

Herta's and Gerda's golden offspring would be doused at once and she would devote her efforts to conveying to the others what a complete moron she was nobly putting up with. She could go either way. I was in big trouble if I did not play my cards right, in more than one meaning.

No sooner had Gerda finished dealing than she reached down for her purse beside her chair and took out a roll of coins, plunking it down beside her. Aunt Kate simultaneously did the same, each woman thumbing open the bank wrap to spill a stock of quarters in front of them.

"Time to feed the kitty," Aunt Kate said musically, evidently a usual joke.

"We'll see about that, Kittycat," Gerda declared.

"Here's my half, Gerd," Herta thrust a five-dollar bill across the table, which vanished into Gerda's purse. I blinked at that transaction, which indicated each roll of quarters was ten dollars' worth, a long way toward the total of my lost stash and plopped down here casually as if this was a game of marbles. That was only half of my astonishment.

"Are we playing for blood?"

My shrilled question, straight from bunkhouse poker lingo, made all three women recoil. It was up to Aunt Kate to set me straight, the pointed looks at her from Gerda and Herta made plain.

"If you mean are we gambling, dearie, *you* most certainly are not," she set in on me with a warning frown. "I am standing your share, aren't I," underscoring the point by picking up a wealth of quarters and letting them trickle from her hand. "The Minnie share, we can call it."

The other two tittered appreciatively at that. "As to our teensy wagers," Aunt Kate spoke as if this might be hard for me to follow but I had better try hard,

“we are simply making the game more interesting, aren’t we, girls. To liven things up a little, mm?”

So saying, she shoved a quarter each for herself and me, the would-be Minnie Zettel, out next to the deck to form the kitty, Gerda did the same for her and Herta, and that was supposed to be that.

With money riding on the game, added to all else circling in my head as I stuffed cards into my hand fifteen deep, I sneaked looks right and left sizing up our opponents. Both women were cut from the same cloth as Aunt Kate, which was to say spacious. Gerda was squat and broad, Herta was tall and broad. The halfway similar names and wide builds aside, they were not sisters, merely cousins, and old acquaintances of Aunt Kate from some ladies’ club way back when, I gathered. Both were widows, Herman holding the firm belief that they had talked their husbands to death. Widders, in the bunkhouse pronunciation I had picked up. *Melody Roundup* on the Great Falls radio station sometimes played a country-and-western song that backed Herman’s theory to a considerable extent: “*Widder women and white lightning, what they do to a man is frightening.*” That tune crazily invaded through my head, too, as I tried to force myself to remember the countless rules of canasta.

Almost as if peeking into my mind, Herta right then chose to ask with a certain slyness, “Are you *musical*, like your auntie who even *talks* like there’s a song in her voice?”

“Oh, now, Hertie, don’t get carried away,” Aunt Kate responded as if she was being teased with that as well as me. Huh. Maybe I wasn’t the only one to see the Kate Smith resemblance she didn’t play down.

Anyway, I answered up to Herta's dig or whatever it was. "Naw, I'm the kind who can only play one instrument. The radio," I fell back on the old joke, which did not go over as big as I'd hoped.

"Are we playing cards or musical chairs?" Gerda asked pointedly.

"Don-ny," Aunt Kate prompted with a smile seeking forgiveness from the Herta-Gerda partnership, "any red threes to meld?"

Not a good start. "Sure, I was just about to."

I grabbed the trey of hearts I had stuck at the far end of my hand without a thought and flopped it on the table. Aunt Kate leaned back and smiled at me with a hint of warning in her eyes that I had almost cost us a hundred points by not playing the damn three in the first place, and Gerda looked at me slyly as she flipped me the replacement card. "My, my, aren't you something, you're beating the *pants* off us already," Herta said in the same dumbed-down tone she used in talking to the bird.

After that I tried to keep my mind fully on draws and discards and Herman's eye-deas for bushwhacking and the rest, but the hen party combination on either side of me, not even to mention Biggie the budgie squealing away, was really distracting. Herta actually clucked, making that *thwock* sound with her tongue against the roof of her mouth when she exclaimed over something, which was often. That was bad enough, but her partner presented an even worse challenge. The last name of Gerda was Hostetter, which was so close to Horse Titter that I couldn't get that out of my mind either. I had learned by way of Gram to call grownups I didn't know well Mr. and Mrs., and every time I addressed the widder to my right it came out something like "Mrs. Horssstetter."

"Oh, don't, snickelfritz," she killed that off after the first few times. "Just call me Gerda, please." Making a discard that I had absolutely no use for as she

uncannily almost always did, she idly glanced at me, saying, "I understand you're from a ranch. Is it one of those fancy dude ones?"

"No-o-o, not exactly. It's more the kind with cows and horses and hayfields," that last word came out wistfully.

"I suppose you're glad to be here because there's not much for a boy like you to do there," said Gerda as if that were the epitaph on my ranch life.

"Aw, there's always something going on," I found myself sticking up for the Double W. All three women were eating the cheese-and-cracker nibbles as if they were gumdrops, so it must have their obvious devotion to food that brought what I considered an inspiration. "You know, what's really fun on a ranch is a testicle festival."

That stopped everyone's chewing and drew me full attention from three directions, so I thought I had better explain pretty fast.

"It happens at branding time, see, when the male calves have to be taken care of. It's nut cutting, there's no way around calling it anything but that. Well, castration, if you want to be fancy. Anyway, all these testicles get thrown in a bucket to be washed up and then cooked over the fire right there in the corral. There's plenty to feed the whole branding crew. Two to a calf, you know," I spelled out because from the blank expressions around the table, maybe they weren't that knowledgeable about livestock.

"Don-ny," Aunt Kate spoke as if she had something caught in her gullet, "that's very interesting, but--"

Herta blurted, "You actually *eat* those?"

"Oh sure, you can guzzle them right down. Rocky Mountain oysters, they're real good. You have to fry them up nice, bread them in cornmeal or something, but then, yum."

Yum did not seem to sit well with the ladies. Thinking it might be because they were used to nibbles, as Aunt Kate called the candy gunk which bite by bite didn't amount to much and Herta's crackers-and-cheese treat which tasted like dried toast and library paste, I kept trying to present the case for Rocky Mountain oysters despite the discreet signals from across the table that enough was enough. Not to me, it wasn't. I had an argument to make.

"Honest, you can fix a whole meal out of not that many nu--testicles, see. They're about yay long," I held my fingers four or so inches apart, the size of a healthy former bull calf's reproductive items.

Herta seemed to take that in with more interest than did Gerda, who just looked at me as if sorting me out the ruthless way she did cards. Apparently deciding I could be coaxed off the topic, Herta crooned in practically birdie talk, "That tells us *so much* about ranch life. Anyway, aren't you cuter than *sin* in your cowboy shirt."

Without meaning to--much, anyway--I gave her the full snaggle smile for that, the one like I might bite.

"*Heavens!*" She jerked her cards up as if shielding herself from me. "What in the world happened to that boy's t--?"

"He fell while he was working on the ranch," Aunt Kate wisely did not go into the roundup tale. "They have a favorite dentist back there and his grandmother is taking him to to be fixed up good as new, the minute he gets home from the summer to Montana," she topped that off smooth as butter. This was news to me, but not the kind intended. My supposedly no-nonsense aunt could story as fast and loose as I could.

After that performance on my part, as I knew Aunt Kate was going to level the word at me later, the game dragged on with the score steadily mounting against

us and the quarters in the kitty regularly being scooped in by Gerda. It turned out that livening things up a little, as Aunt Kate called it, included many an ante during play as well as the payoff for winning each hand. Natural canastas, without wild cards, brought groans and a forfeit of quarters, as did things Aunt Kate characterized as Manitowoc rules, such as melding all black aces. I watched with apprehension as the score steadily mounted against us and Aunt Kate's stake of quarters dwindled. In bunkhouse terms, we were up against sharpies. Gerda was a terrifying player, seeming to know which cards each of the rest of us held, as if she had X-ray vision. Herta was no slouch either. As I desperately tried to keep up with what cards were played and the passel of rules and the kitty being won by them instead of us two times out of three, I was concentrating nearly to the point of oblivion when I heard the word *green*, followed by *stamps*.

I snapped to. Herta was going on about a certain lawn chair featured in the window at the Schermerhorn furniture store downtown. "It has the *nicest* blue plastic weave and is so light, made of aluminum, and you can fold right down *flat* in it to sun yourself," she enthused. "It costs somethiong *fierce*, though. So I'm hoping I can get it if I can build up my Green Stamps before *too* awfully long, while summer is still going good."

"Oh, those, I never bother with them," Aunt Kate pooh-poohed the trading stamps. "They're so little use, you can't even trade them in for decent clothes."

"We all have *ravishing* clothes, Kitty," Herta responded with a bland glance at Aunt Kate's muumuu of many colors. "What I *want* is that lawn chair. *Free* and for *nothing* and with not even a *fee*, as the saying is." All three tittered at that. Then Herta sighed and consoled herself with a nibble. "I've been saving up and saving up, but it's a slow process."

"You watch and see," Gerda put in, "you'll be eligible for that lawn chair about the time a foot of snow comes. I'm with Kitty, those silly stamps aren't

worth the trouble. It's your draw, snickelfritz," and bang, we were right back at playing canasta for blood. For me, though, Green Stamps had been added into the reds and blacks of eye-deas.

I watched and waited for the discard pile to grow, while dipping my hand into my pants pocket to work on the lucky arrowhead. Gerda noticed me at it, as she did everything, and asked none too nicely, "What's the attraction down your leg there?"

Before I could make up an excuse, Aunt Kate spoke up. "Oh, he insists on carrying some piece of rock he thinks is his secret lucky charm, it's harmless."

Luckily enough, that took care of that, and on the next go-round, my ears ringing with Herman's advice--*Hold back, discard one like you don't got any use for it, and watch for same kind of card to show up on pile in your turn. Bullwhack the hens*--I discarded one of the five sevenspots I had built up. Sure enough, two rounds later, Gerda the human card machine operated on memory and tossed onto the pile what should have been an absolutely safe seven of spades. Saying nothing and maintaining a poker face if not a canasta one, I produced my double pair of sevens and swept up the pile.

There was a stunned silence from Gerda and Herta and a tongue-in-cheek one from Aunt Kate as I pulled in the rich haul of cards. Finally Gerda could not stand it and said, in a tone very much as if she had been bushwhacked, "Just as a point of the obvious, you do know you discarded a seven a bit ago."

"Uh-huh," I played dumb although I also kept spreading sevens and other melds across the table, "but this way I got it back." Aunt Kate conspicuously said nothing, merely watching me meld cards right and left as if our good fortune was an accident of luck, which it was but not in the way she thought.

That and a few other stunts I came up with that drew me black looks from Gerda and surprised ones from Aunt Kate saved our skin and our stake somewhat, but I was running out of tricks according to Hoyle and Herman, and several hands later Aunt Kate and I still trailed on the score sheet and worse in the kitty. Another ridiculous thing about canasta was that the game went on and on until one set of partners had scored a total of five thousand points. The way this was going, Herta and Gerda would reach that in another hand or two and wipe us out good and plenty. My partner across the table wore an expression of resignation tinged with exasperation, and I did not look forward to the ride home with her. Before the next hand was dealt, though, we were temporarily saved by the luck or whatever it was of me sneaking the last cracker-and-cheese and downing it.

“Goodness, we’ve gone through the *nibbles*, haven’t we,” Herta immediately noticed the empty plate and felt her hostess duty. “What do you say we take a wee little break and I’ll fix some more.”

“And a little wee break,” said Aunt Kate, surprisingly reckless, as she pronto headed out to what in these circumstances seemed to be called the powder room. Gerda called dibs on the next visit, and went over to wait by cooing to the parakeet.

Here was my chance, slim as it was. As if merely looking around, I wandered into the kitchen where Herta was industriously dipping a tableknife into a freshly opened jar of pimento cheese spread and daubing some on cracker after cracker to build a pyramid on the plate. She glanced around at me with an eyebrow raised, humorously maybe. “After all that talk of ‘*oysters*’, too hungry to wait, are we?”

“Huh-uh. It’s not that.” I peeked back into the living room to make sure we couldn’t be overheard. Gerda was babytalking to the parakeet, which answered her with unending screeches of “*Big-ee, Big-ee*” “Those stamps you were talking

about, the green ones? You know what? I've got some that aren't doing me any good."

"Oh, *do* you?" A glob of cheese spread had smeared onto the edge of the plate and she cleaned it off with her finger and ate it, with a wrinkle of her nose at me that said it would be just our secret, wouldn't it. Thinking I was making too much of too little, she kept her voice low in saying, "You must have been with Kitty or that *husband* of hers at one of those gas stations where they give out a few for a fillup, is that it?"

"Uh-uh. I have a whole book, pasted in and everythibng."

She sucked her finger while studying me with deepened interest. "What's a boy like you doing with *all those*?"

Sixteen hundred and one hard-earned miles on the bus, that was what. But I only said, "I got them with my ticket here. So I was wondering if we could sort of make a trade, since they're called trading stamps, right?"

"A *trade*, you say," she inquired in a lowered voice, nibbles forgotten now. "Such as?"

"Well, see, I know how much you'd like to have that lawn chair. And you know how much Aunt Kate likes to win. If you could help that along a little, so she and I come out on top today, I could bring you my book of Green Stamps next time we play. That way, you get your free lawn chair and I don't get my fanny chewed about canasta all week "

"Goodness gracious, you *do* have a way of putting things." She thought for a couple of seconds, calculating what she would lose in the kitty against the fierce price tag on the lawn chair, then craned her neck to check on the living room, with me doing the same. Gerda was taking her turn in the powder room, and Aunt Kate now was stationed at the birdcage whistling at Biggie and receiving squeaks and scratchy *chirrup*s in return.

Clucking to herself as clicking onto a decision, Herta leaned all the way down to my nearest ear and murmured:

"It *would* be a good joke on Kittycat, wouldn't it."

"A real funnybone tickler, you bet."

"*Just* between us, of course."

"Cross our hearts and hope to die."

She giggled and whispered. "We'll *do* it."

Since there wasn't much time to waste before Herta and Gerda would reach a winning score just in the ordinary way of things, at the first chance I had when the discard pile grew good and fat and all three women were waiting like tigers to pounce and pick it up, I discarded a deuce, the wild card under Manitowoc rules, crosswise onto the pile.

Aunt Kate leaned over the table toward me. "Honeybunch, that freezes the pile, you know."

"I know."

"You are sure that is the card you want to play, that way."

"You betcha." The spirit of Herman must have got into me to sass her that way.

"Mmm hmm." Stuck for any way to dislodge me from my stubborn maneuver, she tried to make the best of it by shaking her head as if I was beyond grownup understanding. "Girls, it appears we have a frozen deck."

"Doesn't it, though," Gerda said through tight lips. "Someone has been putting ideas in this boy's head." Aunt Kate sat there looking like she couldn't imagine what got into me, nor could she. "Well, we have no choice, do we," Gerda reluctantly conceded. "Your draw, Hertie."

The pile built and built more temptingly as we all drew and discarded several more times, until Herta drew, stuck the card away and as if distracted by Biggie's latest rant of chirrup, discarded an ace of spades. Immediately she went into flutters and the full act of "Oh, did I play *that* card? I didn't mean to!"

She made as if to pick it back up, which Aunt Kate headed off so fast her hand was a blur as she protected the pile.

"Oh no you don't. Against the rules, Hertie, you know perfectly well." Tossing down her natural pair of aces, she gobbled up the whopping number of cards and began melding, the black aces sidebet and rainbows of other highscoring combinations across half the table, canastas following canastas, while Gerda squirmed as if enduring torture and Herta tried to look remorseful, although with little glances sideways at me marking our secret. I pressed my cards to my chest with one hand, nervously rubbing the arrowhead in its sheath with the other to summon all the luck I could. It must have worked. Finally done laying down cards, Aunt Kate looked around the table with a smile that spread her chins.

"Guess what, girls. Donny and I seem to have 5100 points, also known as out." She reached for the stream of silver Gerda was unhappily providing by yielding up quantities of quarters while Biggie screamed as if celebrating our triumph.

I felt like a winner in every way as my triumphant partner, humming away as pleased as could be, started to drive back to the house. Victory over the canasta hens! Herman would get a great kick out of that. And winnings, actual money, the first gain of that kind since I had alit in Manitowoc. Manitou's town itself was even showing a more kindly face, leafy streets and nice houses surrounding us as Aunt Kate took a different way than we had come because of the "nasty traffic" of the shift change at the shipyard.

So I was caught by surprise when my attention, racing ahead of the DeSoto's leisurely pace, suddenly had to do a U-turn when I heard the words, "Donal, I have something to say to you, don't take it wrong."

In my experience as a kid, there wasn't much other way to take something that started like that. I waited warily for whatever was coming next.

She provided it with a look at me that took her eyes off the road dangerously long. "Has your grandmother ever, *ever* suggested circumstances in which you should," she paused for breath and emphasis and maybe just to think over whether there was any hope of changing my behavior, "hold your tongue?"

Was I going to admit to her that frequent warning of Gram's, *Don't be a handful*? Not ever. "Naw, you know how Gram is. She calls a spade a shovel, dirt on it or not, like she says, and I guess I'm the same."

From her pained expression, she apparently thought that described her sister all too well and me along with it. She drew a breath that swelled her to the limit of the driver's seat and began. "I'm not laying blame on your grandmother, I know she's done the best she could under the"--she very carefully picked the word--"circumstances."

That could only mean Gram putting up with my redheaded behavior, and now I was really wary of where this was heading. Once more Aunt Kate took her eyes off the road to make sure I got the message. "So this is for your own benefit"--which was right up there in the badlands of being a kid with *don't take this wrong*--"when I say you are a very forward youngster."

I hadn't the foggiest notion of what that meant, but I risked: "Better than backward, I guess?"

She stiffened a bit at that retort, but a lot more when I couldn't stop myself from saying, "And I can't help it I'm a *youngster*."

"There's the sort of thing I mean," she emphasized. "You're Dorie, all over again. Chatter, chatter, chatter," she took a hand off the wheel to imitate with her arched fingers and thumb something like Biggie the budgie's nonstop beak. "One uncalled-for remark after another."

Ooh, that stung. Was my imagination, as she seemed to be saying, nothing more than a gift of gab?

I was getting mad, but not so mad I couldn't see from her expression that I had better retreat a little. "Yeah, well, I'm sorry if Herta and Mrs. Horssstetter took the testicle festival the wrong way. I thought they'd be interested in how we do things in Montana." Figuring a change of topic would help, I went directly to, "Anyhow, we beat their pants off, didn't we. How much did we win?"

"Mm? Ten dollars." She reached down to her purse between us on the seat and shook it so it jingled. "Music to the ears, isn't it," she said with a dimpled smile that would have done credit to Kate Smith.

"And how!" I couldn't wait one more second to ask. "When do I get my half?" Wow, I'd at least gain back five bucks of my ill-fated stash. This was better!

"Sweetheart, it is time we had a talk about money," the smile was gone that fast. "To start with, I was the one who put up our stake, wasn't I. By rights, then, the winnings come to me, don't they."

"But we were partners! We won the canasta game together! And I didn't *have* any money to put up, remember?"

That accusation, for that's what I meant it to be, only made her wedge herself more firmly behind the steering wheel of the DeSoto. "Now, now, don't make such a fuss. If I were to give you your share, as you call it, what would you spend it on? Comic books, movies, things like that which are like throwing money away."

Things like that were exactly what I wanted to spend mad money on, and I tried to say so without saying so. "I can't go through the whole summer just sitting around the house doing nothing."

"That is hardly the case," she didn't give an inch. "I'll take you shopping with me, you can be my little helper at the grocery store and so on. Then there's the jigaw puzzle now that you've learned canasta, and always the greenhouse to visit, isn't there." Her voice went way up musically as she said the next. "Don't worry, bunny, you won't lack for entertainment if you just put your mind to it. And here's a surprise for you." By now she was cooing persuasion at me. "On the Fourth, we'll go the park where they'll have fireworks and sizzlers and whizbangs and all those things, and hear that wonderful Lawrence Welk orchestra Herta talked about. Won't that be nice?"

Talking to me that way, who did she think I was, Biggie the budgie? But before I could think up a better retort, she let out an alarming sigh as if the air was going out of her. I saw she was stricken, for sure, but not in an emergency way. Everything about her appeared normal enough except her eyes were not the road, her attention seized by something we were passing.

"I'm sorry, buttercup," she apologized in another expulsion of breath, "but the sight of it always almost does me in."

I jerked my head around to where she was looking, expecting a hospital or cemetery at the worst, some place ordinarily sad to see. But no, I saw why the sight so unnerved her, as it did me. The forbidding old building set back from the street was spookily familiar, even though I was positive I had never seen it before. The sprawling structure, rooms piled three stories high, each with a single narrow window, seemed leftover and rundown and yet clinging to life like the skinny little trees, maybe a failing orchard, that dotted its grounds like scarecrows.

"What is that place?" I heard my own voice go high.

"Just what it looks like," Aunt Kate responded, speeding up the car to leave the ghostly sight behind. "The poorhouse."

The word hit me all the way through as I still was staring over my shoulder at the creepy building. Put a rocky butte behind it and weatherbeaten outbuildings around it and it was the county poorfarm of my nightmares. As if caught up in the worst of those even though I was awake, I heard Aunt Kate's pronouncement that made my skin crawl.

"And that's another reason I must be careful, careful, careful, with money and impress on you to do the same. I sometimes think we'll end up there if a certain somebody doesn't change his ways."

"Y-you mean Herman?"

"Him himself," she said, squeezing the life out of the steering wheel.

"But--why?" I was stupefied. "How's he gonna end you up in the poorfarm, I mean house?"

"Have you ever seen that man do a lick of work? If only," she said grimly.

Another sigh as if she was about to collapse scared me as much as the first one. "To think, what a difference it would make if Fritzie was here."

"Huh? Who?"

"Oh, the other one," she tossed that off as if it was too sad to go into.

No way was she getting away with that. My burning gaze at her was not going to quit until she answered its question, *The other what?*

She noticed, and said offhandedly, "Husband, who else?"

I gaped at her. She seemed like the least likely person to believe the plural of spouse is spice, as I'd overheard grownups say about Mormons and people like that. "You've got another one besides Herman? They let you do that in Wisconsin?"

"Silly. Before Brinker, I mean." She gazed through the windshield "Fritz Schmidt. A real man."

Herman seemed real enough to me. "What happened to him? The other one, I mean."

"I lost him." She made it sound as if he had dropped out of her pocket somewhere.

Not satisfied, I again stared until she had to answer. "Storm, slick deck."

"Really?" Strange how these things work, but Herman's shake of the sugar bowl that spilled some over the side when he was showing me the fate of the *Badger Voyager* combined with her words to make my pulse race. Trying not to sound eager, though I was, I leaned across the seat and asked, "Like when the Witch of November came?"

"He's been filling your head out there in the garden shed with his old sailor tales, hasn't he. All right, you want the whole story." No sighing this time, actually a little catch in her voice. "My Fritz was bosun on the *Badger Voyager*. Washed overboard in the big November storm of '47."

I thought so! The same storm and ship that took Herman's eye! That Witch of November coincidence inundated me in waves of what I knew and didn't know. Her Fritzie was Herman's best friend on the doomed ore boat. No problem with that, I could savvy the pair of them as a bunkhouse buddies or whatever the living quarters were on a ship. But then how in the world had someone she would not even call by his first name get to be the replacement husband? Someone she thought was so worthless they'd end up in the poorhouse? Where that embattled matchup came from, my imagination could not reach at all.

All this whirling in my head after her news about Fritzie's sad fate, I miraculously managed to hold my exclamation to a high-pitched "That's awful!"

“Yes, it’s a tragedy.” She gazed steadily ahead at the road. “But that’s in the past, we have to put up with life in the here and now, don’t we,” she said as if she didn’t want to any more than I did. As if reminded, she glanced over at me and patted her purse enough to make it jingle again in a sort of warning way. “You did fine in today’s game, honeybunch, but stay on your toes. Next time, the party is at our house and we’ll do as usual and play two out of three.”

Dear Gram,

The dog bus was really something, with all kinds of people like you said. Aunt Kate, as I call her but everybody else says Kitty, and Uncle Herman, who does not go by Dutch any more, found me in the depot fine and dandy and we went to their house and had what they called a Manitowoc dinner, what we call supper. It takes some getting used to here.

Gram had made me promise, cross my heart and so on, to write to her every week, but doing so when she was in the middle of complications after her operation stayed my hand from so much I really wanted to say, none of it good news as far as I was concerned. Carefully as I could, I was doctoring, to use that word, life with Aunt Kate. If word ever came from that intimidating nun, Sister Carma Jean, that the patient was better, maybe I could somehow sneak a phone call to let Gram know I was being bossed unmercifully, from being kept flat broke to being stuck in the attic. On the other hand, what could she do about it from a hospital bed when Aunt Kate was right here, always looming, seeming as big as the house she dominated top and bottom and in between.

Already she had stuck her head in to make sure I was keeping at it on a space of the card table that didn't have presidents from Mount Rushmore staring at me with scattered jigsaw eyes. She left me to it but not before singing out, "Don't forget to tell her the funny story of mistaking me for Kate Smith, chickie," which wild horses could not drag out of me to put on paper. Instead:

Aunt Kate and I play cards some, not pitch like we did in the cook shack but a different game I'll tell you about sometime.

Herman wore a broad grin when I told him he and Hoyle had bushwhacked Herta and especially Gerda, to the Kate's satisfaction. "Did you know they play canasta for money?"

"For two bitses, *pthht*. Hens play for chickenfeed, notcherly."

It was laborious to fill the whole page of stationery with anything resembling happy news. Herman's greenhouse gave me a chance to list vegetable after vegetable growing under glass, which helped, and I recounted the antics of Biggie the budgie as if Aunt Kate and I had simply paid a social visit to old friends of hers. There was so much I had to skip not to worry Gram in her condition--the Green Stamps secret deal with Herta, Herman's out of this world talent at tasting beer, my impressive broken front tooth from the scuffle with the campers, and most of all, Aunt Kate heedlessly throwing away every cent of my money--it would have filled page upon page of writing paper. But if the Reader's Digest could condense entire books, I supposed I could shrink my shaky start of summer likewise.

The Fourth of July is coming, and Aunt Kate is taking me to the big celebration here where they will shoot off fireworks of all kinds and a famous band whose leader is Lawrence somebody will play music. It should be fun. I hope you are getting well fast and will be up and around to enjoy the Fourth like I will.

Your loving grandson,

Donny

“Oh, I was going to look it over to check your spelling.” Aunt Kate clouded up when I presented her the sealed and addressed envelope for mailing. The look-it-over part I believed, which is why I licked the envelope shut.

“Aw, don’t worry about that. I win all the spelling bees in school,” I said innocently. “Miss Ciardi says I could spell down those Quiz Kids that are on the radio.”

“Well, if she says so,” Aunt Kate granted dubiously. “All righty, I’ll stamp it and you can put it out in the box for the mailman. There now, you can get right back to your puzzle, mm?”

The real puzzle, of course, was how I was going to endure a summer of thousand-piece jigsaws, old *National Geographics*, and canasta without being bored loco or something worse happening. That latter hazard in particular, because at the next hen party after I paid off the bribe to Herta by slipping her my Green Stamps, I was going to be no match for the merciless sharpies in not one canasta game but two, and it took no great power of prediction to guess Aunt Kate’s reaction to that. The Witch of November in a muumuu was on that horizon.

So the next couple of days after writing Gram how fine and dandy everything was in Manitowoc, I hung around with Herman in the greenhouse as much as possible to keep my morale up. He was good company, better and better in fact, as he read up some more from Karl May and other books in his corner stash and gabbed with me about cayuses and coyotes-- relying on me to straighten him out on which were horses and which were canines--and the wonders of Winnetou as a warrior and the spirit of Manitou living on and on and making itself felt in mysterious ways. “Here you go, Donny, Indians believed Manitou lived in stones, even, and could come out into a person if treated right, if you will imagine.” With

the fervor of an eleven-year-old carrying an obsidian arrowhead in his pocket, I certainly did turn my imagination loose on that, seeing myself riding the dog bus west sooner than later to a healthy and restored Gram, her with a job cooking on some ranch where the rancher was no Sparrowhead, me back at things I was good at like hunting magpies and following the ways of cowboys, poorfarm and orphanage out of our picture. In other words, in more luck than I was used to lately.

It is said a blessing sometimes comes in disguise, but if what happened in the middle of that week was meant to be any kind of turn of luck, it made itself ugly beyond all recognition when it came.

At first I thought it was only the household's usual ruckus at breakfast while I was parked on the living room couch as usual that time of morning reading a *National Geographic*, this time about "Ancient Rome Brought to Life," where according to the paintings shown, people sometimes went around even more naked than in Bali. I was pondering an illustration of a roomful of women mostly that way and the caption with some ditty from back then, "Known unto All Are the Mysteries, Where, Roused by Music and Wine, the Women Shake Their Hair and Cry Aloud," those mysteries unfortunately unknown to me except for that smackeroo kiss Letty and I exchanged, and I did not notice her shaking her hair and crying aloud from it.

Just then, though, I heard a mysterious outburst where a woman was definitely roused, but not that way.

"Have you lost half your brain as well as that eye?" Aunt Kate was shouting in the close confines of the kitchen.

"Does not take any much brain to know you are talking crazy," came Herman's raised voice in return.

"Oh, I'm the one, am I. I've told you before, don't be filling his head with useless things. When I was out seeing what flowers I could cut for our next little party, I heard you telling him more of that Manitou nonsense."

"Is not nonsense. You think you are more smart than Longfellow? Not one chance in a million." Herman went on the attack now. "You are the one filling him up with canasta nonsense and putting him on spot in your hen parties. Let the boy be boy, I am telling you."

In a kind of stupor as I realized the knockdown dragout fight was about me, I crept to the hallway where I could peek toward the kitchen. They were up on their feet going at it across the table. I'd heard them having battles before, but this sounded like war. More so than I could have imagined, because as I watched in horror Aunt Kate leaned across the table almost within touching distance of Herman and shrieked one of the worst things I had heard in my life.

"Don't get any ideas about who's in charge of our little bus passenger for the summer! You're not wearing a Kraut helmet any more, so don't think you're the big boss around here!"

Herman's face darkened, and for a few frightening seconds, I wondered whether he was going to hit her. Or she him, just as likely, given the way her fists were clenched and ready.

Then Herman said in a voice barely under control, "What I am, you did not care when you wanted your bed kept warm after Fritz." With that, he turned his back on her, heading out to the refuge of the greenhouse. Aunt Kate followed him far enough to get in a few more digs before he slammed the door and was gone.

Shocked nearly senseless as I was, by instinct I scooted for the stairs and scuttled up to the attic while she still was storming around the kitchen. I would have retreated farther than that if I could, after what I had heard. Before long, Aunt

Kate's voice was raised again, this time in my direction and straining to sound melodious.

"Don-ny. Yoo hoo, Donny, where are you? Let's go for a little outing and do the grocery shopping, shall we?"

I stayed absolutely still, gambling that she would not labor up the stairs to seek me out. And if I could make her think I was at the greenhouse with Herman instead, she likely wouldn't want another shouting match out there. Silence, rare as it was tried in this household, might save me yet. After some minutes, I heard the DeSoto pull away, and so hurt and mad at being deceived that I could hardly see straight, I raced down the stairs two and three at a time, bound for a showdown in the greenhouse.

"You look not happy, podner," Herman said beneath his usual cloud of cigar smoke. The only sign that the battle royal in the kitchen might still have him agitated was the sharp strike of his spoon against the pot rims as he fed fertilizer to the cabbages. "Something the Kate did, hah?"

I wanted to holler at him, *No, something you did, turning out to be a German soldier!* Swallowing hard, I managed to restrict myself to saying, "I-I heard Aunt Kate bawling you out in there."

"Habit," he wrote that off and tapped his cigar ash onto the floor. "She wouldn't have nothing to do if not yelling her head off at me."

I had to know. The words almost strangled me, but I gulped them out. "Did you really fight on the Kraut side, like she said?"

Wincing at that language, he looked up at me in surprise. "She should wash her tongue and hang it out to dry." The big shoulders lifted, and dropped. "But, ja"--which I finally heard for what it was instead of *Yah*--"that is one way to put it."

“So you really truly are a”--I had trouble even saying it--“a German?”

“Ja, double cursed,” he said as if life had done him dirty at the start. “The name ‘Herman’ even means ‘soldier’ in German language, if you will imagine.”

“But then how come you don’t talk like they do in the movies?” I demanded to know as if his squarehead accent was a betrayal. “The Nazi bad guys, I mean.”

“Pah, those Prussians, they speak like they are chewing a dictionary,” he dismissed that. “I am from elsewhere. Emden, on the North Sea. Netherlands is next door, the Dutchies are a spit away, we say.”

“So aren’t you sort of Dutch, any?” I seized on what hope there was. “Like when you were called that before it went down with the ship?”

“No-o-o,” he drew the answer out as if calculating how far to go with it.

“‘Dutch’ was sailor talk for ‘Deutsch,’ which means ‘German.’ Better than ‘Kraut,’ but not much.”

That clinched it. A Kraut by any other name, even his shipmates recognized it. Imagination did me no favors right then. My head filled with scenes, of landing craft sloshing to shore under a hail of gunfire from Hitler’s troops, and sand red with blood, and a figure on crutches in the hallways of Fort Harrison hospital trying to learn to walk again, which was not imaginary at all. Giving Herman the German, as he now was to me, the worst stink eye I was capable of, I demanded:

“Tell me the truth. Were you one of them at Omaha Beach?”

“Hah? What kind of beach?”

“You know. On D-Day. Were you there shooting at my father, like the other Germans?”

Realization set in on him, his face changing radically as my accusation hit home. “Donny, hold on to your horses. I am not what you are thinking. The Great War, I was in.”

What, now he was telling me it was great to have been in the war where my father got his legs shot to pieces? I kept steadily giving him the mean eye, hating everything about this Kraut-filled summer and him along with it, until he said slowly so I would understand, "World War Ein. One."

I blinked that in. "You mean, way back?"

He looked as if his cigar had turned sour. "You could say. I was made a soldier thirty-seven years ago," which I worked out in my head to 1914.

Slowly I sat down on a fruit box as he indicated, a whole different story unfolding than what I had imagined. "No choice did I have, Donny, back then." He gazed up at the photographic panes of glass holding olden times in the poses of the portrait sitters, as if drawing on the past from them. "You have heard of the draft, where government says You, you, and you, put uniform on, ja? Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany in the Great War was very drafty place," the joke made a serious point. "There I was, young sailor on the North Sea and before I knowed it, foot soldier wearing a pickle stabber." He put his hand on top of his head with the index finger up, indicating the spiked helmet of the Kaiser's army.

Comical as that was, I was not deterred from asking, "So, were you in any big battles?"

He puffed out cigar smoke that wreathed a rueful grin. "With my corporal, many times."

"Aw, come on, you know what I mean. Real fights. Like Custer and the Indians."

"Shoot-them-ups, you want," he sighed. "Karl May should write Western Front westerns for you."

At first I thought he was not going to answer further, but finally he came out with, "I was at Hohe Toter Mann, was enough."

That didn't sound bad, nothing like Omaha Beach. Disappointed at his evidently tame war, I said just to be asking, "What's that mean, Ho-huh whatever you said?"

He half closed his good eye as if seeing the words into English. "Dead Man's Hill, about."

That sat me up, all attention again. "Yeeps! Like Boot Hill, sort of?"

"More ways than one," he evidently decided to give me Herman the German's side of the war. "Hohe Toter Mann was fought over time after time, back and forth, forth and back, Germans and French killing each other all they could." He grimaced, and after what he said, I did too. "You could not see the ground, some places, dead men or parts of them was so thick."

I'd wanted to know the blood-and-guts truth about him a soldier, had I. That would do. "H-how come you weren't killed there?"

"The shovel is sometimes better friend than the rifle," he said simply. "Learned to dig such foxholes, I did, could have given fox a lesson." He paused to frame the rest of that story. "Here is a strange thing soldiers go through. The more of my comrades died on Hohe Toter Mann, the more it saved my life. My outfit, I think you call it?"--I nodded--"Second Company, lost so many men we was moved to rear guard duty. Behind the lines, we had chance to survive the war." His face took on an odd expression, as if skipping past a lot to say: "And here you see me, in America."

"Yeah, well, good," I spoke my relief that he had been in a separate war from my father. Now I could be curious about things less likely to bring the whole summer crashing down. "My dad was a Private First Class--what about you?"

"Private No Class, my soldiering was more like," he told me, memory turning toward mischief now. "Not what you might call hero. Mostly, behind the lines I was chicken hunter."

“Uhm, Herman, that sounds awful close to chicken thief.”

“In peacetime, ja. In war, is different. When rations are short, you must, what is the word, when cattles go here and there to eat grass?”

“Forage?”

“Sounds better than ‘thief,’ don’t it,” he went right past that issue without stopping. “Same eye-dea, though. Go find what you need to survive. ‘Sharp eyes and light fingers,’ was the saying. When night came, so did chance for hunting. You must understand, Donny,” he could see I still was trying to sort this out from chicken thievery, “we was being fed a pannikin of soup like water and slice of bread per man, day’s only meal, before armistice came. Starvation ration, too bad it don’t rhyme better.” He looked contemplatively at his private garden of vegetables under glass. “I grew up on little farm at Emden, cows lived downstairs from us and chickens loose outside, so I understood where food could be rustled. Even horsemeat is not so bad as you might think,” he sounded like he was kidding but I could tell he wasn’t, “if you boil it first.”

We heard the DeSoto jouncing up the bumpy driveway. “Tell you what, podner,” Herman suggested rightly even if it was not what I wanted to hear, “go help the Kate with the groceries, hah? Keep her off the warpath for once.”

I went through that day of Aunt Kate’s bossy supervision--here, honeybunch, help me with this; there, sweetums, do this for me--with Herman’s words outlasting anything she had to say. *Sharp eyes and light fingers*; there is no switch you can reach in your brain to turn something like that off. It fit with me, for if I hadn’t been what he called a hunter, the black arrowhead still would be on the hall table at the Double W instead of within the touch of my fingers in the security of my pocket. Even after a suppertime so tense I wondered whether one of them might throw the sauerkrkaut at the other, and another march to bed when I

was wide awake, a tantalizing possibility kept coming to mind, like an echo that went on and on: *Go find what you need to survive.*

When I went to bed, my eyes not only wouldn't close in favor of sleep, they barely blinked. Put yourself in my place, doomed to screeching bedsprings and attic confinement for the rest of the summer and no mad money to see a great movie like *Tomahawk* or do anything else that was halfway interesting, and see if your mind doesn't become a fever field of imagination and you don't turn into an eleven-year-old desperado. I ignored the plaque on the wall that preached getting down on my knees and praying as the one and only answer, and instead saw through the house, to put it that way, to the sewing room. Where Aunt Kate kept her purse and maybe significantly more. Those quarters that jingled all the way home from the canasta party had to live somewhere.

It is too much to say I waited for the cover of night the way Herman had poised himself behind the lines to go out into the dark of war to forage, but I did make myself hold back, tingling to go and do it, until long after everything in this battling household went quiet.

Finally swinging out of bed, I hurried into my clothes, Tuffy-wrapped arrowhead in my pocket for luck, and slipped into the moccasins. Cracked the door open, listening for any sound downstairs. There was none whatsoever except that nighttime not-quite-stillness of the house holding people deep asleep. Quiet as a shadow I crept down and into the sewing room. I didn't know what I was going to say if I got caught at this. Something would have to come. It usually did.

Almost the instant I entered the small darkened room, I blundered into the cot, barking my shin on the metal frame and causing a thump that seemed to me loud as thunder.

Sucking in my breath against the hurt, I froze in place for what seemed an eternity, until I convinced myself the sleepers had not heard. Burning up as I was to get this done but not daring to put on the lights in the room, I waited until my eyes adjusted to the dark and the furnishings in the room took form, if barely. What I was after had to be somewhere in here. Aunt Kate's purse hung next to the door as always, but I knew better than to risk going into it. Tightfisted as she was, she would keep track of every cent she was carrying. No, in any household I knew anything about, there was a Mason jar where loose change, the chickenfeed, was emptied into when people cleared out their pockets or purses of too much small silver. Normally kept in a kitchen cabinet or on a bedroom dresser, but from what I had seen, not in this case, undoubtedly to keep even the least coins out of Herman's reach. That stash must be, ought to be, *had* to be in here in the vicinity of her purse, something like hunter instinct insisted in me.

Summoning my courage before it left me entirely--this already was way risky, being in here at all in the middle of the night--I cautiously hobbled over to where the sewing machine was located. If I was right, a Singer model this fancy might have a small light beneath the arm of the machine to shine down on close work. My blind search ultimately fumbled onto a toggle that switched on a small bulb above the needle and router, perfect for my purpose. In its glow I could pick out objects shelved around the room, stacks and stacks of cloth and pattern books and such. But nothing like a jar holding the loose change of canasta winnings.

Doubt was eating away at my courage pretty fast--maybe I was loco to even try this and ought to sneak back upstairs to bed. Instead, Manitou or some similar spirit of the miraculous guided my hand into my pants pocket where I squeezed the arrowhead for all luck it might have. That steadied me enough to take another look around the room. My last hope, and it did not appear to be much of one, was a

standard low cabinet next to the sewing machine, designed to hold thread and attachments. Quietly as possible I pulled out drawer after drawer, encountering a world of spools of thread and gizmos for making buttonholes and ruffles and so on, until finally I reached a drawer that jingled when I opened it.

I dipped my fingers into the discovery, very much like a pirate sifting gold doubloons in a treasure chest if imagination wants to be called fully into the scene. This was it, coins inches deep and loose and rattling to the touch, nickels, dimes, and quarters, quarters, quarters, some in bank wrap rolls. My heart rate and breathing both quickened like crazy. There was so much accumulated small silver a dozen or so quarters and the rest in chickenfeed would scarcely make a dent in it.

Biting my lip in concentration, I sorted out onto the platform of the sewing machine in the pool of light about the same proportion of quarters and dimes and nickels to make the drawer's holdings seem as even as ever. There. I had it knocked, my rightful five dollars of the hard-won canasta pot. I was wrapping my withdrawal, as I saw it, in my hanky and about to pocket it for the journey through the dark back up to the attic, when the voice came:

"Are you done, you little thief?"

She was practically filling the doorway, in a nightdress as tentlike as the muumuu and wearing those fuzzy slippers which were noiseless on the living room rug. At first my tongue did fail me as I stared at a greatly irate Aunt Kate and she at me, an outpouring of words no problem for her. "I was on my way to the bathroom when I noticed this funny little glow from in here. It's not like me to leave the sewing machine on like that, is it. And what do I find, Mister Smarty Pants, but you stealing for all you're worth."

I didn't know anything to do but fight back. "Why is this stealing when I won the pot in the canasta game just as much as you did, remember? I bet Minnie Zettel got her share every time the two of you won. So why can't I?"

"I went over that with you in the car--"

"And you told me you and Herman were headed for the poorhouse, but looky here, you have money you just throw in a drawer."

"--will you listen, please." She was growing loud now. "You need to get used to not having your own way all the time. I hate to say it," but it was out of her mouth as fast as it could come, "Dorie has spoiled you something serious, letting you behave like a bunkhouse roughneck or worse."

That infuriated me, not least for her picking on Gram while she was fighting for her life in the hospital. "Gram's done the best she can, and I am too, here. But you treat me like I'm a bum you took in. If I had that money you threw in the garbage, none of this would've happened."

"That is no excuse for stealing," she said loftily, advancing on me with her hand out for the hanky-wrapped coins.

"I don't think it's stealing," I cried, "when you won't give me anything and I'm only taking my five bucks of what we won as partners. Why isn't it stealing, just as much, for you to keep it all for yourself?"

"Donny," she warned, all her face including the chins set in the kind of scowl as if she was battling with Herman over toast, "you are getting into dangerous territory and had better mind your manners, or--"

"The boy is right. Why do you have to be money pincher so much it is ridiculous?"

The figure in the doorway now was Herman, in pajama bottoms and undershirt, coming to my rescue if there was such a thing as rescue from the

bossypants of our existence. Aunt Kate lost no time in turning the furious scowl onto him. "Brinker, this does not concern you."

"Pah. Why do you talk so silly? You like being wrong?" A thrill went through me when he didn't back down, one hunter of what was needed to survive coming to the aid of another hunter, if I wanted to get fancy about it. "I live here, Donny lives here, and as far as anybody in whole wide world knows, he is my grandnephew too." I couldn't sort out the tangle in the middle of that sentence, but it didn't seem to matter as Herman kept at her. "You talk big to him about behavior, but you should fix up your own while he is our guest."

Aunt Kate had to work her mouth a few times to get the words out, but inevitably she managed, double-barreled. "That is enough out of both of you. We will sort this out in the morning. Donny, put that money back and go to bed. As for you, Brinker, keep your opinions to yourself if you're going to share my bed."

Neither of us wanting to fight her all night when she showed no sign of being reasonable, we complied. Herman waited at the doorway and put his hand on my shoulder as I trudged to the stairs, saying low enough that Aunt Kate couldn't hear as she fussed around with the sewing machine and the change drawer, "Don't let silly woman throwing a fit get you down, podner."

It did, though. The next couple of days were a grind, with me sulking in my attic version of the stony lonesome or spending every minute I could out in the greenhouse with Herman, after Aunt Kate started right in on me again as soon as I showed up for breakfast that next morning.

While I hadn't said a word to her as I mushed up puffed rice and sugar, she in turn kept her head down over the *Herald-Times*, to say as if my behavior was reported in the newspaper, "Donny, last night was very upsetting to me and I hope nothing like it happens again."

"I didn't like it any either. You were futzing at me and Herman like we were criminals of some kind," I responded, unable to resist giving her a dose of stink eye.

She sighed so strenuously it threatened to bulge her out of her robe. "That's exactly the sort of thing I warned you about after the canasta game. Uncalled for remarks. You don't seem to listen when I try to improve your manners a teensy bit. Sometimes," she took a slurp of coffee for the chance to sight in on me over the cup, "I wonder what am I going to do with you?"

"Board me for the summer and send me home with new clothes on my back and money in my pocket like when I came, how about?" I shot back.

I suppose I was being a handful with that, although to me I was only speaking up for myself. And what was she being, parked there on a kitchen chair with her hippo rear end hanging over on both sides, waiting to pick a fight as she always did with Herman? I braced for another go-round about a handful of quarters. But she merely set down the coffee cup and returned to the newspaper, saying more to herself than to me, "We'll have to see about that."

Saturday came, after those days of the two of us being as cautious as scalded cats around each other, and I could hardly wait to go with Herman again on his 'medicine' run for a change of scenery, not to mention atmosphere. This morning, she was more than fully occupying her chair in the kitchen as usual but fully dressed for going out. Herman was nowhere around, but that was not out of the ordinary after their customary breakfast battle. In any case, Hippo Butt, as I now thought of her, actually smiled at me, a little sadly it seemed, as I fixed my bowl of soupy cereal, and naturally I wondered what was up.

I found out disastrously soon when she cleared her throat and said:

“Donny, I have something to tell you. After breakfast, pack your things. I’m sending you home.”

Home? There was no such thing. Didn’t she know that? Why else was I here? I stared at her in incomprehension, but her set expression and careful tone of voice did not change. “Hurry and eat and get your things, so we don’t miss your bus.”

“You can’t just send me back!” My shock and horror came out in a cry. “With Gram laid up, they’ll put me somewhere! An orphanage!”

“Now, now.” She puffed herself up to full Kate Smith dimensions as she looked at me, then away. “This hurts me as much as it does you,” which was something people said when that wasn’t the case at all. “After the sewing room incident, I wrote to your grandmother saying I have to send you back, without telling her that was the reason, so you’re spared that. I didn’t tell you before now because I didn’t want you to be upset.”

Talk about a coward’s way out. She did the deed by letter instead of telephone so there could be no argument on Gram’s part. And to keep clear of that starchy nun Carma Jean asking where her sense of charity was. And ‘upset’? How about overturned and kicked while I was down?

“But, but, it’s like you’re sending me to jail, when you’re supposed to let me be here all summer,” life had flipped so badly I was desperately arguing for Wisconsin.

She had the decency to flinch when I flung that charge at her, but she also dodged. “Donny, dear, it won’t be as bad as you think. We have to believe that your grandmother will recuperate just fine and be able to take care of you again, don’t we. But in the meantime, there are foster homes that take in children for a while.” I knew those to be little more than a bus drop stop on the way to the

orphanage. "To make sure, I went to the county welfare authorities here and got a list of such places in Great Falls. It's all there in the letter I sent. Your grandmother will only have to fill out a form, or two and you'll have a temporary home until she gets well."

If she ever did. With Gram's life in the balance, my only other living relative was throwing me to the winds, sending me to strangers who had no more interest in me than the price tag for taking me in. That outlook would curdle anyone, and I must have given my now sworn enemy a gaze with hatred showing.

"Please don't look at me that way," she fussed at creases in the newspaper that needed no fussing at. "The nuns will help out if need be. They'll have to when you show up. Now eat up and we'll have to be going."

I pushed aside my breakfast, too sick at heart to eat, and went for my suitcase for hundreds upon hundreds of miles of travel agony ahead.

We were at the car before I came out of my shellshock enough to realize the missing part in all this. "Wh-where's Herman? Isn't he coming with us?"

"You shouldn't ask." She sure couldn't wait to tell me, though, as she impatiently gestured for me to climb in the DeSoto. "He sneaked off on the city bus for that 'medicine' of his. Threw the car keys to me and told me to do my--my dirty work myself."

She got the rest off her chest, more than a figure of speech as she heaved herself into position behind the steering wheel and said over the grinding sound of the starter, "That man. He says he can't bear to tell you goodbye. I don't know why not, it's just a word."

Any piece of my heart still unbroken crumbled at that. Abandoned even by Herman the German. I meant less to him than a couple of beers at the

Schooner. Brave survivor of Hohe Toter Mann, hah. If there was a Coward's Corner on Boot Hill, that's where he deserved to end up.

At the bus depot, everything was all too familiar, benchfuls of people sitting in limbo until their Greyhound was ready to run, the big wall map of THE FLEET WAY routes making my journey loom even longer. Forced to wait with me until my bus was called, Aunt Kate turned nervous and probably for her sake as much as mine tried to play up what lay ahead of me. "Just think, you'll be there in time for the Fourth. They'll have fireworks and sizzlers and whizbangs of all kinds, I'm sure."

"I don't give a rat's ass about whizbangs," I said loudly enough to make passing busgoers stare and veer away from us.

"Donal, please." She looked around with a false smile as if I was only being overly cute. "This is the kind of thing I mean, you can see it just isn't right for you here."

It would take a lot to argue with that, but before I even had any chance she had her purse up and was diving a hand into it. "Oh, and take this." She pressed some folded money into my hand. In amazement, I turned the corners of the bills back, counting. Three tens. The exact same sum as had been pinned inside my discarded shirt.

"What--how come--"

"No, no, don't thank me," she simpered, while all I was trying to ask was why she hadn't done this in the first place, like maybe as soon as we both realized she had thrown my summer money in the garbage.

All at once she burst into tears. "Donny, I wish this would have worked out. But you see how things are, Herman and I have all we can do to keep ourselves together. I--I may be a selfish old woman, I don't know, but my

nerves just will not take any more aggravaation. Not that I blame you entirely, understand. It's the, the circumstances." Still sniffing, she pulled a hanky from her purse and blew her nose. "This is the best thing all around. You'll be back there where people are more used to you."

Yeah, well, it was way late for any apology, if that's what this amounted to. All it did was delay us from the departure gate where passengers already were piling onto the bus with MILWAUKEE on its roller sign. For me, there'd be another one with WESTBOUND after that. I did not look back at her as I handed my ticket to the driver for punching, left the wretched old suitcase for him to throw in the baggage compartment, and climbed aboard to try to find a seat to myself to nurse my misery.

If she hadn't cried, I would have given in to tears. As it was, I sat there trying to hunch up and take it, one more time. Two days and a night ahead on the dog bus, doom of some kind waiting at the Great Falls depot. Convinced that everything that could go wrong was going wrong, I sent a despairing look up the aisle of the bus. All the situation needed now was something like that bunch of hyena campers to torment me. But no, my fellow passengers mainly were men dressed up for business, a *Manitowoc Herald-Times* up in front of someone like a last mocking farewell reminder of Aunt Kate, and a few couples where the women were as broad-beamed as seemed to be ordinary in Wisconsin. Nothing to worry, I thought bitterly of Herman's wording.

The bus growled into action, and was at the outskirts of Manitowoc, the radius of my summer failure, when I heard the sort of *oof* of someone dropping down next to me. Oh, swell. Exactly what I did not need, a gabby seat changer. With so much else on my mind, I'd forgotten to place my jacket in that spot and now it was too late. Two full hours ahead to Milwaukee yet, and I was in for an

overfriendly visit from some stranger with nothing better to do than talk my ears off. Goddamn-it-all-to hell-anyway, couldn't life give me any kind of a break, on this day when I was being kicked down the road like an unwanted pup? I didn't even want to turn my head to acknowledge the intruder, but sooner or later I had to, so it might as well be now.

"Hallo."

Out from behind the newspaper, Herman the German was giving me the biggest horsetooth smile.

I rammed upright in my seat. "What are you doing on here?"

"Keeping you company, hah?" he said as if I had issued the invitation.

"Long ride ahead, we watch out for each other."

"Y-you're going to Montana with me?"

His shoulders went way up, the most expressive French salute yet. "Maybe not to Big Falls. We must discuss."

So flustered I was trying to catch up with things in no particular order, I craned my neck back toward Manitowoc as if Aunt Kate was on our trail. "Does she know you're here?"

"Puh." That translated different ways, as Of course not and It didn't matter, take my choice. "Left her a note saying I am gone back to Germany, we are you know what." Kaput? I goggled at him. Just like that, he could walk out of a marriage and hop on a bus in some other direction from where he said he was going? Man oh man, in comparison I was a complete amateur at making stuff up.

"Today was last straw on camel's back," he said next, the words echoing Enough's enough. I listened open-mouthed as Herman continued in a more satisfied tone, "The Kate will run around like the chicken with its head chopped off a while, but nothing she can do. I am gone like the wind." He looked at me with the greatest seriousness. "Donny, this is the time if I am ever to see the West and

how it was the Promised Land for people. I must do so now, or I am going to be too soon old.” To try to lighten that heavy thought, he winked at me with his bad eye. “So, we are on the loose, ja?”

“I guess you are. But Hippo Butt, I mean the Kate got it all set up that my grandmother has to stick me in a foster home ahead of the orphanage as soon as I get to Great Falls and--”

“No, she does not. Silly eye-dea. I kiboshed.”

He had to repeat that for it to make any sense to me. As best I could follow, what it came down to was that he had guessed what she was up to when he saw her writing a letter. “Unnotcherl behavior,” he sternly called it. The rest was pretty much what you would think, him sneaking around from the greenhouse after she put the letter to Gram out in the mailbox, swiping it and reading it and, he illustrated triumphantly to me by fluttering his hands as if sprinkling confetti, tearing the thing up. “Evidence gone to pieces, nobody the wiser, hah?”

It sunk in on me. No one in the entire world knew that the two of us were free as the breeze. Herman wasn’t merely flapping his lips; we really were footloose, or at least bus-loose. Crazy like the comic-strip characters in “Just Trampin’” who were always going on the lam, hopping on freight trains or bumming rides from tough truck drivers to stay a jump ahead of the sheriff. Herman and I did not even have to do any of that, the fleet of Greyhounds ran anywhere we wanted to go. It was a dizzying prospect. Goodbye, battle-ax wife, for him, and no Hello, orphanage, for me--it was as simple as sitting tight in a bus seat to somewhere known only to us, the Greyhound itself on the lam from all we were leaving behind.

I tell you, scratch a temptation like that between the ears and it begins to lick your hand in a hurry. "You mean, just keep going?" The question squealed out of me in my excited state. "Like for all summer?"

"Betcha boots, podner. Who is to know?"

"Yeah, but, that'll cost a lot. I don't know about you, but I've only got thirty dollars."

"Nothing to worry. I am running over with money." Seeing my disbelief, he patted the billfold spot in the breast pocket of his jacket, where there did seem to be a bulge.

"Really truly? How much?"

"Puh-lenty," said he as if that spelled it out for me. "Cashed in all my settlement, I did, then went to the bank and taked my share from there. Half for her, half for me, right down center. What is the words for that, same-sam?"

"Uhm, even-steven. But I thought from what Aunt Kate said, you guys were about broke."

"Pah. Woman talk. We will live like kings, Donny. Here, see." He took out the fat wallet from inside his coat and spread it open for me to see. Lots and lots of the smaller denominations, of course, but I hadn't even known fifty and hundred bills existed, as maybe half the wad consisted of. "Outstanding!" My excitement knew no bounds, money raining down on my situation after that spell of being flat broke.

There was a catch to simply taking off into the yonder, though, isn't there always? "See, Gram has me write to her every week," I fretted. "She'll know right away I'm not back there with you and Hippo--the Kate like I'm supposed to be if those are mailed from any old where."

Even before I finished speaking, Herman had that look which usually produced eye-dea, but this time what came out was scheme. "Mailed from

T. 240A follows →

Manitowoc, they can be. Gus owes me favor." He spieled it as if it was a sure thing, me writing enough letters ahead to cover the rest of the summer, the batch then sent to the bartender at The Schooner with instructions to mail one each week. "I stick ten dollarses in with, Gus would jump over moon if I ask," he impressed upon me. "Your grossmutter hears from you regular, what you are doing," he finished with infectious confidence, "postmark says Manitowoc if she looks."

"You mean," I asked in a daze, "make up the whole summer?"

"Ja, tell each week the way you like. Make it sound good so she is not to worry."

And that clinched it. The chance to condense the disastrous season spent with Aunt Kate entirely according to my imagination was too much to resist.

"Woohoo, Herman!" I enlisted in his plan so enthusiastically he shushed me and took a quick look around at the other passengers, luckily none close enough to have overheard. Whispering now, I asked eagerly, "But where will we go?"

With a sly grin, he leaned back in his seat as if the dog bus was the latest in luxury. "Anywheres," he said out the side of his mouth so only I could hear. "Just so it is"--he made the cocked-finger gesture and pointed that pistoleer finger toward the west--"thataway."

The Promised Land

June 30-August 16, 1951

15

Like a stuck compass needle, Herman's one-way fixation held us to that single arrowstraight direction. To the Karl May territory of Indian knights and pistoleer cowboys, if you were him. To anywhere out there short of 'the other side of the mountains' and a poorfarm for kids called an orphanage, if you were me. To the west, or rather, the West, capitalized in both our minds as the Promised Land where we could be rid of the Kate and her bossy brand of life.

Old gray duffel bag on his shoulder, my new companion of the road marched through the crowd in the waiting room of the Milwaukee depot without deviating an inch either way, the wicker suitcase and me trying to keep up, dead-ahead until reaching the long and tall wall map topped with COAST TO COAST--THE FLEET WAY. Over our heads loomed the outline of America which, I swear, seemed to grow as we stared up at the numerous Greyhound routes extending to the Pacific Ocean.

Our silent gawking finally was broken by a thin voice. Mine.

“So where do we start?”

“Big question,” said Herman as if he didn’t have any more of a clue than I did. I could see him giving the subject a little think. “Maybe takes some fingerspitzengefuhl, hah?”

Unable to get my ears around that, I started to tell him to talk plain English because we didn’t have time to fool around, but he got there first, more or less. Tilting his head to peer down at me as much with his glass eye as his good one, he uttered--and I still was not sure I hearing right--“You got fingerspitzengefuhl, I betcha.”

My hands curled as if he had diagnosed some kind of disease. “That doesn’t sound like something I want to got, I mean have.”

“Faith, you need.” Herman showed that same knowing expression as when he’d disclosed Manitou and Manitowocers and other spooky stuff to me that time in the greenhouse, my goosebumps coming back while he elaborated on the finger-spitty-whatever it was.

“No choice do you have. It comes notcheral, once in great while,” he said as if it was perfectly normal to be singled out by some crazy-sounding thing. “Generals who think with their fingers, like Napoleon, born with it. Clark and Lewis maybe, explorers like us, ja?” The more he spoke, the more serious he seemed to be, while I wished he would just shut up. Ticket-holding passengers coming by to check out their routes on the map and happening to overhear any of this were giving us funny looks and stepping away fast.

“Captain Cook, how about, sailing the world around and around,” he still was cranking it out, very much Herman the German in his accent at this point. “Must of had fingerspitzengefuhl, or *pthht*, shipwreck.”

genius or plain inspired guesswork tracing the best possible course up from map paper there at the end of the hand. A special talent of touch and decision that comes from who knows where.

He cocked that glass-eyed look at me as if I was something special. "You are some lucky boy, Donny, to got it."

Unconvinced and uncertain, I rubbed my thumbs against my fingertips, which felt the same as ever. "And wh-what if I do?"

"Easy. You find us where to go." In demonstration, he waggled his fingers as if warming up to play the piano and shifted his gaze to the map over our heads.

I did not want any part of this. "Herman, huh-uh. Even if I stand on a bench I can't reach anything but Florida, and that's way to hell and gone in the wrong direction."

"Tell you what," he breezed past my objection, "I get down, you get up." Then and there, he squatted low as he could go.

I realized he wanted me to straddle his shoulders. Skittish, I couldn't help glancing at people pouring past in as public a place as there was, a good many of them staring as if we already were a spectacle. "Hey, no, really, I don't think I'd better," I balked. "Won't we get arrested?"

"Pah," he dismissed that. "America don't know hill of beans about arresting people. You should see Germany. Come on, up the daisy," he finished impatiently, still down there on his heels. "Pony ride."

Feeling like a fool, I swung my legs onto his shoulders and he grunted and lifted me high.

Up there eight feet tall, the West was mapped out to me as close as anyone could want, for sure. Matter of faith or not, I had to go through the motions.

Up there eight feet tall, the West was mapped out to me as close as anyone could want, for sure. Matter of faith or not, I had to go through the motions. Pressing my hand against the map surface, slick as a blackboard, I tried to draw out inspiration from one spot or another, any spot. Certain the eyes of the entire depot were on me, I felt around like that blind man exploring the elephant. Easy, this absolutely wasn't. If Herman's Apache knight was anywhere around Tucson or Albuquerque, he didn't answer the call. Nor did any Navajo cousin of Winnetou, around the four corners where Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Colorado all met. Automatically my hand kept following the bus routes traced in bright red, drifting up, on past Denver, Salt Lake City, Cheyenne. Whatever the right sensation of this silly Hermanic stunt was supposed to be, it was not making itself felt.

By now I was stretching as far as I could reach, the Continental Divide at my elbow, with Herman swaying some as he clutched me around the legs.

"Donny, hurry, ja? Getting heavy, you are."

"I'm trying, I'm trying." At least my hand was, moving as if of its own accord. I could tell myself I didn't believe in the finger-guh-fool stuff all I wanted, but all of a sudden my index finger went as if magnetized to the telltale spot over the top of Wyoming.

"I got it!"

"Whereabouts?"

"Montana!"

"Good! Where in Montana?"

"Down from Billings a little."

"What is there?"

"Crow Fair."

"Hah? Go see birds? Donny, try again."

"No! Let me down, I'll tell you about it."

“These Crows are Indians, see, and Crow Fair is their big powwow.”

Back to earth, or at least the depot floor, I talked fast while Herman listened for all he was worth. “They always hold it between the strawberry moon and the buck moon, something to do with when berries are done growing but buck deer grow new antlers.” I could tell I lost Herman more than a little there. “That’s this time of year, get it? We learned a bunch of Indian stuff like that in social study class at Heart Butte. Anyhow,” I rushed on, absolute grade school expert that I was on such matters, “Crow Fair is really something, it lasts until they’re powwowed out after about a week and I bet we can get there while it’s still going on.”

Fingerspitzengefühl notwithstanding, he squinted dubiously up at the little red artery of Greyhound route to the Crow reservation, way out west from Milwaukee certainly but also in the apparent middle of nowhere, until I kicked in, “And all kinds of Indians show up for Crow Fair, honest.”

Herman’s thick glasses caught a gleam. “All kinds Indians? You are sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. Hundreds of them. Thousands.”

“Even Apaches like Winnetou?”

“There’s gotta be,” I professed. “They wouldn’t stay home from a powwow like that, the other Indians would think they’re sissies.”

That settled it. Declaring there could be no such thing as sissy Apaches, Herman nodded decisively. "Crow Fair is where we go. Pick up your suitcase, Donny."

In my experience, there is no other thrill quite like disappearing, the way Herman and I were about to aboard the dog bus. Who would not be excited at the prospect of walking away--no, better, riding away at high speed almost as if the racing hound beneath our side window was carrying us on its back in some storybook--from what we faced in that household where you couldn't even eat toast in peace? This is hindsight, always 20/20, but given my nearly dozen years of living more or less like an underage vagabond in construction camps and cookhouse, I had been through enough to grasp that with every mile flying past we would be borne away from Palookaville existences--Manitowoc ruled by the Kate in his case, foster home and orphanage limbo in mine--to life of our own making in the wide-open map of the West. An idea as freeing as a million-dollar dream and a whole hell of a lot more appealing than waiting on your knees for your soul to be snatched to heaven, right? So I still have to hand it to Herman, vanishing as we did was an inspiration right up there with the Manitou walkers going about their business in ghostly invisibility.

Not that erasing ourselves from where we were supposed to be was as easy as a snap of the fingers and the two of us gone in a cloud of tailpipe exhaust. Right away there in the Milwaukee bus terminal, Herman had me keep out of sight while he did the buying of the tickets to the map dot called Crow Agency--as he said, so any busy body would not remember us traveling together. "No tracks behind do we leave," he told me as if we were as stealthy as the Apaches themselves.

Handwritten: A —

Which held true only if Apaches greeted anyone sitting across from them on a Greyhound bus with "Hallo, you are going where?"

Something I had not counted on was that my newly conceived comrade in travel would be an adventure himself on the long trip west. This came through to me almost the minute our fannies hit the bus seats, when Herman struck up a conversation with whoever happened to be seated opposite us, or for that matter, in front or behind. Evidently he had stored up bushels of talk those hours in the greenhouse all by his lonesome, and did he ever let the surplus out now, much of it given to bragging up the two of us as adventurers of the highway.

"My nephew, some traveler he is," time after time he presented me, grinning back skittishly through my freckles, to whatever listener happened to be captive at the moment. "Seeing the land, we are."

Now, I had palavered plenty with total strangers on my trip to Manitowoc, for sure, but I was not trying to cover my tracks at the time. So while I was constantly jumpy about us somehow being tracked down--fairly or not, in my imagination the busybody who might do so had the plentiful face of Aunt Kate--Herman without a qualm gabbed away along a tricky line of conversation to maintain, keeping things approximate enough to be believed yet skipping the troublesome truth that we amounted to voluntary fugitives.

Runaways, when you came right down to it, as the mean little Glasgow sheriff had wrongly accused me before I was even out of Montana on my first cross-country journey. It does make a person think: Had the runty lawman spied something in me with his sour squint that I didn't recognize in myself? Being seen through is never welcome, and thank heaven or Manitou or whatever weird power seemed to guide Herman, because despite my nerve flutters whenever someone expressed curiosity about where we were going, he always derailed the question

with a goofy grin and the observation, "Somewheres south of the moon and north of Hell, if we are lucky."

And so, state by state as the bus rolled up the miles then and beyond, if we were remembered at all by the young honeymooners giggling their way to Wisconsin Dells or the retired Mayo Clinic doctor and his pleasant wife who reminded me of the kindly Schneiders or the Dakotan couple off the hog farm to shop in town, any of the Greyhound riders across the aisle would have recalled the pair of us only as a pared-down family of tourists out to see things.

That, at least, held a lot of truth, because with Wisconsin behind me I belatedly was ready to heed Gram--although not nearly in the manner she had so strenuously advised back there in the cookhouse--and step out in the world eager for new scenes and experiences, while Herman was as complete a sightseer as a one-eyed person can be. "Donny, see!" he'd point out any stretch of land open enough to hold a horse or cow. Even across cactusless Minnesota, he declared the countryside the perfect setting for a Karl May shoot-'em-up.

Then about the time I'd had all of those exclamations I could stomach, I would glance over and he'd be snoring away--literally in the blink of an eye he could sleep like a soldier, anytime and anywhere, simply conk off--restoring himself for the next stint of gabbing and gawking. But no sooner would I be taking the quiet opportunity to have a Mounds bar or pull out the autograph album to coax an inscription from some promising passenger than I'd hear from beside me, "You got work done, Donny?"

The yawning question as he came awake would be my signal to sigh and get back at what needed to be done, thanks to his big eye-dea on our ride out of Manitowoc. That is, corresponding with Gram from well into the future. I will say, when Herman put his mind to something like that, he did it all-out. In the shop at the Milwaukee terminal that sold everything from toothpaste to shoelaces,

he had bought me a tablet with stiff backing, envelopes and stamps, everything needed "for you to write like a good boy." Then, of course, it was up to me, the storier that I hoped Gram would be more glad of this time than others. As towns and their convenience stops came and went--Fond du Lac, Eau Claire, Menomonie, the Twin Cities where I made damn sure we caught the next bus in plenty of time--I composed letter upon letter describing how my summer in the company of Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch was supposedly going. Creating my ghost self, I suppose it could be said, existing with the Manitowocers roaming around in the afterlife.

If my imagination and I were any example, there may be something to the notion that life on the road lends itself to rambling on the page. Putting the Kwik Klik into action, I would begin with some variation of *Dear Gram--I am fine, I hope you are better. The weather here in Wisconsin is hot. I am having a good time. Then I'd bring my foe into the picture, week by week disguised as the swellest great-aunt ever. For the Fourth of July we went the park where they played music like God Bless America and shot off fireworks and everything... Today Aunt Kitty took me to the circus. Those acrobats are really something... Guess what, Aunt Kitty bought a collie dog named Laddie to keep me company. She is always doing things like that....*

I scarcely mentioned Herman, not wanting to get into his change from Dutch and the glass eye he could play a tune on and all that, and he seemed not to mind being left out. He read each of my compositions with his finger, very much as as Gram would do when it arrived to her, occasionally questioning a word--"Looks funny, trapeze is spelled with z?"--before sealing it up and putting it in precise order in the packet to go to Gus, the Schooner bartender, for mailing onward to the Columbus Hospital pavilion in Great Falls once a week. And I would go on to make up the next feature of my pretended summer on the Lake Michigan shore where Manitou held sway. *Aunt Kitty and I went to the Manitou*

Days celebration. It is a big deal here, with a parade like at a Montana rodeo and everything, because back in Indian times he was their Great Spirit, sort of like God to them, maybe. You know how the Blackfeet go on vision quests, up to Chief Mountain or someplace wild like that, to see if they can get visited by a spirit of some kind. That's like a dream when they are not sure they are asleep, if I savvy it right. I know it sounds spooky, but Aunt Kate said if we can't believe in that, we can at least believe in Indians...

Old Hippo Butt would have been surprised all the way to her back teeth at the number of kindly endeavors my imagination provided her.

I can't actually call it a waking dream that proved real, but definitely a visitation of the spirited sort sought me out me that first night of our journey, in the most ordinary of dog bus circumstances. As happens in the monotony of night travel, passengers up and down the aisle had gradually nodded off until the bus was stilled to the sounds sleeping people make, Herman leading the chorus, and while I dozed off and on, I was too keyed up by our daring escape from Aunt Kate and all she represented to really conk off. Somewhere in the long stretch beyond the Twin Cities to the even longer stretch of South Dakota, around three in the morning, I came to once again, with a strange little comet of light joining my reflection in the pitch-black window beside me. Blinking at its mysterious appearance there, I realized it was coming from inside the bus rather than up in the sky.

I sat up to look around, and across from us where a couple who must have got on at a recent stop were sitting, a narrow beam of light poked down into the lap of the man in the aisle seat. The woman next to him was curled up kittenishly as she slept, while he was writing for all he was worth, just like I'd been during the day, but into a slick-looking hardbound notebook with sky-blue pages. While the rest of the bus was thoroughly dark, his fancy writing gear was illuminated by that

tiny spotlight from someplace. At first I couldn't figure it out, but as my eyes adjusted, I realized he had a pen light, about the size of my Kwik Klik, clipped to his shirt collar and aimed down. This stranger was writing like a demon, whatever it was, his hand never stopping to change or erase anything, a lit-up page no sooner filled than he flipped to the next and was giving it his all.

Holy wow. This was too good to pass up. I nudged Herman awake with a start. "*Hsst*. Trade seats with me."

"Ja, sure, if it makes you happy," he mumbled grumpily, and we switched in that clownish way when there is not enough room to maneuver. Herman at once slumped against the window and back into slumber. He'd have to sleep for both of us, I was not going to miss out on this. More wide awake than ever, I half hung over the arm of the seat, in a way designed to catch the man's attention.

When the ceaselessly writing passenger felt my eyes on him and turned my direction to look, the flashlight dimly revealing each other's face, I whispered eagerly, "Hi. Do you do that a lot? Write on the bus, I mean."

"Funny you should ask, man," he replied in a heavy smoker's voice, low enough not to wake the curled up woman. "Got the divine curse." Shoulders on him like a football player, he shrugged comically nearly up to his ears. "The old itch for which the only cure is pencil-in."

"Wow." I was impressed in more ways than one. His playful way with language reminded me of Gram somehow. Feeling an immediate kinship, I kept right on: "So are you gonna write all night?"

"Until the brain runs dry, let's just say." From the look of him, like he'd had too much coffee, that could be a real long while yet. He patted the open notebook on his lap. "Have to resort to tabula rosy here, because my machine is in the baggage."

My silence must have told him I was trying to decipher that. "My typin' writer." He grinned fast and friendly. "Old Hellspout."

"Oh, sure." Ceaseless writing gave me my opening, sort of. "I wrote a whole bunch myself, today. To my grandmother. She's in the hospital, back in Montana. She had to have an awful operation, and send me away"--I nodded toward snoozing Herman in more or less explanation of the two of us together-- "until she gets better."

"That's a tough go, buddy," this man I had never seen before was all sympathy right away. Full face to me now, he took me in intently yet with a sort of gentleness, as if we were old companions on the hard road of getting by. What he offered next could not be called encouragement exactly, yet I heard a kind of call to courage within it. "Life is what it throws at you."

That fit pretty well with *Hunch up and take it*, I thought. Stranger that he was, he seemed to instinctively understand a loco time like this summer of mine, so much so that I had no qualm about getting personal with him. "Can I ask? When you're writing like that, do you ever make stuff up, a little?"

Amused, he cut a quick caper with the pen-size light, pretending to write wildly in air with its beam. "Anything goes, when you razz the matazz into one of those alphabet boxes called a book."

Book! That was way beyond any number of letters. My excitement grew. "Ever write those Reader's Digest ones? Condensed Books, I mean?"

"Phwaw," he expelled air like a hair ball, "that's a pregnant thought." From his expression after that burst I couldn't tell whether he was grinning or grimacing. He had a face like that, more than one thing going on at a time. In the glow of the pen light, his high forehead shown pale and his nose seemed to come down straight from it, but with a mashed look at the end as if he'd been worked over in a fight. He had quick eyes, like a cat's, as he met mine. I couldn't be sure, but he might have winked in answering my Reader's Digest inquiry. "Condensation is only fog on the windshield for me. What I write, man, is as long as this highway."

"Whoo, really?" About then the woman at his side stirred in her sleep. I couldn't see much of her except quite a bit of bare leg. But emboldened by the dark, I asked, "Is that your wife?"

That set him off into another "Phwaw" exclamation. Shaking his head as if it was a question he had never been up against before, he speculated, "Only in the cosmic sense, bride of the slave to lust, you might say," although I certainly wasn't capable at the time. He reached around and tickled her approximately in the ribs. "Aren't you, Sweet Adeline."

"Mmm." In a sleepy pout she leaned his way and gave him a kiss right in the ear. It instantly brought to mind Letty and that unforgettable smackeroo she'd given me. Admittedly that wasn't this provocative sort, but even so. "Aren't you done scribbling yet?" the woman teased, still going at the ear. "You need to rest up for better things, Jean-Louis de K." She snuzzled--if that was a word, because it sure looked like it fit what she was up to--herself into his side until she was practically joined onto him, before drowsing off again with another pouty "Mmm."

Gazing broodily across to me, he spoke perfectly man to man. "The ladies. You know how it is. Can't do without 'em, can't do with 'em."

He said a mouthful there. Out of nowhere, which was just like her, Aunt Kate abruptly clouded out Letty and I hurried to change the topic. "How far are you and the, uh, lady going?"

"Califrisco, Sanifornia," he quacked it, which if I wasn't mistaken was the address of Scrooge McDuck in the funnies, or at least I laughed like it was. He quit clowning right away, though, soberly thinking out loud in that tobacco-smoked voice. "Babylon by the Bay, yowser. We'll crash with some of the Frisco cats a while, then drop down to Big Sur. The little lady here"--if I wasn't mistaken, he was tickling the inside of her thigh now--"has never seen the blue Pacific, west of the West." Although

the tickle, tickle, didn't stop, his voice deepened, I'd almost say darkened. "Been a while for me, too, to see where it all begins and ends, kerplosh."

To the best of my geography book knowledge, I worked out where they were headed. "Isn't this sort of out of the way?"

"A standard deviation," he replied, which I didn't get at all. As if reminded of the extent of highway ahead, he leaned into the aisle to peer toward the windshield and the stretch of blacktop lit by the bus's headlights. Restlessly passing a hand through his hair which started at a widow's peak but turned so thick and dark it made up for it, he asked as if I'd been keeping better track than he had: "Where are we, anyway? Shouldn't civilization be showing up?"

The way the bus was keeping to eternal bus speed, we still had a lot of South Dakota to go yet, so I gave that the French salute. What's more, if he could cuss to a perfect stranger with that Hellspout remark, I didn't see why I couldn't. "He'd say," I pointed over my shoulder to Herman, "we're somewhere south of the moon and north of Hell."

"That's solid, man," my partner in conversation let out as if he wished he'd thought of it first. His exclamation roused the sleeping woman, who wriggled against him in a way that couldn't help but get his attention. "*Excusez-moi*, buddy," he apologized in a whisper, closing his notebook and putting a hand to her somewhere I could not quite see. "Need to tend the home fire."

"Uh, first, since you're writing so much anyway, could you put something in my autograph book just real quick?" I asked before the chance slipped away. He gazed at me across the aisle again, question replacing mood in his deep-set eyes. "It has Senator Ridpath in it and everything," I hurried to say. "He's called the cowboy senator because he's from Montana."

"Well, bust my britches," he faked a cowboy drawl. "Hand that there thang over, pardner."

Curiosity getting the best of him, he focused his little flashlight on the album pages and read a couple at random. With a hand on his drowsing ladyfriend's thigh marking his place there, he split his attention to keep paging through the inscriptions and signatures, smiling here and there at the purple penmanship. Totaling up the contents, he whistled softly. "You laying this on people wherever you go?"

"Betsa bootsies I am," I answered boldly as one inspired traveler to another, the darkness helping my courage. "I want to collect so much of what they write it'll make Believe It Or Not!"

"Man, that's so far out it's in," he said wisely, or at least I interpreted it that way.

Next thing I knew, he was rapidly filling the album page with slanted handwriting. At the speed he was giving it, I grew alarmed that he might fill a whole bunch of pages.

But finally he signed off near the bottom with a last burst and handed the album back to me. "Toot sweet and adoo, buddy," he excused himself to tend to business next to him. "See you down the road." The pen light snapped off, leaving me in the dark.

You think about what actually happened, you tell friends long stories about it, you mull it over in your mind, you connect it together at leisure, then when the time comes to pay the rent again you force yourself to sit at the typewriter, or at the writing notebook, and get it over with as fast as you can.

Advice free for the taking if you want to live life as she be in this mad bad buggered old contraption of a country called Uhmerica. Hang in there, buddy, and take it as it comes. It evens out in the end.

Jack Kerouac

On the road somewhere south of the moon and north of Hell

“‘Buggered.’ Bad language.”

Herman wore an upset expression not entirely due to the South Dakota version of bus depot breakfast as he read over what, unbeknownst to either of us in the literary dark back then, would turn out to be as famous a set of words as I could ever hope to coax into the autograph book.

“He must have meant ‘boogered,’ don’t you think?” I stuck up for my fellow long-distance writer. “Sort of snotted up like with a bad cold, maybe?”

Herman opened his mouth, but chose not to enlighten me. By then I was already on to the next thing that threw me, that signature, the strange name which sort quacked its way around in the alphabet. “I thought from what the lady said he was John Louie de Something.”

Herman gave it that salute. “The French.”

By then we were in in the linoleum-floored cafe section of the otherwise dead Greyhound depot in Aberdeen, the breakfast stop before the long remainder of South Dakota ahead. To my disappointment, the fully named Jean-Louis de

Kerouac and his Sweet Adeline had vanished, if I had to guess, to an accommodation more horizontal than a bus seat.

I did not think anything much out of the ordinary in bus depot experience when our food arrived not particularly well cooked. My stack of hotcakes was burned to a crisp around the edges, and the ham and eggs must have come from tough pigs and pygmy chickens. Nonetheless I tied into the meal, because food is food. Herman at his, though, turned out to be what Gram would have called a pecky eater, and then some.

That is, when his order of scrambled eggs and toast arrived, he ate the somewhat runny eggs in regular enough fashion, but then I noticed him nibbling away and nibbling away at an overdone piece of toast. More accurately, taking bites tinier than nibbles, whatever those might be, which was quite a sight with his chisel-like teeth.

While this peculiar performance across the table did not cause me to throw a fit as it so regularly did Aunt Kate at Manitowoc breakfast times, I do have to say such behavior was sort of disturbing, hard to watch and harder not to.

Herman kept at it, turning the toast this way and that to take those squirrely little bites, discarding crust onto the edge of his plate, until finally putting down what was left of the slice and sitting back in apparent satisfaction. Figuring it was none of my business if a person wanted to eat a piece of toast like it was bird food, I worked away at my singed hotcakes without saying anything.

He wasn't letting me off that easy. "So, Donny, see," he prompted, indicating the remains of his meal. "Where is it, do you think?"

What kind of nutty question was that? Giving him a funny look, I pointed my fork at the limp remainder of toast, so chewed over it had ended up vaguely like the outline of a discarded boot, nibbled-out instep between heel and toe and all.

“What, are your peepers going bad?” I spouted off, not the best thing I could have said to someone with a glass eye. “I mean, what you were eating on is right there in your plate, if it was a snake it’d bite you.”

“Hah-uh. Think bigger.” When I didn’t catch on, he hinted: “Gee-oh-gaphy.”

Still perplexed, I peered harder at the crustless gob of toast. Then it dawned on me, not vague at all when a person really looked.

“Italy?”

Herman slapped the table in triumph. “Smart boy. You got it, first try.”

Where Aunt Kate thought his way with toast was disgusting, I was totally impressed. “Out the far end, Herman! Can you do other countries?”

“Everything in the book,” he claimed grandly. “On ship and in army, you pass time best you can, so I learned world of toast.” He grinned just about wide enough to fit a piece of it in. “Wonned lots of bets that I could not do Australia or somewheres, too.”

Add that to playing a tune with a spoon on his glass eye and chicken-hunting behind the lines at places like Dead Man’s Hill and surviving the Witch of November in the Strait of Mackinac and recognizing any beer at first taste and stocking up on Indian lore from Gitchee Gumee to Winnetou, and I realized I was in the company of someone whose surprises just did not stop coming. This was a treat of a kind I could never have dreamed of, but also a challenge. Life with Herman was a size larger than I was used to, like clothing I was supposed to grow into.

His next trick came when I still was digesting the breakfast world of toast, so to speak. At the lunch stop in Lemmon, almost out South Dakota finally and into North Dakota after a long morning when the most exciting thing out the bus window was jackrabbits, Herman pushed his half-finished plate away, lit up an el

stinko and puffed away, squinting at me reflectively as I polished off peach pie a la mode after chicken fried steak with all the fixings. Smoke clouding over him like a gathering thought, he asked abruptly, "When do you got to go to gymnasium?"

He pronounced it gim-nasium, and while I figured that out pretty quick, I didn't savvy what he meant. "Why would I have to go to the gym? Nobody plays basketball this time of year."

"Pardon my German," he looked put out with himself. "School, I am talking about."

"Oh, that. Not until after Labor Day. Tons of time until then, see."

"Too long," he thought that over with a puff, something in his tone putting me on guard. "Your grossmutter, hah, Donny?" Even without translation, I knew he meant Gram. "You must telephone, right now quick. Make her think she don't got to worry about situation in Manitowoc."

That jerked me up in my chair. "Aw, fuck and phooey, Herman. Are you kidding? On top of writing letters to her until my hand is about to fall off, like I've been? Why?" I may have whined a bit there at the last.

"Not kidding." Snubbing out his cigar decisively, he looked around the terminal. "Phone booth, over there." While I still was floored by this latest *eye-dea*, he already was onto his feet. "Giddy up," he urged me onto mine. "We got time before bus goes."

I wasn't budging. Lying to Gram by mail was one thing, but doing it out loud, even across hundreds of miles of telephone wire, was nothing I wanted to attempt. "I--I don't think I'd better. The nuns and all maybe don't want me bothering Gram and might not let me talk to her anyway and so it'd be a waste of--"

"Must be done," he insisted. "Otherwise, what if she calls before a letter comes from you, talks to the Kate? *Pthht*, we are."

I had to take his point about our secret trip being kaput if that happened, and even more, the mile-deep trouble I'd be in if Gram had any inkling I was not where I was supposed to be. That fast, I was the one worried about the situation in Manitowoc, and surrendered to whatever scheme Herman had in mind this time.

"So, what do I say?"

He laid it out in more or less plain English, with me trying to fully memorize the words that counted.

When I was installed in the phone booth to his satisfaction, he dug a handful of change out of his pocket, stressing as if this was a lesson I needed to carry through life, "First thing is put in plenty money, so operator don't come on the line for more." *Ching ching ching*, he fed coins in until it was a wonder the phone box didn't burp. With the booth door cracked open so he could help out if I needed it, he oversaw my shaky dialing of the number of the Columbus Hospital pavilion ward, all the way away in Great Falls. "I keep track of time," he tapped his wristwatch.

I clutched the receiver to my ear, with one of Gram's sayings filling my head as if she was already on the line. *Here goes nothing from nowhere.*

The phone rang and rang until at last a highly recognizable voice crisp as frost answered, saying I had reached the Order of Mercy nursing pavilion, Sister Carma Jean speaking, may she help me?

"This is, ah, Donal Cameron," I rushed past any civilities, "please can I talk to my grandmother?"

"Mrs. Blegen, you mean?" The nun sounded none too willing. "She is still getting over the complications from her surgery, I'm sorry to say, and is not allowed visitors yet. Doctor's orders. Can this wait?"

“Huh-uh,” I gulped out honestly enough with the instigator of this phone conversation nearly breathing down my neck. “I’m calling all the way from Wisconsin, see,” I made use of Manitowoc, “so I’m not really a visitor, am I.”

There was silence on the phone as if Sister Carma Jean was reckoning that distance against the doctor’s orders, until eventually she took mercy on me. “I suppose that changes the matter. She’s at the other end of the ward. Hold on, I’ll bring her in the chair.”

That confused me. What, carry her in a chair? Sister Carma Jean must be one muscular nun. Then I caught on.

During this, Herman was frowning into the phone booth at the stall in conversation, and I booted the door open. “They have to go get her, and besides, she’s--”

Swearing in German, he squeezed into the booth alongside me and slugged some more silver into the coin slot. The *chings* had barely died down when I heard: “Donny? In the name of heaven as they say around here, is that you?”

“Gram? Are you in a wheelchair?” Caught by the sudden onset of conversation, Herman had to stay crammed in with me and yank the door shut quickly as the public address system announced a bus arrival.

“For now, it’s best,” she skipped past that as if everybody traveled that way. “What was that noise on the line?”

“The radio. Aunt Ka--Kitty plays it a lot. How come you’re in a wheelchair?”

“Oh Donal, what in the world am I going to do with you?” That shook me, the issue slambang like that in her own words. Luckily it turned out to be only Gram being Gram. “How many times do I have to tell you, boy, don’t worry so about me. I had a little setback, is all.”

"Are you gonna be okay?" I quavered. Herman had his ear down almost on top of mine, both of us waiting in anxiety.

"I'm sewn up like an old quilt, but I'll be good as new. It just takes time." What she was saying did not match what I was hearing, the strain in her talk coming through despite her best effort. My uncharacteristic silence, maybe with Herman's piled onto it, made her try it over. "The only thing about it is, I have so many stitches the doctor doesn't want me exerting myself any, and so they wheel me around everyplace. The nuns are awful kind, Sister CJ and the others treat me like the Queen of Sheba."

Charitable to a charity case, I heard that as. "That's something, I guess."

"Donny, this is quite some surprise, hearing from you like this."

"I--I was thinking about you."

"That's nice. Are you calling about anything in particular?" I could hear her real question behind that: *Or just to make you head rattle?*

"No, no." I tried to think of a good reason why I might be calling. "I only wanted to wish you happy birthday."

"My birthday is in October, like yours."

Herman's heavy breathing in my ear indicated there was exasperation with me at both ends of the phone line to be dealt with in a hurry, and I hastily tried. "Oh yeah, sorry. I must have got that mixed up with, uh"--the calendar of this loco summer tended to blur on the dog bus--"the Fourth of July. Happy firecracker day, Gram."

"You're a little early on that, too, funnybones. What's got into you?" She sounded more like her old self. "If there's nothing else on your mind except birthday candles and firecrackers, let me talk to Kitty a minute, please."

This was the memorized part. "She's, uh, too busy to talk to you, she said. Getting ready to go to her canasta party. Told me not to spend too much time on the phone with you because it's long-distance and costs money."

"So she's going to behave like that, is she," Gram turned huffy, which for once was a development I was after. "Well, she needn't strain her busy self to pick up the phone to talk to her own sister if she doesn't want to. Here I thought we were back to being on speaking terms when she agreed to take you for the summer. But if she's bound and determined to be The Great Kate"--that brought back my dumb Kate Smith episode, along with a rush of blood to my head--"toward me, that's up to her."

Success. An old nerve touched, all the way back to girlhood. As worked up as Gram was, I hoped she didn't bust her stitches. But Herman, crammed in next to me, nodded full approval of how the conversation was going. If so, though, why did I feel more than a little guilty?

We both heard the note of desperation take over the voice at the other end. "Donny, listen, please. Even though she can be so full of bulloney, I hope you're getting along with her, that's all that counts. Her and I don't need to have anything to do with each other, as long as she's treating you right." A pause that was painful at both ends of the line, before: "This summer has to work out the best we can get it to, or--"

That needed no spelling out beyond *or*. "Oh, we're fine and dandy, her and me," I pretended to the best of my ability, nudged along by Herman. "She's teaching me how to play canasta and everything." Herman shook his head at me not to overdo it.

"Playing 'nasty, is she," Gram could not resist. "Anyway, tell Miss Stuck Up for me I'm dreadful sorry I missed her."

"Yeah, sure," I trailed off, my end of the conversation exhausted. "Gram, wait a minute, Herm--I mean, Dutch wants to say hello." He was shaking his head, but I thrust the receiver at him.

"Hallo? How is your operation?"

That induced enough from the other end--which I could not quite hear--that he only needed to contribute "Ah-huh" repeatedly. It went on surprisingly long like that until my name apparently came into it. "Hah-uh, he is not getting carried away any too much." He grinned and I winced.

More expansive yet, Herman was doing all the talking now. "Donny fits right in with us here in Manitowoc, from day number one. We're enjoying him like all get out."

My pained show of teeth told him not to get too carried away and besides, the time was ticking down.

"Must go, somebody at the door," he made up with an ease that impressed me. "Donny is nothing to worry yourself. He is a good boy."

Hanging up, he bobbed his head in satisfaction. "Her and the Kate won't give each other time of day now." Then, though, I caught sight of the concern that flickered into his expression. "She is some woman. The tombstone wants her company much too soon."

Putting aside that sorrowful German saying or whatever it was before I could bring myself to deal with it, he whisked me out of the phone booth for us to make a run for our bus.

Then at suppertime, it was my turn to do the surprising. Almost from the start of the trip, Herman kept pestering me to know, "When are we in the West?" That evening, when we had reached Miles City, far enough into Montana that the neon signs on bars showed bucking broncs kicking up their heels, I finally could

give the answer he wanted to hear. "Guess what," I pointed out the window of the cafe section of the Greyhound depot to that evidence. "We're there now."

"Hah," said Herman, his eyes lighting up and following mine to the flashing sign on The Buckaroo bar across the street, with a rider waving his cowboy hat back and forth with the bronc's every blinking jump. "Feels different already. Map of Montana at breakfast, I make."

I'll say for myself that I knew inspiration when I saw it. "Guess what again," I caught Herman's attention by gobbling the last of my piece of pie and shoving the plate away. "Now that we're here, we need hats like that guy's. C'mon, the bus isn't leaving for a while yet."

Herman was like a kid on Christmas morn as we rushed across to the WRANGLERS WESTERN WEAR, conveniently right next to the bar with the flashing bronc and rider. As we went in the store, he was gamely peeking into his wallet until I told him, "Put that away, this is on me." It was rambunctious of me, because I had handed over my thirty dollars to him for safekeeping since I had no safety pins and a history of money somehow getting away from me. But the smaller sign I had spotted on the storefront was irresistible: S&H GREEN STAMPS ACCEPTED. Tough luck about that lawn chair, Herta, but fate made our deal kaput.

In the merchandise-packed place of business, one of those rambling old enterprises that smelled like leather and saddle grease and spittoons, every manner of western regalia from ordinary cowboy boots to fancy belts slathered with turquoise was on display and I had to herd Herman closely to keep him from stopping and exclaiming at each bit of outfit. But I managed to navigate us to the redemption desk at the back of the store, where the clerk, a bald man with a sprig of mustache who looked more like he belonged in Manitowoc than Montana, pooched his lip as my pages of stamps counted up and up. Finally he pushed a catalogue across the counter, fussily instructing us that we needed to shop through it for what

we wanted--I saw with dismay it was page after page of lawn chairs and the like-- and as soon as the item was shipped in we could return and pick it up.

"No no no," for once I simulated Aunt Kate, waving off the catalogue as if batting a fly. "We're not interested in mail-order stuff, we want hats."

"Cowboys ones," Herman contributed.

"In-store merchandise is outside the redemption program," the clerk stated.

"That's not fair," I said.

"It's policy," said the clerk

"Proves it is not fair," said Herman, the veteran of Der Kaiser's army.

"Folks, I just work here," the clerk recited.

To my surprise, Herman leaned halfway across the counter, the clerk gravitating backward some as he did so. "You maybe know who Karl May is," Herman leveled at him curtly, "writes famous books about the Wild West?"

"I've heard of the person, of course," the clerk tried to fend, his mustache twitching in a rabbity way. "The Zane Grey of Germany or something like that."

"Austria, but does not matter. You are looking at him in the face." Now the clerk appeared really worried, running a hand over his bald head. "Sane Grey, pah," Herman puffed up in righteous Karl May indignation. "I can write whole story about Old Shatterhand while Grey fellow is taking a leak in the morning."

The clerk was speechless, kept that way by Herman's spiel about how I, favorite nephew accompanying him on one of his countless trips from Vienna to the land of Old Shatterhand and the like, had collected Green Stamps all the way across America with my heart set on obtaining cowboy hats for the two of us when we reached the real West, which was to say Miles City, and now here we were and being offered rubbish like lawn chairs instead. "I hope I don't got to tell my million readers Green Stamps are not worth spitting on."

I held my breath, watching the clerk shift nervously. "Mr.--uh, Herr May, let's be reasonable," he pleaded. "The problem is, it takes a special transaction form to substitute anything for catalogue merchandise. It's only done when the item you want is out of stock, but that doesn't quite fit this--"

"Close enough, I betcha," Herman closed him off. "Let's have action form, my nephew will fill it out in big jiffy."

I did exactly that, and the defeated clerk led us over to the selection of Stetsons. Quickly I picked out a pearl-grey Junior Stockman model, the dress-up kind without a high crown or wide brim--even President Truman had one like it--while Herman glommed onto a white floppy ten-gallon type until I convinced him he'd look like the worst duded-up greenhorn this side of Hopalong Cassidy in it, and talked him down to about an eight-gallon one in sensible tan. Without a whimper the clerk shaped the hats for us, working the brims in the steam machine until we each had what we wanted--mine with a neat downward crimp in front, Herman choosing to have his curled up on the sides like the cowboys on the cover of *Deadly Dust*.

Next to each other, we gazed at ourselves in the full-length mirror. "Get you," I laughed to Herman. "You look pretty good in Mr. Stetson's shade."

"Not so bad your own self," he grinned back at me in the reflection. "We can go be punchers of cows now, ja?"

"Huh-uh, not quite yet," I declared. Whipping out the autograph book, I laid it open on the counter, startling the clerk morosely compiling the paperwork of our transaction. All the cross-country letter writing had kept me too busy to hunt inscriptions on the bus to the extent I wanted and I was bound and determined to make up for it. Seeing what I was up to, Herman started to say something, then didn't. "People have been putting stuff in it for me all during our trip, see," I reeled off to the clerk staring at the spread pages in confusion, "I'm getting a real good

collection, but I don't have any Green Stampers in it yet, so can you write something?"

The clerk stood on one foot and then the other, as if he couldn't decide even that much. "I've never been asked for this before. I don't know what to put in it, except--" He dipped his head shyly. "There's our song. We sing it at company picnics. Will that do?"

"Sure! Anything!"

*Oh, S&H, S&H,
What would I do without you
To stretch my wage?
To trade for stuff
page by page?
Everybody craves 'em,
I bet even Jesus saves 'em.
Little green stamps, little green stamps!
Sperry & Hutchinson
Does wonders for my purchasin'.
My book is full at last,
I better spend 'em fast.
I'll get that lamp with the frilly shade,
I'll fill the tub with free Kool-Aid.
Oh, those bonus-givin'
Guaranteed high-livin',
Super excellent little green stamps!*

I spoke truer than I knew when I assured Herman there in Miles City that we had reached the part of the country to take our hats off to, Green Stamp Stetsons or not. The next day, he and I hopped off the local Greyhound at Crow Fair on the Fourth of July, and into a vision of the West that Karl May and Zane Grey at their most feverish could never have come up with.

As if to greet us, what appeared to be a mile of Indians slowly riding in file was headed in our direction. At last! There we were at the fabled gathering, the tribal heart of the Indian world. Herman looked as happy as a tabby in catnip. As was I. We grabbed a spot along the parade route with a few thousand other paleface onlookers to watch the approaching procession.

It was led by the flag-bearing color guard of warbonneted Crow veterans marching in khaki, the same army uniform my father had worn, and those of us with hats held them over our hearts as those modern warriors passed. Then, as parades go, this one spared no form of horsepower. First came ranch trucks and hard-used pickups turned into floats with bales of hay as seating for the participants, the sides of the vehicles draped with handprinted banners.

THE CROW NATION
WELCOMES
ITS INDIAN BROTHERS AND SISTERS
AND
WHITE FRIENDS


CROW FAIR
A PROUD TRADITION
SINCE 1904

CROW FAIR PRINCESS 1951
VALENTINA BUFFALO CHILD
SPONSORED BY THE WIGWAM CAFE

And so on. The genuine thing for us, though, was the Crow nation saddled up in its glory, the horses' hooves stirring up little eddies of dust like a lazy ground blizzard as the spectacular column of riders approached. The Crows, not a tribe afraid to show off, were dressed top to bottom in powwow regalia, men in beaded leather vests that caught the sun in brilliant dazzles and women in beautifully soft red velvet dresses decorated with elk teeth. Even the appaloosas and dappled ponies the riders were mounted on glinted with finery, dazzling beadwork on saddlebags and rifle scabbards.

"Whoo," I let out in awe as the long, long horseback procession passed, while drums kept up a constant beat we could almost feel in the ground, and the air vibrated with the chant of "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya" from every side. Herman I think did not even hear me, too taken up with looking at everything.

"See, Donny, chiefs they must be!" he exclaimed at the sight of elders of the tribe wearing war bonnets of golden eagle feathers, gratifying my Red Chief side.



We watched for maybe an hour, to the last decorated pony and lordly rider of the cavalcade. Such is fascination, the spellbinding moment of imagination coming true. I can only speak for myself, but surely Herman too felt like a spectator into a world beyond any dreaming, that day. Back then, the term "native Americans" had not come into usage, but definitely the traditions of the people who were here before Columbus, like the first owner of my precious arrowhead, were on living display beyond anything museums could capture. As far as we were concerned, "Indian" was word enough to carry the magic of the past, and here it was on full show, as if just for us.

"Oh man, that was as good as it gets!" I still was giddy afterwards. "Did you see those saddle blankets, even? They use Pendletons!"

I rattled on about how unbelievably great it was to be there until Herman said, "Ja, I telled you fingerspitzengefühl works like charm," as if the bus ride all the way from Milwaukee had been merely a matter of giving it a little think.

Already feeling like we'd had one of the great days of our lives, after the parade the two of us followed the flow of the crowd to the ticket booth at the fairground entrance, where the rest of the day's events were chalked on a slab of blackboard. In unison we read the list.

"Fancy dancing, Donny."

"Rodeo, Herman."

I was impatient to get in and start to see everything worth seeing, but he took his time peeling off money for our entrance fee, asking the ticket seller, an Indian of indeterminate age with a single feather sticking straight up out of his hair, if we could stow the duffel bag and suitcase in the booth since we hadn't had time to find a place to stay. "Hokay, I'll keep an eye on 'em," he jerked a thumb to the corner of the booth and I dragged our luggage there and turned to go.

“Donny, wait.” Herman was grinning nearly back to his ears. “One thing more. Put moccasins on, hah?”

Why hadn't I thought of that? Already outfitted in my purple rodeo shirt with the sky-blue yoke trimming and now my pearl-grey cowboy hat, the moccasins were the final needed touch. Swiftly I swapped out of my shoes, my feet grateful in the softness of the buckskin, and in an inspiration of my own, I tucked the autograph book under my belt like a hunter's pouch. And off Herman and I went, as if the beadwork fancy dancers on my feet were leading us to the real thing.

We still were on the same earth as Manitowoc, but the world changed as we headed for the fenced-in area of grandstand and corrals and chutes where the rodeo would be held. Tepees by the hundreds populated the encampment bordering the fairground, white cones sharp against the blue sky like a snowy mountain range, all the same precise height. Drummers and chanters there kept up the “Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya” beat as if it was the pulse of the seasons of the strawberry moon and the buck moon. Herman and I tried not to rubberneck amidst it all, but failed laughably. Fully half of the rodeo-going crowd around us was Indian families, the fathers wearing braids and the mothers maybe not, excited children dribbling after in colorful shirts while trying to look as swayve and debonure as I felt, and we couldn't help getting an eyeful. Herman was like a keyed-up kid too, asking this person and that if they happened to be Apaches and not discouraged by the steady answer, “They're not from around here.”

Then we were funneled into the rodeo grounds--surrounded by a horse-high hog-tight woven wire fence with the gate conspicuously manned by sharp-eyed tribal police; rodeo crowds are not exactly church congregations, and the Crows were taking no chances on drunks and other unwelcome sorts sneaking in--and the pair of us virtually walking on air filled with the aromas of fry bread and sizzling

steak amid the lane of food booths and craft displays of jewelry and woven blankets and wearables set up next to the arena.

"Karl May would not believe his eyes, hah?" Herman chuckled to me when we passed by a homemade camper, SLEWFOOT ENTERPRIZES painted on the driver's door, where a bearlike Indian man sitting on the runningboard was driving belt holes into some piece of paraphernalia with a leather punch and chanting, "Made to order, folks, best dancing rigs this side of the happy hunting grounds, same price as they was a minute ago, git 'em right here and now." Whether or not he was doing any business, suddenly ahead of us at a refreshment stand were fancy dancers everywhere, costumed as if they were under a spell that made them halfway to birds.

The sight cast me into a spell of my own. The day's fancy-dance exhibition, according to the printed program we had picked up at the gate, would take place between the bronc-riding events, and this batch of selected dancers--many of them not a day older than me, I noticed enviously--were waiting around drinking pop and eating candy bars until called on to perform. Until Herman gently tugged me along, I hung back and gaped at their costumes, covering them almost entirely from beaded moccasins to a feather or two sprouting out of equally beaded headbands. I mean, *fancy* only began to say it. Fuzzy Angora goat hide step-ins were wrapped around the bottoms of their legs, and fringed vests long as aprons draped down that far. Anklets of sleigh bells were in there, too, jingling with their every step. The upper part of the body was the real story, though. Strapped on each dancer's back was a great big spray of feathers, like a turkey's tail in full display. What lucky kids they were in all that getup, I thought with a pang, ready to dance their Indian hearts out. It may have been my imagination, but my moccasins seemed to twitch as we passed the dancers by.

Coming out of my trance as everyone but us was flocking to the grandstand on the far side of the arena, I had the presence of mind to say the next magic word to Herman.

“Cowboys.”

“Ja? Whereabouts?”

He gawked all around, as if expecting pistoleer angels wearing Stetsons and boots to materialize. Here I was on familiar ground, steering us to the area behind the bucking chutes, knowing that was where anything interesting happened until events in the arena got underway.

Back there in the gathering place between where horse trailers and other vehicles were parked and the pole corral of the arena, it was as busy as could be wished, big-hatted Indian contestants and those from the professional rodeo circuit clustered behind the chutes working on their riding rigging, fastening their chaps on, joshing one another about how high the bronc they’d drawn would make them fly. Calf ropers were building their loops and making little tosses at nothing. Teenage girl barrel racers exercised their horses, leaving behind increasing islands of manure. In the background, Brahma bulls bawled in the holding pens and saddle broncs snorted and whinnied as they were hazed into the bucking chutes.

Herman and I meandered through taking in the whole scene as if we were old hands at this, our hats blending with the cloud of Stetsons. This was the best yet, hanging around the “choots,” as Herman called the chutes. I didn’t bother to correct him, but a minute later figured he needed it when he poked up his hat and stage-whispered to me in best Karl May style, “Too bad we don’t got chaps for our legs like rest of cowboys.”

“Guess what. It’s *shaps*.”

“*Ch* is *sh*?” he crinkled up in mystification at that. “How is this possible?”

"Like this. Here, look." I whipped out the autograph book and showed him what the Mayo Clinic doctor's wife on the dog bus had written in a pretty hand.

Here's champagne to our true friends,

And true pain to our sham friends.

"Hah," Herman chuckled in surrender. "Crow Fair is education in all ways." That was true enough, but we had about covered the territory there at the chutes and pretty quick would have to go find seats in the grandstand like ordinary folk.

Then I saw it. If I were telling this story from long enough ago, I suppose it would have been the chariot of a god touched golden by the fire of the sun. As it was, the gleaming purple Cadillac convertible parked at the very end of a row of horse trailers and pickups stopped me in my tracks.

"Herman, look at that!" Recovering, I rushed over to the chrome-heavy car with upswept tail fins and peeked in. The seamless leather seat covers were the same deep purple as the exterior. Likewise the floor mats and door panels. And the crowning touch--on the inlaid-wood steering wheel even the necker knob was that color. I was so excited I was forgetting to breathe. All but certain who had to be the owner of this modern heavenly chariot, I checked the hood ornament.

And yes, wonder of wonders, there it was, exactly according to reputation. The shiny replica of a livestock brand replacing the Cadillac's stylized flying figure.



"See, it is!" I gushed to Herman as he came up behind me. "It's his!"

"Ja?" He eyed the gaudy car as if it was unique, all right. "Whose?"

"Rags Rasmussen! The champion bronc rider of the world! He's the most famous cowboy there is! That's his brand, he puts it on everything--the Diamond Buckle." The symbol of his world championships, in other words. "He's just the

greatest,” I attested as Herman puzzled out the hood ornament for himself. “My folks and me saw him ride at the Great Falls fair. I tell you, he turned that horse every way but loose.”

Babbling on like that about what a famous cowboy we were going to be lucky enough to watch in the saddle bronc go-round, I happened to look past Herman and the air sucked out of me as I gasped, “Here he comes!”

Tall and lanky except for squared-off chest and shoulders like the box the rest of him came in, the champ rider was moseying toward us with purple chaps slung over his arm. No one else in the world walks like a real cowboy, a sort of devil-may-care saunter as if the ground was unfamiliar territory but he was making the best of it. “Would you look at them long legs on Rags,” some admirer over at the chutes remarked. “The Lord took his time when he split him up the middle.”

The object of all attention continued on his way toward the bucking chutes as if cloudwalking, his black boots with the inlaid Diamond Buckle emblem freshly shined, his lavender Stetson spotless, his plum-colored gabardine pants sharply creased. Completing his outfit, I was thrilled to see, was a shirt nearly identical to mine, emphatic purple with a blue yoke and pearl snap buttons. Talk about suave and debonair for real, he carried it on his back in a naturally fitting way that made me wish I was him so hard it hurt.

Blinking along with me at the sight, Herman whispered, “Why is he called Rags?”

“That’s easy. He’s always got his glad rags on when he rides.” Herman still didn’t get it. “Look how dressed up he is.”

“Hah,” he understood and more. “Like a knight, he puts on his best for the tournament, what you mean.”

“The rodeo, you bet,” I confirmed breathlessly. “That makes him the slickest rider there is in every way, see.”

The female population of the rodeo grounds conspicuously thought so, too. Barrel racing beauties in tight blue jeans and a performing troupe of blonde cowgirls astride matching palominos called out flirtatious hellos, no small number of these contingents so-called buckle bunnies who had an eye for winners, as the famous broncstomper passed. "Later, ladies," he sent them with a lazy smile.

By now the immaculate lanky figure was nearing the chutes and being greeted by fellow contestants. A calf roper looping out his lariat called out, "How's it hanging, Rags?"

"Long as a bull snake," the champion bronc rider of the world said back, loose and easy. "Got to be careful I don't step on it."

Now that was man talk. Imagine how my vocabulary would increase around somebody like him. Swamped with hero worship, I could think of only one thing to do, and I did it--a little frantically, but I did it. "I'll be right back," I yipped to Herman, and charged over to the most famous cowboy there was, yanking the album out from my belt as I ran.

"Rags? I mean, Mr. Rasmussen. Can I get your autograph, huh, can I?"

He broke stride enough to give me a curious glance.

"I'm helluva sorry to bother you," I bleated, the pitch of my voice all over the place, "I know you're getting ready to ride and everything, but this is maybe the only chance to put you in my book and I'm trying to get really famous people in it and you're right here and--please?"

Amused at my prattling, he smiled and offered up in the same easy drawl as before, "Guess I don't see why not, if it's gonna put me in such highfalutin' company."

He handed me his chaps to hold, taking the autograph book in return, a swap so momentous it nearly made me keel over. A kid in Cleveland with the pitcher's glove of Bob Feller bestowed on him, an eleven-year-old New Yorker

gripping Joe DiMaggio's bat--it was that kind of dizzying moment of experience, unexpected and unforgettable, a touch of greatness tingling all through the lucky recipient. Resting the autograph book on the front fender of the Cadillac, Rags Rasmussen started writing. Not merely his signature, I saw, which would have been plenty. An inscription, from the way he was going at it! World championship words, right in there with the observations on life by the night writer Kerouac and the sage old Senator Ridpath. At this rate, the autograph album was headed for Believe It Or Not! fame in no time.

"Hey, Rags," a hazer at the nearest bucking chute hollered to him, "better come look over your rigging. You're up in this first go-round."

"Great literature takes time, Charlie. Be right there."

*When you lift your hat,
to ladies and that,
make sure you have something upstairs
besides a collection of hairs.*

"There you go," he said, his signature and all the rest on the page in Kwik Klik purple ink magically matching his riding chaps--clear as anything, a sign to me this was meant to happen. Lucky arrowhead, happy coincidence, the spitzen finger that had put Herman and me in this place at this time, something finally was working in my favor this loco summer. Skyhigh about my newly found good fortune, I heard as in a haze Rags Rasmussen talking to me almost as an equal. "Seen that little ditty on the bunkhouse wall at the old Circle X ranch down in the Big Hole country, a time ago. Wasn't much older than you when I started breakin' horses for outfits like that." He gave me a look up and down and a long-jawed grin. "Figured it was worth passing along to somebody who knows how to wear a rodeo shirt."

“Wow, yeah! I mean, thanks a million,” I fumbled out my appreciation for his supremely generous contribution to the autograph book, hugging it to myself as though it might get away. Unwilling to let go of these minutes of glory with him, I blurted, “Can I ask, what horse did you draw today?”

He shifted from one long leg to the other. “Aw, sort of a crowbait”--he broke off into a rueful laugh and scratched an ear. “Guess I hadn’t ought to use that word around here. Anyway, I pulled out of the hat a little something called Buzzard Head.”

Hearing that just about bowled me over. Talk about a Believe It Or Not! moment. Buzzard Head was famous--the notorious kind of famous--as the most wicked bucking horse on the rodeo circuit, the bronc that had never been ridden. Through the years, contestants at Cheyenne, Pendleton, Great Falls, Calgary, all the big rodeos, had done their best to stay in the saddle for ten seconds aboard Buzzard Head, and eaten arena dirt for their trouble. Worse yet, this was the horse that killed its would-be rider in front of twenty thousand people at Madison Square Garden. I was smitten all over again with this extraordinary day, with Crow Fair, with the daring getaway Herman and I had made to reach the Promised Land of the West. Here was the matchup that people would talk about ever after, the bronc that threw them all and the rider who was never thrown, and Herman and I as fate and luck and blind coincidence would have it were on hand to see history made.

When I had my breath back, I said with more fervor than diplomacy, “Good luck in riding to the whistle.”

“Might need it,” Rags Rasmussen said agreeably. “Get yourself a good seat and enjoy the doings.” Flopping his chaps over a shoulder, he strolled off to meet the meanest horse imaginable as if he hadn’t a worry in the world.

Herman had come up behind me and laid a hand on my shoulder. “Some man, he is. Like Old Shatterhand, cool custard, hah?”

"Cool customer," I fixed that, still idolizing the strolling figure in his riding finery. "Look at him, not worried at all about that cayuse in the chute."

"Buzzard Head does not sound like merry-go-round horse," Herman cocked an inquisitive look at me.

"He's the worst," was all I could say. "C'mon," I still was on fire from the miraculous encounter with my hero Rags, "I know the best place to watch him ride, if they'll let us."

"You are sure this is good eye-dea?? Dangerous place, if we fall?" Herman shied away as far as he could from the bronc pawing at the bucking chute beside us, as he crept after me on the narrow plank stairs.

"Then don't fall," I gave him the cure over my shoulder. "Shhh. Leave this to me," I cautioned further, keeping on up the mid-air steps that led to the shaded platform beneath the announcer's booth.

When we popped our heads through the opening in the floor of the platform, what awaited us was pretty much as I expected from other rodeos I'd been to. Clustered there where the arena director and anyone else who counted in running the events could keep track of things at close hand were several Indian men in snazzy beaded vests and the darkest sunglasses made, besides big-hatted rodeo circuit officials, and a few other white guys in gabardine western suits who from the prosperous look of them had to be the livestock contractors providing bucking horses and Brahma bulls for big shows like this one. As I scrambled onto the perch with Herman stumbling after, the only personage paying any particular attention to our arrival was a Crow elder, lean as a coyote, with braids like gray quirts down over his shoulders, who gave us a freezing stare.

"We're friends of Rags and he told us to get a good seat to watch him ride," I said hastily as if that took care of the matter. "My uncle here is from, uh, out of

the country and this is his first rodeo"--Herman wisely only grinned wide as the moon and did not ask if there were any Apaches around--"and it'd be a real treat for him to see it from up here like this and we'll stay out of the way, honest, and just--"

"Welcome to Crow Fair, don't get too close to the horses," the gray-haired Number One Indian made short work of us and swung back to overseeing the commotion in the chutes beneath our feet where the rigging crew was wrestling saddles onto thrashing broncs.

Establishing ourselves at the far end of a long bench softened by gunny sack cushions filled with cattail reeds--boy, these Crows knew how to do things--Herman put his attention to the printed program that listed saddle bronc riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, barrel racing, bareback riding, and of course, the fancy dancing exhibition. "Same as circus, many acts," he expressed in satisfaction as I read over his shoulder. But then, coming to the names of the broncs the riders had drawn, Widowmaker and Funeral Wagon and Dive Bomber and similar ones, he nudged me in concern. "Sounds like war, this buckjumping."

I had no time to reassure him on that as the saddle bronc riding explosively got underway almost beneath where we sat, with an Indian contestant named Joe Earthboy sailing out of the chute on a nasty high-kicking horse called Dynamite Keg. Earthboy and airborne animal became a swirl of dust and leather and mane and tail as the crowd cheered and the announcer chanted encouragement. A full few seconds before the timer's whistle, the rider flew up and away from the bronc as if dynamite had gone off under him, all right. "Ow," Herman sympathized as Earthboy met the dirt, gingerly picked himself up, and limped out of the arena.

Which set the tone for that go-round, contestant after contestant getting piled without coming close to completing the ride. By now it was obvious Crow Fair did not fool around in staging bucking contests. Deserving of their blood-and-guts names, these clearly were biggest meanest most treacherous horses available from

the professional circuit, as veteran in their way as the career rodeo cowboys who tried to master them. Watching these hoofed terrors with Herman swaying next to me as if he felt every jolt in the saddle himself, I couldn't stop my nerves from twanging about Rags Rasmussen's chances on the monarch of them all, Buzzard Head.

All the while--I realize it was as contradictory as could be, but eleven going on twelve is a contrary age--I was having the time of my life. Beside me, Herman was entranced in a Karl May knights-of-the-prairie way as he ohhed and ahed at the spectacle of cowboys and broncos whirling like tornadoes in the arena. We were sitting pretty in the best seats in the rodeo grounds, comfy as mattress testers, in the shade while an acre of sunburn was occurring in the sweltering grandstand across the way. The Crows were running the proceedings slick as a whistle, the rodeo progressing at just the right rhythm--maybe it had something to do with the drumming still pounding away methodically in the encampment--to keep matters interesting. Directly overhead was the booth that held the announcer and the judges, rodeo's answer to heaven as the lofty spot where decisions descended from and a fatherly voice spoke out of the blue. The steady patter always was as soothing to my ears as a cat's purr, with the broadcaster at the microphone filling time between the bucking contestants by joking with the rodeo clown down in the arena as he went through his antics in overalls six sizes too large and a floppy orange wig. Like committing poetry to memory, I took in every word of their old loved corny routines, as when the clown hollered up to the booth that he hated to leave such a good job as dodging broncs and Brahma bulls, but he needed to move to Arizona for his seenus trouble. "Hey, Curly, don't you mean sinus trouble?" I could have recited the deep-voiced announcer's line right along with him. "Nope,"

the clown made the most dejected face ever seen and I knew this part by heart too, "the trouble is I was out with another fellow's wife, and he seen us."

Hooting and hollering, the crowd reliably responded as if that was the height of humor, while Herman slapped me on the back to tell me he got it and nearly fell off his gunny sack seat guffawing and I laughed as hard as if I hadn't heard that mossy joke at every rodeo I had ever been to. Life can tickle you in the ribs surprisingly when it's not digging its thumb in.

All of which is a way of saying, what an emotion came over me in that precious space of time at Crow Fair. For the first time that unhinged summer, I felt like I was where I belonged. Around horses and cattle and men of the ranches and reservations, and the smell of hay in the fields and the ripple of a willowed creek where magpies chattered. Most of all, I suppose, because he was the author of this turnaround of our lives, in the company of halfway wizardly Herman, the pair of us blest with freedom of the road wherever the dog bus ran, enjoying ourselves to the limit at this peaceable grownup game of cowboys and Indians. This is not the prettiest description of a perfect moment, but it was a king hell bastard of a feeling, filling me almost to bursting.

Even the introduction of danger as the next rider was announced--"Here's the matchup we've all been waiting for," the announcer's voice hushed as if on the brink of something colossal, "down in chute number six, the reigning world champion in this event, Rags Rasmussen, on a pony that has never been ridden, Buzzard Head!"--felt like it fit with the fullness of the day. Secretly, I would have given anything to be in those Diamond Buckle boots snugging into the stirrups down there on the notorious horse that the riding champ of all mankind was easing onto. A fantasy like that knows no logic and common sense, of course, because the

most treacherous hazard in all of rodeo was hanging up a foot in a stirrup while being thrown and getting dragged by a saddled bronc determined to kick the life out of its trapped victim. While my imagination naturally pasted me into Rags Rasmussen's place as he rode to the top of his profession, I nonetheless fervently fingered the arrowhead in my pocket for whatever luck it might bring in his matchup against the killer horse.

Herman looked as breathless as I felt, on the edge of his seat as we craned to see into the chute below, watching Rags make his preparations, his purple chaps vivid against the buckskin flanks of the waiting horse. Buzzard Head plainly deserved its name, with a big Roman nose and cold mean eyes at the end of a droopy neck. Clustered behind us, the Crow organizers masked in sunglasses and the gabardined livestock contractors witnessed the doings in the chute as fixedly as we were. Rags took his own sweet time getting ready, joking to the chute crew that they might at least have stuck some chewing gum in the saddle to help him stick on, casually pocketing his world championship diamond ring so it wouldn't catch in the rigging and yank his finger off, tugging his hat down tight, flexing his boots into the stirrups until it felt right. Then, every motion easy but practiced, one hand gripping the hackamore rope and the other high in the air according to the rules, spurs poised over the point of the bronc's shoulders, he leaned back almost sleepily in the saddle, balanced against the catapult release he knew was coming. Throughout this, the glassy-eyed horse stayed deathly still, according to reputation saving itself up to attempt murder in the arena.

The tense chute crew stood ready until the man in the saddle said, cool as can be, "Open."

Then the gate was flung wide, and the bronc erupted out of the chute, twisting its hindquarters in mid-air that initial breathtaking jump. Buzzard Head alit into the arena practically turned around and facing us, as if to convey *You wanted*

to see what a real horse can do, here it is. Instantly the buckskin bronc went airborne again, throwing itself full circle in the opposite direction from the first maneuver, snapping Rags from one side to the other like cracking a whip.

"Damn, it's a sunfisher," my fear found words.

Herman needed no translation of that, the crazily bucking creature contorting in its leaps as if to show its belly to the sun. He worried in return, "The picker-ups, they can't get to Rags neither if he don't fall."

I saw what he meant. The pair of Indian pick-up men, whose job it was to trail the action at a little distance and swoop in on their spotted horses to pluck the rider off after the whistle blew, were driven away by the bronc's hind hooves cutting the air wickedly at every unpredictable twist and turn. Buzzard Head plainly hated everything on four legs as well as two. Now even if Rags survived atop the murderous horse for the full ride, he would have to get out of the trap of stirrups by himself. "Meat wagon," the grey-braided Crow in back of us issued flatly, sending one of the other Indians swiftly down the steps to the arena gate where the ambulance and its crew waited outside.

An *Oooh* ran through the crowd as the bronc levitated as high as a horse can go, the ugly head ducking from side to side trying to yank the rope from Rags's grasp. Possibly the only person there that never to be forgotten day who thought the rider stood a chance as Buzzard Head writhed and twisted and plunged through its bag of tricks was Rags himself, athletically matching split-second reactions to those of the bronc, his long form rebounding from every dodge and dive as if he was made of rubber. I suppose a question for the ages is, What is so spellbinding about watching a man ride an uncooperative horse? Probably something that goes far, far back, the contest between human will and what it finds to match itself against. At least that is the justification for the sport of rodeo, if it needs any. I was rubbing the obsidian arrowhead so hard my fingers went numb as we watched

the sunfishing horse do its best and worst, but Rags still in the saddle, even as his hat flew off, bouncing onto the horse's rump, then to the ground as if Buzzard Head meant to throw the man off his back piece by piece.

Time never passed so slowly. But at last, after the ten-second eternity of Rags Rasmussen's immortal ride, the whistle blew.

"Jump, right quick!" Herman shouted, as carried away as I was, watching the pickup men futilely trying to spur in on the furiously kicking bronc.

Then, in a feat as unlikely as sticking in the saddle the way he had, Rags shed the stirrups in a lightning backward kick and simultaneously vaulted off in a running dismount. Before Buzzard Head could locate and trample him, the pickup men forced their horses in between, letting Rags saunter to the safety of the chutes, picking up his hat on the way and sailing it up to the pretty woman whistle judge in the announcer's booth.

That great ride, I knew even then, was the legendary kind that would have people saying for years after, *I was there that day*, and by the luck of the arrowhead or some other working of fate, now I was one of them, forever. It was left to Herman to put the moment into words.

"That was bee-yoot-ifle."

Then came this, all because I had to use the rodeo version of a convenience, one of the outhouses behind the corrals.

During a break in the action while the chute crew saddled the next round of broncs, I excused myself to Herman and trotted off to do the necessary. Naturally there was a long line there at the one-holer toilets, but I scarcely noticed the wait, my head filled with the dizzying experiences of the day, topped by the purple presence of Rags Rasmussen himself in the memory book. On my way back from the outhouse visit, I still was caught up in such thoughts, trying to decide whether

to press my luck and ask the head Crow there on the platform to write himself in, too. He looked kind of mean behind those darkest dark glasses, but at last getting an Indian into the autograph album would make the day just about perfect, wouldn't it. Couldn't hurt to try, could it? Maybe if I said to him--

Whomp, the sound of hooves striking wood next to my ear sent me sideways. Startled, I reeled back from the corral alley I was passing. In the confusion, it took me a moment to catch up with what was happening. Horses were being hazed in for the bareback riding, and barebacks generally were unruly cayuses fresh off the range and not accustomed to being corraled as the saddle broncs were. This first one being herded through from the holding pen was spooked by the cutting gate that would send it to one of the bucking chutes and was trying to kick its way out, hind end first. Almost crosswise in the narrow corral enclosure with its rump toward me, the snorty bronc kept on kicking up a ruckus despite the swearing efforts of the corral crew. "Whoa, hoss," I contributed uselessly as I backed away farther, ready to continue on my way. But then. Then the agitated horse turned enough that I caught sight of the brand on its hip, the double letters registering on me as if still hot off the branding iron.

I stood there like a complete moron, unable to take my eyes off the WW in the horseflesh. It didn't take any figuring out that the same would be on all the broncs in the bareback bucking string. No way had this ever entered my mind, that Wendell Williamson, livestock contractor to rodeos though he was, might furnish Double W bucking stock to this one all the way across the state. But perfectly like the next thing in a nightmare, here came the familiar braying voice in back of the milling broncs and the frustrated corral crew. "Don't let 'em skin themselves up on the cutting gate, damn it. These nags are worth money, don'tcha know."

In horror, now I could see the chesty figure through the corral rails. Sparrowhead, flapping a gunnysack at the hung-up bronc and barging in on the hard-pressed corral wranglers. My blood drained away.

"Here, let me handle the sonofabitching thing myself," he broke off a hotter streak of swearing and scrabbled up onto the corral to run the cutting gate. Instinctively I backed away fast, but he spotted me. The beady expression of recognition on the puffy face expanded into something far worse.

"Hey you, Buckshot! Get your thieving butt over here, I want that arrowhead back!"

I bolted.

Behind me I heard Sparrowhead hollering for the tribal police. Luckily I was able to dodge out of sight around the corrals and back to the arena before the gate cops knew what was up. Every lick of sense told me, though, it would not take long before they tried to sort me out of the crowd. Heart beating a mile a minute, I scrambled up the stairs beside the bucking chutes, reached through the platform opening and grabbed Herman's ankle. "Hah?" I heard him let out, before he had the good sense to glance down and realize it was me.

He came down as fast as I had gone up, ducking behind a head-high trash bin of the kind called a green elephant where I was hiding. "Donny, what is it? You look like losing your scalp."

"We're in trouble up the yanger," I whimpered.

"Don't want that, I betcha." Herman waited for translation and explanation, hanging on every word as the story tumbled out of me about how I took the arrowhead when I left the ranch and Sparrowhead now wanted it back to the extent of siccing the Crow cops on me.

When I was finished, he poked his hat up as if to get a closer look at me. Too close for comfort.

"Took. As means, stealed?"

"No! I found it in the creek fair and square. You said it yourself, sharp eyes and light fingers. I mean, Sparrowhead thinks it's his because he owns the whole place, but why isn't it just as much mine, for seeing it in the creek when nobody else had since before Columbus and--"

He held up a hand to halt any more explanation. "Let's think over. Maybe give it him back?"

"No," I moaned it this time. "Herman, listen. It's like when you were a chicken hunter. Didn't you take only what you needed? I--I can't really explain it, but the arrowhead is like that to me. Something I need to have."

"Different case, that is," his expression changed, in my favor. He cast a look around the rodeo grounds and that horse-high hogtight fence. "We must get you away."

There was this about Herman. When he really gave something a think, you could see him generating a brainstorm until his eyes lit up, somehow even the glass one. That happened now, as I listened with every pore open to hope while he assuredly outlined the *eye-dea* to me. Anything was better than being arrested and branded a thief and handed over the authorities who would send me to the poorfarm for kids the other side of the mountains and I'd lose Gram and my life would go right down the crapper. But Herman's plan set off all kinds of fresh worries in me.

"You--you're sure that'll work? I mean, they'll *know*, won't they? I don't think I can--"

"You betcha you can," he had more than enough confidence for both of us, not necessarily a good sign. "Come on, no time is there to waste."

Scared half out of my wits as I kept looking for the trooper hats of Crow cops to show up, I stuck tight by his side as we sifted along the arena corral where

people were watching the rodeo from the backs of pickups and the fenders of their cars, blending in as best we could, which probably was not that much.

At last safely reaching the area of food booths and crafts tables and so on, we made straight for the homemade SLEWFOOT ENTERPRIZES camper where the bearlike Indian man sprang up from his leatherwork when he saw us coming.

"Howdy. You fellows collectors, maybe? 'Cause I got some nice things stashed in the camper here. Buffalo skulls and like that."

"Hah-uh," Herman shook off that approach, glancing over his shoulder in one direction while I nervously checked over mine in the other. "Something else, we are in hurry for."

"In a hurry, huh? Funny, you don't look like fugitives from a chain gang." Humorous as that theoretically was, there was small-eyed suspicion behind it as the Indian vendor studied the pair of us trying too hard to compose ourselves.

"Anyhow, the something else. What might that be?"

"Your help, ja?" So saying, Herman extracted a twenty-dollar bill from his billfold but held on to it.

"Huh, twenty smackers," the Indian acknowledged the sight of the cash, "that's starting to look like the price on something else." He jerked his head toward the rear of the camper. "Step around the tepee on wheels here and let's palaver."

Back there out of sight, I breathed slightly easier. Waiting to hear what we had to say, the Indian stood there broad as a bear. Even his head looked like a grizzly's, round and low on his shoulders. Herman couldn't wait to ask. "You are Apache, maybe? Winnetou, you know about?"

"Winnie who?"

"Not now, okay?" I hissed to Herman.

"Apaches aren't from around here, friend," the Indian helped me out in putting us past any further Karl May enthusiasms out of Herman. "I'm Blackfoot.

Louie Slewfoot, to boot,” he introduced himself, Herman and I shaking hands with him the proper soft Indian way while keeping our eyes off his clubfoot that jutted almost sideways from the other one.

Briskly he got down to business. “What can I do for you to loosen your grip on poor old Andy Jackson there,” he indicated the twenty-dollar bill in Herman’s fist. “Look, he’s turned green.”

Herman glanced at me, I endorsed what he was about to say with a sickly smile, and he spoke the momentous words that would either save my skin or not.

“Dress up Donny like fancy dancer. Long enough to get him out from here.”

“Whoa, no way,” Louie Slewfoot backed away a lame step, laughing in disbelief. “These costumes are sort of sacred to Indian people, you can’t just wear them for Halloween.” He gave me a sympathetic wink. “Nothing personal, cowboy, but them freckles of yours are a long way from Indian.”

“Hey, that’s not fair,” I bridled. “I have an Indian name even, Red Chief. Nickname, I mean.”

“Sure you do,” he rolled his eyes, “and I’m Tonto.”

“And look at my moccasins, don’t they count? They’re Blackfoot, like you.” His heavy dark eyebrows drew down as he took a good look, but that was the extent of it. “And I went to school some at Heart Butte with Indian kids,” I persisted insistently, “and--

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he butted in, “all of that gives you full standing in the Whoopdydoo tribe, chiefie, but I can’t go around duding up a white kid in--”

“How about this, then,” I butted right back, reaching the arrowhead out of my pocket and peeling back enough of its condom sheath to flash the slick black obsidian to him in my palm.

“Wah.” Silent now, he put a hand toward the shiny black stone, but didn’t touch it. “That’s big medicine. Where’d you git it?”

“It’s, uh, been in the family.”

“Tell him all, Donny,” Herman warned before wisely hustling off toward the front of the camper to keep a lookout.

I spilled the whole tale of arrowhead and Sparrowhead, Louie Slewfoot listening without ever taking his gaze off the obsidian gleam of it.

When I was done, he laughed over the Tuffies as Herman had, saying, “Pretty smart, but the problem with them things is they can spring a leak and you end up with something you wasn’t expecting.” That explained it! Why the arrowhead sometimes worked like a charm and sometimes didn’t, if its luck could leak out like that. Louie had the way to fix the matter, reaching onto his table of leather goods and tossing me a small leather sack on a buckskin thong. “Let’s git it out of its cock socks and into a medicine pouch, hokay? Hang it around your neck and treat it right if you don’t want to lose the big medicine.”

At the end of that, he growled deep in his throat. “That wampus cat, Williamson. He runs the Gobble Gobble You like the whole earth is his. We have to chase its goddamn cattle off the rez land all the time. The rich sonofabitch sure to hell don’t need any big medicine like that.” With something like an animal grin, he sized me up in a new way. “Dearie dearie goddamn” he expressed, which went straight into my cussing collection. “How did I git myself into this, fixing you up as a fancy dancer? Gonna take some doing,” he laughed so low it barely came out, “but it’d be a helluva good joke on these Crows, wouldn’t it. They was on Custer’s side, you know. Bastard scouts for Yellow Hair.”

“Po-leece are com-ing,” Herman’s soft singsong reached us from his sentry post up front.

I just about dissolved at that, but it galvanized Louie Slewfoot. "Git in," he half helped half shoved me into the back of the camper, with him clambering after. In there, in the semi-dark, everything was a flurry as I undressed and was dressed all over again by the grunting Louie slipping a long apronlike skin shirt and a beaded harness that hung way down and really woolly leggings--"Them other kids can have their plain old goatskin, this here is pure angora"--and jingle bell anklets and a bunch more onto me. As he draped a sort of harness made up of shiny disks bigger than a silver dollar around my neck, I wondered, "Are these real silver?"

"Naw, snuff box lids. Stand up straight, can't you."

I was starting to feel as weighted down as a deep-sea diver, but he kept on digging out items and fastening me into them, until we both froze in position when we heard a voice with the flat cadence of the Crows asking Herman where the person for that booth was.

"Hungry, he is. Gone for the frying bread. I am minding for him," said Heman, as if glad to be of help.

"When he comes back, tell him to keep an eye out for a redheaded punk kid in a purple shirt and give us a shout if he spots him. Some kind of sneak thief we need to turn in to the sheriff," the Crow cop finished his business and could be heard moving on. Sheriff! The memory of the mean little Glasgow lawman who arrested his own brother gripped me like a seizure, the vision of what all sheriffs must be like.

Louie Slewfoot had his own pronounced reaction. "You would have red hair." He pawed through his stock of costumery, and the next thing I knew, I was top-heavy in a turban-like feathered headdress that covered my hair and came halfway down to my eyes. "That's better. Now we paint you up good." Working fast, he smeared my face and hands with some oily tan stuff. "The halfbreed kids use this, it makes them look more Indian to the dance judges."

Along with a knock on the back door came Herman's urging, "Coast is clear, better hurry."

"Yeah, yeah. We're about done. Turn around a half mo, Red Chief." When I did so, Louie strapped something large and feathered on my back, patted me on a shoulder epaulette the size of a softball and told me, "There you go, chiefie. The rest of this is up to you."

"Donny, is that you?" Herman met me with astonishment when I hopped out of the camper. Overcome with curiosity myself, I stretched my neck around to glimpse the thing on my back, and blinked at the unmistakable mottled black and white feathers arrayed almost to the ground, fanned out as if in full flight.

"Holy wow! The bald eagle wing thinger!"

"You been to Heart Butte basketball games, sure enough," Louie Slewfoot granted. The Heart Butte Warriors had cheerleaders in swirly skirts like any other high school, but also famously or notoriously, depending on your point of view, a boy dancer rigged up pretty much as I was, stationed at the top of the stands every game who at crucial points would whirl around and around letting out the hair-raising staccato eagle screech, *nyih-nyih-nyih*. Before a player on the other team was about to shoot a free throw, preferably.

"Never been able to sell the bald eagle getup to these cheapskates down here," Louie was saying philosophically, "so you might as well give it a little use. See if you can git its medicine going for you." Turning to Herman, he rubbed his thumb and forefingers together. "Speaking of medicine, where's that twenty?"

Herman paid up, but we weren't done with Louie Slewfoot yet, nor he with us.

"Hokay, now we need to git Fancy Dan here past the rodeo chief," he instructed as he set off toward the bucking chutes, motioning us on behind. "Henry

Swift Pony. He's not a real chief, but he's a bossy SOB even for a Crow and somebody has to run the show."

With my outfit jingling and jangling and Herman fretting that he hoped nothing happened to the moccasins in this, we trailed after Louie's slewfooted gait, both of us unsure how this was going, especially when he did not turn aside at all as the biggest Crow policeman imaginable, black braids down to his shiny badge, appeared from the back of the chutes and beside him, complaining loudly about the lack of arrest of a certain thieving runt of a kid, Wendell Williamson.

The shaking of my feathers and ankle bells had nothing to do with dance steps. I was convinced my life was going to end then and there, amid horse manure and moccasin tracks. In that big word incarceration, one way or another.

"Th-that's Sparrowhead," I quavered to Herman, wanting to turn and run.

"Ja, I thinked so," he grunted back, keeping right on toward Louie and the oncoming lethal pair. "Don't be horrified," he bucked me up as if being scared to death was that easy to be rid of. "This is where you are Red Chief, brave as anything," I swear he sounded straight off a page of Karl May. "Big medicine in your pouch, remember," his words made me feel the presence of the arrowhead resting against my chest. "Walk like Winnetou and Manitou are with you, the earth is your hunting ground." I couldn't match his steady stride, but I did square my shoulders beneath the epaulettes and skin shirt and work my eagle wing rig as if flying on the ground and marched to the jingle of my bells.

Still, as Louie barreled along on his collision course with Sparrowhead and the Crow version of a harness bull, I said tremulously out the side of my mouth, "Is he gonna turn us in?"

"We find out. Keep walking like you got no business but dancing fancy, Red Chief."

Of all things, Louie planted himself in the path of the oncoming two men. Hunched like a bear spotting prey, he gave the Crow policeman a wicked grin and said:

“Howdy, constable. Glad to see you keeping the peace. No ghosts of Custer around or anything.”

The big Crow cop glared, snapped “I don’t have time for fool talk,” and stepped around him. Giving the Indians an exasperated look, Wendell Williamson sidestepped along with the cop and kept on ragging him about finding a purple-shirted kid who stuck out like a sore thumb. Meanwhile, Herman and I swept past unnoticed.

“That was sort of close,” Louie Slewfoot remarked when he caught up with us at the bucking chutes. “Hokay, next act. Git in back of the green elephant there and stay out of sight until I tell you,” he pointed me to a big trash bin, and as for Herman, “You can make yourself useful by standing at one end and sort of blocking the view. Pretend like you’re watching the rodeo and you don’t know him or me from Sitting Bull.”

We took our places, and Louie clomped around to face the platform above the bucking chutes, cupping his hands to his mouth. “See you about something, Henry?” he hollered up to the man in charge. “Won’t take time at all.”

Peeking past the edge of the trash bin, I could see the rodeo chief turn to him, stone-faced behind the dark sunglasses, his braids more than ever like whips of authority down over his shoulders. “You again, is it, Slewfoot. I gave you the booth spot you pestered the crap out of me for. What’s eating you now? If you weren’t so frigging good at the squaw work, I wouldn’t let your blanket-ass butt in here.”

"Big frigging *if*, Henry, and you know it," Louie gave no ground. "Don't be giving me a bad time when I'm trying to be nice to you by perking up your rodeo with something special, huh? My nephew, Donny. Brung him to show you spazzes how dancing's done at Heart Butte."

Henry Swift Pony laughed without any humor whatsoever. "Pull my other one, Louie. Nothing doing, we have all the entrants we need." Herman, nearly toppling over in their direction to hear this, looked as anguished as I felt.

Louie ignored the turndown and called out, "Donny! Come show Mr. Swift Pony what a fancy dancer looks like."

I stepped out from behind the green elephant.

From his platform perch, the head Crow looked me over for half a minute, whipping off his dark glasses to see if the feathered rig on my back was truly the bald eagle wing outfit, and stopping at my moccasins. My heart thumping a mighty rhythm, I jigged enough to make the eagle feathers shimmer and the anklet bells ring-a-ling-ling. Helpfully or not, Herman abandoned his fixed casualness of staring into the arena to turn around and exclaim, "Some outfit!"

With a dip of his head, Henry Swift Pony had to agree, conceding to Louie: "He's got it all on, for sure. Fine, chuck him in with the other kids. But at the tail end."

The gaggle of fancy dancers that had been at the refreshment stand was now bunched at the passageway gate beyond the chutes, where the rodeo clown and anyone else who needed access to the arena could come and go. Wishing me luck-- "Git out there and show 'em how the cow ate the cabbage," said the one; "Let Manitou be in moccasins with you, hah?" said the other--Louie and Herman left me to it, and so, ankles tinkling and snuff lids clattering, I shuffled down the passageway to join the gaudily outfitted assemblage.

Not that the group of them, waiting for their time of glory in the arena, could particularly hear me coming. They jiggled and jangled and jiggled and jingled--maybe other jittery *j* words, too, but I don't know what those would be. These were some wound up-kids. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but be noticed as I tucked myself in with them. The biggest one of the bunch, an ornery-looking high school kid with a jackknife face, spotted me at once, my black and white wing outfit standing out amid their feathers of the mere golden eagle, dime a dozen out there on the plains. Enviously he looked down that long blade of nose at me, his eyes narrow as the rest of his unwelcoming mug. "Who're you ? Little Beaver?"

Ordinarily those were fighting words, but these were not ordinary circumstances. Trying to make nice, I started to respond, "Donny Ca--" and just in time managed a coughing fit. "Sorry, frog in my throat," I barely rescued the name situation. "Anyway, Donny, but my dancing name is Slewfoot."

"Tanglefoot is probably more like it," the ornery kid, head and shoulders taller than me, suspiciously eyed what he could see of me under all the costume. "So, Donny Frog in the Throat, where'd you dig up the bald eagle rig?"

There comes a point, in something like this, where you just do not want to take any more crap. "That's for me to know and you to whistle through the hole in your head to find out," I retorted to Jackknife Face.

"Gotcha there, Ferdie," the other rigged-up kids hooted, more curious about me than hostile. Giving me a good looking-over, they concluded: "You're not from here."

"That's for sure," I verified, and let drop: "Heart Butte."

"Blackfoot," Jackknife Face snickered. "That explains a lot."

The others, though, were as impressed as I'd hoped. "Whoa, the war whoop hoopsters, like in the papers! Neat! You play basketball?"

"Damn betcha," I may have fluffed my feathers some in composing the brag. "We shoot baskets for an hour after school every day. Everybody does, even Shorty the janitor."

"Bunch of crazy gunners," my original skeptic tried to dismiss Heart Butte's famous basketball proficiency. The others hooted again. "Yeah, they shot the living crap out of you, Ferd. What was that score the last game, about 100 to 20?"

The jackknife-faced one was back at me. "So, baldy. What are you, an apple in reverse?"

Not up on that in Indian talk, I dodged. "Ever hear of speaking English?"

"Come on, pizzlehead, you know--white on the outside and red on the inside?"

"Oh, that. Sure, why didn't you say so." That fit fine. Maybe he was going to acknowledge me as an honorary Indian after all, and that would be that.

"I still don't go for this," Jackknife Face took a turn for the worse, though. "We've practiced our butts off together and you just show up to do the eagle dance, big as you please? Why should we let you horn in?"

Uh oh. That didn't sound good. If I got kicked out, I was right back to being searched for all over the rodeo grounds by every Indian policeman. In a fit of desperation, I started to protest that the rodeo chief himself had let me into the fancy dancing, but Jackknife Face was not about to give that a hearing. Pointing to me, he called out to the dance leader waiting at the gate, a tribal elder with a skin drum, "Hey, Yellowtail, how come he gets to--"

He was drowned out by a shout from Henry Swift Pony, up on the platform. "You there, bird boy! I thought I told you to stay at the back."

"See you at the dancing," I told Jackknife Face as I scooted to the rear of the bunch.

"And now, a special treat, courtesy of Crow Fair," the announcer's voice crackled in the nick of time, "for your entertainment, the fancy dancers of the Crow nation, junior division!"

"Here we go, boys, do yourselves proud," the dance leader intoned, simultaneously starting up a rhythm with his drum like a slow steady heartbeat and the entire group of dancers with one exception--me, the straggler in more ways than one--burst into "Hey-ya-ya-ya, hey-ya-ya-ya." I caught up, more or less, as the whole befeathered and jinglebob collection of us pranced into the arena, and in the soft dirt each began to dance to the chant and drumbeat.

Did I have any idea of dance steps to do, fancy or otherwise, there in front of thousands in the packed grandstand and the eyes of the Crow nation and the worldbeating bronc rider Rags Rasmussen? No, yes, and maybe. For although I was merely a make-believe Indian in pounds of costume, I did remember the whirling and twirling of the Heart Butte mascot while he scared the neck hair off opponents at basketball games with the high-pitched eagle screech, and may have invented swoops and swirls of my own as I swept rambunctiously around in jigging circles with my arms out like wings and the array on my back aquiver in every beautiful black-and-white feather. Caught up in the drum music and the *hey-ya-ya-ya* but most of all in the moment where imagination became real, I danced as if my flashing beaded moccasins were on fire. I danced as if the medicine pouch with my arrowhead in it was a second heart. I danced for Gram in her hospital bed and wheelchair, danced for Herman the German and his monumental little thinks, danced for shrewd Louie Slewfoot, danced for the threesome of soldiers fated to Korea and for Leticia the roving waitress and for Harvey the romantic jailbreaker and for the other traveling souls met on the dog bus and inscribed in the memory book, all of us who were hunched up and taking it while serving time in this life.