

And when I unwrapped it, the so-called sheath seemed all too thin. Huh. I thought by reputation these things were made of rubber. Instead the material was sort of like fishskin, and while stretchy, didn't strike me as all that strong. When I dug the arrowhead out of the suitcase and compared lengths, though, the condom thinger looked just about right.

For all I knew, maybe more than one at a time was needed in this matter of protection, like putting on extra socks in zero weather. I had a last couple of quarters left and inserted them one after the other into the Tuffy dispenser, drawing quite a look from a guy at the nearest urinal. Then over in a corner at the sink counter, working carefully, carefully, with a little toilet paper padding to help out, I managed to tug the triple layer of condoms over the arrowhead. Definitely sheathed, it fit in my pocket as not much bigger than an ordinary charm like a rabbit's foot, and finally felt like a lucky piece should, ready and waiting.

Back out in the boarding area, the driver showed up at the still empty bus at the same time I did. Burly and black-mustached and still settling his company crush hat on his head, he looked me over enough that I was afraid he'd heard about me, the entire Greyhound fleet alerted about the stray whom trouble followed like a black cat's shadow. But he only remarked, "Early bird, aren't you," and stuck the antiquated suitcase safely in the baggage compartment. I went up the steps right at his heels, and for quite some time we were the only ones on the bus, me securing a window seat partway down the aisle but away from the bumpy ride over the back tires, and him behind the steering wheel dealing with paperwork.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl during this. I was tired and getting cranky along with it. The driver kept on dabbling at his paperwork. I continued to be the one and only passenger. At last a few others dribbled aboard, but to my

puzzlement, not as many as at any point of the trip since passengers dwindled away into the void of North Dakota. Was Manitowoc such a ghost town no one wanted to go there? Soon enough I'd know, wouldn't I. If the Greyhound ever got itself in gear, which I was starting to doubt.

Growing really antsy, I was about to ask the driver when he was ever going to start us rolling, until I heard him say to himself, "Hoo boy, here they are," and climb off in a hurry to do his baggage job. I turned to the window to see what was happening, and gasped.

A disorderly line of kids, snaking from side to side like one of those Chinese dragons in a parade, was pouring out of the depot, each with a suitcase in hand. There was an absolute mob of them, and worse than that, entirely boys, and even worse yet, the worst I could imagine, they all were about my age and there were more than enough redheads among them to confuse anyone. I knew it! Redheaded thinking it surely was, but this clearly was a disaster in the making. Just like I had tried to tell Gram, there was no conceivable way Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch could pick me out, confronted with red mopheads everywhere they looked.

The whole pack of them stormed onto the bus laughing and shoving and talking at the top of their voices as I sat dismally watching the pandemonium. A couple of fretful adults were in charge, or trying to be, but they were no match for the stampede. The kids swarmed as they pleased through the aisles, claiming seats and instantly trading. The bus filled up, and the next thing I knew, three boys descended on where I was sitting, one of them flopping down next to me and the others straight across the aisle.

As sharp-featured as if he'd been whittled, my new suitmate had a natural nose for poking into other people's business, eyeing me with none too friendly curiosity. "What'ja do, get on the bus early?"

“Sort of. Yesterday.”

“Yeah? Where ya from then?”

I told him, his snoopy pair of chums listening in. If the new bus riders were impressed by my distant point of departure they had a funny way of showing it. “Monta-a-a-na,” they bleated like sheep. “Know any cowboys? Like Hopalong Assidy?” They snickered roundly at the idea.

What to do? Lay it on them about the past two years of hanging around the bunkhouse with the Double W riders every chance I got, sometimes even being permitted when I caught Gram and Sparrowhead both in the right mood to saddle up and help move cows and calves to a new pasture, riding right next to cowboys not of the phony movie ten-gallon-hat-on-a-half-pint-head Hopalong Cassidy variety but as genuine as they come, as shown by their imaginative cussing?

These kids, not a freckle from the outdoors on their milkwhite faces, did not seem like a promising audience for any of that. For once, I figured I’d better tone matters down.

“Well, sure, I couldn’t help but know plenty of them, could I,” I said offhandedly, “my grandmothers’s the cook on the biggest ranch in Montana, see, and the whole crew, cowboys and all, eats together at a table as long as this bus.” That did stretch the matter a little, but not unreasonably so, I thought.

“Huh. Sounds like basement supper at church,” my seatmate mouthed off, but if it didn’t get any worse than that I’d be fine.

“Jeez, you must have wore a hole in your butt, on here that long,” one of the others came up with about my duration on the bus.

“Uh-huh, it’s cracked a little, too,” I shot back, making them laugh in spite of themselves, and matters relaxed somewhat.

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

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

"Where'ja get that?" Kurt looked at me like I was crazy. "School's out. We're goin' to camp."

"Sleep outside like that?" Why on earth would anyone with a home and a bed, as these milksops surely had, camp for the night on the cold ground? "What for?"

"Outside, nothin'," the big talker who spelled his name with a K turned up his nose at that. "We're goin' to Camp Winnebago. It has cabins and everythin'."

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

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

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

“Give that man a dicky bird.” With that, Kurt pinched the back of my wrist black-and-blue.

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

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

But when I told him, he snickered, while across the aisle Gus, or was it Mannie, jeered, “Ooh, old Manitowocee, couldn't make it to Milwaukee.”

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

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

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

Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,

Mutilated monkey meat.

Dirty little birdie feet.

*Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,
And me without my spoon.*

That was impressive, I had to grant, as did the harried grownup who came rushing down the aisle and told them to quit showing off. As one, they snickered at his retreating back. The candy company should have put the three of them on the Snickers bar, like the Smith Brothers on cough drop boxes.

I didn't have much time for that kind of thinking, however, as they turned their attention back to me, the Mannie one looking particularly hungry for a crack at me.

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

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

Oh, the temptation that brought on. To see the look on their faces when I coolly announced that when it came to things like arrows, I just happened to have a lucky arrowhead older than Columbus right there in my possession. The only shortcoming was, if they clamored to see it I'd have to show it in its wrapping of Tuffies, and I sensed that was not such a good idea. I hated to miss the chance to be superior about the archery matter, but maybe I had something better up my sleeve.

"How about guns?"

My question silenced them for a full several seconds.

Mannie was the first to recover and break out a sneer. "What, cap pistols? Little kid games ain't for us."

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

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

"Magpies."

"Yeah? What's those?"

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

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

"Then how do you make any money?" I pressed my advantage, Kurt still leaning away as if his ass might get shot off from my direction. "See, there's a bounty on magpies, on account of they eat the eyeballs right out of calves and lambs and things, and"--I had a moment of inspiration-- "they really do gobble gopher guts." At that, my audience was agog, if slightly green around the gills.

"So what you do," I continued in expert style, "after you shoot them, you cut off their legs with your jackknife and turn those in for the bounty. Fifty cents, just like that," I snapped my fingers like a shot, if a person imagined a little. "They're pretty easy to shoot, I got seventeen so far this year," I concluded as if dead magpies were notches on my gunbelt.

By now I was being looked at as if I was either a gunslinging hero of the eleven-year-old set or the biggest liar on the face of the earth. But it was totally true that Wendell Williamson, tightwad that he was, ponied up for dirty little birdy feet, magpies being the hated nuisance they were on ranches, after Gram vouched

that my father had taught me how to shoot the .22 and she swore I was responsible enough to hunt along the creek willows without endangering the cattle.

My listeners stirred uncertainly. Gus's lips were moving as he worked out fifty cents times seventeen, while Mannie gauged me more warily than before. It was up to Kurt to rally the campers.

"Yeah, well, bows and arrows can kill stuff, too. Like, uh, frogs. We're goin' frog huntin' the first night at camp, ain't we, guys."

"We'll murder the buggers!" and "Frog legs for breakfast!" from across the aisle backed that up as if hunting hopping amphibians in the dark, Indian style, was a tried-and-true camp activity, which I seriously doubted.

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

Really? The comprehension began to sink in that I was nearly there at last. Fifteen minutes truly did sound like no time after all my hours on the bus, the never-to-be-forgotten encounters I'd had, close calls especially, chapter after thick chapter of memory. In an odd way, I started to miss all that, the good and the bad, so many bits and pieces of my immense journey coming to mind while my latest companions thought it was a big deal to go up the road a skip and a jump to the same dumb camp year after year. But the mind does funny things, and half listening to their razzing back and forth about which of them was most likely to shoot himself in the foot with an arrow, I had a sudden itch toward the autograph

book. After all, here was my last chance on the dog bus for who knew how long, and three candidates right here handy. So what if they behaved like nose pickers, when they knew stuff like that campers' song. Goofiness had its place in the pages of life, too.

Impulsively I pulled out the album, its cream-colored cover somewhat smudged from so much handling but overall less the worse for wear from its trip than I was, and showed it off to Kurt.

"Yeah?" his answer to almost everything. He fanned through the pages like a speed reader. "So you want us all to put somethin' in it."

I said I sure did, which brought about quite a reaction across the aisle. Gus giggled in Mannie's face. "Gonna write *My name is Manfred Vedder, I'm an old bed wetter*, aintcha?"

"Sure, dipshit, just like you're gonna sign yours *Augustus Dussel, that's me, I barely have brains enough to pee*," Mannie jeered back.

Nervously I pasted on a grin at their name-calling contest. Whatever their parents had been thinking in saddling them with those wacky christenings, these brats would be a different kind of material for the autograph book, for sure. And I couldn't help but wonder what Kurt the leading loudmouth was going to come up with when he committed ink to paper.

Meanwhile he still was toying his way through the pages, and to get things going, I was about to hand him the Kwik Klik and explain how it worked, when he clapped the book shut and held it out to show Gus and Mannie. "Gotta better idea. We'll take it to camp and everybody there can write in it for ya. The counselors, even." All three of them snickered at that, you can bet. "Don't blow your wig," Kurt, the sneak, said as if I shouldn't have a care in the world, "we'll send it back to you in Monta-a-a-na when it's full."

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

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

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

In desperation, I shoved the heel of my hand into Kurt's surprised face and kicked my way past him--he didn't amount to much of a barrier compared to the braided Indian or the man in the bad-fitting suit--and launched myself onto the giggling pair across the aisle, calling them dickheads and sons-of-bitches and whatever other swearwords came to my tongue. It was two against one, but they were underneath and I was all over them with flailing limbs. In the scuffle, I elbowed Gus hard enough to take the giggle out of him. Mannie was chanting "Uh uh uh, don't be grabby!" when I got on top of him enough to knee him in a bad place and snatch the album back.

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

Still cussing to the best of my ability, I was grappled by one of the adults into the seat across the aisle, Kurt having retreated to the window as far as he could get from me.

"We wasn't gonna keep it, honest," he whined, the liar, as I furiously checked things over. The autograph book miraculously had survived without damage, but my shirt was wrecked all to hell, a pocket dangling almost off--fortunately not the one with the money pinned to it--and a number of buttons were missing and I could feel a draft from rips under the arms and long tears down the back as if I'd been fighting clawed animals, which I pretty nearly was.

About then I spat something out. A piece of tooth. My tongue found the chipped spot. One of the sharp teeth next to my bottom front ones. Sharper now. Baring my choppers at him, I gave Kurt another murderous look, not that it repaired anything but my feelings, and he whimpered, the fearless frog hunter.

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

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

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

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

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By then I had seen sixteen hundred miles' worth of towns, from Palookavilles to the Twin Cities busy as double beehives to gray sippy Milwaukee spiked with churches. At this first sight of Manitowoc, though, I did not know what to think. Houses looked old, and many of them small and with gray siding, on streets with some flower gardens fringing the lawns but none of the overtowering cottonwood groves of Gros Ventre or Great Falls. Nothing about the tight-packed neighborhoods appeared even remotely familiar except Chevies and Fords dotting the streets and those were strangely pulled in sideways--parallel parking had not converted Montana. Plenty of church steeples here, too, like arrow tips in the hide of the sky. As for the people out and about, they were not as highly dressed up as in Minneapolis, yet the women looked like they had on nylons, which not even Meredice Williamson wore on an everyday basis at the ranch, and the men sported hats that would scarcely keep the sun off at all, not a Stetson among them.

My eyes stayed busy as could be, my mind trying to keep up with all the different sights and scenes--Gram had been right about that, I had to admit--as the bus approached the more active downtown section, with long lines of mystifying storefronts. We passed a business calling itself a SCHNAPPS SCHOP, which looked like a bar, and the bars I could recognize all had a glowing blue neon sign in the window proclaiming SCHLITZ, THE BEER THAT MADE MILWAUKEE FAMOUS, which was news to me--it hadn't done so in Montana--while what looked like restaurants commonly had the word SCHNITZEL painted on the plate glass, and an apparent department store had SCHUETTE'S, a very strange-sounding product if it wasn't a name, spelled in large letters above its show windows. I was no whiz at other languages, but I had the awful growing

suspicion that if ghosts walked in Manitowoc, they had better speak German to find their way around this weird town.

Like a thunderclap following that realization, the bus rumbled across a drawbridge over a murky river, with half-killed weeds clinging to its banks, and on past huge shed-like buildings with signs saying they were enterprises unknown to me such as boiler works and coal yards. Fortunately I caught a reassuring glimpse of a sparkling grey-blue lake that spilled over the horizon, and the best thing that had yet come into sight, a tremendously long red-painted ship in the harbor with ORE EMPRESS in big white letters on its bow.

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

“Manitowoc, the pearl of Lake Michigan. Everybody off.”

I was thunderstruck, but not for long.

“HEY, NO, EVERYBODY SIT TIGHT! YOU'RE NOT THERE YET!”

My outcry halted the driver and probably everyone else on the bus.

“You're taking them to Camp Winniegoboo!” I instructed the open-mouthed man at the wheel. “They told me so!”

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

I nodded dumbly, and followed him off the bus into the unloading area. There still was a chance, if I could grab my suitcase and hustle into the waiting room ahead of the throng of campers. But of course at Milwaukee mine had been the first one stowed in the baggage compartment, and as infallibly as Murphy's

Law that anything that can go wrong is bound to go wrong, every camping kid received his bag and filtered into the depot before the wicker suitcase was reached. Directly ahead as I slogged in dead last, Kurt and his gang looked back and gave me various kinds of the stink eye, but stayed a safe distance away.

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

When my greeters didn't show up and didn't show up, I decided there was only one thing to do. Resort to the slip of paper with their phone number. Not that I knew squat about using the instrument evidently hidden in the forbidding closet-size booth with GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE on it, all the way across the terminal. Payphone? Like a jukebox, was that, where you stuck coins in and a bunch of machinery was set in motion in the guts of the apparatus, or what? Everywhere I had lived, the construction camps, the ranch, telephones were a simple party line where you merely picked up the receiver and dinged two longs and two shorts or whatever the signal was for whoever you were calling. This was not the best time to have to figure out strange new equipment, especially if you were as close to having the heebie-jeebies as I was.

Then I slapped my pants pocket, remembering. I'd spent the last of my loose change buying Tuffies for the arrowhead. To get coins to call with, I would need to break a ten-dollar bill from the stash under my remaining shirt pocket,

which meant undressing even further right here in the most public place there was, where anyone like the convict in the suit and tie could be watching as I unpinned the money, because I didn't dare retreat to the men's room to do it out of sight-- that was a guaranteed way to miss Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch should they show up looking for me. This was becoming like one of those nightmares in which the predicament gets deeper and deeper until you think you never will wake up back to sanity.

Trying to fight down the jitters, I cast another wild gaze around the teeming waiting room hoping for salvation in the form of anyone who might resemble Gram enough to be her sister. No such luck, not even close. People of every shape and form and way of dress, but none showed me any recognition and of course I couldn't to them. I must have been looked past hundreds of times, as if I was too ragged for anyone to want to pack home. I was stuck.

There was no help for it, I was going to have to throw myself on the mercy of GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE. Setting down my suitcase to try to get things in order, especially myself, I first of all reached out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and flipped through the pages to find the slip of paper with the phone number. Then again. My fingers began to shake.

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

Distress hit like an instant paralysis, as a terrible omission caught up with me. Worse, what might be called the commission of an omission. I hadn't bothered to so much as glance at the phone number or street address even when showing those to the Schneiders. Now I stood rooted there feeling worse off even than I was when stranded in Minneapolis--unmet, my clothing half torn off, as good as lost in a weird city, with night coming on and not even the dog bus as a haven any more. Rough introduction into being a total orphan, it felt like.

I was dissolving into utter surrender, tears next, when I heard the melodious voice behind me.

“So here you are, sweetie pie. We wondered.”

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

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

In the meantime the man was giving me a bucktoothed expression of greeting, like a horse grinning. “Looks run in the family, hah?” he said in a voice as guttural as hers was musical. “Hallo,” he shook hands, mine swallowed in his, “I am Herman.” Not Dutch? Gram had said he was something else, but not that he was something you couldn’t put a name to for sure. Seeing my confusion, he grinned all the more. “You are thinking of how I used to be called, I betcha. Herman is me, more.”

Blinking my way out of one surprise after another, I simply stood planted there gawking at the two of them, one tall and slope-shouldered, the other nearly as broad as the fat lady in a carnival. Longfaced and with that horsy grin and glasses that made his eyes look larger than human, with an odd glint to them, he was quite a sight in his own right, but it was her I was stupefied by. I could only think Gram hadn’t spelled her out to me to save the surprise. Oh, man! *She* was in our family, what there was of it? This was like a wish come true, life all of a sudden springing the better kind of trick for a change.

I still almost couldn’t believe it, but the more I looked at this unexpected personage, the more excited I became. I would have known her anywhere, an unmistakable figure in more ways than one, big around as a jukebox, jolly double chins, wide-set doll eyes, hairdo as plump as the rest of her, the complete picture. The exact same face I had seen big as life--well, *LIFE*, really, the picture

magazine that showed what was what in the world every week--just that same day at the Minneapolis newsstand, and the melodious voice, familiar as if it was coming out of the radio that very moment. My Aunt Kitty was clearly none other than what the magazine cover described with absolute authority as America's favorite songstress, and unless a person was a complete moron and deaf to boot, recognizable as the treasured vocalist of every song worth singing, Kate Smith.

At last, I had it knocked.

Where Manitou Walks**June 17-30, 1951****9**

It made perfect sense to me. Although the mention went in one ear and out the other at the time, hadn't Gram herself spoken of her little dickens of a sister--although that description was a quite a few sizes too small any more--as "the great Kate," in saying the two of them just could not make music together from girlhood on? Well, who could, with a singer whose voice carried her to the very top? Back then, I could not have defined palpitations, but did I ever have them, so excited was I to possess this famous woman for an aunt. Great-aunt, but close enough. I gazed raptly up at her, top-heavy as she was with that mighty chest but as cool and composed there in the hubbub of the bus station as if posing for her picture in a magazine. And wasn't she smart to condense *Smythe*, her and Gram's maiden name that looked to me like one of those trick words in a spelling contest, to good old *Smith* to sing under? Believe It Or Not! disclosed this kind of thing all the time, you could hardly read the Sunday funnies without learning that Patti Page before she reached the hit parade with songs like "Tennessee

Waltz” was plain Clara Ann Fowler, a name switcheroo if there ever was one. Besides, as Red Chief myself, I was naturally in favor of sprucing up what you called yourself in any way possible.

So the great Kate Smith, dressed in a peach-colored outfit that made her look like a million dollars, monumental in every way as she peered down at me with a perfectly plucked eyebrow arched, represented rescue, relief, reward, a miraculous upward turn in my circumstances. And I needed whatever I could get, ragged and snaggle-toothed as my appearance was. Her expression turned to puckered concern as she tallied my missing buttons, dangling pocket, and the rest of my shirt more or less torn to shreds. “Heavens, child, you look like you’ve been in a dogfight.”

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

“We’ll have to get you changed”--she noted the heavy traffic into the men’s rest room, and frowned--“later.” A new note of worry crept in at my general disarray and the wicker suitcase which itself was looking the worse for wear, if that was possible. “You did bring something presentable, I hope?”

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

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

Paying no attention to that, she seemed to make up her mind to smile at me, the extra chin and the famous chubby dimples involved. She had the bluest eyes, which mine swam in guilelessly. “If you’re ready, honeybunch,” she was

saying in that voice so melodious I was surprised she could pass herself off in public as Aunt Kitty at all, "we may as well go."

I nodded eagerly. Herman--somehow I had trouble applying Uncle to him, without Dutch to go with it--insisted on taking my suitcase, remarking on the wicker, "Old-timey, from somewheres else, I betcha."

Out we went, he and I trailing her as she plowed through the depot crowd, drawing second looks every step of the way. At the curb, I was glad to see, an idling bus that was not even a Greyhound was filling with the kids going to camp, the poor saps. If there was any justice, Kurt, Gus, and Mannie were in there watching and eating their weasel hearts out at my royal welcome.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I glanced at her hopefully. Maybe she even could slip into the program some hint that I had arrived, and Gram would hear it in her hospital room and know I had come through my harrowing journey safe and sound, mostly. I didn't want to ask that yet, shy about bothering someone getting ready to perform for a national audience. I would not have been surprised if she exercised her vocal cords right there in the car, but the only sign she gave of impending performance was humming to herself while she tapped a hand on the round rise of one thigh as steadily as a telegraph operator in a shoot-'em-up western.

I figured she was entitled to a few jitters. What had that first seatmate of mine, the stout woman on the Chevy bus, said? "*I'd be such a bundle of nerves.*" And that was merely about my supposed journey to Pleasantville, nothing like facing a radio microphone and a live audience and singing for the thousandth time "God Bless America" the way everyone coast to coast was waiting to hear again. If I was a trouper like Joe Schneider had said, the famous entertainer sitting right here at my elbow was the biggest example imaginable. It must run in the family.

"How is Montana?"

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

"Yah, I betcha. Like Old Shatterhand would say, up on its hind legs and still going, hah?"

His laugh came from the bottom of his throat, like his words. His lingo threw me a little at first, but I knew I'd get used to it, accustomed as I was to hired hands in the bunkhouse or the barracks at a construction camp who were called Swede or Ole or Finnigan if from Finland, and spoke "that broken stuff" as it was called. Squarehead, was the catch-all term for such types. Herman's accent and name I guessed must have come straight from Holland with its tale of Hans Brinker and the silver skates and all that, and it only added to the surprise of my sensational arrival. His choppy voice now reached a wistful register as he declared, "Out in cowboy land, you are in luck."

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

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

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

"Yeah!" Only minutes before I would have had to fake this kind of answer, but landing in the spacious lap of Kate Smith, in a manner of speaking, I

had no trouble whatsoever being enthusiastic. "This is so much better than there, it knocks my socks off."

Just then the DeSoto pulled off the street, Herman steering with his hands wide apart like the captain at a ship's wheel, and I craned for the first sight of the radio station. But he had only stopped for gas, and went inside to use what he called the man's room while the attendant filled the tank and checked the oil and wiped the windshield, whistling all the while as if he had caught the musical spirit from the great Kate beside me. Staring off into the night, she continued to hum to that fitful pitty-pat rhythm on her mound of thigh.

With only the two of us in the car, I couldn't help feeling this was my chance. It was all I could do not to yank the autograph book out of my coat pocket and ask her to write in it, right then and there, in the greenish yellow glow of the gas station's pump lights. Whatever she put on the page, it would be so good, I just knew. And of course I would want her to sign it *Kate Smith*, not something like *Your devoted Aunt Kitty*, to elevate the autograph collection toward true Believe It Or Not! territory as I kept adding to it. I bet she knew all kinds of other celebrities who would write their famous names in it for me, too. Talk about a jackpot! Herman had said a mouthful, about my being in luck. The sacred black arrowhead could not have been doing its job as a lucky piece better, the Tuffies packaging it in my pocket were paying off sensationally.

I cleared my throat to make my request. "Can I ask you for a real big favor?"

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

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

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

"Why, of course you can, adorable," she nodded into her second chin in relief. "It's my given name, after all. That sister of mine started the 'Kitty' thing when we were girls, and heaven knows why, it stuck."

I squirmed at anything said against Gram, but maybe that was the way sisters were.

Herman returned and went through the dashboard maneuvers and what else it took to start the DeSoto. "Home to the range," he sang out, earning a sharp look from Aunt Kate.

As we pulled out of the gas station, I felt dumb as they come. Obviously I had the wrong night about the radio show. Now that I thought about it, back at the Greyhound terminal Aunt Kate most certainly would have said something like, "We have a surprise for you tonight, dear," if I was going to be part of the audience for "Kate Smith Sings," wouldn't she. Sheepish, I fell back to the early bus habit of "Uh-huh" and "Huh-uh" as Herman tried to make conversation on the drive to their house.

It was dark by the time the DeSoto rocked into a bumpy driveway. The house, painted that navy gravy gray shade like in pictures of battleships and with a peaked roof and lit sort of ghostly by the nearest streetlight, appeared big as a ranchin' mansion to me after the cook shack, although looking back, I realize that only meant it had an upstairs as well as a downstairs.

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

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

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

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

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

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had a surprise to show me. Everything was, so far.

I edged into the living room and onto a pea green rug so deep I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A big long leathery davenport, also green but closer to that fakey shade of lime Kool-Aid, sat prominently in front of a bay window where the sill was crammed with potted plants of kinds I couldn't recognize. On an end table next to the arm of the davenport rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters. Whatever else this strange territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

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

Yeah, well, okay, I supposed that went with the reputation of ghosts walking around town, but now what had me more interested was a cubbyhole room off the far end of the living room.

The door was partway open and I glimpsed what appeared to be a day bed under a plain gray cover. Lured by hope, when I poked my head in and saw piles

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

Of greater significance to me was that day bed, just my size, really--I'd slept on any number of cots like that, jouncing through life with my parents--and I'd have bet anything this nice snug room was where I was going to be put up for the summer, special guest in a special place of the house.

Through taking in these new surroundings, something else needed taking care of, and I had to retreat to the kitchen to ask.

"Aunt Kate? I need to use the convenience."

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

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

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

I most certainly did remember, and more than that, I took the opportunity to examine my chipped tooth in the mirror over the sink. Baring my teeth in a kind of maniac smile, I saw that the damaged one stood out menacingly from the others. A snag, in fact, the chip having left it as pointed as a fang.

Studying my reflection, I decided I sort of liked the snaggletooth sticking up that way. It made me look tough, like I'd been through some hard going in life.

My admiration of this new feature was interrupted when all of a sudden I heard singing.

I went still as stone to make sure. Yes! Distinct as anything, from the direction of the kitchen. A solo, to keep the famous Kate Smith voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but *the* song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

*“God bless America,
Land that I love.
Stand beside her
And guide her
Through the night with a light from above.”*

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

Herman had reappeared, sitting at the table paging through a book and not even particularly listening, he evidently was so used to the glorious sound. Rocking ever so slightly side to side to the rhythm, Aunt Kate stood at the stove with her back turned to us, as if it was nothing to be pouring out the best-known song since “Happy Birthday” while cooking 'kraut and weinies. I stood

entranced there at the other end of the kitchen, listening to her sing just for me. Then as the most soaring part rolled around again, the beautiful voice reaching its height--

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looking down and me looking up, we gazed at each other in something like mutual incomprehension. I squirmed a little, and not just from the clammy touch of the davenport through the seat of my pants. Dismayed as I was, she too appeared to be thrown by the situation, until with a nod of resolve she sucked in her cheeks, as much as they would go, and compressed her lips to address the matter of me.

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

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

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

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

“Me? No! I get straight A’s! In deportment, even!” I babbled further, “I heard Miss Ciardi, that’s my teacher, say to Gram I’m bright enough to read by at night.”

My frantic blurts eliciting the throaty response “I see,” although she didn’t seem to, Aunt Kate tapped her hand on her thigh the jittery way she’d done in the car when I assumed singing to all of America was upmost on her mind.

Before she could say anything more, Herman stuck up for me from the kitchen doorway.

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

“When I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it,” she flared, giving him a dirty look. “A person should be able to dress the way she likes. And if Kate Smith happens to resemble me, that is her good luck, isn’t it,” a sentiment that made her draw herself up as if double-daring him to contradict it. I breathed slightly easier. If they were going to have a fight, at least that might put me on the sideline temporarily.

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

“Maybe a little bit more than most,” I owned up to.

My modest admission, she rolled over like a bulldozer. “You mustn’t let it run away with you,” her voice not Kate Smith nice now. “You know why you’re

here, because of Dorie's--your grandmother's operation. We can't have you going around with your head in the clouds while you're with us, we all just need to get through this summer the best we can." Another glare in the direction of the kitchen doorway. "Isn't that so, Brinker?"

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

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

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

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

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



No sooner was the tube steak meal ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, "Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip," which I didn't think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss, "Your room is ready for you."

The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound's long gallop through the dark, but if she wanted to settle me in the cozy sewing room with that nice cot, I was ready for that any time. "It's best for you to have a room all to yourself," she said leading the way into the hall--wow, I thought, she's really putting herself out, giving up her sewing room for my sake--"so we have fixed a place for you, haven't we, Brinker."

He oddly answered, "Yah, you come to Manito Woc and rough it like a cowboy, Donny. Make you feel at home, hah?"

And whiz, just like that, I was bypassing the cubbyhole sewing room and instead trooping upstairs behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase--"You are the guest, you get the best"--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one tread at a time. And as the stairs kept going, quite a climb by any standard, the suspicion began to seep in on me as to where we were headed, even before Herman shouldered open the squeaky door.

To this day, that 'room', up where the hayloft in a barn would be, is engraved in me. Aunt Kate could call it what she wanted, but I had bounced around enough with my parents in makeshift quarters to recognize this as nothing more than the attic. Bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works.

The first thing to strike me in my shock was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages, instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the

useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO. To give Aunt Kate the benefit of good intentions, which I was not about to do, I suppose all that was an attempt to camouflage the suspect bed, which I could tell from its ancient iron legs would skreek every time a person turned over. The rest of the furniture amounted to a cheap fiberboard dresser, a rickety straight-backed chair, and a bedstand holding a lamp with a stained shade. The remainder of the space was taken up by a sagging bookcase shelved with the unmistakable yellow spines of many years' worth of *National Geographics*, and stacks of storage boxes labeled *Xmas tree lights & curtain material* and such.

A kind of concentrated Palookaville, in other words. But veteran of makeshift quarters that I was from life with Gram and my folks in construction camp circumstances, I could have put up with my so-called home for the summer but for one thing. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:

Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

There could not have been a worse verse facing down on me with Gram somewhere between living and dying in a faraway hospital. That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal as long as you got on your knees right before going to bed, unhinged me so badly that if someone had written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out.

As things were, I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the praying boy as Aunt Kate swirled around in the confined quarters instructing me where to put things, while Herman stood well back out of the line of fire.

“There now,” she said when I was installed to her satisfaction, “and you know where the bathroom is.” Yeah, about a mile downstairs. “Kiss kiss,” she patted her cheek in a particular spot. I kissed Gram good night every bedtime, but only reluctantly put my lips to where I was ordered in these circumstances. Gram always returned the kiss, but Aunt Kate wasn’t about to. “Nighty-night, sleep tight,” and away she went, clumping down the stairs one by one. Kate Smith would not have left me with anything that babyish, I knew with a sinking heart, but at least Herman came through with “Have a good shuteye” and another of those half cockeyed man-to-man glances as he followed her into the stairwell.

Bunkhouse vocabulary failed me as I undressed for bed, faced with endless nights ahead stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. I could have cried, and maybe should have, but instead, cold dismay welled in me. How did I land in this fix? More to the point, why? Did this whopper of a woman who was my last remaining relative after Gram hate me at first sight? Was I asking for it by showing up looking more like a stray hobo than the little gentleman she wanted me to be? What was I going to do all summer long, be kicked around in this household where the grownups bickered like magpies? Try as I might to think my way out this tough situation, captive to an aunt who not only was not Kate Smith but thought I must be missing a part between my ears, the only advice I could find for myself was that bit whispered from those interrupted existences Gram kept in touch with. Hunch up and take it.

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

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

"Donny? Are you sleeping?"

"I guess not."

"Good. I come in."

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

"The Kate is in the bath," he explained as if we had plotted to meet in this secret fashion. With the same odd glint he'd had at the Greyhound station, he scooted the chair up to my bedside, displaying the book he'd been paging through earlier, thumb marking a place toward the middle. "What I wanted to show you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Triumphantly he turned the book so I could not miss the full effect of the picture, which looked awfully familiar, similar to a Charlie Russell painting seen on endless drugstore calendars. It depicted Indian hunters in wolf skins sneaking up on foot to stampede a herd of buffalo over a cliff, the great hairy beasts cascading to the boulders below.

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

It took all the restraint I had, but I didn't let on that right over there in my pants was a little something from Montana that may have slain many a buffalo. This Herman was wound up enough as it was; the night might never end if we got off on more or less lucky arrowheads and so on. I stuck to the strictly necessary. "Can I tell you something? It's Mon-TANA, not MONT-ana."

"Funny things, words. How they look and how they say." He broke off, glancing toward his feet. Letting out an exclamation I couldn't decipher, he reached down and picked up one of my moccasins.

"I stepped on it!" he cried out as if he had committed a crime. "I hope I didn't break it none."

I could tell by a quick look the decorative fancy dancer still had all his limbs, the rest of the beadwork had survived too, and so I reassured Herman no harm had been done, meanwhile scooping the other moccasin out of range of his big feet.

“Fascinating,” he said under his breath, pronouncing it *faskinating*, lovingly turning over and over in his hands the deerskin footwear he had tromped on. When he right away had to know what the beaded stick figure cavorting there on the toe and instep was supposed to be, I explained about fancy dancing contests at big powwows.

Still fondling the moccasin as if he couldn't let go, he asked in wonder, “You got from Indians?”

“As Indian as they come.” This time I couldn't resist. Before I could stop myself, I was repeating the tale I'd told the ex-convict about the classy moccasins having been made for a great Blackfoot chief, temperately leaving out the part about my having won them in a roping contest on a dude ranch and instead circling closer to the truth by saying Gram had lucked onto them on the reservation. Herman did not need to know they'd been hocked at a truck stop by a broke Indian.

“How good, you have them. You are some lucky boy.” Maybe so, if the rotten sort was counted along with the better kind, I thought darkly to myself there on the skreeky bed.

He ran his fingers over the beadwork and soft leather one more time and carefully put the moccasin side by side with the other one.

“So, now you know about Winnetou and I know about fancy dancing. Big night!” He grinned that horsy way and clapped *Deadly Dust* shut. Evidently gauging Aunt Kate's bath was about done, he rose from his chair. “We palaver some more tomorrow, yah?” he whispered from the stairwell as he sneaked back downstairs.

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

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

Such as how to get on the good side of the Kate, as Herman tellingly designated her. Plainly she was something unto herself, by any measure.

And so, determined to make up for my dumb jump to the wrong conclusion last night in mistaking her for Kate Smith--although was it my fault they both were the size of refrigerators and shared jolly numbers of chins and dimples and all in all looked enough alike to be twins?--I dressed quickly and headed downstairs.

Nice manners don't cost anything, Gram's prompting followed me down the steps. C'mon, Donny, Donal, Red Chief, I pulled myself together, it shouldn't be all that hard to remember to be polite and to speak mainly when spoken to and and to not mix up when to look serious and when to smile, and similar rules of the well-behaved. Hadn't I gotten along perfectly fine with tons of strangers on the dog bus? Well, a couple of drivers, the ex-convict, and one fistfight aside.

Surely those didn't count toward the main matter, which was to survive for the time being in a household where Aunt Kate seemed to wear the pants and Herman tended to his knitting in the company of beings with names like Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

In the light of day it was clear that if I knew what was good for me, I had better fit somewhere in between them, tight as the fit might be, and strolling in at breakfast with a sunny "Good morning!" and the white lie "I slept real good" ought to be the place to start.

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

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

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

"Toast does not need help!"

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

Whoa. I backed off to the bathroom, out of range of the blowup in the kitchen, in a hurry. Staying in there a good long while, I ran the faucets full blast and flushed the toilet a couple of times to announce my presence, and finally cracked the door open to test the atmosphere. Not a sound of any kind. Deafening silence, to call it that, was spooky in its own way and maybe not an improvement, but I couldn't stay in the bathroom permanently. Mustering all the courage I had, I approached the deadly quiet kitchen.

Herman was nowhere to be seen. Aunt Kate was sitting by herself there, in a peppermint-striped flannel robe and fuzzy pink slippers that would never be mistaken for part of Kate Smith's wardrobe, drinking coffee while reading the newspaper spread open on the table. "There you are, sugar plum," she looked up as if reminding herself of my existence, before I could say anything. That voice. She sounded musical simply chanting that. "Did you sleep all right, poor tired thing?"

Nervously I met that with, "Like a petrified log."

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

"Now then," Aunt Kate said with no urgency, licking her finger and turning a page of the newspaper, "what in the realm of possibility can we get you for breakfast, mmm?"

I answered with more manners than good sense, "Oh, just whatever you've got."

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

Swallowing on that fact, if not much else, I found a bowl in the cupboard as she directed and a milk bottle in the refrigerator and spied the sugar bowl and did what I could to turn the puffed stuff into a soup of milk and sugar. A parent would have jumped right on me for that, but she paid no attention.

Evidently the kind of person who did not have much to say in the morning--although that was not what it had sounded like from the stairwell--she kept on drinking coffee and going through the paper, occasionally letting out a high-pitched hum of interest or exasperation at some item, as I spooned down the puffed-up cereal. The scatterings of crust on what must have been Herman's plate seemed like a fuller meal than mine.

Finally I saw no choice but to ask, polite or not. "Suppose I could have a piece of toast, please?"

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

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

"Donny, come to the phone."



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

“Hello? This is... he.”

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

“Last thing when I was at her bedside, your grandmother wished me to tell you yourself”--echo of *last wish* in that; I clung harder to the receiver--“she has come through the operation as well as can be expected.”

I breathed again, some.

“Of course, there are complications with that kind of surgery,” the sister of charity spoke more softly now, “so her recuperation will take some time.” Complications. Those sounded bad, and right away I was scared again. “But we have her here in the pavilion,” the voice on the line barely came through to me, “where she is receiving the best of care. You mustn’t worry.” As if I could just make up my mind not to.

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

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

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

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

“I guess not,” I quavered, squeezing the phone. Then erased that in the next breath. “No, wait, there is too. Tell her”--I could feel the look from across the room--“the dog bus worked out okay.” Mentally adding, *But Manito Woc or however you say it is even a tougher proposition than either you or I ever imagined, Gram. So please get well really, really fast.*

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

“I guess.”

That word *complications* rang in my ears, and no doubt hers, as we faced each other’s company for an unknown length of time ahead.

“Well, now, we must keep you entertained, mustn’t we. I know you like to be busy, so I set up the card table and got out a jigsaw puzzle. Those are always fun, aren’t they.”

Maybe I was not the absolute shrewdest judge of character, but I had a pretty good hunch that habit of agreeing with herself covered up her desperation at not knowing what to do with a kid. This household didn’t have so much as a dog

or cat, not even a goldfish. By all evidence so far, Aunt Kate was only used to taking care of herself and the constant war with Herman, as it gave every appearance of being.

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

Ready to leave me to the mountain of puzzle pieces and my cold toast, Aunt Kate headed for the basement to see if the laundry was finished yet. "Oh, just so you know," she sang out as she started down the cellar stairs, "I put your snapbutton shirt in with our washing, but the other was torn so badly I threw it away. It wasn't worth mending."

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

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

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

For someone of her heft, she came up out of those cellar stairs in a terrific burst of speed, turned the hall corner at full tilt and barreled through the kitchen and out to the garbage can at the top of the driveway, flannel robe billowing

behind her, me at her heels. Her backside was too broad for me to see past as she flung open the lid of the can and looked in, and I was afraid to anyway.

“Too late,” she moaned, “it’s been picked up.”

“C-can’t we get it back?” Frantically I ran down the driveway, followed by Aunt Kate at a heavy gallop. Pulling up short at the curb, I shot a look one way along the street and she the other, then our heads swung in the opposite directions, staring past one another. No garbage truck. We listened hard. Nothing to be heard except her puffing and blowing.

“Maybe we could go to the dump,” I stammered, “and head it off.”

“Impossible,” she said in a way that could have meant either the dump or me. With that, we trudged back up the driveway, the slap-slap of her fuzzy slippers matching the thuds of my heart.

Outside the kitchen door, she rounded on me furiously. “Why didn’t you tell me it was pinned there?”

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

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

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

“Th-thirty dollars, all I had,” I said as if it were an absolute fortune, which to me it was. As I’ve said, no small sum in those days, to someone like her either, according to the excruciating groan she let out.

“See,” I tried to explain, “I was supposed to buy my school clothes with it, and whatever comic books I wanted, and go to a show once in a while if you said it was okay, and--” I looked at her angrily flushed face, twice the size of my merely red one, and abjectly tailed off--“wasn’t supposed to be a nuisance to you about money.”

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

I babbled another apology to try to make amends, although I wasn’t getting anything of the sort from her for failing to go through my pocket before junking my shirt and costing me every cent I possessed, was I.

“Why don’t you start on your puzzle,” she said darkly, heading for the basement again

“Maybe later,” by now I felt the right to sulk. Even if I had been in the wrong about not retrieving the money from that shirt, I didn’t think I was the only one that description fit--Gram went through every pocket in the dirty laundry pile before doing the wash, and it was clear Aunt Kate carelessly had not--and I was not going to let myself be sent to the permanent dunce corner, which the card table with Mount Rushmore in a thousand pieces amounted to. It occurred to me that with this woman as mad at me as a spitting cat, it would really help to have someone on my side, or at least another target to draw her fire. “Where’d Herman go?” I wondered, hoping he might show up any moment to get me off the hook.

No such luck. Gone to “work,” where else, she forgot about the basement long enough to circle back and huff, the quotation marks speaking loudest. Then when I asked what his job was, she sorted me out on that in a hurry.

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

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

“Maybe I’ll go say hi,” I mumbled, and trooped out to the back yard where the odd shed of glass gleamed in the sun. Already at that time of the morning the Wisconsin air felt heavy to me, as if it could be squeezed out like a sponge, and I plucked at my one wearable shirt of the moment and unbuttoned my sleeves and rolled them back onto my forearms for a bit of ventilation as I crossed the lawn, Herman’s big footprints ahead of me fading with the last of the dew.

I had been curious about the mystifying structure when the DeSoto’s headlights reflected off it as we pulled up to the house the night before, which now seemed another lifetime ago. Halfway hidden in a corner of the hedge at the rear of the yard, the greenhouse, as I now knew it, seemed like it ought to be

transparent but somehow could not actually be seen through, whatever the trick of its construction was.

It did not reveal much more about itself in broad daylight as I approached past a neatly marked out vegetable patch, the small glass panels that were the walls and roof of the shed frame splotchy as if needing a good washing. Funny way to grow things, the soot smears or whatever they were blocking out full light that way, I thought. Weird old Wisconsin, one more time.

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

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

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

Properly impressed with his green thumb, I stood back and watched Herman fuss over his crop, pot by leafy pot. Pausing to tap the ash off a smelly cigar that undoubtedly would not have been allowed into the house, he made a face that had nothing to do with the haze of cigar smoke that had me blinking to keep my eyes from watering. “You have escaped with your scalp, yah? I heard the Kate on the warpath again.”

“Yeah, well, she’s sort of pee o’d at me,” I owned up to, making plain that the feeling was mutual.

Herman listened with sympathy, as best I could tell behind his heavy glasses and the reeking cigar, while I spilled out the story of the torn shirt and the fatally safety-pinned bills. He tut-tutted over that, saying throwing money in the garbage was not good at all. But he didn't lend me any encouragement as to how I was supposed to get through the summer flat broke.

"The purse is the Kate's department," he said with a resigned puff of smoke. Reflecting further, no doubt from a lot of experience, he expressed effectively: "She is tight as a wad."

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

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

Growing interested in spite of myself, I made the offer the lukewarm way-- "Uhm, anything I can do?"--a person does just to be polite.

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

That got me started, almost as if I was back on the dog bus telling yarns free and easy. I regaled Herman with this, that, and the other about life on the Double W, from riding out with the actual cowboys to check on the cattle, to hunting magpies along the creek, making him exclaim I was a pistoleer, by which I figured he meant gunslinger. Puffing away on his stogie and babying his plants with spoonfuls of fertilizer and careful irrigation from a long-necked watering can--a couple of times I interrupted myself to go and fill it for him from the spigot at the back of the house--Herman listened to all that as though I were a storyteller right up there with his idol who wrote the pile of books about cowboys and Indians.

In the end, my storying naturally led around to the whole thing, Gram and I being chucked out of the cook shack and her into the charity ward and me onto the dog bus, when I could just as well have been earning wages in the hayfield the entire summer, and while I couldn't quite bring myself to lay out my full fear about the poorfarm looming in her future if medical things did not go right and ward of the county and orphanage starkly in mine as well, he grasped enough of the situation to tut-tut gravely again.

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

Somehow I felt better for having poured out that much of the tale, even if it went into squarehead ears, so to speak. At first I was suspicious that Herman resorted to a kind of Indian speakum in talking about anything western, but no, it became clear that was genuinely his lingo from the old country mixed in with the new. Whatever the travels of his tongue, I was finding this big husky open-faced

man to be the one thing about Wisconsin that I felt vaguely comfortable with, despite his evident quirks and odd appearance. In most ways, he was homely as a pickle. That elongated face and the prominent teeth, taken together with the cockeyed gaze magnified by his glasses, gave him the look of someone loopy enough that you might not want to sit right down next to, although of course there I was, plopped beside him like just another potted plant. Together with everything else in the humid greenhouse, he himself seemed to have sprouted, his shoulders topping my head as he stretched from his stool here and there to reach into his menagerie of vegetation, his big knuckles working smoothly as machine parts in crimping a leaf off a tomato plant near its root--“Pinch their bottoms is good for them,” he told me with a naughty grin--or tying a lagging bean stalk to a support stick. The dappled light streaming through the glass ceiling and walls brought out the silver in his faded fair hair, which I suspected made him older than Aunt Kate, although there was no real telling. I’d have bet anything gray hair did not stand a chance on her; she would rather, as not much of a joke had it, dye by her own hand.

About then, as I was yammering away with Herman, I noticed a strange smudge of some sort on the back of my hand. Dirt is to be expected in a greenhouse, so I went to brush it off, but when that didn’t get rid of it, I peered more closely. Then gasped. A ghostly scrap of face, an eye clear and direct, feminine eyebrow and ladylike cheekbone distinct in outline, had scarily materialized on my skin. Yanking my hand away as if burned, I sent Herman one hell of a look. Whatever this stunt was, I didn’t like having it pulled on me.

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

I tipped my head back and must have gaped, my eyes adjusting even if my brain was lagging. When looked at closely, reversed faces spookily gazed down from every glass pane, eyes and hair empty of color while the rest of the countenance was dark as night. Bygone people, for I could make out old styles of men's collars and women's hairdos--the lady who appeared on my hand again when I hesitantly put it out and held it at the right distance to bring her portrait pose into full miniature was done up in marcel curls, her probably black tresses tumbling ever so neatly down the sides of her head.

Agog, I kept looking back and forth from her image there on me to the shadowy section of glass overhead, still not seeing how this worked. "These--these things were in cameras? How?"

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

"So, Donny," the master of the house of glass went on with a squint that was all but a wink. "When Schildkraut's Photography Shop went *pthht*," he made the noise that meant kaput, "these are for the dump but I get there first. The Kate thinks I am crazy to do it, but glass is glass, why not make a greenhouse, hah?" He tapped his forehead, his eyebrows lifted toward the plates pintoed dark with people. "I give a little think whether to scrape people off. Nuh-uh, leave them like so. Makes it not too hot in here." He had a point. Without those clever dabs of

shade and a pair of hinged windows that let some air through, the greenhouse would have been an oven by the afternoon.

Along with me, Herman gazed up at the ranks of panes of glass with their memories showing. Picking up a box lid large enough to catch more than a single phantom photo from overhead, he now showed me that the smoky blotches turning into recognizable pictures like the one on me were a trick of the brightening sunshine as the day went along, the rays hitting the photographic substance a certain way like a darkroom enlarger.

I more or less grasped that, but still was spooked enough to ask in nearly a whisper:

“Who are they?”

“Manitowocers,” he said around the stub of his cigar, or maybe “Manito Walkers,” I couldn’t be sure which he meant. At the time, I assumed he merely meant those in the old days who had but to gallivant around town to think they were hearing their blest souls talk, according to the cross-stitched sampler hanging in the living room. I was disappointed the figures preserved in glass were as ordinary as that, but maybe that was Manitowoc for you, nothing to do but hoof around being airy.

Just then, the back door of the house banged like a shot, making me nearly jump out of my skin, Herman reacting with a jolt too, the ash spilling off his cigar. A dressed-up Aunt Kate was advancing on us with quick little steps, high heels tricky on a lawn. Again my heart twinged, that someone who was such a perfect mirror reflection of Kate Smith was not the real thing.

I did not have time for much of that kind of regret, as she minced right up to the doorway of the greenhouse but plainly was not setting foot in the place, and announced, “I’m off to canasta. You two are on your own if you think you can stand it.”

At first I took that to mean another town with one of those Wisconsin names, Kunazdah or something, packing up and leaving us which raised my spirits no little bit, until Herman said without a trace of expression, "Cut the deck thin and win," and I realized she was off to a card game.

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

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

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

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

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

I watched her pick her way to the DeSoto, and drive off speedily. Showing less interest in the tomato plant now, Herman peered at me through his specs. "She is off to her hen party. They will yack-yack for hours. Now then," he luxuriously mimicked that word combination of hers that made less sense the more you thought about it, patting around on himself to find his matches and light up another cigar, as if in celebration of the Kate being gone. He gave me a man-to-man grin. "So how do you like Manito Woc?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yah, like Gitche Gumee, from the poem?" He looked saddened when I had to tell him I was not up on Hiawatha.

"*By the shore of Gitche Gumee,*" he recited, his accent thumping like thunder. Again, I had to shrug. "*By the shining Big-Sea Water,*" he persisted. I shook my head, wishing he would try me on something like "*A flea and a fly in a flue...*"

Despairing of my lack of literary education, he held up crossed fingers. "Longfellow and Karl May were like so. Poets of Gitche and Winnetou."

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

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

Supposedly it takes one to know one, right? So, then and there my own sometimes overly active mind, red in the head or however the condition of seeing things for more than they are can best be described, was forced to acknowledge that this odd bespectacled yah-saying garden putterer and henpecked husband, fully five times older than me, had a king hell bastard of an imagination. Possibly

outdoing my own, which I know is saying a lot. Wherever Herman Brinker got it from, he'd held onto the rare quality that usually leaves a person after a certain number of years as a kid, to let what he had read possess him. I saw now why Aunt Kate was forever at him about taking to heart too much the stories of Karl May in what seemed to be, well, squarehead Westerns. Not that I wanted to side with her, storyteller of a sort that I sometimes turned into. But from my experience of his mental workings so far, notions Herman had picked up out of books did not appear to be condensed from their imaginative extent any at all, let alone properly digested.

Put it whatever way, this was getting too thick for me, people dead and gone but still strolling around in my cigar-smoking host's telling of it, as well as shadows on glass flaring to life like lit matches, Manitowocers here, Manitou walkers there--a lot more than potted plants flourished in this greenhouse of his.

I shifted uncomfortably on my fruitbox. "Spirits like in ghosts, you mean? Herman, I'm sorry, but I don't think we're supposed to believe in those."

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

With an opening like that, how could I resist?

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

"Heart? Like gives us life, yah?"

“Yeah--I mean, yes, same word anyhow.”

Herman leaned way toward me, cigar forgotten for the moment. “Heart Bee-yoot. Bee-yootiful name. Tell more.”

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

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

“Yeah, but”--I stole an uneasy glance at the pile of Karl May books-- “who's this Winnetou anyway? What tribe he's from, even?” If he was Blackfoot, my Red Chief tag might as well shrink back to Heart Butte invisibility in comparison.

Herman puffed on his cigar, maybe seeking smoke signals, as he gave it a think about how best to answer. Finally he said, “An Apache knight, he was.”

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

Herman laughed. “Not iron clothes, hah. Leather leggings and a hunting shirt, he dressed in, and, best yet”--he nodded approvingly at me--“fancy moccasins.” Turning serious again, he went on, “Karl May calls him a knight

because he was honorable. His word you could trust. He fought fair. Like a chief supposed to, yah." He nodded at me gravely this time.

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

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

One thing about hanging around with Herman, time went by like a breeze. That noontime, with Aunt Kate gone to canasta, the house was without commotion as Herman assembled lunch, laying out the kind of store bread that came sliced and without taste, but announcing we would have plenty of sandwich meat, which to me meant good old baloney slathered with mayonaise, which had me licking my lips after the menu in this household so far. I stayed out of the way by reading the funnies in the newspaper and so didn't pay any attention to what he was making until he called me to the table. "Meal fit for an earl."

When I looked blank at that, he winked and said, "Earl of Sandwich, invented guess what."

Some sense of caution caused me to peek under the top slice of bread, revealing a gray slab pocked with gelatin and strange colonies of what might be meat or something else entirely. "Is this"--I couldn't even ask without swallowing hard--"headcheese?"

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

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

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

"Shoot, podner," he responded agreeably enough, pointing a finger and cocked thumb at me like a pistol, which I figured must be something he picked up from a squarehead western.

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

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

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

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

I still didn't grasp that swap, and said so.

“Eye-dea,” he announced as if something had come to him when he wasn’t looking. Whatever the idea was, it had the former ‘Dutch’ grabbing for the sugar bowl with sudden purpose. “You know about ore boats any, Donny?”

At the shake of my head, he instructed, “This is ore boat. *Badger Voyager*, pretend. Table is Great Lakes. Gee-oh-graphy lesson, hah?”

Plotching a hand here and there across the table top, he named off the bodies of water--Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie, Ontario--while I paid strict attention as if about to be called on in class. Done with that, he steered the sugar bowl toward me.

“Where you sit is Duluth. Full of iron mines. How it works, *Badger Voyager* comes, loads ore, takes it maybe here, maybe there”--he maneuvered the sugar bowl in winding routes to various ports of call where he told me the ore was turned into steel, Chicago, Cleveland, all the way to Buffalo.

Very instructive, yes, if you were interested in that kind of thing. “But what about--”

“‘Dutch’, yah. Coming to that.”

He peered at the sugar bowl through his strong glasses as if encouraging me to have a close look, too. “He is on the ore boat, see. Me, I mean. Twenty years.” Pride shown out of him as he sat back, shoulders squared nearly enough to burst out of his shirt, in making the pronouncement, “A stoker I was.”

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

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

“Hah, no. I am on shore, so ‘Dutch’ is no more. No shipmates to call me that. I change to ‘Herman’, who I was before.”

This was a whole lot more complicated than my Red Chief nickname coming and going at will, I could see. Still, something had been left out of the story, and my guarded silence must have told him I knew it had. Herman, who looked to me as if he could still stoke coal all day long if he wanted to, read my face, studying me with that unsettling cockeyed gaze. “The Kate did not blabber it to you? Something wrong. Her tongue must be tied up.”

He sat back and folded his arms as if putting away the hands that fit a coal shovel. “A settlement I have.”

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

“I show you.”

He navigated the sugar bowl back to the Lake Superior territory of the table, then began wobbling it so drastically I thought it would spill.

“Strait of Mackinaw,” he pronounced the word that is spelled *Mackinac*. For some moments, he didn’t say anything more, a tic working at the corner of his eye as if he had something in it, all the while staring at the imaginary piece of water. At last he said in a strained voice: “Bad place any old time. Bad and then some when Witch of November comes.”

Another one of those? One more Great Spirit of Gitche Gumee or whatever, I didn’t need. My skin was starting to crawl again just from how he’d said that. “Herman, hey, really, is this like Manitou, because I don’t think we ought to be fooling around with--”

All seriousness, he cupped his hands around the sugar bowl vessel as if protecting it. “Witch of November is big storm. Guess what time of year.”

He drew a breath as if girding himself for that mean-sounding storm. "When Witch of November comes, you are on the boat, no place to go," opening his hands to expose the fragile sugar bowl, "and waves big like hills hitting the deck, send you over the side if you don't hang on hard as you can. Drown you like a kitten katten in a bag, it will."

Drowning like a cat in a sack was definitely no good, as he'd said about throwing money in the garbage. That description did make quite a bit of an impression, I had to admit. But we still weren't anywhere near how the name Dutch went down with the ship and Herman was sitting there big as life. Maybe I was being a sucker, but I said, "Go on,"

"Night of thirtieth of November, *Badger Voyager* gets to Strait of Mackinac," his voice growing husky as he maneuvered the sugar bowl. "We feel lucky, no Witch that year, nineteen and forty-seven. Then it starts storming, middle of night--Witch of November saving up all month, hah? Worst I was in, ever. Lost an old friend, the bosun." Teeth clenched, he girded himself again for telling this. "We sailed together maybe hundred times on the Lakes. This time, bad luck is with him. One minute he is giving orders like ever, and the next, the Witch takes him in biggest wave yet and he is gone." Sugar shook from the bowl, he quivered it so hard. "After that, the *Badger Voyager* sanked, like I say. Big waves broke her in half," he lifted his hands and mimicked snapping a branch.

You can bet I was on the edge of my chair for the next part. "Raining and wind blowing like anything when order comes, Abandon ship," he continued slowly as if retelling it to himself to make sure he got it right. "I go to climb in the lifeboat, and a pulley swings loose from the davit and hits me, like so."

All too graphically, he clapped a hand over his left eye and I couldn't help recoiling in horror.

“Hits ‘Dutch,’ yah?” he made sure I was following all the way. Now he removed his glasses, set them aside, and took the spoon out of the sugar bowl. Reaching up to his left eye with his free hand, he held his eyelids apart. My own eyes bugged as he lightly tapped his eyeball with the spoon handle, *plink plinkety-plink-plink plink-plink* distinct as anything.

Immediately enthralled, I let loose with “Holy wow, doesn’t that hurt at all?”

Grinning and even winking with that false eye, he shook his head.

“Herman, that’s out the far end!” The squint of his good eye questioned me. “That’s soldier talk, it means something is really something! Can you do it again?”

He obliged, this time with the recognizable rhythm of *Hap py-birth day to-you*. I couldn’t get over the stunt; the carnival sideshow that set up camp in Gros Ventre at rodeo time didn’t have tricks nearly as good as playing *shave and a haircut, four bits* and the birthday song and who knows what else on an eyesocket. Still overcome with enthusiasm, I pointed to that left eyeball or whatever the substitute ought to be called, politeness gone to hell. “What’s it made of?”

“Glass,” he said with a half wink this time, donning the eyeglasses again. “Like a greenhouse of the head, hah? Only it grows this, from the ship company.” He rubbed his thumb and fingers together, which with a penniless pang I recognized meant money. “Dutch is name buried at sea,” he dropped his voice as if at a funeral. “Herman stays on land, no more Witches of November.”

That was Herman in the ways most meaningful that first adventurous day, or so I thought. I can’t really say a glass eye he could play a tune on sold me on

spending a stifling summer in Wisconsin, but you can see he did make things more interesting than expected.

Aunt Kate was another matter, a sizable one in every way. After the morning's catastrophe with my money and our general lack of meeting of minds--if she even thought I had one--I didn't know what I was going to be up against when she returned from canasta, but suspected it probably would not be good.

So, after lunch when Herman went off for a nap--"Shuteye is good for the digestion," he surprised me yet again--I figured I had better show some progress on the jigsaw puzzle or I'd hear about it from Aunt Kate when she came home. Spilling out the pieces that half covered the card table and sorting the ones of different colors with my finger, I had quite a stretch of the sky-blue top edge fitted into place, strategy recalled from having done the damn thing before, working my way down onto George Washington's acre of forehead, when I heard the DeSoto groaning up the driveway and then Aunt Kate's clickety high heels on the kitchen floor, instantly stilled when she reached the plush living room rug.

"Yoo hoo," she called as if I wasn't just across the room from her as she swung through on her way to hang up her purse in the sewing room.

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

"A disaster," she moaned, flinging a hand to the vicinity of her heart. "It ruins the whole summer. Of all the bad luck, why, why, why did this have to happen on top of everything else?"

Continuing the drama, she dropped heavily into the recliner beneath the Manitowoc sampler, whipped around to face me where I was stationed at the card table, and cranked the chair back until she was nearly sprawling flat. In the same stricken voice, she addressed the ceiling as much as she did me: "It's enough to make a person wonder what gets into people."

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

Now she lifted her head enough to sight on me through the big V of her bosom. "It's ever so much worse than that," she went on in the same tragic voice. "Years and years now, the four of us have had our get-together to play canasta and treat ourselves to a little snack. Religiously," she spiked on for emphasis, "every Monday. It starts the week off on a high note."

To think, Kate Smith might have uttered those exact last couple of words. But this decidedly was not America's favorite songstress, with me as the only audience trying to take in what kind of catastrophe a dumb card game could be.

"And now, can you believe it, Minnie Zettel is going off on a long visit," Aunt Kate mourned as if Minnie Zettel was also going off the rails. "Why anyone would go gadding off to St. Louis in the summertime, I do not know. She will melt down until there is nothing left of her but toenails and shoe polish, and it will serve her right."

Her chins quivered in sorrow or anger, I couldn't tell which, but maybe both--they were double chins, after all--as she fumed, "The other girls and I are beside ourselves with her for leaving us in the lurch."

Having been beside herself with me not that many hours ago, she was having quite a day of it, all right. Getting left in the lurch seemed pretty bad, whatever it meant. I made the sound you make in your throat to let someone know they have a sympathetic audience, but maybe I didn't do it sufficiently. Still flat in the recliner, Aunt Kate blew exasperation to the ceiling, wobbled her head as if coming to, and then her sorrowful eyes found me again, regarding me narrowly through that divide of her chest.

"Donal," she startled me by actually using my name, which I think was a first time ever, "do you play cards?"

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

"Mmm, I thought so," she mustered the strength to nod her head. "When we were girls, Dorie was always one to haul out a deck of cards when nothing else was doing. I must have caught it from her."

That'd be about the only thing she and Gram were alike in, I morosely thought to myself, minding my manners by nodding along in what I took to be her bid for sympathy while I kept at the jigsaw, nine hundred and fifty or so pieces to go, when all at once she swelled up and exhaled in relief.

"Good. Then you can learn canasta and fill in for Minnie."

I don't know if my hair stood straight on end at that or what. While I didn't actually think she was ordering me to put on a girdle and a dress and sit for hours on end in some wacky card game with three gossipy old women, it amounted to the same. Instinctively I was filled with misgivings and couldn't help that it was written all over me.

Aunt Kate busily began dismissing my swarm of doubts before I could sputter them out, cranking her chairback up higher with every burst of sentence. "There's no way around it, we need a fourth for canasta and that's that."

Upright in the chair by now and facing me dead-on, she manufactured a sort of smile. "You needn't look so alarmed, kitten. I'll teach you the ins and outs of the game. We have an entire week for you to learn, isn't that lucky? It will help take your mind off your imagination, mmm?"

Still speechless, I tried to think how to head her off in more ways than one as she heaved herself out of the recliner and quickstepped over to me. "Now then. It's too bad, but we need the card table."

Before I could come out of my stupor, she was crumbling the sky-blue edge and George Washington's forehead and scooping the pieces along with the rest of the puzzle into its box. "Don't worry, child, you can start over on it once you've learned canasta."

The puzzle pieces were barely settled in the box before Aunt Kate was pulling up across the table from me and had the cards flying as she dealt a stream to each of us and to the absent partners we would be playing against. Herta and Gerda--even their names sounded mean. Helplessly watching her deliver the valentines, as the poker game regulars in the Double W bunkhouse termed it, I felt unsure of myself but all too certain that turning me into a Minnie Zettel for hen parties was going to test the limits of both of us. And this was before I even had any inkling that a contest of hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades could become such a dangerous game.

While she was rifling the cards out, Herman wandered by the living room, took a peek at what was happening, sending his eyebrows way up there and his step quickening until he was safely past and out the back door. No rescue from that direction, so I cursed silently and kept stuffing cards in my overloaded hand.

Finishing dealing with a flourish, Aunt Kate slapped the deck down

squarely in the middle of the table and sang out, "Now then, honey bun, the first thing is, you have to catch up a weensy bit by learning a few rules, mmm?"

That began a spell of time when the high point of my days was the sugar on my cereal.

Far from being the adventure I had been so excited about when I was met at the bus station by the living image of Kate Smith, my Wisconsin summer bogged down into the same old things day after day. Afternoons were canasta, canasta, canasta, and mornings veered from boredom when, after getting up hours earlier than anyone else and doctoring some puffed rice with enough spoonfuls of the white stuff, all I could find to do was to hole up in the living room reading an old *National Geographic* brought down from the attic, until the time came to tread carefully around the first of the battles of the Brinker household. Every day, Aunt Kate and Herman had a fight to go with breakfast. Generally it was her to start things off with a bang. "Can't you quit that?" Her first salvo would make me jump, even though it was not aimed at me. "It's childish and a nasty habit, how many times do I have to tell you?"

"Is not," he would pop right back. "Toast is made for such things."

"That is absolutely ridiculous. Why can't you just *eat*?"

"Hah. It goes in my mouth, same as you push it in yours."

"It is not the same! Oh, you're impossible."

The one constant in the repeated quarrels was Aunt Kate holding her ground in the kitchen, while Herman retreated elsewhere waiting to scrap over toast scraps another breakfast time. Eventually, when it sounded safe, I would abandon the green leather couch and *National Geographic* --even the attractions of people pretty close to naked in "Bali and Points East" can hold a person only so long--and creep across the living room to peek into the kitchen. The remains of the daily toast war

which might still be sitting there at lunch or beyond, I could not figure out. Sometimes on what had to be Herman's plate would be nothing but crusts, other times a pale blob of toast from the middle of a slice that looked like something I almost but not quite recognized was the only morsel left over. In any case, I would face the inevitable and call out "Good morning" and she'd look around at me as if I'd sprung up out of the floor and ask "Sleep well, honeykins?" and I'd lie and reply "Like a charm" and that was pretty much the level of conversation between us.

I have to hand it to Aunt Kate, she was a marvel in her own way. To say she was set in her habits only scratches the surface. Regular as the ticks and tocks of the kitchen clock, she maintained her late start on the day, parked at the breakfast table in her robe striped like the world's biggest peppermint stick as she dawdled over the Manitowoc *Herald-Times* and coffee refills, yawning and humming stray snatches of tunes, until at nine sharp she arose and clicked the radio on and one soap opera after another poured out, the perils of Ma Perkins and Stella Dallas and the others whom she worried along with at every devious plot turn afflicting them.

Needless to say, monotony was not my best mode. Herman's either, fortunately. During the soap opera marathon, he hid out in the greenhouse, where I sooner or later would join him so as not have radio performers' woes piled atop my own.

"What do you know for sure, podner?" he would greet me, as no doubt one cowboy in a Karl May western would drawl to another.

Actually not a bad question, because the one thing I was sure of was what a mystifying place Manitowoc was, from toast fights to smoky portrait sitters inhabiting greenhouse windows to Manitou walking around dead to the strange nature of the neighborhood. I mean, I seemed to be the only kid anywhere. As

used as I was to being in grownup company at the Double W, now I apparently was sentenced to it like solitary confinement, with the street deadly quiet, no cries of Annie-I-over or hide-and-seek or boys playing catch or girls jumping rope, nobody much making an appearance except a grayhaired man or woman here and there shuffling out to pick up the morning paper or position a lawn sprinkler. It made a person wonder, did every youngster in Wisconsin get shipped off to some dumb camp to hunt frogs?

In any case, the sleepy neighborhood was getting to me, so I finally had to put the question to Herman as he fiddled with a cabbage plant. "Aren't there any other kids around here at all?"

"Like you?" I was pretty sure I heard a note of amusement in that, but he soon enough answered me seriously. "Hah uh, kids there are not. The Schroeders on the corner got boys, but they're older than you and don't do nothing but chase girls." Taking the stogie out of his mouth, so as not to spew ashes on the cabbage leaves, he shook his head. "Except them, this is all old folks."

I still had a hard time believing it. "In this whole part of town? How come?"

"Shipyard housing, all this. From when Manitowoc builds submarines in the war. The last one," he said drily, I supposed to mark it off from the one going on in Korea. "People did not go away, after. Now we are long in the tooth," he mused. He gave me a wink with his artificial eye. "Or ghosts."

That was that, one more time. I pulled out a fruit box and settled in while he went on currying the cabbages.

Under the circumstances, with no other choice except Aunt Kate, hanging around with Herman in the greenhouse suited me well enough. Whenever he wasn't pumping me about ranch life or telling me some tale out of Karl May's squarehead version of the West, I was free to sit back and single out some family or

man and woman in the photographic plates overhead, catching them on the back of my hand thanks to a sunbeam, and daydream about who they might have been, what their story was, the digest version of their lives. It made the time pass until lunch, when I'd snap out of my trance at Herman's announcement, "The Kate will eat it all if we don't get ourselves in there."

After lunch, though, inevitably, the nerve-racking sound in the living room changed from soap opera traumas to the slipslap of the canasta deck being shuffled and the ever so musical trill, "Yoo hoo, bashful," and all afternoon I'd again be a prisoner of a card game with more rules than a stack of Bibles.

"No, no, *no!*" She put a hand to her brow as if her mind needed support, a familiar gesture by this third or fourth day--I was losing track--of card game torture. "What did I tell you about needing to meld a full canasta before you can go out?"

"I was thinking about something else, excuse me all to pieces. What do I do now?"

"For a start, pay attention, pretty please."

I suppose I should have, but nothing was really penetrating me except the something else I kept thinking about. My money. The disastrous shirt-in-the-garbage episode that left me broke as a bum. No mad money meant no going to a show, no comic books, not even a Mounds bar the whole summer, for crying out loud. But that wasn't nearly the worst. It bothered me no end that if I went back to Montana in the fall without the school clothes Gram had expressly told me to stock up on, I would have to go to class looking like something the cat dragged in. People noticed when a kid was too shabby, and it could lead to official snooping that brought on foster care--next thing to being sentenced to the orphanage--on

grounds of neglect. Gram would never neglect me on purpose, but if she simply couldn't work and draw wages after her operation, how was she supposed to keep me looking decent? With all that on my mind, here was a case where I could use some help from across the card table, and I didn't mean canasta. The one time I had managed to broach the subject of school clothes and so on between her morning loafing at the breakfast table and soap opera time, Aunt Kate flapped her fingers at me and said, "Shoo now. We'll figure out what to do about that later." But when?

By every sign, not while I was stuck with a mittful of canasta cards. Back to brooding, I sucked on my chipped tooth as draw-and-discard drearily continued.

A little of that and Aunt Kate was grimacing in annoyance. "Don't they have dentists in Montana? What happened to that tooth, anyway?"

"Nothing much," I sat up straight as a charge went through me, my imagination taking off in the opposite direction from those modest words. "I got bucked off in the roundup, is all."

"From a *horse*?" She made it sound like she had never heard of such a thing.

"You betcha," I echoed Herman, pouring it on more than I had to, but a person gets carried away. "See, everybody's on horseback for the roundup, even Sparrowhead," I stretched the matter further. "I was riding drag, that's at the rear end of the herd, where what you do is whoop the slowpoke cows and calves along to catch up with the others. Sort of like *HYAH HYAH HYAH*," I gave her a hollering sample that made her jerk back and spill a few cards.

"Things were going good until this one old mossie cow broke off from the bunch," the story was really rolling in me now, ever so much better than admitting to a run-in with campers who didn't have a brain in their bodies, "and away she

went with her calf at her heels. I took out after them, spurring Snipper--he's a cutting horse, see--and we about got the herd quitters headed off when Snipper hit an alkali boghole and started bucking out of it so's not to sink up to his, uhm, tail. I'm usually a real good rider," modesty had to bow out of this part, "but I blew a stirrup and got thrown out of the saddle. I guess I hit the ground hard enough that tooth couldn't take it. I was fine otherwise, though." I couldn't resist grinning at her with the snag fully showing.

"Good grief," my listener finally found her voice. "That's uncivilized! Poor child, you might have been damaged any number of ways!"

"Aw, things like that happen on the ranch a lot."

That put the huff back into Aunt Kate in a hurry. "Whatever has gotten into Dorie?" she lamented, catching me off guard. "That sister of mine is raising you to be a wild cowboy, it sounds like. Tsk," that tail end of the remark the kind of sound that says way more than words.

"Oh, it's not that bad," I tried to backtrack. "Gram sees me with my nose in a book so much she says my freckles are liable to turn into inkspots."

"Does she." As if looking me over for that possibility, she scanned my earnest expression for a good long moment, with what might have been the slightest smile making at her jowls twitch.

"All right then, toothums. Let's see if that studious attitude can turn you into a canasta player." Laying her cards face down, she scooped up those of the phantom Gerda, drew from the deck, hummed a note of discovery, then discarded with a flourish, saying "My, my, look at that."

A fourspot, what else. I perked up, ready to show her that I knew what was what in this damn game. With a flourish I melded some fours and other combinations to get on the board, and then as she watched with that pinched expression for some reason deepening between her eyes, I flashed the one fourspot

I'd held back and a joker to scoop in the pile when the voice across the table rose like a siren.

"No, no, no! Wake up, child. You can't take that without a natural pair."

"Huh? Why not?"

Rolling her eyes, she put a hand to the peanut brickle plate. Finding it empty, she bit off instead: "Because it's a rule. How many times have I gone over those with you? Mmm? Can't you put your mind to the game at all?"

At that, our eyes locked, her blue-eyed stare and my ungiving one right back. If she was exasperated enough to blow her stack, so was I.

"There are too many rules! This canasta stuff goes through me like green shit through a goose!"

I know it is the mischief of memory that my outburst echoed on and on in the room. But it seemed to. At first Aunt Kate went perfectly still, except for blinking a mile a minute. Then her face turned stonier than any of those on Mount Rushmore. For some seconds, she looked like she couldn't find what to say. But when she did, it blew my hair back.

"You ungrateful snot! Is this the thanks I get? That sort of talk, in my own house when I've, I've taken you in practically off the street? I never heard such--" Words failed her, but not for long. "Did you learn that filth from him?" She flung an arm in the direction of the greenhouse and Herman.

"No!" I was as shrill as she was. "It's what they say in the bunkhouse when something doesn't make a lick of sense."

"Look around you, mister fellow," she blazed away some more. "This is not some uncivilized bunkhouse on some piddling ranch in the middle of nowhere. Dorie must be out of her mind, letting you hang around with a pack of dirty-

mouthed bums. If she or somebody doesn't put a stop to that kind of behavior, you'll end up as nothing more than--"

She didn't finish that, simply stared across the table at me, breathing so heavily her jowls jiggled.

"All right," she swallowed hard, then again, "all righty right. Let's settle down."

If sitting there letting her tongue-lash the hide off me without so much as a whimper wasn't what might be called settled down, I didn't know what was. My tight lips must have told her so, because her tone of voice lessened from ranting to merely warning: "That is enough of those words out of you, understand?"

My face still as closed as a fist, I nodded about a quarter of an inch, a response she plainly did not like but took without tearing into me again. "That's that," she said through her teeth, and to my surprise, threw in her hand and began gathering in all the other cards on the table.

"I need to go and have my hair done, so we won't try any more cardsie-wardsie today. Now then," she shoved the cards together until they built into the fat deck ready for my next day of reckoning, "while I'm out, find something to do that you don't have to swear a blue streak about."

Naturally I resorted to Herman. He was sitting there book in hand in the greenhouse, comfortable as person can be on a fruitbox, smoking a cigar while he read. As soon as I called out "Knock, knock" and sidled in, he saw I was so down in the mouth I might trip over my lower lip. Squinting over his stogie, he asked as if he could guess the answer, "How is the canasta?"

"Not so hot." Leaving out the part about what went through the goose, I vented my frustration about endless crazy rules. "I try to savvy them, really I do, but the cards don't mean what they're supposed to in the dumb game. Aunt Kate is

half p.o.'d at me all the time for not doing better, but I don't know how." I ended up dumping everything into the open. "See, she's scared spitless her card party is gonna be a mess on account of me. So am I. But she's got it into her head that she can teach me this canasta stuff by then."

"The Kate. Sometimes her imagination runs off with her," said the man paging through *Winnetou the Apache Knight*.

Herman nursed the cigar with little puffs while he thought. "Cannot be terrible hard," he reasoned out canasta with a logic that had eluded me, "if the Kate and the hens can play it. Betcha we can fix." Telling me, cowboy style by way of Karl May, to pull up a stump while he searched for something, he dragged out the duffel bag from the corner of greenhouse.

Dutiful but still dubious, I sat on a fruit box as ordered and watched him dig around in the duffel until he came up with a deck of cards that had seen better days and a well-thumbed book of Hoyle. "We reconnoiter the rules, hah?" A phrase that surprised me, even though I pretty much knew what it meant. But we needed more than a rulebook, I told him with a shake of my head.

"We're still sunk. Aunt Kate and them play partners, so it takes two decks."

"Puh. Silly game." He swung back to the duffel bag, stopped short, turned and gave me a prolonged look as if making up his mind. Then thrust an arm in again. Scrounging through the bag up to his shoulder, he felt around until he grunted and produced another deck of cards even more hard-used than the first.

"The Kate is not to know," he warned as he handed me the deck and pulled out a box to serve as a table. "Man to man, yah? Here, fill up your eyes good."

I was already bug-eyed. The first card, when I turned the deck over for a look, maybe was the queen of hearts all right, but like none I had ever seen--an

oldtime sepia photograph of a woman grinning wolfishly in a bubble bath, her breasts out in plain sight atop the soapy cloud like the biggest bubbles of all.

With a gulp, I spread more of the cards face up on the box table, which meant breasts up, legs up, fannies up, pose after pose of naked women or rather as close to naked as possible without showing the whole thing. Who knew there were fifty-two ways of covering that part up? That didn't even count the joker, a leggy blonde wearing a jester's cap and coyly holding a tambourine over the strategic spot. Mingled with the Manitowocers' shadow pictures from the photographic panes overhead, the frolicsome set seemed to be teasing the portrait sitters into what a good time could be had if they simply took all those clothes off and jumped into bathtubs and swimming pools bare naked.

"French bible," Herman defined the fleshy collection with a shrug as I still was pop-eyed at it. Scooping the deck in with the tamer one, he shuffled them together thoroughly, the kings and queens and jacks now keeping company with their nude cousins and the ghostly Manitowocers .

He had me read out canasta rules from Hoyle while he dealt hands of fifteen cards each as if four of us were playing, the same as Aunt Kate had just tried, but that was the only similarity, the cards flying from his fingers almost faster than the eye could follow. I felt justified to hear him let out an exasperated "Puh" at the various rules that threw me. After scooping up his hand and studying it and then doing the same with the other two and mine, he instructed me to sort my cards into order from kings--in the girly deck, even those were naked frolickers around a throne or doing something pretty close to indecent with a crown--on down, left to right, with aces and wild cards and any jokers off the end together for easy keeping track, something Aunt Kate had never bothered to tip me off to. I will say, the bare parts of the French ladies peeking from behind the usual queens and jacks garbed to

their eyebrows did cause me to pay a good deal more attention to the display of my cards.

His eyeglasses glinting with divine calculation--or maybe it was a beam of light focused through a photographic pane of glass overhead--Herman lost no time in attacking our phantom opponents. "First thing after everybody melds, freeze the pile, yah? Throw on a wild card or a joker even, so they must have natural pair to take what is discarded. Get your bluff in, make it hard for the hens to build their hands."

That made more sense than anything Aunt Kate had dinned into me in all the afternoons. I had to part with a wild-card deuce featuring a sly-looking brunette skinnydipping in a heart-shaped swimming pool, but reluctantly figured it was worth it to place her crosswise on the discard pile to indicate it was frozen.

About then, Herman noticed my hand visiting deep in my pants and tut-tutted with a frown. "Donny, sorry to say, but this is not time for pocket pool."

Turning red as that seven of hearts, I yanked my hand out at that accusation of playing with myself. "No, no, it's not that, honest. What it is, I carry, uh, a lucky charm and it's got to be rubbed for, you know, luck."

He cocked his head in interest at my hasty explanation. I still was flighty about letting anyone see the arrowhead. But something moved me, maybe the spirit of Manitou, and I suppose somewhat ceremoniously I dug out the arrowhead and peeled back its sheaf of Tuffies enough it to show him.

He laughed and laughed when I explained the need for protection from the sharp edges. "First time in history ever those are used that way, I betcha." When I handed him the condom pouch with the arrowhead catching enough light through the glass panes to glisten like a black jewel, he fell silent for a minute, holding it in the palm of his hand as if it were precious beyond any saying of it. At last he

murmured, "Bee-yoot-iful," and handed it back to me with great care. "Where did you get such a thing?"

I told him about finding it in the creek, right where some Indian dropped it, way back before Columbus, adding none too modestly, "It's rare."

"Goes with your moccasins, you are halfway to Indian," he puffed up my estimate of myself even further. His long face crinkled in a surprisingly wise smile. "You are right to use it as lucky piece and rub it often. Luck is not to be sniffled at wherever it comes from."

Stoking up with a fresh cigar, Herman turned back to Hoyle and how to arm me for the hen party, running his finger down the canasta page black with rules. "Hah, here is oppor-tun-ity. Hoyle don't say you got to put meld down any time quick." Reaching over, he grabbed up the cards I had melded and tucked them back in my hand. "Bullwhack the hens. Hide what you will do, yah?"

It took me a few blinks to rid myself of the mental picture of laying into Aunt Kate and Herta and Gerda with a bullwhip--"Take that, you canasta fiends!"--and figure out he meant bushwhack. Then to grasp his idea of an ambush, by holding back meld cards so Gerda and Herta wouldn't have any clue to what was in my hand, until the twin cardplaying demons blindly discarded something I had a bunch of and could snatch up the pile and put together melds like crazy.

"Eye-dea is, surprise their pants off," he formulated, already tracing through the dense print for further stunts I could pull. I giggled. That would put them in the same league as the undressed womanhood peeking various parts of themselves out from card to card. Canasta Herman style was proving to be worth ever so much more close attention than that of Aunt Kate.

In our session next day, my amazed partner praised my new powers of concentration and confidence and what she unknowingly termed a better feel for

canasta. "That's more like it," she declared, celebrating with a chunk of peanut brickle. "Honeybun, I knew you could do it. All it takes is patience, mmm?" If you didn't count whatever could be squeezed out of a French bible and a lucky arrowhead wearing condoms.

"All righty right," she munched out the words, "you've learned the hard way what a canasta is. Let's don't futz with it any more today."

My ears must have stood straight out at that. Hearing one of Gram's almost cusswords come from high-toned Aunt Kate shocked me all the way through.

Nor, it turned out, was that the end of her capacity to surprise. After popping another piece of brickle into her mouth, one for the road, she rose from her chair and beckoned for me to follow her. "Come see, honey bunch. A certain seamstress has been working her fingers off," she all but patted herself on the back, "and I have something to show you in the wardrobe department."

Wardrobe. I knew that meant clothing, and lots of it, and instantly I envisioned what must be awaiting in the sewing room. Homemade school clothes, what else?

Oh man! Suddenly, something made sense. The sewing machine zinging away during the soap operas, her secretive behavior in holing up there while shooing me off when I tried to bring up the matter of the missing money--all this time, she'd been busy making shirts and the rest to surprise me with. Those baby-blue stares of hers sizing me up in the best sort of way, when I'd unkindly thought she was in the habit of eyeing me as if I was a stray left on the doorstep. What a relief. I wouldn't have to go back to school in the fall looking like something the cat dragged in, after all.

Giddy with this turn of events, I revamped my attitude about everything since I arrived. No wonder she stuck me away in the attic, in order to have the sewing room produce what I most lacked, a wardrobe! Forgiving her even for

canasta, I nearly trod on her heels in my gratitude as my newly wonderful aunt paraded us across the living room to the sewing nook, dropping smiles over her shoulder.

"I do hope you like what I've done," she was saying as we entered the snug room full of piles of fabrics, "I put so much work into it." I bounced on my toes trying to see as she plowed right in to the stack on the day bed, lifting something really colorful off the top.

"Ready?" she trilled, keeping up the suspense. "Usually I have a better idea of the size, so I had to guess a little." Of course she did, unaccustomed to making things for someone eleven going on twelve.

"I bet it'll all fit like a million dollars," I loyally brushed away any doubt.

"You're too much," she tittered. "But let's see."

Proudly she turned around to me with an armful of cloth that radiated colors of the rainbow, and while I gaped, let what proved to be a single garment unfold and descend. It went and went. Down past her cliff of chest. Unrolling along the breadth of her waist, then dropping past her hamlike knees without stopping, until finally only the tips of her toes showed from beneath the curtain of cloth, striped with purple and yellow and green and orange and shades mingling them all, that she held pressed possessively against her shoulders.

"My party outfit," she said happily. "The girls will get their say at the party, but I wanted you to see it first."

It was a sight to be seen, all right, the whole huge buttonless sheath of dress, if that's what it was. Straight from the needle of Omar the tentmaker, it looked like.

Still holding the wildly colored outfit up against herself, she confided, "They wear these in Hawaii. I came across a picture of one in a *National*

Geographic.” Crinkling her nose with the news, she informed me: “It’s called a muumuu.”

“It’s, it’s really something.”

Beyond that, words failed me, as the same old situation sunk in, no school wardrobe, no mad money, no hope of prying either one out of the clothes horse preening over her creation. Or was there?

Sweeping the creation over her shoulders to try to get a look at herself from behind in the full-length mirror, she asked as if my opinion actually counted for something: “What do you think, dearie? Does it look all right from behind?”

The muumuu made her rear end look like the butt of a hippo, which I absolutely did not say. “It’s, ah, about like the front. Fits where it touches. like Gram would say.”

“Oh, you. But you’re right, it is supposed to fit loosely.” Humming full force as she twirled this way and that in front of the mirror that was barely big enough to accommodate her and the tent of fabric both, she was in her own world. Not for long, if I had anything to do with it.

“Gee, yeah, the moo dress will look awful nice on you,” I fibbed wholeheartedly. “And you know what, I sure wish I had any good clothes to go along with it at the card party.” I furthered the cause of a spiffy homemade wardrobe by angling my head at the sewing machine. “I wouldn’t want to look like something the cat dragged in, when you’re so dressed up,” I clucked as if we couldn’t stand that.

That took the twirls out of her in a hurry. She frowned at the reflection of the two of us in the mirror, seeing my point. My hopes shot up as she chewed on the matter, studying back and forth from the crazily colored muumuu to me dressed dull as dishwater as usual. I cast another longing look around at the waiting sewing

machine and stacks of enough material to outfit me twenty times over, but she was not going to be oufoxed that easily.

“I just remembered, sweetums,” she exclaimed as if reminding me, too.
 “You have your wonderful rodeo shirt to wear, don’t you.” She smile victoriously.
 “We’ll put on a fashion show for the girls, mmm?”

With hen party day looming beyond and me not one stitch better off than I’d been, Saturday arrived, with the soap opera characters taking the day off to recuperate from their harrowing week--I could sympathize with them--and I was leery that Aunt Kate might have second thoughts about any canasta futzing and sit me down me for one last drill all forenoon. Instead she let me know in no uncertain terms that she had things to do to get herself ready for the party and I needed to find some way to occupy myself. “You can do that if you put your mind to it a weensy bit, I’m sure,” she told me without any snookums stuff, for once.

I was puzzled. “Can’t I be in the greenhouse with Herman like always?”

“Hmpf,” she went, pretty much her version of his *Puh*. “Him? Didn’t the old poot tell you? He won’t be here.”

Just then Herman appeared from the direction of their bedroom, surprisingly dressed up, at least to the extent of wearing a blue-green tie with mermaids twined coyly in seaweed floating all over it. “She is right, can you imagine. Time to go take my medicine.” He stuck a few small bills she must have doled out to him into his wallet, sayng “It is not much, Your Highness.”

She answered that with a dirty look and, “It’s the usual, it will have to do--there’s no such thing as a raise when there’s no income, is there.”

He shrugged that off, but juggling the car keys, he halted across the kitchen table from her. “Donny can go with, why not?”

Aunt Kate snorted and barely glanced up from the scandals of the *Manitowoc Herald-Times*. "Brinker, he is only eleven years old, that's why not."

"Old enough. We both knowed what is what in life by then, yah?" Not waiting for whatever she had to say to that, probably plenty, he turned to me with a wink of his glass eye. "Up to Donny, it should be. What do you say, podner?"

A trip along to a doctor's office did not sound any too good, putting me in mind right away of Gram's awful medical situation. On the other hand, it might help the case of cabin fever I was coming down with from my shabby attic room and the allures of Bali and other boundless places shown in the *National Geographics*.

"Sure, I guess so," I said as if I didn't care one way or the other, hoping that would keep me on the straight and level with Aunt Kate. According to the parting snort she gave as Herman and I headed out to the DeSoto, it didn't.

In no particular hurry, Herman drove in that sea captain fashion, his big knuckly hands wide apart on the steering wheel while he plied me with questions about Montana and the Double W ranch and as many other topics wild, woolly, and western as he and Karl May could come up with. All of it was really on his mind, to the point where he asked how long my folks and Gram and hers had been out west. Oh, practically forever as far as I knew, I told him, Gram's grandfather having been a Wegian--Herman gave me a hard look until I explained that was bunkhouse talk for *Norwegian*--who packed up and came from the old country to homestead, which explained the wicker suitcase. And the Campbells, I guessed had similarly been in Montana about as long as Montana had been around.

"Must have been like Canaan for them, maybe," he thought out loud. "Like in Bible--the Promised Land, I betcha."

“How do you know all this stuff?” I had reached the point of popping questions like that, since he never hesitated to bring up things out of nowhere. “The Bible and Longfellow and Karl May and so on?”

“Plenty of time to read on the ore boats,” he answered soberly. “*Badger Voyager* and the others gave me my learning, in manner of speaking.”

I didn't doubt that, and let the matter go as I tried for some learning of my own, trying to figure out Manitowoc if I was going to be stuck there for the whole long summer. It appeared to be an even more watery place than I'd thought, the river with the same name as the town taking its time winding here and there--Gitche Manitou really got around on his spirit walks--before finding Lake Michigan. When we reached downtown, street after street of stores occupied brick buildings grimy with age--if this was the pearl of Lake Michigan, it needed some polishing. An exception was the movie theater with a marquee full of colored lightbulbs brightly spelling out the current show, TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo, which I immediately set my heart on seeing until I remembered I was broke.

As Herman pattered us through the downtown traffic a fraction as fast as the van driver tore through the Twin Cities, I passed the time noting more of those stores with the same caliber of names that I'd spotted from the dog bus, as if anyone going into business had to line up way down the alphabet. Schliesleder Tailoring. Schloter Brothers Grocery. Schroeter Bakery. The schushy sound of the town sounded awful German to me, and I tried to savvy at least a little of it.

“Hey, Herman? What's schnitzel?”

He worked on that as we pressed on past the main street buildings toward the more grubby waterfront ones. “What are little cattles in English?”

“Calves? You mean the schnitz stuff is a way of saying calf meat? Veal, that’s all it is?”

“Yah. Fixed fancy with stuff on, you got schnitzel. Old German recipe.”

“What’s schnapps, then?”

“Firewater, Red Chief. Old German drink.”

“Boy oh boy, those dumb old Germans really went for some funny stuff, didn’t they.”

“Story of mankind,” he gave a blanket answer to that.

That was not nearly as many definitions as I’d wanted, but another matter quickly had me wondering as the DeSoto potted across the drawbridge of the weedy river and on past the coal sheds and boiler works. This doctor’s office was in an odd part of town and I tried to think what kind of ailment Herman needed to be treated for in a rundown neighborhood. Firmly built right up to the gray summit of his head, he looked healthy enough to me. “Uhm, this medicine of yours, what exactly is it?”

“Neck oil.”

Now he had me. I didn’t see anything stiff about the way he swung his head to give me a big bucktoothed smile, not the usual attitude shown when going to see the doctor.

Revelation arrived when he turned the car onto the last waterfront street, a block with the lake actually lapping under buildings held up by pilings, and parked at a ramshackle establishment with a sign over its door in weathered letters, THE SCHOONER. This I did not need to ask about, the Schlitz sign glowing in the window telling me all I needed to know.

Herman escorted me in as if the porthole in the door and the sawdust on the floor were perfectly natural furnishings where you go to take medicine, ha ha. I had been in bars before, what Montana kid hadn’t? But this one looked like it had

floated up from the bottom of the harbor. Sags of fishnets hung from the entire ceiling like greenish-gray cloudbanks. Above the doorway were wicked-looking crossed harpoons, and the wall opposite the gleaming coppertop bar was decorated with life preservers imprinted with *Northwind* and *Pere Marquette* and *Nanny Goat* and *Chequamegon* and other wonderful ships' names. Into the mix around the rest of the long barroom were walrus tusks carved into intricate scrimshaw, and longhandled grappling hooks that looked sharp as shark's teeth, and those bright yellow slicker coats called souwesters, as if the wearers had just stepped out to sniff the sea air. To me, the place was perfect from the first instant, and I could tell Herman felt at home simply entering its briny atmosphere.

Still setting up for the day, the man behind the bar was so round in his various parts that in the wraparound apron and white shirt he looked more like a snowman than a bartender, but plainly knew his business when he turned with towel and glass in hand to greet Herman. "Well, well, it's the Dutcher. Must be ten o'clock of a Saturday." Me, he eyed me less merrily. "Uh oh, Herm, who's your partner in crime?"

I waited for the guttural response I knew was going to turn my stomach, that I was his wife's sister's grandson, practically worse than no relative at all. Instead, I heard proudly announced, "Gus, please to meet my grandnephew Donny from a big cowboy ranch in Montana."

There. My full pedigree. Stuff that in your pink telephone, why don't you, Aunt Kate.

I grew an inch or two and swaggered after Herman to a bar stool just like I belonged. As I scooted on, Gus met me with a belly laugh--he had the full makings for it--while saying he didn't get many cowboys in the Schooner and warning me not get drunk and tear up the place. Just then the building shook, and I started to bolt for dry land.

“Sit tight, happens all the time,” Herman was chuckling now as he caught my arm before I could hit the floor running. Gus informed me it was only the ferry to Michigan going out and the joint had never floated away yet, although it kept swaying thrillingly as I gawked at the gray steel side of a ship sweeping by the porthole windows facing the harbor and lake. Oh man, I loved this, almost the sense of sailing on the Great Lakes as Herman had so heroically done. As the slosh of the ferry’s wake died down and the building quit quivering, Gus snapped his towel playfully in Herman’s direction. “Ready to take your medicine? Gonna beat you this time.”

“Always ready for that, and it will be first miracle ever if you beat me,” Herman replied breezily. Laughing up a belly storm, the bartender moved off along the line of beer spigot handles extending half the length of the bar, running a hand along them the way you do a stick in a picket fence. The assortment made me stare, beer tap after beer tap of brands I had never heard of, and I would bet, even the most seasoned drinkers in Montana probably had not. Rheinlander. Carling Black Label. Piels. Bavarian Club. Stroh. Schlitz, naturally, but then Blatz, followed by Pabst, for some reason spelled that way instead of Pabzt. On and on, down to the far end, where Gus stopped at a handle with a towel draped over it so it couldn’t be read. “No peeking, Dutcher,” he sang out. “You either, Tex.”

“No reason to peek,” Herman replied with utter confidence and gazed off into the fishnets and such, the mermaids on his tie looking perfectly at home. I had no problem joining him in losing myself in the nautical trappings, knowing full well a ship did not have a bunkhouse, but this was the most comfortably close to such a thing since the Double W.

Shortly, Gus came back scooting a shotglass of beer along the bar between thumb and forefinger. “Here you go, just up to the church window like always.” I

saw he meant by that it was only up to the jigger line, not even a full shotglass.

Huh. Herman must be a really careful drinker, I thought.

Sure enough, he took the little glass of beer in a long slow sip, almost like you do drinking creek water out of your hand. Swirled it in his mouth as if thinking it over, then swallowed with satisfaction. "Hah, easy--Olde Rhine Lager."

The bartender slapped the copper top of the bar with his towel in mock fury. "God damn it, Herm, how do you do it? I had that brought in all the way from Buffalo to fool you."

"Takes more than Buffalo," Herman said with the simple calm of a winner and still champion, and set the shotglass aside like a trophy while the bartender trooped back to the hitherto mystery tap and drew a genuine glass of the beer, which is to say a schooner. "What about Cowboy Joe here?" he asked as he presented Herman the free beer. "I might as well stand him one too while I'm giving away the joint."

"Name your poison, podner," Herman prompted me as if we were in a saloon with Old Shatterhand, and so I nursed a bottle of Orange Crush while the two men gabbed about old times of the Great Lakes ore fleet and its sailors, Herman soon buying a beer to even things up a bit in the tasting game and a second Orange Crush for me, adding to the general contentment. I was drifting along with the pair of them to the Strait of Mackinac and Duluth and Thunder Bay and other ports of call, when I heard Gus utter:

"So how's Tugboat Annie?"

I went so alert my ears probably stood straight out from my head. Somehow you just know a thing like that out of the blue, or in this case, the fishnets. Aunt Kate, he meant.

Herman took a long slug of beer before answering. "Same same. Thinks she is boss of whole everything."

Gus laughed, jowls shaking like jelly. "She was that way even when she was slinging hash down here on the dock, remember? Order scrambled eggs and they'd just as apt to come fried and she'd say, 'Eat 'em, they came from the same bird that cackles, didn't they?'" He let out a low whistle and propellored his towel somehow sympathetically. "You got yourself a handful in her, Herm."

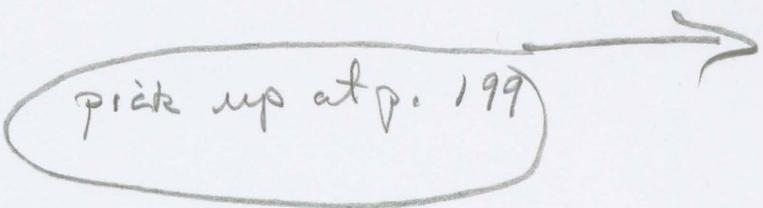
"Armloads, sometimes," said Herman, not joking at all

Wait a minute. I was trying to catch up. The Tugboat Annie part I got right away, that rough and tough hefty waterfront character in stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*. But Aunt Kate was ever a *waitress*? Snooty as she was now, with her Kate Smith style of dressing up and insistence on good manners and all? It almost was beyond my ability to imagine her, twice the size of shapely Letty and her name sewn in big sampler letters on the mound of her chest, behind a cafe counter bawling meal orders to someone like Gram in the kitchen. And strangely enough, in their breakfast battles over slices of toast, Herman never threw that chapter of the past in her face.

Eventually we departed The Schooner, Gus vowing he would stump Herman the next time and Herman telling him he could try until the breweries ran dry, with me still wowed by that beer tasting stunt. Before we reached the car, I asked, "How'd you learn to do that?"

Herman was maybe somewhat tanked up on Olde Rhine Lager, but his answer was as sober as it comes. "Job I had in old country. Story for another time, when you want your hairs raised. Get in, Donny. We must go home and face the Kate."

pick up at p. 199



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Nervous as a cross-eyed cat, I took my place across the card table from Aunt Kate. It was the fateful turn of Herta Schepke, seated to my left, to host the weekly canasta party and she had really put herself into it, the heavy old dark brown living room furniture burnished with polish, the rose-and-thistle patterned rug vacuumed until every tuft stood and saluted, the “nibbles” plate impressively stacked with Ritz crackers spread with pimento cheese. Even the parakeet in a cage by the window shone dazzlingly, preening its green and gold colors in the sunlight as it squawked and whistled for attention.

“That’s some bird,” I thought I’d make polite safe conversation while her partner Gerda shuffled and reshuffled the fat deck of cards in expert fashion and Aunt Kate inaugurated the nibbles plate with an *Mmm mm* and two bites that did in a cheese-topped cracker. “What’s its name?”

“Big Tiny Little Junior,” replied Herta, although I wasn’t sure I had heard right. She took pity on my mystified expression. “Oh my, don’t you know? Big Tiny Little Junior is the *most* divine piano player with the Lawrence Welk orchestra. They make ‘champagne music’ and play here every year for the Fourth

of July observance in the park and at the county fair and everything of the sort. And the name Big Tiny Little Junior just seemed *so* right for a parakeet. The little dear is a budgerigar, you know." I didn't have a clue that was what a shrunken parrot was called, and my face must have given me away because Herta gave a little giggle of compassion and spelled out, "So there you have it, don't you see? Biggie the budgie. He even knows his name." To prove it, she twittered across the room, "Pretty bird, who's my pretty bird?" The wild-eyed parakeet cocked its head and squeaked, "*Big-ee, Big-ee*" over and over.

During this, Gerda was dealing out cards with mere flicks of her fingers, faster than I could pick them up. We had barely started and already I was scared half sick at the way this so-called game was shaping up. Characters such as Old Shatterhand in Herman's shoot-'em-ups faced situations all the time where a person's fate could be decided on the turn of a card. But in real life, my future with Aunt Kate rested just as precariously on my gameness, to call it that in all possible senses, to cope with great big handfuls of canasta cards.

For it had dawned on me during the hen party chitchat before we sat up to the card table why she was so determined--savagely so, I thought at the time--to drill canasta into me. From the evidence of framed family photographs lined up over on the glistening sideboard, Herta was the matriarch of a whole slew of sharp-looking Schepkes, and Gerda ever so casually kept working into the conversation remarks about the latest achievement of a grandson here, a granddaughter there, the cream of her crop no doubt rising in the world. And Aunt Kate was stuck with me, her lone such twinkling star of the younger generation, supposedly bright enough to read by at night, to be shown off at last. If I didn't prove to be too dim to grasp a card game old ladies played like riverboat gamblers. By now I knew Aunt Kate well enough that if that were to happen, any attempt at shining me up to match