into the newest lake on earth never wore off.

Next on the route of remembering, however, butted up against a rocky butte right at the county line as if stuck as far out of sight as possible, a nightmare of a place reappeared, the grim rambling lodginghouse and weatherbeaten outbuildings of the county poorfarm--we pronounced it that way, one word, as if to get rid of it fast. Once upon a time my father had graded the gravel road into the place and dozed out ditches and so on while my mother and I spent creepy days watching out a cabin window at the shabby inmates, that lowest saddest category of people, wards of the county, pottering listlessly at work that wasn’t real work, merely tasks to make them do something.
Seeing past the talkative woman to that terrifying institution again where the unluckiest ended up gave me the shivers, but I found I could not take my eyes off the poorfarm and what it stood for. In most ways I was just a dippy kid, but some things get to a person at any age, and I fully felt the whipsaw emotions of looking at the best of life a minute ago, and this quick, the worst of it.

Mercifully the highway soon curved and we passed Freezout Lake with its islands of snowy pelicans, within sight of the one-room Tetonia school where I went part of one year, marked mainly by the Christmas play in which I was the Third Wise Man, costumed in my mother’s pinned-up bathrobe. A little farther on, where the bus route turned its back on the Rockies to cross the Greenfield Canal of the huge irrigation project, I was transported once more to a summer of jigging for trout at canal headgates.

What a haze of thoughts came over me like that as memory went back and forth, dipping and accelerating like a speedometer keeping up with a hilly road. Passing by it all with everything unfamiliar ahead, maybe too much of a youngster to put the right words to the sensation but old enough to feel it in every part, I can only say I was meeting myself coming and going, my shifting life until then intersecting with the onrushing days ahead.

That near-stranger who was me, with his heart in his throat, I look back on with wonder now that I am as grayhaired as my talky companion on the Chevy bus was. The boy I see is a stocky grade-schooler, freckled as a spotted hyena, big for his age but with a lot of room to grow in other ways. Singled out by fate to live a tale he will never forget, I wish for him that things could have been different enough then to let this boy on a bus start off as if on a grand adventure, turned loose in the world at an age when most kids couldn’t unknot themselves from the apron strings of home. He has never been out of Montana, barely even
out of the Two Medicine country, and now the nation stretches ahead of him, as unknown and open to the imagination as Pleasantville. And he knows from Condensed Books that unexpected things, good about as often as bad, happen to people all the time, which ought to be at least interesting, right? On top of it all, if worse comes to worst, tucked in those new bluejeans is a roundtrip ticket home.

But that was the catch. Home to what, from what?

I must have been better than I thought at hiding my double-edged fear, because the chatterbox at my side seemed not to notice anything troubling me until I shifted restlessly in my seat because the object in my pants pocket had slipped down to where I was half sitting on it and was jabbing me something fierce.

“ Aren’t you comfortable? Heavens to Betsy, why didn’t you say so? Here, I’ll make room.” With a grunt she wallowed away from me a couple of inches.

“ Huh-uh, it’s not that,” I had to confess as she watched my contortions with concern, because I still needed to squirm around and reach deep into my pants to do something about the matter. Knowing I dare not show it to her, I palmed the thing and managed to slip it into my jacket pocket sight unseen while I alibied, “ My, ah, good luck charm sort of got caught crosswise. A rabbit’s foot on a key chain,” I thought up, hoping that would ward her off.

“ Oh, those,” she made a face, “ they sell the awful things so many places these days I’m surprised the bunnies have any tootsies left.” With that, to my relief she went back to dishing out topic after topic in her chirpy voice.

“ Donal,” she eventually got around to pondering my name as if it was one of the mysteries of the ages. “ Without the d on the end? That’s a new one on me.”
“It’s Scotch, is why,” I came to life and informed her quick as a flash.

“My daddy said--says the Camerons, see, that’s us, were wearing kilts when the English still were running around buck naked.”

From the way her eyebrows went up, that seemed to impress her. Emboldened, I confided: “You know what else, though? I have an Indian name, too.”

Her eyebrows stayed lofted as for once I leaned in her direction, and half whispered as if it was just our secret: “Red Chief.”

She tittered. “Now you’re spoofing.”

People can be one surprise after another. Here she hadn’t let out a peep of doubt about anything I’d reeled off so far, but now when I told her something absolutely truthful, she clucked her tongue against the roof of her mouth the funny way that means That’s a good one.

“No, huh-uh, honest!” I protested. “It’s because of my hair, see?” My floppy pompadour, almost always in need of a haircut, was about as red as anything from the Crayola box. And if that didn’t earn me a tribal alias, I didn’t know what did. Maybe, as Gram would tell me when I got carried away with something, this was redheaded thinking. It seemed only logical to me, though. If Donal was tagged on me when I came into the world bald as a baby can be, didn’t it make sense to have a spare that described how I turned out? Indians did it all the time, I was convinced. In the case of our family, it would only have complicated things for my listener to explain to her that my alternate name had come from my father’s habit of ruffling my hair, from the time I was little, and saying something like, “You’ve got quite a head on you, Red Chief.”

My seatmate had heard enough, it seemed, as now she leaned toward me and simpered, “Bless your buttons, I have a grandson about your age, a livewire like you. He’s just thirteen.” Eleven going on twelve as I was, I mutely let
“about” handle that, keeping a smile pasted on as best I could while she went on at
tireless length about members of her family and what I supposed passed for
normal life in the America of nineteen fifty-one.

That fixed smile was really growing tired by the time we pulled in to the
Great Falls bus depot and everyone piled out. As the club ladies tendered their
goodbyes to each other, in one last gush my backseat companion wished me a
safe trip and reminded me to be sure to tell my father how much she enjoyed
digested books.

I blankly promised I would, my heart hammering as I grabbed my suitcase
and headed on to the next bus ride which, while way short of coast to coast, was
going to carry me far beyond where even my imagination could reach.
“Why dumb old Wisconsin, though?” I’d tried not to sound like I was whining, at the beginning of this. “Can’t I just stay here while you’re operated on?”

“You know better than that.” Gram went down on her knees with a sharp intake of breath to dig out the wicker suitcase from under her bed. “They need the cook shack for whatever gut-robber Wendell Williamson hires next.”

“Yeah, but--” In a panic I looked around the familiar tight quarters, lodgings for Double W cooks since time immemorial, not much more than a cabin-size room and a few sticks of furniture, yet it had providently housed the pair of us the past two years and if we were being kicked out, temporarily or not, I couldn’t help clinging to whatever I could. “I can stay on the ranch, I mean. Be in the bunkhouse with the haying crew, why not. I bet nobody would care and I wouldn’t take up hardly any room and--”

“For one thing, Donny, you’re not old enough for that.” Trying not be cross with me but awful close to it, she squinted my direction through the bifocals that made her look like her eyes hurt along with the rest of her. “For another,
Wendell may be short on brains, but he’s still not about to let you gallivant around the ranch on your own. So don’t talk just to hear your head rattle, we need to get a move on or you’ll miss the mail bus.” After more or less dusting off the suitcase, which was the best that could be done with wicker, she flopped the thing open on my bed. I didn’t care that it came from the old country with my grandfather’s father or somebody, to me it was just outdated and rickety and I’d look like some ridiculous comic-strip character--PeeWee, the dimwitted little hobo in “Just Trampin’” readily came to mind--carrying it around. Ignoring my fallen face, Gram directed, “Hurry up now. Go pick out your shirts. Three will have to do you, to start with.”

I stalled. “I don’t know what to take. What’s the dumb weather like back there?”

“About like anyplace else,” she said less than patiently, “summer in the summer, winter in the winter. Get busy.”

Grudgingly I went over to the curtained-off nook that substituted for our closet. “Fuck and phooey,” I said under my breath as I sorted through shirts. I was at that stage--part of growing up, as I saw it--where cusswords were an attraction, and I’d picked up this expression from one of the cowhands being sent out in the rain to ride herd on stray cattle all day. It applied equally well to a dumb bus trip to Wisconsin, as far as I was concerned.

“What was that?” Gram queried from across the room.

“Fine and dandy,” I mumbled as if I’d been talking to the shirts, and grabbed a couple I usually wore to school and my dressy western one. “Put that on to wear on the bus,” Gram directed from where she was aggregating my underwear and socks out of the small dresser we shared, “and these,” surprising me with the new blue jeans still in store folds. “People will think you’re a bronc rider.”
Oh sure, a regular Rags Rasmussen, champion of the world at straddling saddle broncs, that’d be me, riding the bus like a hobo with a broken-down suitcase. Knowing enough not to say that out loud, I stuck to: “I bet they haven’t even got rodeos in Wiss-con-sun.”

“Oh don’t whine.” Cheering me up was a lost cause, but she made the effort. “Honest to goodness, you’ll look swayve and debo-nure when you get on the bus.” I took that as a joke in more ways than one, suave and debonair the farthest from how I could possibly feel, packaged up to be shipped like something out of a mail-order catalogue. She gave me a wink, not natural to her, and that didn’t help either.

Folding things smartly like the veteran of many moves that she was, she had the suitcase nearly packed while I changed into the stiff pants and the purple shirt with sky blue yoke trimming and pearl snap buttons, which ordinarily would have lifted my mood. Back and forth between gauging packing space and my long face, Gram hesitated. “You can take the moccasins if you want to.”

“ar-oh I guess so.” Truth told, I didn’t care what else went in the hideous suitcase as long as those did. The pair of decorated Blackfoot moccasins rested between our beds at night, so whichever one of us had to brave the cold linoleum to go to the toilet could slip them on. Each adorned with a prancing fancy-dancer figure made up of teeny beads like drops of snow and sky, they were beauties, and that couldn’t be said for any other of our meager stuff. Gram somehow had acquired them while she was night cook at the truck stop in Browning, the rough and tough reservation town, before she and I were thrown together. By rights, she deserved them. My conscience made a feeble try. “Maybe you’ll need them in the--where you’re going?”

“Never you mind. They’ll have regular slippers there, like as not,” she fibbed, I could tell. “And after”--staying turned away from me, she busied herself
more than necessary tucking the moccasins into the suitcase—"the nuns will see to things, I'm sure."

After. After she had some of her insides taken out. After I had been sent halfway across the country, to a place in Wisconsin I had never even heard of. My voice breaking, I mustered a last protest. "I don't want to go and leave you."

"Don't be a handful, please," she said, something I heard from her quite often. She took off her glasses, one skinny earpiece at a time, to wipe her eyes. "I'd rather take a beating than have to send you off like this, but it can't be helped." She blinked as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from watching. "These things happen, that's how life is. I can hear your granddad now, 'We just have to hunch up and take it.'" Gram kept in touch with people who were no 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 now as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, she managed a trembling smile. "Nell's bells, boy, don't worry so."

I didn't give in. "Maybe I could just go to the hospital with you and the nuns would let me live with them and--"

"That's not how something like this is done," she said tiredly, "don't you understand at all? Kitty and Dutch are the only relatives we have left, like it or not. You have to go and stay with them for the summer while I get better," she put it to me one last time in just so many words. "You'll do fine by yourself," she maintained. "You're on your own a lot of the time around here anyway."

She maybe was persuading herself, but not me. "Donny," she begged, reading my face, "it is all I can think to do."
"But I don’t know Aunt Kitty and him," I rushed on. "I’ve never even seen a picture. And what if they don’t recognize me at the bus station back there and we miss each other and I get lost and--"

Gram cut me off with a look. As red-headed as a kid could be, a wicker suitcase in hand, I was not especially likely to escape notice, was I. No mercy from her on the rest of it, either. "I seem to remember," she said flatly, "telling you not five minutes ago that I wrote down their address and phone number and tucked it in your memory book, just in case. Quit trying to borrow trouble, boy."

"Yeah, well, I still don’t know them," I muttered. "Why couldn’t they come in a car and get me, and see you and help you go to the hospital and things like that?"

This caused her to pause. "Kitty and I didn’t always make music together, from girls on," she finally came up with, hardly the most enlightening of explanations. "The great Kate, you’d think her full name was back then, the stuck-up little dickens," she sighed, sad and exasperated in the same breath. "She always did have her own ways, and I had mine, and that was that. So we haven’t much kept in touch. I didn’t see any sense in trying, until now," Gram drew what seemed to be another hard breath, "because when that sister of mine gets a certain notion in her head she can’t be budged. I suppose that’s how she’s got to where she is in life. And your Uncle Dutch is"--a longer pause--"something else, from what I hear."

Whatever that was supposed to mean, she lost no time changing the subject, saying my big trip was a chance that did not come often in life, really, to get out in the world and see new sights and scenes and meet people and have experiences and all that. "You could call it a vacation, in a way," she tried hopefully.
“It’s vacation here,” I pouted, meaning school was out and I had the run of the ranch and could do pretty much what I wanted without being shipped off to complete strangers back east in Wisconsin.

“Oh, Donny,” she groaned and let loose with, “I swear to Creation, I don’t know up from down anymore,” one of her standard sayings when things became too much for her. Outbursts of that sort scared the daylights out of me at first, but I had learned such squalls passed as quickly as they came. Certain complaints gathered on a person with age, it seemed. This woman who meant everything to me carried the burden of years and deprivation along with all else life had thrust on her, including me. As much as I adored her and tried to fit under her wing without causing too much trouble, my grandmother was from another universe of time, another century, actually. My six grades of schooling already were twice what she ever received in the sticks of North Dakota, if North Dakota even had sticks. She read recipe books with her finger, her lips silently moving, and had to call on me to help out with unfamiliar words such as pomegranate. Not that she lacked a real vocabulary of her own, for besides sayings that fit various moods and occasions, she possessed a number of expressions that edged right up to cussing, without quite qualifying. The way she’d meet something dubious with “That’s a load of bulloney” always sounded to me suspiciously close.

At least she didn’t resort to any of that now, instead telling me to temper my attitude in what for her were measured terms. “It’s not the end of the world,” a look straight at me came with the words. “School starts right after Labor Day, you know that, and this is only till then. Kitty”—she loyally amended that—“your Aunt Kitty will make sure you’re back in time, and I’ll be up and around by then, and we’ll get on with life good as new, you wait and see.”
But I didn’t need to wait to see, plain and simple, that if what was happening to us wasn’t the end of our world, it was a close enough imitation. Just the sight of Gram, the way her apron bagged on her never very strong build, caused a catch in my throat. There was not much of her to spare to surgery, by any measure. And while I did not fully understand the “female trouble” discovered in her by some doctor at the Columbus Hospital in Great Falls, I grasped that the summerlong convalescence in the pavilion ward run by the nuns made her--us--a charity case. Maybe we weren’t poorer than lint, like the worst-off people, but apparently not far from it. If that, plus losing our only shelter on earth--the cook shack, for what it was--did not add up to the edge of disaster, even without my banishment to a town in Wisconsin I wasn’t even sure how to spell, I didn’t know what did. This awful day, the second worst of my life, both of us were becoming medical casualties. Gram was the one with the drastic condition, but I was sick at heart. For I knew if this operation of hers did not come out right, we were goners, one way or the other. If something went wrong, if at the very least she could no longer work, she would be put in the poorfarm as down-and-out people, those wards of the county, were. And what I knew with terrible certainty would happen to me then was keeping me awake nights.

Argument over as far as she was concerned, Gram gave 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 boss 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, bunkhouse, barn, sheds, corrals, and the rest of the sprawl of the Double W from the extravagant structure in “ranchin’ mansion” style that was the stronghold of the Williamsonsons. 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 white-painted pile of house 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 ranch headquarters, the so-called boss 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 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 that 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 at least, the rest maybe the kind of hope only someone at that age can have. “Hunch up and take it” might be 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.

Getting ready, I smoothed open the autograph book. A memory book, was another name for it, because collecting autographs really was an excuse to have people dab in some lasting 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 sentiments 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 forty-one 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 set off for the office down the wood-paneled hall.

Only to slow to a halt as ever at the display table in the hallway nook. The show-off table, Gram called it, there to impress visitors with items discovered on the ranch from pockets of the past. I never passed without looking the fascinating assortment over. A powder horn and bullet pouch from the days of the fur trappers. A long-shanked jinglebob spur a cowboy lost on a trail drive from Texas. A big bone of some beast no longer seen on earth. All stuff like that until the array of Indian things, spearpoints and hide scrapers and flint skinning knives and other remnants of buffalo hunts long before Double W cattle grazed the same land. And resting there prime amid those, the object I longed for, the dark black arrowhead that was my find.

I was heartbroken when Gram made me turn it in. I'd been hunting magpies in the willows when I spotted the glassy sparkle in the gravel bottom of the creek crossing. When I reached in the water and picked it up, the glistening triangular shard of rock was sharper and more pointed than other arrowheads that sometimes surfaced after winter frosts or a big rain. Much more beautiful, too, solid black and slick as glass--which actually it was, I later learned, a hardened volcanic lava called obsidian from somewhere far away--when I stroked it in the palm of my hand. My excitement at gaining such a treasure lasted until I burst into the cook house and showed it to Gram, and was given the bad news.
“Donny, I’d rather pull my tongue out than tell you this, but you can’t keep it.”

“W-why not? That’s not fair!” Dismay sent my voice high. “I’m the one who found it, and if I hadn’t, it’d still be there in the creek and the haying crew might break it when they pull the stacker across, and so I saved its life, sort of, and I don’t see why I can’t--”

“You can talk that way until you’re blue, but I just don’t like your having something that rightfully might be theirs,” she laid down the law as she saw it. “Sparrowhead makes the riders turn in anything like this they come across, you know that.” I absolutely could not see why the Williamsons were entitled to something that had fallen to the ground probably before the ranch even existed, but Gram’s mind was made up. “Go on up to the house and give it to him.”

“Good eye, Buckshot.” was all the thanks I got from Wendell Williamson when I did so. “Lucky to find one of these. It’s pre-Columbian.” He liked to say things like that to show he had been to college, although Gram claimed it only went to prove he was an educated fool besides a natural-born one. Anyway, when I looked up the meaning of the phrase in the Webster’s dictionary Meredice Williamson kept in the bookcase with the condensed books, I was awed. Older than Columbus! That made the black arrowhead even more magical for me. Just think, it had lain there all those hundreds of years, until as the man himself said I was lucky enough to be the one to find it. Equally unlucky, it had to be admitted, to be forced to part company with it. Well, that would not have to happen for good if my gamble of calling on the boss of the Double W paid off in that way, too.

With hope and trepidation, I now approached the office. 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. The office 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, 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. “Mered--Mrs. Williamson already put in her name and a sort of ditty for me.”

That changed his look, not necessarily for the better. “She did you the honor, did she. You must have caught her when she wasn’t packing up for Beverley Hills again.” Thinking it over to the very end, he reluctantly put out a paw-like hand, saying he guessed he’d better keep up with her any way he could.

Taking the album 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*

*in the great state of Montana*

“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 tamest workhorses on the place, everyone’s favorites, Prince and Blackie, 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 not much harder than that, simply walking 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 at driving the easy pair of horses, 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. To my way of thinking, how could a plan be more of a cinch than that?

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 an army tank? I stood there, mouth open but no words adequate. 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 workhorses, 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 down the hallway. I can’t account for what happened next except that I was so mad I could hardly see straight. Without even thinking, as I passed the show-off table and its wonders for the last time, I angrily snatched the black arrowhead and thrust it as deep in my jeans pocket as it would go.

Gram watched in concern as I came back in to the cook shack 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.”
And here I was, stepping up into what I thought of as that real bus, with GREYHOUND--THE FLEET WAY TO TRAVEL in red letters on its side and as if to prove it, the silver streamlined dog of the breed emblematically running flat-out as if it couldn’t wait to get there. Maybe not, but I had two days and a night ahead of me before climbing off at the depot in farthest Wisconsin, and that felt to me like the interminable start of the eternity of summer ahead.

At the top of the steps I stopped short, not sure where to sit. The seats in long rows must have been easily four times as many as in the Rocky Mountain Stage Line sedan, the roomy high-backed sets on each side of the aisle making my experience of riding from Gros Ventre squashed between the mailbag and the bulky woman seem like three in a bed with room for two, as Gram would have said. This was a vehicle for a crowd, and it already was more than half full. Way toward the back as though it was their given place sat some soldiers, two together on one side of the aisle and their much more sizable companion, who needed the space, in the set of seats across from them. Slumped in front of them was a bleary rumpled guy in ranch clothes, by every sign a sheepherder on a spree, who appeared to have been too busy drinking to shave for a week or so. Across from him, like a good example placed to even him out, rested a nun in that black
headgear outlined in white, her round glasses firm on her set face. Then toward
the middle were scattered leathery older couples who I could tell were going home
to farms or ranches or little towns along the way, and some vacationers dressed to
the teeth in a way you sure don’t see these days, coats and ties on the men and
color-coordinated outfits for the women. One and all, the already seated
passengers were strangers to me, some a lot stranger than others from the looks of
them, which didn’t help in making up my mind. Much more traveled than I ever
hoped to be, Gram had told me in breaking the news that I was being shipped
halfway across the country by Greyhound, “The dog bus gets all kinds, so you
just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself.” Yeah, but where?

Now I noticed the dark-haired woman nearest me, with her name sewn in
red on her crisp blouse in waitress fashion, although I couldn’t quite read it.
Wearing big ugly black-rimmed glasses that made her look like a raccoon, she
took short quick drags on a cigarette while reading a movie magazine folded over.
She was sitting alone, but her coat was piled in the seat beside her, not exactly a
friendly signal. Robbed of that spot—I’d have bet my bottom dollar that she knew
how to be good company, snappy when talking was called for but otherwise
minding her own business; some people simply have that look—I kept scanning
the seats available among the other passengers, but froze when it came to
choosing. It was a bad time to turn bashful, but I decided to take potluck and
ducked into an empty set of seats a row behind the nonstop smoker.

And no sooner had done so than I changed my mind. About potluck, I
mean. What was I going to do if the bus filled up and whoever sat next to me was
anything like the nonstop talker about the digestive system? Or if the drunk
sheepherder toward the back, recognizing me as somebody fresh off the ranch--
my shirt said something like that--came staggering up the aisle to keep me
company? Or the nun decided to sneak up and get going on me about God? I
didn’t know squat about religion, and this was not the time to take that on. It panicked me to think about trying to keep up with conversations like those all the way to the next stop, Havre, or who knew, endless hours beyond that.

I bolted back out of the bus, drawing a glance between rapidfire puffs as I passed the seated woman.

Luckily I was in time. The lanky driver in the Greyhound blue uniform and crush hat like a pilot’s was just then shutting the baggage compartment in the belly of the bus. “Sir? Mister?” I pleaded. “Can I get my suitcase?”

He gave me one of those Now what? looks, the same as when he’d punched my ticket and realized I was traveling by myself at my age.

Straightening up, he asked with a frown, “Not parting company with us, are you? There’s no refund once you’re checked onto the bus, sonny.”

“How, uh, no,” I denied, “nothing like that,” although jumping back on the Chevy bus for its return trip to Gros Ventre was mighty tempting. “I need to get something out, is all.” He hesitated, eyeing the profusion of suitcases in the compartment. “Something I need helluva bad.”

“That serious, is it?” He seemed more amused than compelled by my newfound swearing skill. “Then I guess I better pitch in. But make it quick. I can do my tire check while you’re at that. Remind me, which bag is yours?”

When I pointed, he gave me another one of those looks. “Don’t see that kind much any more.”

Kneeling on the concrete while the traffic of the busy Great Falls depot went on around me—“NOW LOADING FOR BUTTE IN BAY THREE,” the loudspeaker intoned, “ALL ABOARD FOR BUTTE”; why couldn’t Aunt Kitty and her Dutch live there, even, instead of dumb Wisconsin?—I unlatched Gram’s old suitcase and dug out the autograph book, stuffing it in the pocket of my corduroy jacket. While I had the suitcase open, I reluctantly tucked the black arrowhead in
under the moccasins; I hated not to be carrying it as a lucky piece, but I didn’t want to risk being jabbed in my sitting part all the way to Wisconsin, either.

Missions accomplished, I returned the suitcase to the baggage compartment as best I could, then as I headed to climb back on the bus, I nearly bumped into the driver coming around the front. I still was on his mind, apparently. “Say, I saw you come straight off the Rocky bus--did you get your Green Stamps?”

I plainly had no idea what he was talking about. “They’re a special deal this summer, long-distance passengers get them for their miles. You’re going quite a ways across the country, aren’t you?” I sure was, off the end of the known world. “Then, heck, go in and show your ticket to that prissy agent,” he jerked a thumb toward the terminal. “Hustle your fanny, we’re leaving before long.”

My fanny and I did hustle inside, where I peered in every direction through the depot crowd before spotting the ticket counter. Miraculously no one was there ahead of me, and I barged up to the agent, a pinchfaced woman with a sort of yellowish complexion as if she hadn’t been away from the counter for years, and rattled off to her while waving my ticket, “I’m supposed to get Green Stamps, the driver said so.”

“Those.” She sniffed, and from under the counter dug out sheets of stamps, about the size you would put on a letter but imprinted with a shield bearing the fancy initials S&H, and sure enough, sort of pea green. Next she checked my ticket against a chart. “Sixteen hundred and one miles,” she reported, looking me over as though wondering whether I was up to such a journey. Nonetheless she began counting out, telling me I was entitled to fifty stamps, a full sheet, for every hundred miles I was ticketed for. As the sheets piled up, I started to worry.
“Uhm, I forgot to ask. How much do they cost?”

“What the little boy shot at and missed,” she answered impassively, still dealing out green sheets.


“Believe it or not,” she muttered, little knowing that was the most convincing reply she could have given me.

Pausing, she squared the sheets into a neat stack. “That’s sixteen,” she announced, studying the chart again with a pinched frown. The one extra mile evidently constituted a problem for her. “What the hey,” she said, and tossed on another green sheet.

“Wh-what do I do with them next?” I had to ask as I gathered the stack of stamps off the counter. Handing me what she called a collector book, which was right up my alley, she explained that I was supposed to stick a sheet onto each page and when enough pages were filled, I could trade in the collection in for merchandise at any store that hung out an S&H sign. “You’ve always wanted a lawn chair, I bet,” she said expressionlessly.

“Uh, sure.” Shoving the green stamp haul into my opposite jacket pocket from the autograph book, I turned to dash to the bus. Behind me I heard her recite, “God bless you real good, sonny.”

Already this was some trip, I thought to myself as I dodged through the depot crowd, enriched with a pocketful of trading stamps and a blessing, the latter I was not really sure I was glad of because that implied I might need it. In any case, I scurried out and vaulted back into the impressive silver-sided Greyhound. The same seat was available and I dropped into it as if I owned it.
There. I felt more ready. Now if I was trapped with someone who wanted to talk my ear off about canned succotash or similar topics, I could head them off by asking for their autograph and get them interested in my collection. It was at least a plan.

As the loudspeaker announced the last call for the eastbound bus, which was us, I waited tensely for whatever last-minute passenger would come panting aboard and, as surely as a bad apple falls tardily from a tree, plop into the seat next to mine. Someone probably dumb as Sparrowhead, arriving out of breath but that would not stop him or her from telling me all the travails that made them late, I could just hear it coming.

Sure enough, the sound of that someone setting foot on the steps. I reared up half out of my seat to see, startling the driver as he climbed into the bus. Guiltily I sank back down. Shaking his head to himself, he did a passenger count, starting with me, then slid in behind the steering wheel and started the bus. The next thing I knew, we were pulling out of Great Falls and lurching onto the highway that ended, as far as I was concerned, a million miles from Gram and the cook shack.

Once underway, the bus lived up to that tirelessly loping emblem on its side, cruising right along, I had to admit. In short order, the country along the highway turned into all grainfield, miles of green winter wheat striped with the summer fallow of strip farming and tufted here and there with low trees planted around farm buildings as windbreaks. I stayed glued to the window, which for a while showed the blue-gray mountains I had been used to all my life, jagged tops white with snow left over from winter. All too soon, the familiar western peaks vanished behind a rise and did not come back. Apparently everything this side of the Rockies was dwarfed in comparison and only any good for plowing, not a
cow or horse anywhere in sight. I could just imagine Wisconsin, the whole place a cornfield or something equally boring.

Watching the miles go by, with no company but my indistinct reflection, loneliness caught up with me. It had been held off by the woman talking a blue streak at me on the ride from Gros Ventre and then the confusion of getting settled on the Greyhound, but now if I could have seen myself, hunched in that seat amid the rows of passengers confined within themselves by the cocoon of travel, surely I matched the picture of despair in one of those sayings of Gram’s that said it so well, lonely as an orphan on a chamber pot.

Eleven going on twelve is a changeable age that way. One minute you are coltish and sappy, and the next, you’re throwing a fit because you’re tired or hungry or something else upsetting is going on inside you. Right then my mood churned up a storm. Things had been tossed turvy, and although I was the one cast out alone onto a transcontinental bus, home was running away from me, and had been ever since some doctor’s dire words to Gram. For if I lost the last of my family to the poorfarm or worse, with that went everything connected to the notion of home as I had known it, and I would be bound for that other terrifying institution, the orphanage.

Full of instinct and intrigue as a schoolyard is, kids grasp to a terrifying extent what losing the world you have known means. Too many times had I heard the whisper race through recess, jackrabbit telegraph, that So-and-so was “going to the other side of the mountains.” Packed up and dumped in the state-run orphanage over at Butte, across the Continental Divide where the sun went down and so did kids’ lives; news that always came as grim in its way as a hushed remark at a funeral. Designation as an orphan truly did sound to me fatal in a way, the end of a childhood in which my real parents literally moved earth,
and would have done the same with heaven had it been within immediate reach, to keep me always with them no matter how unhandy the circumstances.

So, right then it did not seem at all imaginary that life was turning against me, Gram and me both, to an awful extent. I resented the human plumbing or whatever it was in her case that produced this situation. If that nun back there playing with her beads or whatever wanted to do something useful, why didn’t she pray up a better system of women’s insides so a boy wouldn’t worry himself sick about losing his grandmother, all he had, to some kind of operation?

And getting booted out of the cook shack and off the ranch like we were nobody—if that wasn’t enough cause for resentment, I didn’t know what qualified. I could have driven that stacker team in haying time just fine, and if Wendell Williamson didn’t think so, he needed his sparrow head examined.

The list didn’t stop there. These shirttail relatives I was going to be stuck with for an endless summer—why hadn’t this Kitty and Dutch pair, the Brinkers by name, ever visited us, so I’d at least know what they looked like? Even if they were dried-up old coots who probably kept their teeth in a glass at night, as I figured they must be, it would have helped if I could picture them at all.

I could have gone on and on like that, nose against the window and feeling sorry for myself, but that gets old, too. Stirring myself so plowed fields would not bore me out of my skull, to be doing anything I took out the autograph book. It opened to *In the game of life, don’t lose your marbles.* Right. If you were lucky enough to own any marbles to start with. Moodily I moved on from the Double W brand of advice, flipping to the front of the book. Naturally, Gram’s was the very first inscription. Wouldn’t a person think, in a nice autograph book that she’d spent real money for, she would have carefully written something like *To my one and only grandson*... Instead, in her scrawl that barely did for grocery lists:
My love for you shall flow
Like water down a tater row.
Your Gram
Dorie Blegen

I was finding out that people came up with surprising things like that almost automatically when presented with the autograph book. It was as if they couldn’t resist putting down on the page--their page, everyone got his own, I made sure--something of themselves, corny though it might be, and happily signing their name to it. Wistfully thumbing through the inscriptions, I lost myself for a while in the rhymes and remarks of my school friends and teachers and the ranch hands and visitors like the veterinarian and when I hit it lucky, a bigshot like Senator Ridpath when he spoke in the Gros Ventre park on the Fourth of July. That was my prize one so far; the Senator was surely famous, if for nothing more than having been in office almost forever. What a pretty piece of writing his was as I looked at it with admiration again, every letter of the alphabet perfectly formed and the lines about the pen being mightier than the sword composed there as balanced as a poem.

The Senator’s elegant citation was even more fitting than he could have known, because along with the autograph book, Gram had given me my very own ballpoint pen--not the plain old type then that was an ink stick with a cap on the end, but a fancy new retractable kind called a Kwik Klik. It wrote in a purplish hue that seemed to me the absolute best color for an autograph collection, and I made sure to have people use it when composing their ditties rather than just any old writing instrument. Of course, there were exceptions--Wendell Williamson was represented in that deathly black Quink fountain-pen stuff--but page to page, the creamy paper showed off the same pleasing ink, like a real book, thanks to my fervor for the Kwik Klik.
And then and there, the way a big idea sometimes will grow from a germ of habit, it dawned on me that a dog bus full of passengers, as captive as I was, possibly presented a chance to fill a good many more of those pages with purplish inscriptions.

Sitting up as if I’d had a poke in the ribs, I snuck a look toward the back of the bus for likely candidates. The soldiers were talking up a storm, joking and laughing in their own world. The tourists yakked on across the aisles, a gauntlet of talk. A number of passengers were napping. The only ones not occupied, so to speak, were the nun and the sheepherder.

Drunk or not, the sheepherder immediately looked a whole lot better to me.

Mustering my courage, I stacked my jacket to save my seat and started down the aisle, swaying when the bus did. Saying “Excuse me” a dozen times, I made my way past pair after pair of aisle-sitting conversationists. I swear, the sheepherder read my mind, dragging himself upright and lopsidedly grinning at me as if he was thirsty for company.

Just as I reached his vicinity, the bus rocked around a curve and I lurched and lost my balance, dropping into an empty seat like a pinball into a slot. The one directly behind the sheepherder.

The big soldier who had been sitting by himself raised a bushy eyebrow at my abrupt arrival beside him. “Hi,” I piped up as I recovered, the top of my head barely reaching the shoulder patch of his uniform.

“What’s doing, buddy?” he wondered.

My voice high, I hurriedly told him, displaying the autograph book. His eyebrow stayed parked way up there, but he sort of smiled and broke into my explanation.
“Loud and clear, troop. If there’s a section in there for Uncle Sam’s groundpounders, you’ve got them up the yanger here.” Holding out a hand that swallowed mine, he introduced himself. “Turk Turco.” Rubbernecking for all they were worth, the soldiers across the aisle sent me two-fingered salutes and chipped in their names, Gordon in the near seat and Mickey by the window.

“Mine’s Donny,” I said to keep things simple. “Where you guys going?”

The one called Gordon snickered. “Sending us east to go west, that’s the army for you. We catch the train at Havre. Then it’s Fort Lewis, good old Fort Screw Us, out by Seattle. And after that it’s,” he drew out the next word like it was sticky, “Ko-re-a.”

“Where we’ll get our asses shot off,” Mickey said glumly.

Turk sharply leaned over, just about obliterating me. “Lay off that, will you, numb nuts. You’re scaring the kid. Not to mention me.”

The gulping thought that the Korean war, which like any American youngster of 1951 I grasped only from G.I. Joe comic books and radio reports, could claim the lives of people I knew face to face, even on short acquaintance like this, had never occurred to me. It struck with lightning force now. Glancing guiltily around at the three soldiers, fresh-faced in their pressed khakis, I almost wished I had lit in with the mussy sheepherder, who could be heard carrying on a muttered conversation with himself in front of us. The nun had cast a severe look at me as I flew past, then disappeared into her holy hood again.

“I’m just saying,” Mickey stayed insistent. “Think about it, there’s Chinese up the wazoo over there”—I was fairly sure that must be the same as up the yanger and could be not good—“must be a million of the bastards, then there’s us.”

“And the whole sonofabitching rest of the army,” Turk pointed out.

“C’mon, troop, this is no time to come down with a case of nervous in the service.”
Mickey was not to be swayed. "I wish to Christ they were shipping us to some base in Germany where we wouldn’t get our asses shot off, is all."

That startled me. Germans still were the bad guys from the last war, as far as I was concerned. Fiends all the way up to Hitler, and down to the enemy soldiers my family had a personal reason to hate forever. The Chinese were an enemy I had not quite caught up with, but from being a little kid during the World War Two war news I had built up fantasies full of hostility against anything German.

"Yeah, right, Mick," Gordon rolled his eyes about Germany for me. "Over there where you could put on your jockstrap spats and wow the frauleins."

"Go take a flying fuck at a rolling donut, Gordo."

I was starting to realize what a long way I had to go to be accomplished in cussing. If the nun was lucky, she was deaf, around these guys.

Snickering again, Gordon now maintained that if anybody’s ass was going to get shot off, it could not possibly be his. "Mine’s gonna be the size of a prune, from the pucker factor." All three soldiers roared at that, and while I didn’t entirely get it, I joined in as best I could.

When the laughter died down, I figured maybe I ought to contribute something. "My daddy was in the war," I announced brightly. "The last one. He was on one of those boat kind of things at Omaha Beach."

"A landing craft?" Turk whistled through his teeth, looking at me a different way. "Out the far end!" he exclaimed, which took me a moment to savvy as soldier talk for outstanding and then some. "D-Day was hairy. Came back in one piece, did he? Listen up, Mick."

I didn’t have the heart to tell them the truth about that. "He always, uh, says he’s in pretty good shape for the shape he’s in."

Gordon leaned across the aisle. "So what’s your old man do?"
"He’s a"--it’s amazing what a habit something like this gets to be--"cropduster."

"No crap?" Gordon sounded as envious as that remark could be made to be. Still, he grinned at me his smart alec way. “Grainfield flyboy, is he. Then how come you have to travel by dog? Why doesn’t he just give you a lift in his airplane?"

"It’s too far. See, I’m going to visit my rich aunt and uncle. They live back east. In Decatur, Illinois."

"Never heard of the place. What’s there?"

"The Cat plant.” That drew three blank looks. “Where they make bulldozers and graders and stuff like that.” I was developing a feel for the perimeter of story that could be got away with. A detail or two expanded the bounds to a surprising extent, it seemed like.

So, there it went, again. Out of my mouth something unexpected, not strictly true but harmlessly made up. A storying, maybe it could be called. For I still say it was not so much that I was turning into an inveterate liar around strangers, I simply was overflowing with invention. The best way I can explain it is that I was turned loose from myself. Turned loose, not by choice, from the expected behavior of being “a good kid,” which I was always a little restless about anyway. “You’re being a storiern,” Gram would warn whenever I got carried away spinning a tale about one thing or another. Now, with no check on my enthusiasm when it started playing tricks upstairs in me--the long bus trip seemed to invite daydreaming, mine merely done out loud--I was surprising myself with the creations I could come up with. I mean, what is imagination but mental mischief of a kind, and why can’t a youngster, particularly one out on his own, protectively occupy himself with invention of that sort before maturity works him over? One
thing sure, the soldiers on their way to their own mindstretching version of life ahead did not doubt my manufactured one in the least.

Shoulders shaking with laughter, Mickey forcefully nudged Gordon. “If it was the cat house, you’d know all about it, huh, Gordo?”

Gordon turning the air blue in response, Turk nudged me for the autograph book. “Somebody’s got to go first.” I instructed him in the mystery of the Kwik Klik, and with it in hand, he balanced the book on his knee and wrote for a good long time. When he was through, I passed things across to Gordon, who looked over Turk’s entry with a mocking expression but didn’t say anything before writing his own.

Mickey balked when the autograph collection reached him. “I don’t know about this happy horseshit of writing in here. What am I supposed to say?”

“Pretend it’s your coloring book,” Gordon wisecracked. But Turk took right in on the reluctant penman. “Get with the program, troop. If the kid’s good enough to give a damn about us, the least we can do is put some ink on the page for him.”

Without looking up, Mickey did so, and after laboring through, passed the autograph book and pen across to me. Gratefully thanking the three of them up, down, and sideways, I retreated to my own seat to catch my breath.

Giddy with success, I read the soldiers’ inscriptions over and over, the pages as distinct from each other as handwriting could possibly be.

\[\text{Life is like a deck of cards.} \]
\[\text{When you are in love it's } \spadesuit\text{s.} \]
\[\text{Before you are married it’s } \clubsuit\text{s.} \]
\[\text{After you are married it's } \diamondsuit\text{s.} \]
\[\text{When you are dead it's } \heartsuit\text{s.} \]
May your long suits be hearts and diamonds.
Alvin “Turk” Turco, Pfc.

TIME FLIES LIKE AN ARROW,
WHY I’VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD.
FRUIT FLIES LIKE A BANANA,
NOW THAT SOUNDS PRETTY GOOD.
Gordon Jones
General Nuisance, US Army

Mickey O’Fallon is my name
America is my nation
Butte, Montana, is my home
Korea is my destination

Like the Turk one had said, Out the far end! Three fresh pages of inscriptions, just like that. Now, though, I faced a dilemma. Stretch my luck and go back for Kwik Klik tidbits from other passengers, or quit while I was ahead? The bus was belting along through nondescript country with nothing much to show for itself except a brushy creek and flat buttes, so Havre or any place else was not in the picture for a while yet, and I had time if I wanted to brave the gauntlet of strangers again. But if I wasn’t mistaken, the nun had looked about ready to pounce as I hustled past from keeping company with the swearing soldiers. Was it worth it to risk falling into her clutches, or for that matter, end up with some talky tourist bunch like the ladies’ club on the Chevy bus?

Dumb me. While I was hung up trying to decide, blue puffs rose steadily as ever from the passenger in front of me as if she was putting up smoke signals.

Making up my mind, I leaned way forward to the crack between the seats. I could just see the side of the woman’s face as she smoked away, eyes down on her movie magazine.
“Uh, can I bother you?” I spoke into the narrow gap. “Talk to you about something, I mean? It’ll only take a jiffy. Honest.”

Somewhere between curious and skeptical, she took a peek at me through the crack. “A jif, huh? In that case, I guess come on up and let’s hear it.”

Scooping her coat off the seat and stuffing it down beside her purse as I slid in next to her, she gave me a swift looking-over. Up close, she herself was eye-catching in spite of the raccoon glasses, I was somewhat surprised to see, with big dark eyes that went with her glossy black hair, and quite a mouth, full-lipped with cherry-red lipstick generously applied. From the sassy tilt of her head as she sized me up, I could imagine her giving as good as she got if someone smarted off to her, which was not going to be me if I could help it.

Before I could utter a word, she dove right in. “What’s on your mind, buttercup? You’re quite a jumping bean, you know. First time on a bus?”

Uncomfortably I owned up to “Almost.”

“Takes some getting used to, especially in the sitdown bones,” she said with a breezy laugh. Just then a flashy Cadillac of the kind called a greenback special--Wendell Williamson had one like it, of course--passed us like the wind. “What has big ears and chases cars?” she playfully sent my way, not really asking. “A Greyhound full of elephants.”

I giggled so hard I hiccupped. So much for being businesslike with the autograph book. My partner in bus endurance, as she seemed to be, didn’t bat an eye at my embarrassing laughing fit. Still treating me as if I were an old customer, she tapped me on the knee with the movie magazine. “Don’t wear yourself out worrying, hon, this crate will get you there. Always has me, anyway. Betsa bootsies, there’s always a bus to somewhere.”

With all that said, she plucked up her cigarette from amid the lipstick-stained butts in the armrest ashtray and took a drag that swelled her chest. Trying
not to look too long at that part of her, my eyes nonetheless had to linger to figure out the spelling of the name stitched there in pink thread. *Leticia,* which stood out to me in more ways than one. Determinedly lifting my gaze to meet her quizzical expression, I rattled out my pursuit of autographs to remember my trip by, producing the creamy album in evidence.

“So that’s what’s got you hopping,” she laughed, but nicely. Taking that as encouragement, I fanned open the pages to her. “See, people write all kinds of stuff. Here’s my favorite, just about. It’s from Miss Ciardi, best teacher I ever had.” Together we took in the deathless composition:

*A flea and a fly in a flue*

*Were caught, what could they do?*

*“Let us flee,” said the fly.*

*“Let us fly,” said the flea.*

*So they flew through a flaw in the flue.*

“Tough competition,” she laughed again. The cigarette met its fate with the other mashed-out ones as she surprised me with a drawn-out sigh. “Sure, I’ll dab something in for you, why not. Your tough luck it’s me instead of her, huh?” She flourished the movie magazine, open to a picture of Elizabeth Taylor with a cloud of hair half over one sultry eye and nothing on above her breastbone.

“Aw, anybody can be named Elizabeth,” I spouted, feeling brave as I extended the open autograph book and special ballpoint to her. “But Leticia, whew, that’s something else.”

Solving the pen with no trouble at all, she gave me a sassy grin. “Had your eye on the tittytatting, have you,” she teased. “Letting the customers get to know you right up front on the uniform helps the tips like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I think it’s a really great idea,” I got caught up in a rush of enthusiasm. “I wish everybody did that. Had their name sewn on them, I mean. See, mine is
Donal without a *d* on the end, and hardly anybody ever gets it right at first, but if it was on my shirt, they couldn’t mess it up like they always do.”

Listening with one ear while she started to write, she pointed out there can be a drawback to having yourself announced on your breast. “Like when some smart ass leans in for a good look and asks, ‘What’s the other one’s name?’”

It took me a moment to catch on, then several to stop blushing. Thankfully, she still had her head down in diligence over the autograph page. She had whipped off her glasses and stuck them in her purse--she looked a lot younger and better with them off--and I couldn’t contain my curiosity.

“How come you wear your glasses to read but not to write?”

“Don’t need ’em for either one,” she said offhandedly. “They’re just windowpane.”

“So why do you wear them ever?”

Another one of those grins. “Like it probably says in the Bible somewhere: Guys don’t make passes at gals who wear glasses.” She saw I wasn’t quite following that. “Honey, I just want to ride from here to there without every man who wears pants making a try at me. The silly specs and the ciggies pretty much do the trick--you don’t see those Gls sniffing around, do you.”

“They’ve got something else on their minds,” I confided as if wise beyond my years. “They’re afraid they’re going to get their asses shot off in Korea.”

Frowning ever so slightly, she made a shooing motion in front of her face. “Flies around the mouth,” she warned me off that kind of language. She glanced over her shoulder toward the soldiers, shaking her head. “Poor babies.” Going back to her writing, she finished with a vigorous dotting of *i’s* and crossing of *t’s*, and handed book and pen back to me. “Here you go, pal. Signed, sealed, and delivered.”
I saw she had done a really nice job. The handwriting was large and even and clear, doubtless from writing meal orders.

*Life is a zigzag journey, they say,*

*Not much straight and easy on the way.*

*But the wrinkles in the map, explorers know,*

*Smooth out like magic at the end of where we go.*

"That's pretty deep for me," I admitted, so far from the end of my unwanted journey that I could not foresee anything remotely like magic smoothing the way. More like a rocky road ahead, among people as foreign to me as a jungle tribe. Still, I did not want to hurt her feelings and resorted to, "You really know how to write."

"Learned that ditty in school, along with the one about burning your candle at both ends. Funny how certain things stick with you," she mused as I was reluctantly about to thank her and excuse myself to get up and leave. But then I stiffened, staring into the autograph book. "What's the matter, kiddo?" she asked offhandedly, her next cigarette on the way to her lips. "Did I spell something wrong?"

What had stopped me cold was her signature. *Letty Minetti.*

"The truck stop at Browning," I blurted, "did you work there?"

In the act of lighting up, she went stock-still with the cigarette between her fingers and the Zippo lighter in hand. "Okay, Dick Tracy, I give," she turned and studied me narrowly now. "How come you're such an expert on me?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, expert, I mean," my sentences stumbled in retreat. "More like interested, is all. See, my grandmother used to cook there, you maybe knew her?"
“Dorie?” Letty, as she was to me now, spoke with deliberation as she sorted this out. “Sure, great old gal, best fry cook I ever worked with.” She sucked in her cheeks as if tasting the next before she said it. “So you’re him.”

Him? What him? I looked at her in confusion.

“Don’t take me wrong,” she said quickly. “All I meant, Dorie told me what was up when she had to quit the truck stop. To take on raising you, at that cow outfit.”

Blank with surprise, I stared back at the waitress who suddenly was the expert on me.

Letty nibbled her lip, disturbing the lipstick a bit, then uttered the rest.

“When she left to be with you, she had me put flowers on the crosses every month.”

White as bones, the roadside trio of short metal crosses stood in memoriam on the long slope up from the Two Medicine River. One for my father, one for my mother, and although I could not see why he deserved the same, one for the drunk driver whose pickup drifted across the centerline and hit theirs head-on. Only once had I seen the crosses, on a school trip to the Blackfoot Museum in Browning not long after the funeral, and I had to swallow sobs the rest of the trip. I almost wished the American Legion post would quit marking highway deaths like that—for some of us, too much of a reminder—but my father had been a favorite at Legion halls, someone who came out of the D-Day landing badly wounded but untouched in his personality, ready with a laugh and a story any time he and my mother blew in for a drink and a nice supper and some dancing. The flowers, which I remembered were yellow, must have been Gram’s own ongoing remembrance, by courtesy—a great deal more than that—of Letty Minetti.
A jolt went through me like touching the hot wire of something electric. Connected by accident, she and I were no longer simply strangers on a bus. This woman with the generous mouth knew all about me, or at least enough, and I was catching up with her circumstances. Wherever she was headed with her name on her uniform, it was not to work the counter at the Browning truck stop, a hundred miles in the other direction. “You do that any more?” I rushed out the words, then hedged. “The flowers, I mean?”

Letty shook her head and lit the interrupted cigarette. “Couldn’t, sorry. Been in the Falls a year or so,” she expelled along with a stream of smoke, “busting my tail in the dining room at the Buster. You know it?”

Surprisingly, I did. The Sodbuster Hotel was a fancy place where the Williamsons stayed during the Great Falls rodeo, so Wendell could oversee—or according to Gram, mess with—the handling of the Double W’s string of bucking horses. My new confidante let out her breath, nothing to do with smoking this time. “It didn’t work out. I’ll tell you something. The more dressed up people are, the harder they are to wait on,” laughing as she said it, but not the amused kind. “I missed the Browning gang. The Rez boys tip good when they have a few drinks in them, you’d be surprised. And truckers leave their change on the counter. It adds up.”

What wasn’t adding up was her presence on this bus with the rest of us nomads, so I outright asked. “What are you doing on here, in this direction?”

She flicked me a look, but answered readily enough. “Taking a job in Havre. New town, fresh start. That’s the way it goes.”

That didn’t sound good. People were always saying about Havre, off by itself and with not much going for it but the railroad that ran through, You can have ’er.
Something of that reputation must have been on Letty’s mind, too. “Hey, you know any French?”

“Aw river, maybe.”

“Nah, more than that. See, the place where I’ll be working is called, capital T, The Le Havre Supper Club.” She nibbled her lip. “Something doesn’t seem quite right about that, don’t you think? Anyway, that’s why I’m wearing my work shirt,” meaning the uniform top with the prominent stitching, “in case I have to go on shift right away. Some morons,” she pronounced it mo-rons, with the same note in her voice as when Gram would say Sparrowhead, “put you to slinging coffee almost before your keister is through the doorway, would you believe.”

I made a sympathetic noise, but my attention wasn’t in it. By now I had a crush on her. Oh man, my thinking ran, wouldn’t it be great if she and Gram could get a job together at the Top Spot cafe back in Gros Ventre, if Havre didn’t pan out for her and if Gram was as good as new after her operation and if I made it through whatever waited in Wisconsin, and we could all share a real house together, not a cook shack, right there in town? When you are as young as I was then, a world of any kind begins at the outskirts of your imagination, and you populate it with those who have proven themselves to you. The unknowns are always laying in wait, though. Trying not to, I kept glancing at Letty’s hand and the wedding ring that showed itself with every drag on her cigarette.

She caught me at it. “You don’t miss much, do you,” she flexed that finger away from the others. “My husband’s still in Browning. Tends bar there, chasing women on the side. We made a great pair.”

She shrugged as if the next didn’t matter, although even I knew it was the kind of thing that always does. “We split. He was jealous. There was this one trucker, Harv, I got a little involved with. Harv’s some piece of work,” she grinned a way that said more than she was saying. “The strong silent type right
out of the movies, you know? Doesn’t say much, but when he does, it’s right on
the money.” The grin humorously tucked in on itself. “Even looks a little like
Gregory Peck if you close one eye a little.” Then her face clouded. “Trouble is,
he’s sort of hard to keep up with because he’s on the road so much, trucking here
and there. But when he’s around,” her voice dropped to a confidential level,
“sparks fly.”

“Holy wow,” I said as if I knew anything about such matters. “He
sounds like a real boyfriend.”

“Real as they come.” She blew a smoke ring as I drifted along in the
romantic mood. “We’re more or less engaged, or will be when that husband of
mine gets it through his thick head to agree to a divorce.” Dabbing the ash off her
cigarette, she mused, “Haven’t seen Harv lately, wherever he’s been. Hated to do
it, but I had to leave word for him at the Buster that I’ve moved on to the Le
Havre.” Then her grin sneaked back infectiously. “Absence makes the heart
grow fonder, truer words were never. Harv’s good at catching up on things.”

“I bet he is,” I endorsed him sight unseen, talented as he sounded in areas a
little beyond me. “Anyway, what’s done is done,” she said briskly. “You ought to
have that in your book.” She mashed out the latest cigarette. “Hey, enough of the
story of my life. How’s Dorie these days? Why isn’t she with you?”

“She’s got to have an operation.” I poured out everything, the cook shack
and charity nuns and Wisconsin and all, my listener taking it in without saying
anything.

When I finally ran down, Letty bit her lip again. “Jeez, that’s rough on both of
you. Tough deal all around.” The bus changed speed as the driver shifted gears on a
hill, bobbing us against our seatbacks, and when that stopped, Letty still rocked back
and forth a little. “You know what? You need something else to think about.”
Reaching in her purse, she took out a compact and redid her lipstick, which surprised me because she’d already been wearing quite a gob. Working her lips together to even it out the way women do, when she was satisfied she snapped the compact shut and asked:

“Ever been kissed?”


“Besides nighty-night?”

“Uh, not really, I guess.”

“Scooch down a little like you’re showing me something real interesting in the book there, and turn this way, and we’ll do something about that.” She craned around to make sure no one was watching, and I really hoped the nun wasn’t.

Dazed, I did as she said. And she did what she said, bringing her warm lips to mine in a kiss I felt to the tips of my ears. She tasted like tobacco and lipstick, but a lot more than that, too, although I was too young to put a name to such things.

We broke apart, her first. “There you go, kiddo, that’s for luck.” Grinning broadly, she opened the compact again to show me myself plastered with the red imprint of her lips, as if I needed any evidence, before tenderly wiping away the lipstick with her hanky. “First of many smackeroos in your career,” she said huskily, “you’ll get good at it. Betsa bootsies you will. Now you better scoot back to your own seat, sugar, we’re just about there.” That was true of her and the pink tittytatting that pointed the way. I still was trying to catch up with the dizzying twists and turns of the day.
“Havre, the Paris of the prairie,” the lanky driver called out in a mechanical way, “you may disembark if you so wish and stretch your legs. The Greyhound bus depot, proud to serve you, has full conveniences.”

To me that meant the one that flushes, and with Gram’s number one instruction for riding the dog bus in comparative comfort urgently in mind—*Every stop, you make sure you get in there and go before the bus does*—I was the first one off and into the station, fantastic Letty first giving me a goodbye pat on the cheek and wishing me all the luck in the world.

I could have used some by the time I emerged from the men’s rest room and tried to navigate the waiting room crowded with families of Indians and workgangs of white guys in bib overalls and a mix of other people, the mass of humanity causing me to duck and dodge and peer in search of something to eat. My meal money, a five-dollar bill Gram tucked into my jeans before I caught my ride to town for the mail bus, was burning a hole in my pocket. Besides that, on the principle that you never want to be separated from your money while traveling among strangers, I had a stash under my shirt, three ten-dollar bills which she had folded snugly and pinned behind the breast pocket with a large safety pin, assuring me a pickpocket would need scissors for hands to reach it. These days, it is hardly conceivable that three perforated tenspots and a fiver felt to me like all
the cash in the world, but at the time a cup of coffee cost only a dime, as did that stimulant for the younger set like me, comic books, and a movie could be seen for a quarter, and a pair of blue jeans would set you back two bucks and a half at most. It's funny how dollars and cents have changed so much from then till now, but that's the story of money.

Be that as it may, besides providing me with a little to spend during the Wisconsin stay--"mad money," Gram's words for it probably fitting my tendencies all too accurately--the shirt stash was meant to outfit me with school clothes back there to come home with, as well. School clothes were a big deal then, no real family wanting to look stingy about it. So, scraping that much cash together to send me off with was no easy thing--it amounted to half of Gram's last monthly paycheck from the tight fist of Sparrowhead--and that's why I had firm instructions from her to stretch the pocket fiver through the trip by confining lunches to a sandwich. No milkshakes, no pieces of pie, no bottles of pop, in other words no getting rambunctious with the tantalizing fivespot.

Which sounded okay in theory, but less so in a thronged bus depot when I was hungry as a wolf. Wouldn't you know that the lunch counter, offering greasy hamburgers if a person did not want runny egg salad sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, was jampacked by the time I could get there and service was slow as ring-around-the-rosy. Havre really needed Letty.

Desperately looking around as my stomach growled for something to be done, I spied the newsstand that sold magazines and cigarettes and other sundries. Gram had not thought to say anything about candy bars.

I hurried over, one eye on the clock. No one else was buying anything, but the gum-chewing woman clerk had to tend to freight parcels as well as the candy counter, and it took a very long couple of minutes to get her to wait on me. "A Mounds bar, please"--dark chocolate with coconut inside, you can't beat that--
I said rapidly as I could. Then I remembered that suppertime would not be until
North Dakota, as distant to me as the cheese side of the moon. "Make it three."

The Greyhound had its motor running when I dashed out of the terminal, peeling a Mounds as I ran. The door was open, but the driver was resting a hand on the handle that operated it. "Cutting it pretty close, sonny," he said, giving me the stink eye as I panted up the steps, the door sucking shut behind me.

To my amazement, the bus had filled up entirely, except where I had saved my spot by leaving my cord jacket. And if I could believe my eyes, there in the aisle seat next to my window one was sitting a big-bellied Indian with black braids that came down over his shoulders.

Oh man, here was my chance! A seatmate I could talk to about all kinds of Indian things! The Fort Belknap Reservation was somewhere in this part of Montana, and he and the Indian families taking up about half the bus must be headed home there. My head buzzed with the sensation of double luck. Here delivered right to me was not only someone really great for the autograph book, but who could palaver--that's what Indians did, didn't they?--with me about the black arrowhead if I went about it right. What a break! Gram's view of Indians, I knew, was that maybe they weren't always smart, but they were generally wise. Just from the look of him, I was sure as anything that this one would have the wisdom to know about obsidian and where an arrow point made of it came from.

"Hi!" I chirped as I joined him.

"Howdy," he said in a thrilling deep voice that reverberated up out of that royal belly--maybe he was a chief, too!--as he moved his legs enough for me to squeeze by to my window seat.

The bus lurched into immediate motion, as if my fanny hitting the cushion was the signal to go, and I settled into eating my candy bar and sneaking looks
sideways at my traveling companion. He was dressed not all that different from me, in bluejeans and a western shirt with snap buttons. All resemblance ended there, though, because his buckskin face could have posed for the one on nickels, and then there were those braids, even. I envied him his straw cowboy hat, beat-up and curled almost over on itself at the brim and darkly sweat-stained from what I would have bet was life on one of the small ranches scattered around on the reservation, riding appaloosa horses and hunting antelope and dancing at powwows and a million other things that beat anything I had been through at the Double W.

_Mind your manners no matter what, so people won't think you were born in a barn, _I could all but hear Gram reciting in my ear, and so I politely turned away to the window to wait until we were out of town and freewheeling toward the reservation before striking up a conversation about him being an Indian and my second name or nickname or whatever it was being Red Chief. That ought to get the palaver going. Then when obsidian arrowheads became the topic, should I tell him, just sort of casually, that I had one in my suitcase? For all I knew, possessing such a rarity maybe made a person special in the tribe. Possibly I was already a sort of honorary chieftain and didn’t know it, from whatever sacred quality—to me, that meant pretty much the same as magic—a glistening dark treasure like that carried.

Yet there was another consideration, wasn’t there. While I was surer than sure that Wendell Williamson did not deserve an arrowhead older than Columbus, what about the Indians from that time on? What if my braided seatmate were to tell me the black arrowhead was a lucky piece that they worshiped, and there was a whole long story about how tough life had been for Indians ever since it was lost? I’d feel bad about having it. I decided I’d better play it safe at first and start with his autograph.
Finally the bus labored out of the last of Havre and we were rolling ahead on the open prairie. Expectantly I turned toward my braided seat partner for conversation to be initiated, by me if not him.

The straw cowboy hat was pulled down over his eyes. Oh no! Phooey and the other word, too! He was sound asleep.

I was stymied. Talk about manners and the wraith of Gram riding herd on me. I couldn’t very well poke a total stranger in the ribs and tell him, “Hey, wake up, I want to palaver with you.” That was born-in-a-barn behavior, for sure. However, if I accidentally on purpose disturbed his slumber, that was a different matter, right?

Retrieving another Mounds from a coat pocket, I noisily unwrapped it, crumpling the wrapper as loudly as possible while I munched away. No result on the sleeper.

I coughed huskily. He still didn’t stir. Working myself into a fake coughing fit, not even that penetrated his snooze.

I squirmed in my seat, jiggled the armrest between us, made such a wriggling nuisance that I bothered myself. Sleeping Bull, as I now thought of him, never noticed. The man could have dozed through a cavalry charge.

Well, okay, Red Chief, you’d better figure this out some, I told myself. After all, the prize sleeper was not the only autograph book candidate and possible conversation partner on the packed dog bus, was he. If I wanted Indians, a small tribe of them was scattered up and down the aisle, entire families with little kids in their go-to-town clothes and cowboy-hatted lone men sitting poker-faced but awake, all of them as buckskin-colored as the one parked next to me. Then at the back of the bus, the workgang, off to some oilfield where a gusher had been struck according to their talk, was having a good time, several of them playing cards on a coat spread across a couple of laps, others looking on and making
smart remarks. From snatches I could hear, there wasn’t any doubt I could pick up the finer points of cussing and discussing from them just as I’d done with my buddies the soldiers, last seen shouldering their duffel bags to head in the direction of Korea, poor guys. As with the GIs, a gold mine of names and all that came with those was right there up the aisle waiting if I could only reach it.

I gauged my seatmate, who seemed to have expanded in his sleep. Getting by him posed a challenge, but I figured if I stretched myself just about to splitting, I could lift a leg over him into the aisle and the other leg necessarily would follow.

*Here goes nothing from nowhere,* this one of Gram’s old standards was more encouraging, and I was perilously up and with one leg spraddled over his round midriff as if mounting a horse from the wrong side, when the fact struck me. *Moron, there aren’t any empty seats.* I’d have to stand up all the while as I went along the aisle visiting with people to introduce them to the notion of giving me their autographs and whatever else they wanted to put on the page, and I saw in the rearview mirror the driver already had his eye on me.

Defeated, I dropped back in my seat, silently cussing to the limits of my ability. Trapped there, I apologetically fondled the autograph album and to console myself ate my last Mounds. Maybe my luck would change at the next stop, I told myself, scratching for some hope. Surely the bus would let some passengers off in the town ahead, Chinook, freeing up seats, and then I could negotiate the tricky climb over the soundly slumbering form between me and the aisle and proceed with autograph gathering and talking to Indians, awake ones. In the meantime, punch-drunk on candy, I must have been catching the sleeping sickness from my hibernating seatmate, my eyelids growing heavy, the rhythm of the bus wheels on the flat open road lulling me off into a nap, only until something happened, I drowsily promised myself.
“Twenty minute stop, folks.”

The driver’s droning announcement that we could disembark if we so wished and take advantage of the conveniences of the Greyhound terminal jerked me out of a nightmare, not knowing where I was. It was one of those bad dreams where you try to hide but never get anywhere, in this case in some big awful building where Wendell Willianson was after me, but every time I ran down a long hallway or up a staircase, he would barge out of a room and demand, “Where’s that arrowhead? Hand it over or I’ll tell your folks.” Groggily I looked up and down the aisle of the bus, trying to come to grips with my surroundings. Then looked again, blinking to see whether I still was in a dream, not a good one.

The Indians had vanished. Likewise the oilfield crew. The passenger load was down to a precious few, myself and one of those tourist couples out to see the world on the cheap and a man in a gabardine suit of the kind county extension agents and livestock buyers wore. All the rest of the seats, including the one next to me, were as empty as a bare cupboard.

I couldn’t get my bearings. The bus already had slowed to a town speed, we must be nearly to a depot and those conveniences, but this was no drop stop as Chinook or Fort Belknap would be. I whirled to see out the window to the street. A Stockman Bar, a Mint Bar, a Rexall Drug, a Buttrey’s grocery, those could be anywhere. Then I spotted a storefront window with the oldfashioned lettering, GLASGOW TOGGERY--MEN’S WEAR AND MORE. Glasgow! I had slept away a sizable portion of Montana. The Indians, including my seatmate whom I had only managed to coax the single word “Howdy” out of, long since must have got off back on the reservation, the oil roughnecks likewise somewhere along the way. I felt ridiculously cheated, yet with no one to blame but myself. Staying awake on a
once-in-a-lifetime journey should not be that hard a job, I could about hear Gram chiming in on my sense of guilt.

Kicking myself about all the unfulfilled pages of the autograph book and the lost chance to palaver about the black arrowhead, I scrambled off for the rest room the moment the bus door whished open, vowing to get the Kwik Klik into action from here on, no matter what it took.

When passengers filed on again, things looked more promising, several fresh faces, although no obvious Indians. I was nothing if not determined, singling out seats I could pop in and out of as the autograph book and I made the rounds. Itching to start, I waited impatiently for the driver to finish some paperwork he was doing on his lap. All at once, I saw him look up in surprise, spring the bus door open, and address someone outside.

"Afternoon, Sheriff. Prize customer?"

"A steady one, for damn sure," an irritated voice replied. "Returning him to the stony loneseome at Wolf Point again. He's their prisoner. Supposed to be anyhow, if the escape artist didn't keep showing up here. I'll catch the local back after I dump him."

Sheriff. Prisoner. The stony loneseome, which meant jail. I sat up sharply. Sure enough, up into the bus stepped a rangy man with strong features and dark expressive eyebrows and a set mouth as if he was on a mission. He looked like he could carry a sixgun natural as anything, and know the right way to use it.

He, though, unfortunately was not the sheriff, according to the handcuffs on his wrists. Right behind him came a sawed-off guy not much more than half his size, wearing the biggest kind of crow-black Stetson and a star badge. "Here, Romeo," the runty one directed. "Across from the kid will do."
Oh man! Not only had my luck changed, the rush of it flattened me back against my seat as I watched the pair of them settle in as the bus started into motion, the prisoner by the window and the sheriff on the aisle. The butt of a revolver protruded out of a well-worn holster on his hip like a place to hang his hat.

Noticing me gaping, the sheriff cackled a little. "Getting an eyeful of law enforcement, bucko?"

"Yeah! How come you take him by bus?"

The lawman grimaced as if he'd been asking himself that very question. "My deputy's out on a domestic dispute call, and the jail's full of rangutang drunks from Saturday night. Not the way I want, doing this by Hound," he looked around the bus with distaste, which sort of bothered me as a full-fledged passenger by now. "But it'd be just like the master criminal here to bail out of the patrol car if I drove him. Tried that last time, didn't you."

"We weren't going that fast."

The sheriff laughed nastily. "Not gonna be bailing out of the bus, are you."

"To tell the truth, I don't see how."

"Damn right you don't. You're on a one-way ticket back to behind bars and that's that."

"You needn't be quite so tickled about it. I'm not exactly public enemy number one."

"Oh, hurting your feelings, am I. Ain't that just too damn bad."

Still irritable, which may well have been his standard mood, the sheriff glanced up at the composed figure nearly a head taller than him and complained, "I've got a whole hell of lot of better things to do than pack you back to Wolf Point, you know. Do you have to be such a pain in the britches? First you get in a fight with some fool bartender because you think you've been shortchanged and tear up the bar. " So much for my imagining this was an escaped murderer, being delivered to the cold scales of
justice. “Then you keep breaking out of that half-assed excuse for a jail they have over there and showing up back here in my jurisdiction.” With his face squinched like one of those apple dolls that have dried up, the sheriff groused, “Can’t you for Christ’s sakes light out in some other direction for a change? Go get yourself a haying job somewhere? Stacking hay is about your speed, Harv.”

“I explained that, Carl,” the prisoner said patiently. “My girlfriend Letty waits tables in Great Falls. How else am I supposed to get to see her?”

“I KNOW HER! Leticia, I mean, it was right there in pink!”

My bray startled both men, their heads whipping around to scrutinize me. “She was here on the bus, see,” I gave out the news as fast as I could talk, “so I met her and we talked for a long way and she was really nice to me, boy, she’s a piece of work.” I reported further to the surprised prisoner, “She told me all about you, sort of. The trucker part.”

“Oh, swell,” the sheriff said sardonically. “Now she’s running around the countryside too. What is it about you two, claustrophobia?”

The prisoner ignored the sarcasm, leaning forward to see around the sheriff, sunlight glinting off his handcuffs. Those aside, he intently questioned me as if he was the one handling the case of himself and Letty.; “Why was she on the bus, my friend? Start at the beginning.”

With both of them fixedly looking at me nonstop across the aisle, it seemed a good time to keep the beginning close to the end. “She got sick and tired of uppity customers at the Buster hotel, so she’s gonna try Havre.”

“Havre.” The men looked at each other as if that was the bottom of the barrel.

Harv recovered enough to maintain, “Letty’d have her reasons.”

“Eh, her,” the sheriff scoffed. “The cause of all this. Isn’t that so, loverboy?”
“Only because you arrested me when I was on my way to go see her in Great Falls, before Havre came up,” the prisoner said, patient as paint. “I was hitchhiking just fine until I had to stop for a bite to eat.”

“For crying out loud,” his captor groused, “I leave the office for lunch at the Highliner Cafe like usual, and there you come waltzing up the street, big as life. What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have looked down the street.”

“Oh, sure, wink and let a jailbreaker run around loose, even if it’s you,” the sheriff shook his head in disgust. A mean little smile crept in after that expression. “Anyway, this Letty sounds like she isn’t waiting for you, Harv old kid.”

“We’ll fetch up together, sooner or later,” the big quiet man in cuffs vowed calmly, and jailbreaker notwithstanding, I found myself pulling for that to be true.

The sheriff sighed in exasperation. “You’re being a fool for love, worst kind. Honest to God, Harv, if brains was talcum powder, you couldn’t work up a sneeze.”

Aware that my fascination with all this showed no sign of letting up, the sheriff tipped his hat back a fraction with his finger as if to have a clearer look at me. I had already noticed in life that shrimpy guys didn’t like the idea of being shrimpy guys, and so they acted big. The sheriff still wasn’t much bigger than I was when he fluffed himself up to ask suspiciously, “What about you, punkin, what’s a little shaver like you doing on here by yourself? Where’s your folks?”

“Me? I’m, uhm, I’m going to visit our relatives,” which I hoped was just enough truth to close the topic.

His eyelevel the same as mine, this tough kernel of a man simply stared across the aisle at me. “Traveling on the cushions, huh? Pretty good for a kid your age. Where you from?”
“Gros Ventre,” I said distinctly, as people from over east, which was most of the rest of Montana, sometimes didn’t know it was pronounced Grove On.

“That’s some ways from here. I didn’t hear you say how come your folks turn you loose to--” The bus suddenly humming in a different gear, it dropped down in a dip and showed no sign of coming out, the road following the Missouri River now. The broad river flowing in long lazy curves with thickets of diamond willows and cottonwood trees lining the banks impressed me, but the sight seemed to turn the sheriff’s stomach. Beside him, though, his handcuffed seat partner smiled like a crack in stone.

“There ’tis, Carl. What’s left of the river, hmm?”

“Shut up, Harv, I don’t need to hear about it.” Sounding fit to be tied, the sheriff shot a look over to where I still was taking in everything wide-eyed, and growled, “We’re just past Fort Peck Dam, the outlaw is talking about.” His mouth twisted. “Franklin Delano Roosevelt didn’t think the Missouri River worked good enough by itself, so he stuck in a king hell bastard of a dam,” a new piece of cussing for me to tuck away.

“Biggest dirt dam in Creation,” the sheriff was becoming really worked up now, “biggest gyp of the American taxpayer there ever was, if you ask me.” He scrunched up worse yet, squinting at the river as if the grievance still rubbing him raw was the water’s fault. “Every knothead looking for a nickel came and signed on for a job, and next thing I knew, I’m the law enforcement having to deal with a dozen Fort Peck shanty towns with bars and whorehouses that didn’t shut down day or night.”

“I know,” I nodded sagely. “I’m from there.”

That was a mistake. His apple-doll face turning sour, the sheriff spoke as if he had caught me red-handed. “You wouldn’t be pulling my leg, would you?”
So much for the value of the unvarnished truth.

For it was absolute fact, that I was born in one of those damsite shanty towns the sheriff despised. By then, 1939, the Fort Peck dam work was winding down but there still was employment for skilled heavy equipment operators like my father, Bud Cameron, catskinner. Young and full of beans, he was one of those ambitious farmboys raring to switch from horses to horsepower, and he must have been something to see sitting up tall on the back of a bumblebee-yellow Caterpillar bulldozer, manipulating the scraper blade down to the last chosen inch of earth, on some raw slope of the immense dam.

I may as well tell the rest of the Cameron family story, what there is of it. My mother, teenage girl with soft eyes and fashionably bobbed dark hair according to the Brownie box camera photos from the time, was waitressing there at the damsite in an around-the-clock cafe where Gram was day cook. I imagine Gram met it with resignation when, much as her younger self Dorothea Smythe had met roustabout Pete Blegen in the cook tent of a Glacier Park roadwork construction camp twenty years earlier, her daughter Peggy fell for the cocky young catskinner across the counter. Fell right into at least one of his capable arms, I can guarantee, because this livewire who became my father always had a necker knob, the gizmo that clamped onto the steering wheel for handy one-fisted driving, on every car he ever owned, from Model A to final Ford pickup.

Marriage came quick, and so did I. I had my footings poured, to use the Fort Peck term, in a thrown-together shacktown called Palookaville. Later, whenever we were living at some construction site or another in crude housing, my parents would think back to that time of a drafty tarpaper shack between us and weather of sixty below, and say, “Well, it beats Palookaville anyway.” Once the Fort Peck work shut down for good, we began a life of roving the watersheds
along the Rockies. My father was six feet of restlessness and after the Depression there were irrigation and reservoir projects booming in practically every valley under the mountains, where a man who knew his stuff when it came to operating heavy equipment could readily find work. For her part, my mother learned bookkeeping, and jointly employable Bud and Peg Cameron moved from one construction camp to the next, with me in tow.

The war interrupted this pattern. In 1943 my father went in--enlisted or drafted, I have never known; it is one of the mysteries of him--and at Omaha Beach on D-Day he was badly shot up in the legs. He spent months in a hospital in England where surgeons put in rods and spliced portions of tendon from elsewhere in him into his knees and on down. Eventually he came home to my mother and me, at least to Fort Harrison hospital in Helena where he advanced from casts to crutches to learning to walk again. Perhaps it says most about my father that he went right back to being a catskinner, even though you operate a bulldozer as much with your legs, working the brake pedals, as with your hands. Whatever it cost him in pain and endurance, Bud Cameron never veered from that chosen line of work, and in a way his stubborn climb from a cripple’s life summed up our family situation, because we were always getting on our feet.

Money was tight when earthmoving jobs shut down for the winter, and Montana winters are long. Hopping to whatever water project was first to hire ’skinners when the ground thawed, with me attending whatever one-room school happened to be anywhere around, my folks had hopes of moving up from wages to contracting projects on their own. They had managed to take out a loan on a D-10 Caterpillar dozer and were on their way to the Cat dealer in Great Falls to sign the final papers, when the drunk driver veered across the center line on the Two Medicine hill.
If the big-hatted lawman poking his nose into my life had asked about any of that, I was ready to tell him.

The sheriff sniffed as if smelling something he didn’t like after I protested that I really had been born at Fort Peck, honest.

“That’s as maybe,” he allowed, leaning toward me as if to get a better look. “Tell me something, laddy boy.” His tone turned into something I did not like to hear. “You don’t happen to be running away from home, do you?”

“No! The other way around! I mean, Gram and me got kicked out of the cookhouse and so we don’t have anywhere, and she’s sending me off to these people like I told you for someplace to go, honest!”

Characters in the funnies sometimes act out a situation to the fullest and whenever the “Just Trampin’” hobo PeeWee and his buddies encountered a sheriff like this, they squawked, “Yeeps! It’s the constabulary!” and their hair stood on end. I can’t prove the top of my head was a red pompadour reaching for the sky, but it felt that way as I faced the scowling little lawman across the aisle. I was as dumbfounded as I was scared. Could a person be arrested for riding a Greyhound bus? And if so, would my suitcase be searched? How could I explain the obviously precious black arrowhead to a sheriff already full of suspicion? It’s really mine, see, because I found it, but my grandmother made me hand it over to Sparrowhead and so I got it back when he wouldn’t let me stay on the ranch and-- That sounded fishy even to me, let alone a skeptical law enforcement officer. Then and there, with that star badge full in my face, the consequences of my impulsive grab off the show-off table at the Double W went through me like a fever spasm. I could howl to high heaven maintaining that in pocketing the rare arrowhead I was only retrieving what was rightfully mine,
finder, keeper. But Wendell Williamson never in his stingy life was going to accept being loser, weeper.

Afflicted as I was by something I'd done without thinking, now I had to strain my brain for how to head off the inquisitive sheriff. The prisoner sent me a knowing look of sympathy that didn't help. Somehow I needed to dodge incrimination by proving I actually was going to visit relatives like I'd said.

"Here, see?" Frantically I dug out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and produced the slip of paper Gram had written the Wisconsin address on.

Still spooked to my eyeballs, I held my breath as the sheriff studied Gram's spidery handwriting. If he was overly suspicious of what he held in his hand and hauled me back to Gros Ventre and turned me over to the authorities there without her on hand to straighten things out, to me that was the first awful step to becoming an orphan, permanently a handed-around outcast by any other name. Worse yet, with "thief" added on if Wendell Williamson learned I was back and went to those same authorities about me taking the arrowhead. My whole life to come teetered on jottings on a scrap of paper.

"Hell if I know what people are thinking anymore, the things they do these days," the sheriff muttered as he kept squinting at the scrawled set of numbers and street name. Finally the evidence seemed to convince him, if reluctantly.

Handing back the address slip, he rasped, "It's still bad business, I say, turning a kid young as you loose in the world."

The prisoner Harv rumbled a laugh. "How old do you always say you were, when you set out on your own? Barely out of short pants, right?"

"Nobody asked you, Harv-ey," the sheriff snapped. His attention diverted from me, he folded his arms on his chest and shook his head at the lovelorn suitor in his custody and the dammed river that had saddled him with wide-open boomtowns, the things a lawman had to put with.
Although I was still shaky from the close call, my impulse was to get back
to an even footing as a legitimate Greyhound passenger if I possibly could.
Screwing up my courage, I took a gamble. “Uh, sir?” I tried to keep the squeak
out of my voice. “I’ve never had anything to do with a sheriff before, so how
about signing my autograph book for me, please, will you, huh?”

That seemed to amuse him no end. “Kind of a feisty squirt, hnn?” he
cackled. “I can believe you was hatched at Fort Peck.” In the next blink, though,
habit or something set in and he made a face and pushed away the opened album I
was trying to give him. “I don’t have time for foolishness.”

Harv came to my rescue. “Aw, come on, Carl. Don’t you remember at all
what it was like to be a kid?”

The sheriff shot him a look, but for once didn’t snap “Shut up.” Shifting
uncomfortably, he muttered, “Oh hell, give the thing here.” He took the album as
if it might bite him, fumbled with the pen until I showed him how to click it, then
bent his head and wrote.

\textit{Like they say at Fort Peck, keep your pecker dry.}

\textit{--Carl Kinnick, Sheriff, Hill County, Montana}

“Gee, that’s a good one,” I managed to more or less thank him. “Can I
get his, too?”

The sheriff laughed meanly. “What do you say to that, Harv? I bet you’re
not used to writing your John Hancock except to bounce checks.” Entertained, he
passed the autograph book to the handcuffed prisoner.

With great concentration, the arrested man went to work at writing. It took
him a long time, even considering the contorted way he had to hold the pen and
book. “What in hell-all are you writing, the Bible?” the sheriff derided.
Finally the prisoner was done and thrust his manacled hands across to give me the finished product, only to have it intercepted, the sheriff growling, “Not so fast. Let me see that.”

Reading it with a pinched look, the sheriff at first couldn’t seem to believe his eyes, saying to himself, “Huh. Huh.” Finishing, he burst out: “Harv, you’re hopeless! That’s schoolhouse mush if I ever saw any.”

Unperturbed, Harv stated, “Letty is worth every word of it.”

Spitting out “Huh” again, the sheriff sourly passed the opened album for me to take in the painstakingly shaped words.

\[
\begin{align*}
I'm \text{ in love with a lovely miss.} \\
\text{She's this.} \\
\text{the like} \\
\text{kind at} \\
\text{of look} \\
\text{a you girl}
\end{align*}
\]

Holy wow, I thought to myself, that pretty well describes Letty except for the pink stitching.

The sheriff was still expressing disgust with his prisoner. “What jailhouse wall did you learn that off of, loverboy?”

“Below decks on a troop carrier headed for the Guam invasion, if that counts any with you,” Harv countered that with a level gaze at his captor.

Somewhere amid their back and forth and my thrilled admiration of his construction on the page, I finally fully took in the signature beneath.

\[Harvey \text{ Kinnick, serving time in this life.}\]

I blurted, “Y-you’ve got the same last name?”

“We’re brothers,” the prisoner specified. “Aren’t we, Carl.”

The sheriff folded his arms on his chest in practically a pout. “Step-brothers.”
The pair of them got off at Wolf Point, a town so small it was no surprise that it could not hold Harv the jailbreaker. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, button,” the sheriff left me with. I thought to myself, as I have ever since, that left a large margin for error, given the behavior of certain adults.

Wolf Point seemed to be the cutoff between what is generally thought of as Montana and the notion of North Dakota, farms sprinkled across a big square of land. By now passengers had dwindled drastically--there wasn’t much of anywhere to pick someone up until the supper stop at Williston, a couple of hours away--and I managed to gather only the autographs and inscriptions of a Rural Electrification troubleshooter and two elderly Dakota couples retired from wheat farming and moved to town, so much alike right down to the crow’s-feet wrinkles of their prairie squints that they could have been twins married to twins. Maybe inspiration flattens out along with the countryside in that area, because they all tended to come up with sentiments along the lines of Remember me early, remember me late, remember me at the Golden Gate. But every page filled went
toward my goal of a world-famous collection, so that was okay. With nothing happening to match the Kinnick brothers, I thumbed back through the other writings in the album, daydreaming of more that surely were to come, the one good thing about this forcible trip, until the Greyhound pulled in at the Williston depot.

For once, the driver beat me in getting off, handing over the paperwork to the next driver, waiting at the bottom of the bus steps. As I scooted for the rest room, I overheard him say to the new man, “Carrying a stray,” and the response, “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

That exchange made my guts tighten. Was that what I was, a stray? Like a motherless calf? That was not the kind of fame I wanted, and unfair besides. I had Gram yet, and like it or not, the unknown great-aunt and -uncle ahead in Wisconsin. It was only between here and there that I was unclaimed, I tried telling myself.

But I was further unsettled when the lunchroom’s supper offerings did not include chicken-fried steak or anything remotely like it, only stuff such as macaroni and cheese or meatloaf that wasn’t any kind of a treat, anytime. In direct violation of Gram’s orders, feeling guilty but fed, I had a chocolate milkshake and a piece of cherry pie, ala mode. Maybe Minnesota, on tomorrow’s stretch of the trip, would feed better.

The bus added a dozen or so passengers in Williston, but I was too played out by the full day to go up and down the aisle with the autograph book. Instead, I settled in for the night, which took a long time coming in horizontal North Dakota. First thing, making sure no one was watching, I took out my wallet and put it down the front of my pants, another of Gram’s strict orders. It felt funny there in my shorts, but nobody was going to get it while I slept. Then I remembered the Green Stamps, of inestimable or at least unknown worth, and stuck those down there to safety, too.
Bundling my jacket for a pillow, I made myself as close to comfortable as I could and thought back on the day while waiting for sleep to come. Oh man, was Gram ever right that the dog bus gets all kinds. The soldiers going to meet their fate in Korea. The nun and the shepherder, both of whom I had miraculously escaped. That hibernating Indian. Heavenly Letty. The cantankerous little sheriff and his gallant prisoner. And that didn’t even count the digestive woman back at the start of the trip. They all filled in the dizzying span of my thoughts like a private version of Believe It Or Not! And wherever life took them from here on, most of them had left a bit of their existence in my memory book. A condensed chapter of themselves, maybe, to put it in Pleasantville terms. I had much to digest, in more ways than one, as I lay back in the seat going over experiences which began at the low end with Sparrowhead and peaked in the middle at being kissed by a woman the way grownups kiss, as far as I knew.

With the sun glinting in the panel window my jacket pillow was crammed against, I woke up confused about where I was. Blinking and squinting, I wrestled myself upright until it all began to become familiar, the ranks of seats around me, some with heads showing and some not, the road hum of the bus tires, the countryside—greener than it had been the day before—flying past at a steady clip. Sleeping had been a tussle, trying to stay comfortable while sitting up, coming half-awake when the bus sighed to a halt in some dark and deserted town. At the wheel now was a driver I had never seen before, another switch having been made sometime deep in the night. It crossed my mind whether I was passed along as a stray to this one, too, branded that way for as long as I was on the dog bus.

“Uh, sir?” I called to the driver, still foggy. “Where are we?”

“Minnie Soda,” he responded in a mock accent. “Meal stop coming up in Bemidji.”
What language was that? Actually, my stomach didn’t care. It was ready for one of Gram’s prescriptions that I could obey to the letter, stuff myself with a big breakfast.

He must have singled me out there by myself at a side table as I wolfed down bacon and eggs and hotcakes. The man in the bad-fitting suit, who has haunted me to this day.

As misfortune would have it, my classy western shirt caught a dribble of maple syrup from a forkful of hotcake, and stayed sticky no matter how I wiped at it. Not wanting to draw flies for the rest of the trip, I checked around the depot for the bus driver and spotted him in conversation with the ticket agent. Finishing off my breakfast as fast as I could, I scurried over to ask if I could please have my suitcase long enough to change shirts. That drew me a look, evidently my reputation among bus drivers as a stray not helping any, but he took pity on me and out we went to the luggage compartment. “Better hurry, freckles, I have to keep to the schedule,” he warned as I hustled to the restroom with the suitcase.

In there, a lathered guy was shaving over a sink and a couple of others were washing up, and there was what I thought was only the usual traffic to the toilet stalls, so I didn’t feel too much out of place opening the wicker suitcase on the washbasin counter and stripping off my snap-button shirt and whipping on a plain one. While I was at it, tucking the syruped shirt away, I took the opportunity to get rid of the Green Stamps and collection book into the suitcase as well. Then I had to dash for the bus, but the driver was waiting patiently by the luggage compartment, and I wasn’t even the last passenger. Behind me was the man, who must have been in a toilet stall while I was busy at my suitcase.

I desposited myself in my same seat, feeling restored and ready for whatever the day brought. I thought.
“Hello there, cowboy. Mind some company?” The man, whom I had not really been aware of until right then, paused beside the aisle seat next to me, looking around as if I was the prize among the assortment of passengers.

“I guess not.” For a moment I was surprised, but then realized he must have noticed my bronc rider shirt, as Gram called it, before I changed. He appeared to be good enough company himself, smiling as if we shared a joke about something, even though he did remind me a little of Wendell Williamson in the way he more than filled his clothes. Wearing a violet tie and pigeon-gray suit—I figured he must have put on weight since buying it and I sympathized, always outgrowing clothes myself—he evidently was fresh from the barber shop, with a haircut that all but shined. Easing into the seat next to mine, he settled back casually as the bus pulled out and did not say anything until we left Bemidji behind and were freewheeling toward Minneapolis, some hours away. But then it started.

Crossing his arms on his chest with a tired exhalation, he tipped his head my direction. “Man alive, I’ll be glad to get home. How about you?”

“Me, too,” I answered generally, for I would be glad beyond measure to have Wisconsin over and done with, and the return part of my roundtrip ticket delivering me back to Gram and whatever home turned out to be, if that could only happen.

“Life on the road. Not for sissies.” He shook his head, with that smile as if we both got the joke. “You’re starting pretty young, to be a traveler.”

“Twelve going on thirteen,” I stretched things a little, and for once my voice didn’t break.

He maybe showed a tic of doubt at that, but didn’t question it. Himself, he was going gray, matching the tight-fitting suit. He had a broad good-natured face, like those cartoons of the man in the moon, although as Gram would have said he must have kept it in the pantry; his complexion was sort of doughy, as if he needed
to be outdoors more. “I’m all admiration,” he said with that confiding shake of his head. “Me, I’m on the go all the time for a living, and anybody who can do it for pleasure gets my vote.”

I must have given him a funny look, although I tried not to. The only thing about my trip that had anything to do with pleasure was phony Pleasantville, so I steered the conversation back to him. “What do you do to keep the sheriff away?”

“Eh?” He glanced at me as if I’d jabbed him in the ribs.

“See, that’s what my father always says when he wants to know what a person does for a living.”

“Sure, sure,” he laughed in relief. Gazing around as if to make sure no one heard but me, even though I couldn’t see anyone paying any attention to us—the driver in particular had no time to eye us in the rearview mirror, Minnesota crawling with traffic in comparison with North Dakota—he lowered his voice as if letting me in on a secret. “I sell headbolt heaters, the Minnesota key chain. Bet you don’t know what those are.”

I thrust out my hand so quickly to take the bet he batted his eyes in surprise. “You take a bolt out of the engine block and stick the headbolt thinger in there and plug it in all night and you can start your car when it’s colder than a brass monkey’s balls,” I couldn’t help showing off and getting in some cussing practice.

“You’re something else, aren’t you.” He tugged at his tie as he appraised me. “Where’ve you been anyway, donkey school?”

Mystified, I furrowed a look at him.

“You know, where they teach you to be a wise ass?” He nudged me, smiling like a good fellow to show he was just kidding.

“Oh man, that’s a good one,” I exclaimed, wishing I had it in the autograph book. If only the sleeping Indian had been this talkative! Taken with the back-and-
forth, I said in the spirit of things, “I skipped wise ass school, see, for a dude ranch. Out west.”

“That so?” Still with a sort of a grin, he prodded: “Saddled up Old Paint, did you, to go with that cowboy shirt I saw?”

The idea seemed to entertain him, so I expanded it for him. “Sure thing. I won it in the roping contest. That and the jackpot.” I was having so much fun, I threw that in as if it was prize money in a regular rodeo; Gram had been teasing about people thinking I was a bronc rider, but twirling a lasso didn’t seem beyond me. I built it up a touch more: “The other dudes couldn’t build a loop worth diddly squat, so yeah, I hit the jackpot,” I couldn’t help grinning at the slick double meaning. Carried away even further, I confided, “And there was another prize, too, even better.”

“You don’t say. The grand prize to boot?” he said in a kidding voice, although I could tell he was impressed.

To keep him that way, it was on the tip of my tongue to airily say the prize was nothing less than an arrowhead blacker than anything and older than Columbus. But something made me hold that in, for the time being. Instead I resorted to:

“You pretty close to guessed it. Beaded moccasins.”

“Indian booties?” That had him eyeing me as if to make sure I was on the level. “How are those are any big deal?”

“They were made a long time ago for the best Blackfoot fancy-dancer there ever was, that’s how.” I didn’t need to fumble for a name. “Red Chief, he was called.” My enthusiasm built with every detail that flashed to mind. “See, when there was this big powwow about to happen with Indians coming from everywhere, the tribe gathered all its beads on a blanket, and the best moccasin maker chose the prettiest ones and spent day and night sewing the design.” Expert
of a kind that I was from donning the soft leather slippers for so many middle-of-the-night calls of nature, I lovingly described their blue and white prancing figures that seemed to lighten a person’s step, like wearing kid gloves on the feet.

“They’re real beauties,” I assured my blinking listener, “and when the guy, Red Chief I mean, put them on for the fancy-dancing contest against all the other tribes, he won everything. And so, after that the moccasins were called ‘big medicine’--that’s Indian for ‘magic,’ see--and nobody else in the tribe could even touch them but that one fancy-dancer.”

“When he got old and died, though,” my tone hushed just enough to draw my audience of one in closer, “the tribe was going to sell them to a big museum, but the dude ranch owner heard about it and traded a bunch of horses to the Blackfeet for them.” For all I knew, this part approached the truth. Admittedly in very roundabout fashion, but the fact was that my grandmother the sharp-trading fry cook there in the Reservation town of Browning had bargained someone out of the impressive moccasins somehow.

I had to really reach for the next portion, but I got there. “When the dude rancher tried them on, they had shrunk up real bad and didn’t fit him, so he made them the grand prize for the roping contest. They’re just right for me,” I finished modestly.

My seatmate’s jaw kept dropping until I reached the end, then as if coming to, he studied my feet. “I’m surprised you don’t have them on, show them off some.”

“Uh-uh, they’re way too valuable,” I fielded that, “I have to keep them tucked away in my suitcase. I’ll only wear them at home, around the house.”

“A fortune on your tootsies, huh? I tell you, some guys have all the luck.”
Good-natured about it, though, he drew back as if to make room for his admiration of me, topping it off with "Look at you, just getting started in life and you've got it knocked," and I went still as death.

How can a word, a saying, do that? Make your skin prickle, as memory comes to the surface?

Innocent as it sounded, the utterance from this complete stranger echoed in me until my ears rang. Gram was more used to this sort of thing, the sound of someone speaking from past the grave. Past a white cross on the side of Highway 89, in this instance. How many times had I heard it, waiting with my mother in a kitchen table card game of pitch or a round of dominoes or some such while my father scouted for work, for the next construction camp that needed a hotshot catskinner, and in he would come at last, smiling like the spring sun as he reported, "They're hiring at Tiber Dam," or the Greenfield irrigation project it might be, or the reservoirs capturing creeks out of the Rockies, Rainbow and Pishkun and those. Each time his voice making the words wink that certain way, "We've got it knocked." Wherever it came from--World War Two? the Depression?--for me the expression indeed meant something solid we were about to tap into, wages for my folks after a lean winter and a firmer place to live than wherever we had fetched up when the ground froze hard enough to resist a bulldozer blade. It entered me deeper than mere words generally go, as Gram's sayings did with her, to the point where I perfectly well knew, even though I wasn't there, that starting out on that trip to take possession of the bulldozer that would set them--us--up in life for once and for all, Bud Cameron and his wife Peg declared in one voice or the other that they had it knocked. Until they didn't.
If my temporary companion hadn’t prodded me with what he said next, I don’t know when I would have snapped out of the spell his intonation had put me in. Tugging at his suit coat cuffs, he asked briskly, “Where’s home? Minneapolis?” as if it was what we had been talking about all along.

“Chicago.” The rest came to me from somewhere, natural as drawing breath. “My father’s a policeman there.”

“You don’t say,” he said again, with a couple of blinks as if he had something in his eye. “A harness bull, is he?”

“Huh?”

“You know, a cop on the beat?”

“Huh-uh. Detective. He solves murders.”

He studied me as if really sizing me up now. “That what you’re going to be? A flatfoot?” He winked to signal we both knew the lingo, didn’t we.

“Nope. A rodeo announcer. ‘Now coming out of chute four, Rags Rasmussen, saddle bronc champeen of the world, on a steed called Bombs Away,'” I gave him a rapid-fire sample. My parents never missed a Gros Ventre rodeo, and given all the hours I had sat through bareback and saddle bronc riding, the announcer’s microphone spiel was virtually second nature to me.

“Whew.” My seatmate gave that little shake of his head again as if I was really something. “Whatever it is, yo seem to know the ropes.”

If I knew any, it was that it was time to quit fooling around. He wasn’t as good at making up things as I was, whatever that was about. Maybe he was embarrassed about being a headbolt heater salesman and not able to afford to dress better than he did. In any case, I didn’t have time for bulloney from him, I needed to get going with the autograph book. In several seats not far behind us was a group of women all wearing hats with various floral designs, and from what I was able to overhear of their chatter they were a garden club who called themselves the
Gardenias, and were out for fun, which seemed to consist of staying at a lakeside lodge with a flower garden. I didn’t want to miss out on the bunch of them, so I produced the album to deal with my seatmate first and then scoot down the aisle to those hats bursting with blossoms.

He registered surprise at seeing the book open to an inviting page, and the Kwik Klik seemed to throw him, too. “Tell you what, maybe later.” He wiggled his hand as if it needed warming up.

“Okay, then. Let me past, please. I have to start on the garden club ladies.”

“Hey, don’t rush off,” he protested, showing no sign of moving. “How often do I get to visit with a jackpot roper?” he said with a palsy-walsy smile.

“Yeah, but,” I explained what a golden chance the bus was for building up my collection and the only way to do it was, well, to get out there in the aisle and do it. I made ready to squeeze by him, but he still hadn’t budged and he was as much of a blockade to try to climb over as the plump Indian.

I don’t know what would have happened if the bus hadn’t started slowing way down, for a reason that caught me by surprise. And one that made him change his mind in an instant about keeping me for company.

“What do you know, here’s my stop,” he craned to look ahead through the windshield. “Lost track of the time.”

I dropped back in my seat, stretching my neck to see too. We were pulling in to what looked like an old mercantile store with a gas pump out front and a faded sign under the Mobil flying red horse, LAKE ITASCA GARAGE--FUEL, FOOD, AND FISH BAIT. Half the building appeared to be the post office and a little grocery shop. The rest of the crossroads settlement was a bar or two, a small cafe, a whitepainted church, and a scattering of houses, not many. It looked to me like a Palookaville. And the driver was announcing this was only a drop stop, as soon as the passengers getting off had their luggage we’d be on our way.
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Although we were nearest the door, my companion in conversation was super polite in waiting for the garden club to file off first, before winking me a goodbye along with, “Say hi to Chi,” which it took me a moment to translate as Chicago, and then launching himself to the bus door as if he had to get busy.

In his wake, I gazed out the window at the sparse buildings, idly thinking Minnesotans must be a whole lot more foresighted than Montanans, who waited to rush out and buy headbolt heaters when the first real snow came, around Thanksgiving. I felt sorry for the man in the suit, disappointing company though he’d turned into there toward the end, for having to slog around all summer dealing with places like this rundown garage, which looked all but dead. And besides the size of suitcase that would take, he must have to lug round a--what was it called?--sample case, although I hadn’t noticed any when my own suitcase was put back in the belly of the bus at Bemidji.

All at once the awful fact hit me. I grabbed my shirt pocket to make sure. When I changed out of the pearl-button shirt, I hadn’t thought to unpin the folded ten-dollar bills in back of its pocket and secure them in the fresh shirt I was wearing. Except for loose change in my pants to use for meals, all my money now resided in my suitcase. Gram would have skinned me alive, if she knew I’d let myself get separated from my stash.

Feeling like a complete moron, I charged out the door of the bus.

The Gardenias were in a clump while the driver sorted out their bags as they pointed in the compartment. I had to skirt around them to where I knew mine was, and was startled to see the broad back of a familiar suit. The man had ducked behind the driver and was grabbing for the only wicker piece of luggage.

“He’s after my suitcase!” I shrieked. A cry that carried with it moccasins, arrowhead, money, clothing, my entire trip, everything I foolishly was about to lose.
At my hollering like that, the flowery hats scattered far and wide, but the driver bravely spun right around and clamped the sneak’s wrist before he could bolt. Wrestling my suitcase from the thief, he roughly backed him against the side of the bus.

“Yardbird on the wing, are you,” the driver sized him up with distaste while pinning him there below the racing silver greyhound. “Suit from the warden and all. How’d you like the accommodations in the pen?”

The penitentiary! Really? I goggled at the ex-convict, or maybe not so -ex. Trying to display some shred of dignity, he maintained in a hurt voice, “Paid my debt to society. I’m a free man.”

“Swell,” the driver retorted, “so you go right back to swiping things like a kid’s suitcase.”

“Just a misunderstanding, is all,” the captured culprit whined. “I thought the youngster was getting off here, and I was going to help him with his luggage.”

“Sure you were.” The driver turned his head toward me as the Gardenia group clucked in the background. “What do you say, champ, you want to press charges? Attempted robbery?”

How I wished for that halfpint sheriff in the big hat right then. This Lake Itasca place, not much more than a wide spot in the road, didn’t look like it had any such. I could tell that the driver was antsy about the delay it would take to deal with the criminal, and come right down to it, I did not want my trip, complicated enough as it was, to be hung up that way either.

“Naw, let him go,” I said, sick of it all. When the driver turned the thieving so-and-so loose--my swearing vocabulary wasn’t up to the description he deserved--he swaggered off in the direction of the cafe, adjusting his suit, careful not to look back. The garden club ladies fussed over me, but I only looked at the bus driver with a long sigh. “Can I get something out of my suitcase again?”
“Paint it red” was my father’s backhand way of saying “Forget it,” and I did my best to follow that advice after the close call with the jailbird. But it was the sort of thing you can’t blot out in your mind by saying so. Even after I hurriedly fixed the money matter by retrieving the stash from the shirt in the suitcase and pinning it under the pocket of the one I was wearing, there was no covering over the fact that I had nearly lost just about everything I owned—the precious autograph book excepted, thank goodness—by my bragging about the fancy moccasins. Plain as day, the master criminal, as I now thought of him, zeroed in on me as a jackpot of his own, and why hadn’t I been smart enough to see that coming? *That’ll teach you, Red Chief,* I mentally kicked myself, and for the rest of that morning on the ride down to Minneapolis I kept to my seat and watched the other passengers out of the corner of my eye lest I be invaded by some other wrongdoer.

Luckily that did not happen, the bus inhabitants minding their manners and leaving me alone—maybe I was painted red to them—and around noon my attention was taken up by the way the Greyhound little by little was navigating streets where the buildings grew taller and taller. We were now in the big half of the
Twin Cities, according to the driver’s good-natured announcement, and whatever
the other place was like, everything about Minneapolis was more than sizable as I
perched on the edge of my seat peering out at it all. The first metropolis—it puffed
itself up to that by stealing half the word, didn’t it—of my life.

Wide as my eyes were at the sights and scenes, it was hard to take it all in.
Even the department store windows showing off the latest fashions seemed to
dwarf those in, say, Great Falls. Likewise, the sidewalks were filled with
throngs that would not have fit on the streets back in Montana. People, people
everywhere, as traffic increasingly swarmed around us, the tops of cars turtling
along below the bus windows barely faster than the walking multitudes.

As the Greyhound crept from stoplight to stoplight, I couldn’t help
gawking at so many passersby in suits and snappy hats and good dresses on an
ordinary day, each face another world of mystery to me. Where were they going,
what drew them out dressed to the gills like promenaders in an Easter parade?
Where did they live, in the concrete buildings that seemed to go halfway to the sky
or in pleasant homes hidden away somewhere? I wished this was Wisconsin so I
could start to have answers to such things, all the while knowing I was many
miles yet from any kind of enlightenment.

When we at last pulled in to the block-long driveway of the terminal, with
numerous busses parked neatly side by side as if the silver dogs were lined up to
start a race, the driver called out that routine I knew by heart now, lunch stop,
conveniences, and so on. Minneapolis, however, was his changeover spot, so he
got off ahead of the rest of us, but the relief driver was not there yet, and when I
reached the bottom of the steps the departing driver gave me a little salute and said
with a serious smile, “Take care of yourself, son.”

Son. My chest was out, I’m sure, as I charged through the double doors
of the bus station. I knew the driver had only said it because we were inadvertant
buddies after dealing with the larcenous man in the suit, but no one had called me that for the past two years.

In high spirits, I gazed around the teeming depot to scout matters out. The slick-looking blue building, when we'd pulled up to it, took up most of the block, with a rounded entrance on the corner where three fleet greyhounds the same as on the bus seemed to be in an everlasting chase after one another around the top of the building. But impressive as the entranceway was, that was not the most outstanding thing to me. Inside, an actual restaurant, just like you'd find on a street, was tucked to one side of the majestic space, with a full menu posted. It hooked me at first sight; all due apology to Gram and her decree of sandwich for lunch, my stomach was only interested in a real meal. Hadn't I been through a lot since Bemidji, coping with the danger of being robbed blind? That kind of narrow escape was bound to cause an appetite, right? Besides, I still was carrying loose change wanting to be spent.

Anyway, feeling highly swayve and debonure out on my own in grownup territory, I found a table where I could see the big clock over the ticket counter—most of an hour yet until the bus was to leave, but I wasn't taking any chances—and was served Swiss steak by a pleasant waitress, although I didn't know what she was called because it wasn't written on her breast. To me in my grand mood, only one name in pink stitching deserved such prominence anyway.

Leticia. What a reward it was, when I was done with that summer of living out of a wicker suitcase and Gram met me at the Greyhound station in Great Falls, healed up and feisty as ever, to hear her say guess what, she had her old job back as fry cook at the truck stop in Browning. And guess what again, Letty was back too, waitress on the same shift. Havre didn't work out, I was not surprised to hear. And sure enough, there she was from then on,
red-lipstickered and sassy as she dealt out the meals Gram made appear in the kitchen’s ready window, sneaking a cigarette whenever the counter wasn’t busy, and boldly taking up where she left off with Harv the trucker. With his jailbreaking past and mean sheriff brother behind him, and regular as the days of the week in courting Letty--who wouldn’t be, linked up with the world’s best kisser--he was my great companion as well. On weekend trips to places like Great Falls and Helena sometimes he would take me with him in the bus-wide cab of his truck, and always pull over at a side road on the long hill at the Two Medicine River, so we could get out and put flowers at the two white crosses. Both couples of us lived in apartments above the famous Browning Mercantile, so everything a person could possibly want--school clothes, used Reader’s Digest Condensed Books--was right downstairs. I went to school with Blackfoot kids who all wore moccasins but none as good as my fancy-dance pair. To top off this dreamlike turn of life, I took my meals at the truck stop, with Gram dishing up chicken-fried steak whenever I wished and Letty giving me a wink and asking, “Getting enough to eat, sonny boy?”

“I said, are you getting enough to eat, sonny boy?”

I came to with a start, the Minneapolis waitress puncturing that vision as she started to clear away my empty plate. “Fine, yeah, I’m full as can be,” I mumbled my manners as real life set in again, the public address system announcing departures and arrivals the same as ever.

Rousing myself with still plenty of time until I needed to be back at the bus, I left a dime tip as I had seen the person at the next table do, and roamed out into the busy waiting area, where I was naturally drawn to the news and candy stand.
The stand was piled on all sides with newspapers and magazines, a dozen times more than the Gros Ventre drugstore had to offer, and after buying a Mounds that I justified as dessert I circled around investigating who was famous just then. On cover after cover was someone smiling big, although not President Truman who seemed to be having trouble with a Wisconsin senator named McCarthy, according to TIME and NEWSWEEK. Of the others pictured, though, biggest of all in every way was the well-known face of the impressively hefty singer Kate Smith on the oversize cover of LIFE, which identified her as AMERICA’S FAVORITE SONGSTRESS--BLESSSED WITH A VOICE LIKE NO OTHER. If a voice like no other meant singing “God Bless America” over and over until it stuck in the head of everyone in the country, she sure had that, all right. Giving her the admiring look of someone who, as Gram would have said, couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, I passed on to a whole section of the newsstand populated by movie stars--Elizabeth Taylor again, and Ava Gardner and Gary Cooper and Robert Taylor and a good many I had never heard of, but they were clearly famous. How I envied every gleaming one of them.

Perhaps it goes without saying that my fame fever was a product of imagination, but there was greatly more to it than that. Call me a dreamer red in the head, back then, but becoming famous looked to me like a way out of a life haunted by county poorfarm and orphanage the other side of the mountains. A change of luck sort of like winning a real jackpot, in other words. Wouldn’t we all take some of that, at eleven going on twelve or any other age? The missing detail that I had no fixed notion of what I might best be famous at--the talent matter--other than a world-record autograph collection, maybe even constituted an advantage, giving me more chances as I saw it.
I became more engrossed in the faces of fame than I knew. When I remembered to check the clock, I looked twice, the second time in shock. The hour was up, the bus would be leaving in less than a minute.

I ran as hard as a frantic human being can with a depot full of travelers in the way as I raced for the departure gate.

But too late. By the time I scrambled through the maze of passengers lined up out in the loading bays for other buses, I could see mine rumbling onto the street and pulling away.

I stopped dead, which right then I might as well have been. There I was, in a strange city, with only the clothes on my back, while my every other possession—including the slip of paper with Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch’s address and phone number tucked into the autograph book in my coat pocket left on my seat--sped away in a cloud of exhaust. Helpless is pretty close to hopeless, and right then I felt both. For the second time that rugged day, eleven years old seemed much too young to be facing the world all by myself.

Too overcome even to cuss, I was only dimly aware of the thickset man who’d been dropping bundles of newspapers off at the stand while I still was deep in the magazines now wheeling an empty handtruck out to his van, whistling carelessly as he came. “’Scuse, please, comin’ through,” he made to get past me on the walkway, but halted when he had a look at my face. “Whasamatter? You sick? Gonna throw up, better get over to the gutter.”

“I missed my bus,” I babbled, “it left without me and my suitcase is on it and my jacket and autograph book and moccasins and--”

“Them puppy bus dickheads,” he said with disgust. “’At’s about like them. Which way you goin’?”

“W-W-Wisconsin.”
He waved me toward the green van with TWIN CITIES NEWS AGENCY on its side as he trundled the handtruck over and heaved it in with a clatter. “Hop in, kiddo.”

“Are you gonna take me there? To Wisconsin?”

“Naw, can’t quite do that,” he gestured so urgently I jumped in the open-sided van. “C’mon, we’ll catch ’em in St. Paul.”

“Is it very far?”

He gave me a look as if I was mentally lacking. “They don’t call these the Twin Cities for nothin’.” Crouched over the steering wheel and shifting gears fast and furious, he goosed the van out into the street traffic, blaring the horn at anything in our way. I hung on to one of the newspaper bin dividers behind him as we went clipping past the big buildings and fancy stores at daredevil speed.

“Don’t that beat all,” my samaritan kept up a one-sided conversation as he willy-nilly changed lanes and ran stoplights on the blink between green and red. “Pullin’ out without even lookin’ around for you any. What kind of bus drivin’ is that?” He shook his head at the state of Greyhound affairs. “Dickheads,” he repeated.

I held my breath as we swerved around a yellow taxi cab and zoomed through an intersection with a few warning honks of the horn. When I could speak, I felt compelled to stick up for the earlier bus driver who had saved my skin at Lake Itasca. “They aren’t all like that, honest.”

“Hah. You don’t know the half of it.”

Before I could ask about the half I was missing, I was distracted by the high bridge we were atop without warning, over a river that seemed to go on and on. Which is basically what the Mississippi does. The Greyhound driver question dogged me, so to speak. As the van rumbled across the seemingly endless bridge and the chasm below, I kept my death grip on the divider and
leaned down to speak into my escort’s ear. “So how come you think they’re all”--

I tried out the new word--‘dickheads?’

“They ain’t union.” He pointed to an encased certificate up by the visor.

By squinting, I at least could read the large type, INTERNATIONAL

BROTHERHOOD OF TEAMSTERS.

At last, something I knew about! “Horses!” I burst out as a hayfield

teamster if only anyone would let me. “You drive those, too?”

He cast me a grin over his shoulder. “In the old days, every Teamster did,
you bet your pucker string they did.”

“Me, too! I mean, I know how to harness up and drive a team and

everything. See, I wouldn’t be here at all if Sparrowhead back at the ranch in

Montana had let me drive the stacker team like I know I can and--”

“Life’s tough, ain’t it?” He held up a hand as if letting the air rush through

his fingers. “Feel better? We’re in St. Paul.”

“Really?” It looked the same as Minneapolis to me, the Identical Twin

Cities evidently. The van kept up its rapid clip, the rush of wind through the open

side making my eyes water. I had to hope my fellow teamster could see all right,
as we were cutting in and out of lanes of traffic by the barest of space between us

and other vehicles. “Smooth move!” I let out like one race driver complimenting

another when he skimmed us around a double-parked delivery truck by inches and

blazed on through a changing traffic light. “Nothin’ to it,” he claimed, flooring

the gas pedal in a race to beat the next light, “you just gotta keep on the go.”

“Lemme think now,” I heard him calculate as we wove our way through
downtown traffic, the street checkered with shadows thrown by the high

buildings. “When we reach the station, you be ready to jump off and tell that
doggy driver you belong on the bus, ’kay?”
“S-s-sure,” I said uncertainly. I didn’t have time to worry about how I would do at that, because ahead in blinking neon was a towering sign that read from top to bottom, GREYHOUND.

"Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway," the teamster addressed the unwavering red light that held us up at the cross street. On the other side, so near and yet so far, the St. Paul terminal which was fancied up with plaster-like decorations of fruit and flowers appeared to be older and smaller than the Minneapolis one and must not have dealt in as many passengers, because fewer buses with the racing dog on the side were backed into the loading area in the open-arched driveway. I had eyes only for one, with MILWAUKEE in the roller sign above the windshield, and I spotted it immediately, its door cruelly folding closed as if shutting me out.

“There it is! It’s leaving again!"

“That’s what he thinks, the dickhead.” The newspaper van revved and so did the teamster, bouncing slightly in his seat, as the stoplight took agonizingly long to change.

The instant it did, we shot across the street and along the arches of the terminal driveway, directly toward the warning sign at the far end, reading in red letters of descending order EXIT WRONG WAY DO NOT ENTER.

“Hang on!” shouted the teamster, and whipped the van around the curb into the exitway, jamming us to a halt nose to nose with the bus.

By reflex, the wide-eyed driver of the bus had hit the brakes, and even more so the horn. “Here you go, kiddo. Have a nice trip,” my good samaritan daredevil at the wheel said, giving the Greyhound driver the finger. In the blare resounding in the arched driveway, I could barely be heard thanking the van-driving teamster as I leaped out and he gave me a little bye-bye wave.

Peering down at me through the broad windshield, his eyebrows dark as thunderclouds, the bus driver at last let up on the deafening horn as I edged
through the slit of space between the facing vehicles and popped out at the bus
door. With faces watching curiously in every window above the ever-running
streamlined dog, I wildly pantomimed that I needed in, until the driver, keeping
his hand dubiously on the door lever, cracked things open enough that I could
make myself heard.

“You left me! In Minnesota, I mean Minneapolis. My jacket was holding
my seat like always, see, but I stayed in the bus station a minute too long and
when I ran to where the bus was, it wasn’t there and--”

“That’s yours?” Looking more upset than ever, the driver fished my
jacket from behind his seat. “You should have kept better track of it, junior. I
didn’t see it in time or I’d have turned it in back there before we started.”

As I gulped at one more near miss, he pointed a further accusing finger at
me. “And technically, if a passenger misses the bus, it’s his own tough luck.” I
was so afraid of exactly that, I couldn’t form words. “It says right in the
regulations,” he kept on reading me the dog bus version of the riot act, “it is the
passenger’s responsibility to--”

Just then a sharp blast of horn from the van made him jerk his head
around, glowering back and forth from me to the motionless teamster, unbudging
as a bulldog.

In exasperation, he yanked the bus door open. “Okay, okay, step on and
show me your ticket.”
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 as I scrambled 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 faces of fame at the newsstand. 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 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 once more, put the bus-missing episode out of mind, concentrate on something else like, well, anything but that.
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 Teton 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 druggist 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, and it couldn’t come too soon.

“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 across the aisle as if catapulted out of her seat, landing right next to me while 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 humped 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 Schneider, 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 Schneider 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. Schneider 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. Schneider interrupted himself to ask, wrinkled with concern, "Now where is it you're going, Donal?"
“Manitowoc.”

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

I repeated the tricky word, adding “My grandmother says it means ‘Where ghosts live,’ in Indian,” which didn’t seem to help.

“Don’t know it at all. You, Mae?”

“No 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 storied to nor did I want to, hard truth the destination I had to face now.

“No, no, it’s in Wisconsin, honest, see.” Producing the autograph book from my jacket pocket, I showed them the precious piece of paper with the Manitowoc address and phone number. 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, like 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. Schneider whistled when I finally ran down, “you’re a trouper for not letting anything throw you,” and Mrs. Schneider added a flurry of tskts 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 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. Schneider 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 next thing to 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 an 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 Schneider 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 an underage hobo, and
Mae Schneider 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. Schneider 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. Schneider 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 knowing 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 Schneiders 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 Schneiders’ son. Oh how 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.
Milwaukee. The last hazardous stop 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 poked leaks in the clouds. Either a very religious place 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 different kinds of foreign.

Humped up 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 Schneiders came along to stick up for me when I most needed it--my imagination darting back and forth to what could have happened instead of what did. *Life is a zigzag journey*, Letty’s inscription predicted, and how right that was turning out to be.
Yet, already those experiences, bad and good, seemed farther past than they were. In some way that I could not 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 away from my life until then than simply the count of hours could show. I had to think for a bit to realize by now it was Sunday, and from that, it struck me 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 do­or-die operation.

That thought swelled 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. I headed straight down the long bank of swinging doors with arrivals and departures posted beside them, not veering an inch toward the waiting room newsstand and its lure of Mounds bars, 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
Of all things, this time I was way early, the bus sitting there empty, no 
driver in sight. I checked the posted departure time and saw that I had plenty of 
leeway to go use the nearby convenience, so as a precaution in I went, hugging my 
suitcase to me. It was there, washing my hands afterwards, that the large red 
lettering on the machine on the wall past the stalls registered on me.

MAXIMUM PROTECTION!

That drew my interest. Keeping a death grip on my suitcase, I went over to 
see what was being dispensed that qualified as so surefire against jeopardy of 
whatever kind. In smaller print but still in blazing red letters above the coin slot 
was the explanation, more or less.

TUFFY PROPHYLACTICS

THE STRONGEST CONDOM COMING AND GOING!

Well, that indicated to me, in an inexact schoolyard way, the vicinity of 
what these were for. But only that? The further wording touting how stout and 
reliable a Tuffy was included the word sheath. That in turn brought to mind one of 
the poems Miss Ciardi had made us memorize by the dozens in the sixth grade, 
_Noble Cyrano sheathed his knife/And spared the foul assassin’s life._ I had 
something sharp to sheath too, did I ever.

After all, it made sense to me that people carried good luck charms for a 
reason—carried the thinger that brought luck—which I had not been able to do with 
the practically knife-edged arrowhead stashed in the suitcase. If I could just 
somehow have it in my pocket without getting jabbed like crazy every time I sat 
down, maybe it would work more like a lucky piece was supposed to. In short, 
protection was what I needed, and here it was promised for twenty-five cents.

Risking one of my few remaining coins, I turned the knob on the machine 
and into the trough at the bottom dropped a round packet disappointingly small.