

So, I suppose I was me, nerved up to the highest degree, but in the moment I was also Red Chief, and who knows, maybe some kind of ghost of Manitou bursting out of wherever a spirit walks through time. Possessed as I was, my moccasined feet knowing no boundaries and my high-pitched eagle shrieks of *nyih-nyih-nyih* puncturing their chant, I spooked the other fancy-dancing kids away from me as I plain and simple outcrazied them.

By now I could hear as if in a dream the announcer singling me out, calling me Woolly Leggings. "How about that boy, part angora and part bald eagle, quite the combination! Look at him go! He's got more moves than a Scotchman trying to sneak under the door of a pay toilet. Folks, what you're seeing here today holds special meaning. These dances go back a long way--"

On the dust cloud raised by the pack of dancing kids, my moment of fame forever with me, I jiggled my way from the arena as the exhibition ended and on out the gate of the rodeo grounds, still hopping and writhing, past the stern-faced Indian police watching for a purple shirt and red hair.

Herman was waiting a little way beyond the gate, and immediately gathered me in front of him, herding me to the parking lot near the tepees. "Quick fast. Louie has camper out, you can change there."

Sweat running off me in streams, as tired as I had ever been, I stood there slack like a horse being unharnessed as Louie took the costume off me piece by piece.

"You did pretty good for a redhead," he allowed. As I slowly dressed in my own clothes, he excused himself, saying he had to try to wangle the same booth spot out of the Crows for the next day, it was a sort of lucky location.

That left Herman, sitting on the narrow bunk at the front of the camper cabin with his arms folded across his chest, saying nothing as he watched me

button my rodeo shirt and settle my Stetson on my head. The last thing I did was to make sure the freed arrowhead hung straight in the medicine pouch under my shirt, where it felt like it belonged. My watcher still had said nothing. Timidly I broke the silence.

“Are--are we gonna keep on?”

Herman took off his glasses, breathed on one lens and then the other and cleaned both with deliberation, using the tail of one of Louie's costume garments lying there. Settling the eyeglasses back in place, he gazed at me as if newly clear-sighted. “On with what, Donny?”

“On with our trip?” my voice was uncertain. “On the bus?”

Deliberately or not, he kept me in suspense a while more. Finally he said, “More to see out west here, there is. Dog bus is how to git”--natural as breathing, he had absorbed the word from Louie-- “there, ja?”

Overcome with relief, I still had to make sure. “You're not too mad at me for getting us in that fix? By taking the arrowhead, I mean?”

He shifted on the bunk, his glasses catching what light there was in the cabin. “I am giving it a think, sitting here while you was putting clothes on. You know what, Donny? Not for me to decide, how right or wrong you taking the arrowhead comes to. You are some good boy where it counts, by sticking with me. I must do same by you, hah?”

I just about cried with--what, gratitude, happiness? Some feeling beyond that, inexpressible elation that he and I would hit the road together again? In any case, it was the kind of situation where you duck your head because there is no way to say thanks enough, and move on.

“Yeah, well, gee, Herman--what do you want to see next?”

“Something without police breathing on us,” he thought. “Notcheral wonders, how about.”

303

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For another twenty smackers, Louie Slewfoot's going rate for saving our skins, he drove us to Billings, a safe distance from Crow Fair and its cops in braids, and dropped us at the Greyhound station there.

"You fellows sort of make a full day," he remarked as he handed down the now dusty suitcase and duffel bag from the back of the camper, with dusk giving way to dark. Life with Herman packed a lot into the hours, I was definitely finding out.

"Take good care of that arrowhead, chiefie, so it'll take care of you," Louie advised me with a sly wink as he took his leave of us with a slam of the camper door. But not before, big medicine or whatever doing its work, I coaxed him into an autograph and more.

*Say, do your remember the time*

*I slipped on a banana peeling*

*and hit the ceiling*

*while wondering why*

*I had a stye in my eye  
and how in hell  
my nose runs while my feet smell?  
Oh, I was in tough condition  
because life's a rough proposition--  
but at least it makes a nice rhyme.*

*--Louie Slewfoot*

*Off the rez and on the go*

"Not Longfellow, but not shabby," Herman approved, reading over the inscription from a genuine Indian that I had finally proudly attained. "More to him than meets an eye. Too bad he is not Apache."

Handing me back the autograph book, he switched his attention to the old standard, the red-webbed route map on the Greyhound depot wall. "Scenery everywhere, I betcha," he observed about the many roads trending west. "So, Donny, what does your fingers say?"

This was almost too easy. On tiptoes, I jabbed a finger to the most famous spot west of Crow Fair.

"Yallostone," Herman ratified, looking over my shoulder. "Old Faithful geezer is there?"

Fixing his pronunciation, I assured him that besides geysers there were bound to be natural wonders popping up all over the place in Yellowstone National Park.

"Not only that," it must have been the big medicine still working in the pouch around my neck that had me thinking so expansively. "See there, then we can go on through the park," my finger confidently traveled down the spine of the West, arriving in Arizona, "all the way to where the Apaches live, how about."

"Now you are speaking," he enthusiastically took up the prospect. First thing was to get us on our way, and I drew Herman's attention to the schedule board, showing that the bus we wanted was about to go. "C'mon, or we're gonna miss it."

"Donny, wait," he held back, concerned. "We have not had bite to eat since breakfast."

"Never mind," I took care of that, seasoned bus hopper that I was, "we'll grab candy bars."

Scrambling onto the bus at the last minute with a handful of Mounds bars apiece, scanning the rows of mostly filled seats in that game of chance of where to sit, we even so were not the last to board. Just as the driver had shut the door with the departing *whoosh*, there was a polite tapping on it, and here came a wisp of a man, hardly enough of him to withstand being blown away by the wind; well-dressed in a mild way, his plain brown suit obviously far from new; gray-headed and with a silvery mustache sharp over his lip like a little awning. He thanked the driver kindly for letting him board, and evidently to make no more fuss deposited himself in the first seat available, which happened to be across from us.

As the bus pulled out, for once someone got the jump on Herman, with the latecomer leaning across the aisle and inquiring in a cultivated voice, "Where are you gentlemen headed, may I ask?"

"Yallostone Park, next on list," replied Herman, triggered into his usual spiel that he and I were out to see the West but perhaps in deference to the man's oh so polite demeanor, he left off the part about ending up somewhere south of the moon and north of Hell.

"Oh, good for you and the young man there," his visitor approved our intentions with an odd click of his mouth. "Endless things to see in the park," he

went on in that same refined tone but clickety at the end of each string of words, “all the marvels of nature. I’m passing through there myself, on my way to visit my daughter in Salt Lake City.” By now I had caught on that his false teeth clacked.

“Ah-huh,” Herman stalled, like me thinking over the prospect of several hours of clickety-clack conversation like this from across the aisle. “You got some big miles to go.”

“So I have, you put it so well.” The fine-boned man, on second look maybe not as elderly as he first appeared, smiled under the cookie-duster mustache. “But that’s the story of life, isn’t it. Keeping on across the unknowable distances that at the end of it all add up to that mystical figure of three score and ten,” click-click.

I had heard Herman’s gabs with strangers across the aisle so many times I was only half listening to this exchange, more interested in devouring Mounds bars and catching my breath, mentally at least, after the narrow escape from Sparrowhead. But that sizable serving of heavy thought from the little gent drew my attention. By now Herman too was cocking a speculative look at him.

“Please forgive me,” this daintiest of passengers touched the area of the knot of his tie. “There I go again, with my preaching collar on. You see, I’m a minister. Answered the call all those years ago”--a smile peeped from under the mustache again--“those big miles ago, and even though I’m retired, the pulpit still beckons at odd moments.” He laughed at himself, ever so apologetically. “I suppose folks like you unlucky enough to listen to my ramblings are my congregation now. I didn’t mean to intrude, my heart was simply warmed by the sight of the pair of you traveling together.”

Back there at the word *minister*, I stiffened. Dearie dearie goddamn. Why this, why now, why why why? On one of the biggest days of my life, the question

of my taking the arrowhead had attached itself to me like a telltale shirt tail that hung out no matter how I tried to tuck it. I mean, I still believed I in no way amounted to a real thief, whatever grabbyguts Wendell Williamson thought, because discovering the arrowhead after it had lain there unclaimed since before Columbus amounted to my luck and his loss, didn't it? And I deserved half of our canasta winnings just as much as Aunt Kate, didn't I? Shouldn't old Hippo Butt and Sparrowhead both know when they were beat, and fold their cards like canasta losers? Yet if the situation was that clearcut, why did it keep bugging me? Now *whoosh*, and right here on the dog bus the latest stranger proved to be a man of the cloth, as I knew from something I'd read such people were called, whose occupation it was to provide answers to things like that, in church and out, from the looks of it.

Oldtimer on the dog bus that I was from sixteen hundred and one miles going back east to Wisconsin and now many hundreds more westward with Herman, I had the crawly feeling that this particular passenger across the aisle was too close for comfort. This was way worse than the nun in black several seats back eyeing me spookily at the start of my trip to Manitowoc or the attic plaque of the kid on his knees bargaining with death in the night, this was as if the big mystery called God was using the bus-hopping minister like siccing a sheepdog onto strays. "*Go get 'em, Shep, herd them close. Nip 'em good. Here, take this new set of teeth.*"

Maybe a limited dose of religion never hurt anyone, but bumping into the smallfry minister this way bugged me. For some reason, the wispy figure an arm's length away reminded me of the little sheriff who'd arrested Harv of his same name. Trouble came in small sizes as well as large, I was learning.

"No, no, is okay," Herman was busy assuring the kindly minister he wasn't intruding on us, although he sure as hell was, pardon my French. I could

tell Herman too was thrown by the religious wraith's sudden appearance. For if my conscience had a few uncomfortable things on it, the one in the seat next to mine must have been considerably weighted down with the phony tale of going back to Germany and this entire disappearing act he had thought up for the two of us. *No tracks behind do we leave* did not sound so simple after Wendell Williamson and now this delver into people's souls.

"May I ask how you two are related?" the minister pressed on. "I see such a striking resemblance."

He did? Was I growing to be like Herman that much? Oh man, there was another weighty question--good or bad, to take on the homely yet compelling characteristics of somebody one-eyed, horse-toothed, and, well, Hermanic? "Great-uncle only, I am," he postponed the matter as best he could, with a glassy glance at me. "Donny is best grandnephew ever made."

"How fortunate you are, sir," a click and a chuckle from across the aisle. "Great by dint of the fruit of the family tree."

"Ja, I guess."

"By the way, my parishioners called me Reverend Mac," came next, with an extended hand of introduction. "It's from my middle name, Macintosh," which had quite a clack to it as he said it.

Seeing no way out of it, Herman and I shook hands with him and introduced ourselves back, and the Reverend Mac promptly followed up with just what we did not want to deal with.

Smiling to the fullest under the rim of mustache, he made the modest gesture toward his collar again. "A contribution I can still make to the good cause is to distribute Bibles into hotel rooms," he confided. "I have been doing so in Billings, which needs all the salvation it can get." He gave another clickety chuckle, Herman and I trying to politely match it with heh-hehs. I think we both

were a little afraid of what was coming, rightfully so. Slick as a carnival barker, the man of the cloth or whatever he was now pulled out a black book with gilt lettering, unmistakably a Bible, saying, "I happen to have an extra, and would be gratified if you gentlemen would accept it as a gift from a fellow traveler."

With it deposited on him that way, Herman had to take the offer, mumbling a thanks and shoveling the Bible along to me as if I were its natural audience. I gave him a look, but he wouldn't meet my eye, attending instead to the minister's rambling about the inevitable good that the Good Book would do in those dens of sin, hotel rooms. What he gave us proved to be a flimsy paperback version with typeface about the size of flyspecks, but it still unnerved me enough that I didn't want it paired with the autograph book, and quick as I could, stuck it in my opposite coat pocket.

"It does provide its rewards, spreading the good word," the minister still was holding forth to us as if we were in a church on wheels. "And that brings me to a question, if I may"--Herman and I both braced, now really knowing what was coming--"are you followers of the Lord, in your own way?"

The bus saved us, barely, gearing down into the town of Laurel at that moment, followed by the driver's announcement of a ten-minute stop to pick up passengers. As the Greyhound pulled over at the hotel serving as depot, I pleaded to Herman, "I need to go," although the urge wasn't really about using the convenience. "Real bad."

"Me too," he was out of his seat as if his pants were on fire, with me right after.

"I'll mind your seats for you," Reverend Mac obligingly called after us.



Making use of the rest room since we were there anyway, we spraddled side by side to discuss the minister matter. Escaping a preacher may not sound like the worst problem there is, but you have to admit it is among the trickier ones.

“Sky pilot, Old Shatterhand would call him.” said Herman, buttoning up.

“Nosy old Holy Joe, Gram would call him,” I said, doing the same.

“Ja, he is sniffing awful close to us.”

“Guess what. I’ve got an idea.”

Hearing me out as we headed back to the bus, Herman brightened up and paid me the ultimate compliment, saying I had a good think.

“You do it first, then I do same,” he whispered before we stepped on. As we took our seats, Reverend Mac, his hands peacefully folded, welcomed us back.

He looked as if he’d been jolted in his prayer bones when, first thing, I leaned across Herman and thrust the autograph book at him, asking him ever so nicely to contribute some words of wisdom.

“My goodness, this is quite an honor,” he recovered quickly enough, “and I had better make the most of it, hadn’t I.” He stroked his mustache as he studied the opened album, apparently sorting through holy thoughts. Then he began to write, surprisingly like a schoolboy toiling away at a handwriting exercise.

*The Good Book is a stay against the darkness*

*a source of wisdom*

*and a comfort in troubled times.*

*Yours in the fellowship of man*

*Isaac M. Dezmosz*

“Written with a pen of iron and with the point of a diamond. That’s biblical,” he said, handing me back the Kwik Klik with that click of his own. “Hallelujah, brother, I thank you for the chance to get those words down.” It

seemed to me sort of a preachy inscription and didn't even rhyme, but what else could I expect, I figured.

"I see you wondering about the last name," he provided next, noticing Herman's puzzlement as he studied the inscription over my shoulder. No wonder the man went by Reverend Mac, was my own reaction to what looked like a line from an eyechart.

"A touch of Poland in the family, way back," he smiled as if we all knew what a tangle the family could be. "Mankind is such a mixture sometimes."

Herman could readily agree to that, yawning prodigiously some more as he had made sure to do while the reverend wrote.

Yawns are of course catching, and following his, mine were absolutely epidemic, according to my plan. "You know what," I stretched drowsily, which did not take much pretending, "I'm all in but my shoelaces."

"Ja, we are feeling it," Herman did his part, patting away another yawn as if doing a war whoop. "South Dakota is a long ride," he borrowed the jackrabbit territory of the day before.

If the Reverend Mac was disappointed in not pinning us down about whether we were with the Lord, he did not show it. "By all means, go to your rest," he could not have been more gracious about excusing us to slumber. "Bus travel takes it out of a person."

He said a mouthful there. Naturally Herman was asleep almost the instant he shut his eyelids, and I was more than ready to doze off as well, with the bus heading due west through the Yellowstone valley into a sunset of colored clouds and shafts of sunlight that had the driver pulling his windshield visor all the way down. The dainty minister sat back, smiling to himself, one more Bible inflicted on potential sinners or proven ones, to his evident satisfaction. The last thing I

remember before sleep claimed me, he was humming to himself, more than likely a hymn.

“Old Faithful Inn, the Waldorf Astoria of Yellowstone National Park. You may disembark if you so wish--”

Herman and I alit in the dim parking lot after the driver’s done-it-a-hundred-times announcement with a cluster of tourists already exclaiming over this and that. Still trying to yawn ourselves fully awake as we waited for our baggage to be dug from their mountain of suitcases, I looked around for the talkative minister, suspicious that he would hop off to stretch his legs and have another go at us. But there remained no sign of the soul-hunting demon, to mix terms in an unholy way. The little Bible-pusher had disappeared from the seat across from us whenever I cracked an eye open from my series of naps as the bus traveled through the dark, probably to farther back in the aisle where religious pickings might be better, and I figured he must be staying aboard to work on some poor Salt Lake City-bound soul who needed directions to the Lord.

Hallelujah, brother, now the Reverend Mac was digested into the memory book, and that was enough of him for me. Quickly putting aside the churchy bus experience, Herman and I turned to our much-awaited surroundings. Smell that piney air, feel that high altitude! We had made it to glorious Yellowstone, free as knights and Apaches and other roaming spirits, and in silent agreement we grinned at each other and took a minute to marvel at it all.

Some distance away, with black forest as a backdrop, floodlights picked out a mound of earth, nearly as white as salt, which we divined must be where the famous geyser would make its appearance. Out and around in what looked like a geyser kitchen, steaming water bubbled out of the ground as if from gigantic boiling pots. Oh man, nature was really cooking here, in all senses of the phrase.

And magically, a star brighter than all the others--probably the planet Venus, I now realize--was pinned right there over the geyser site, as Mae Schneider's ditty in the autograph book promised. Yellowstone already was putting on a show for us, and Herman's mile-wide grin said he felt the same. Nearly as splendid as the natural wonders for our current purpose was the colossal Old Faithful Inn overlooking all this, several stories high like an elaborate fortress made of logs, with gables everywhere and a sloping roof as long as a ski jump. By now it was long past suppertime and a place as grand as that surely would have a menu fit for the gods or at least us and then a nice warm room for the night.

"Notcheral wonders and fancy eats and feathery beds, hah, Donny?"

Herman exulted as he shouldered his duffel bag and I hefted my suitcase.

"Yeah, finger-spit knew what it was doing, didn't it," I crowed happily as we started off after everybody else to check in to the fancy Inn and head for supper.

"Donny, wait!"

What I heard in Herman's voice stopped me cold. When I glanced back, he had dropped the duffel bag and was clutching his chest. Having never seen a heart attack, I nearly had one myself at this sight.

"Herman!" In a stumbling panic, I rushed to him. "Y-you're not gonna die on me, are you?"

"No, not that. My wallet." He kept searching his coat pockets over and over. "Is gone."

"How can it be? Didn't you put it down the front of your pants when you were sleeping?"

"I didn't think."

I could barely squeak out the next. "Was all our money--?"

"Ja."

“Fuck and phooey, Herman!” my voice came back. “You mean we’re skunk broke?”

“Hah?” He looked so anguished I was afraid he really might have a heart attack. “If that means all gone, ja again.” He slapped his pants pocket, which did not jingle one bit. “Spent the chickenfeed on candy bars, even,” he moaned.

I still was in shock. This was a hundred times worse than the ex-convict trying to steal my suitcase at that Minnesota Palookaville. “Who--how--” We needed to do something, but what? “Let’s ask on the bus, maybe Reverend Mac saw somebody--”

“Not just yet, hah-uh,” he stopped me. He still looked stricken but in a different way. “Something is tickling my mind. Quick, your book. Let me see.”

Blankly I handed over the autograph album, and peered along with him in the barely lit parking lot as he flipped pages to Reverend Mac’s inscription. With some kind of swearing in German, he put his thumb next to the signature, *Isaac M. Dezmosz*.

“Should have seen. Dismas was thief crucified with Christ.” It took me a moment to put together the initials with that pronunciation and come up with it: *I Am Dismas*.

”Lying in his false teeth, he was,” Herman bleakly summed up the so-called Reverend Macintosh.

I blew my top. “The smart-ass little sonofabitch of a thief! Distributing Bibles, my butt! C’mon, we’ll show him troubled times.”

I tore across the parking lot to where the bus was idling, ready to go, Herman galloping after me. I banged on the door, and Herman joined in as if he would tear it open with his bare hands.

The driver opened and considerately asked, “Forget something, boys?”

Without answering, I lunged up the steps and into the aisle, Herman right behind, both of us furiously searching for a distinctive gray head and silvery mustache.

Neither of which was in evidence on any of the remaining passengers, from front of the bus to the back as I careened up the aisle in search, Herman blocking the way in back of me in case the little Bible-spouting weasel tried to make a break for it. "Where'd that goddamned preacher go?" I demanded at the top of my voice, glaring at the rows of startled faces, none of them the right one.

"Who, the nice little minister?" the driver called down the aisle to us, perplexed by our invasion. "He got off at Livingston, a ways back. Said he had a train to catch."

"Sunked, we are," Herman said huskily, putting a hand on my shoulder to steady me, or maybe himself.

Retreating to the front of the bus, we laid out our situation to the driver, who could only shake his head as if now he had heard everything and offer the commiseration, "Tough break, boys, better report it at park headquarters and they'll get the sheriff in on it."

Still as mad as could be, I piled off the bus to do that very thing, my view of law enforcement having come around full circle in the past few minutes, with Herman more slowly following.

“Hurry up,” I called over my shoulder, half frantic or maybe more, as he lagged on the way across the parking lot, “let’s get some kind of cops after the thieving bastard.”

“Donny, hold back. Over here, please.”

Disconcerted by the detour, I uncertainly trailed after as he veered off to the gigantic wooden deck at the geyser side of the Inn, where people could sit out to watch Old Faithful display itself, although at that time of night we were the only ones anywhere around.

He dropped his duffel bag in a corner away from where everyone else was sitting, so I set my suitcase there too until it would become clear what this was about. More and more unnerved, I whispered when I didn’t have to, “Why’re we wasting time here when he’s getting away with--”

“Shhh, notcheral wonder is coming,” he gently shut me up.

Unstrung as I was anyway by Herman behaving this way, now I was hearing what sounded like low thunder and heavy rain mixed together, although the sky remained cloudless. I thought I felt the earth tremble, but it may have been only me. We turned together toward the source of the sound, a boiling hiss from the whitish mound, and as we watched, in its center what looked like a giant fountain started up, the cascades of steaming water billowing and falling, but steadily and incredibly billowing higher and higher, until the ghostly white column stood taller than the tallest trees, almost touching the single bright star, it looked like.

Yet magnificent as the sight was, it did little to change my anxious mood. Old Faithful was an eyeful, for sure, but so what? It faithfully would be blowing off steam again in an hour or so, after we'd had time to spill our story to whatever passed for cops under these circumstances, but Herman was making no move whatsoever in that direction.

Instead, he motioned wordlessly for me to take a seat in the deck chair next to the one he claimed. Scratching a match on the arm of the chair, he lit a cigar and gazed fixedly at Old Faithful's rising and falling curtains of water as he puffed. Had he gone loco? This I could not understand at all, the two of us planting ourselves there sightseeing the geyser fading slowly back into the ground while the thief who'd left us skunk broke except for a cheap Bible was making a getaway free as the breeze.

Finally he extinguished his cigar and murmured as if coming out of his deepest think yet, "Guess what, Donny. Not a good eye-dea, to go to police."

"Not a--? Sure it is. We've got to, they're the ones to chase down the sonofabitching phony religious--"

"Many questions, they will have."

"So what?"

"Donny, listen one minute."

Something in his voice warned me to prepare myself for what was coming.

Not that I possibly could, because what he was leading up to saying was:

"I am not American on paper."

That took some digesting. At first, I didn't know what to make of it.

"Then what are you?"

"German."

"Well, yeah, sure, we been all through that. But who cares about something of that sort any more?"

"*Citizen* of Germany, yet," he spelled out, his voice growing strained.

"Here I am what is called an alien."

Giving this news what I thought it deserved, the French salute, I asked what was wrong with being one of those, whatever they were.

"An enemy alien."

That hit me where it counted. It put things right back to when I learned he was Herman the German and feared he was one of the Hitler demons who shot my father's legs to pieces at Omaha Beach. Was I right the first time?

Fearfully I trembled out, "How--how are you an enemy?"

He threw up his hands. "By not showing my face when World War Zwei"--wincing, he corrected that to Two--"got America in. Some big danger I ever was, hah?"

I listened dumbstruck to the rest, how having had enough of war in the first one, the second time around he quietly shipped out on ore boats like the *Badger Voyager* where no questions were asked as long as you could shovel heaps of coal, keeping himself at sea or whatever it was on the Great Lakes, and, beyond that, essentially hiding out in plain sight. "Manitowoc is German sort of place, you

maybe noticed," he said whimsically. "Government was not going to declare whole town an enemy."

The meaning was sinking in on me now, all right. "You're not supposed to be in this country at all? They'd kick you out?"

"Not at first," he raised my hopes. But then: "Put me in prison, they would."

I was horrified, as Herman's word best said such a thing. "You're that much of an--" I couldn't bring myself to say *enemy* "--alien?"

"By stupid law, ja," he spat out. Given how law enforcers seemed to automatically side with Sparrowhead against me, I couldn't blame him for feeling picked on. "But if you're still stuck being a, a German," I was back to circling in confusion, "how'd you get here at all?"

He laughed, the hollow empty kind.

"Took French leave."

Unsteadily I told him I didn't quite know what that meant.

"Long story, Donny."

"Hitler, pah. Too bad I did not break his neck when he was close as me to you, that night."

And so in the next unforgettable minutes there in an American national wonderland, I learned that French leave meant desertion, although in this case not from any army but an entire country. Germany, that is, when it was falling to pieces after losing World War One and the Nazis were coming out of the woodwork. As his searching words led me through, my imagination transformed the hunched figure clasping his hands between his legs into a young veteran like my own father coming home from combat. Aunt Kate may have thought Herman had no ambition, but it sounded to me as if he had been smart as an Einstein in his choice of livelihood after his term as a soldier on the losing side: making beer where

they drank it like water. "In Munich were beer halls like you would not believe, big as this, almost," he pointed a thumb to the whopping Inn behind us. "And Oktoberfest there, two-week festival of foods and beers." He gave that hollow laugh again. "Crow Fair for drunkards. Good place to be a braumeister." From what he said, that was a vital task in the brewing of beer, sampling and comparing to the competition, and he had enough knack at it to work up to a job at a famous place, although I had never heard of it until his chilling telling.

"The Buergerbraukeller, biggest in Munich." He paused, the night just before Armistice Day in 1923 coming back to him as it brought me to the edge of my deck chair. "Not always a good idea to be where history gets made," he ducked his head as if dodging too late. "Packed hall that night, thousands drinking beer, government people there to say the country is not going to the dogs, if anybody would believe them. I am notcherly curious, so I come out from where brew vats are, to listen. Bring stein of beer for myself, why not, and sit at table near the back, where people have left." All of a sudden he flung an arm up as if firing a pistol at the sky, making me nearly jump out of my hide. "Right in time for Hitler to come through door and climb on table and shoot in the air, ja, like some cowboy. Close as me to you," he repeated, shaking his head at how history brushed past him. "But when I try to reach across table to grab him, pull the feet from under this crazy person up there shooting, make him fall on his face like fool he is, Hitler keeps dancing around like cat on a stove, he is so nervous, and I miss him this far." He held his fingers inches apart. " Before I can try again, whole bunch of brownshirts"--storm troopers--"with guns out jump on me and others around, goverment people and all." Drawing a breath, he husked out the rest of the recitation. "Hitler takes those to a room, the rest of us is held at point of guns, told shut up and drink beer. When myself and some others say what is happening is not right, we get knocked around and told we are now on list to be shot." Talk about

spellbound; I was as much all ears as when he'd told about being swept up by the Witch of November, only this November rough weather was called Adolph Hitler.

"A putsch, it was," which he defined as a gamble at taking over everything. "Did not work that time, Nazi march on rest of Munich failed the next day, so putsch collapsed, good thing. But I had two eyes then," he made a wan face, "and did not like look of things in Germany. Beer hall bullies, Hitler bunch was, but maybe more than that if they ever got hold of government, hah? On list to be shot reminded me too much of Hohe Toter Mann"--the specter of Dead Man's Hill sent a real chill up my spine. "*Pthht*, to that," he rid himself of his homeland. Leaning toward me as if that would bring me nearer to understanding, he tapped his temple, where little thinks came from. "Listen, Donny, this is the how of it. Find a safe harbor, is good saying. In Germany then, that meant small ports on the Baltic, where Nazis was not thick on the ground yet. Always ships going out the Baltic Sea, all places of the world." This I could follow almost as though I were at his side escaping from the Nazis and that sonofabitch of all sonsofbitches, Hitler. "I give the ship engineer a little something," he went on, rubbing his fingers together in that familiar gesture meaning money. "He lets me hide in tool room, down where boilers are. Nobody topside comes ever, and I make friends with stokers by helping out. Learn to shovel coal. When we dock in America, jumped ship, I did."

In three paragraphs, there it was, not so long after all. One for Believe It Or Not!--the man who came within the length of his fingers of stopping Hitler. Not only that, the history that had made him an enemy of Germany for real and an enemy of America on paper, both at the same time.

Almost dizzy with the size of the fix he was in--*we* were in--one more thing I had to check on.

"Jumped ship. Is--is that against the law, too?"

“Could say so, ja,” came the not unexpected reply. “Stowaway, is that word,” he ruefully added it to the growing list of other offenses charged to Herman Brinker.

“Aunt Kate,” I whispered again, for no reason but the weight of the question, “was she in on this? You being an alien and all?”

He nodded slowly. “She knew, all the time. Had to. House in her name, car in her name. She is the one that counted, on paper.” He shrugged, helplessly resigned to the one-sided situation. “No identification papers can I show for anything, as enemy alien.”

And she had called *me* a storer? What about living under false pretenses with a husband who was not anything he appeared to be? Busy piling that up against her, it took a few moments for that last part to fully register on me. I thought we were bad off when we simply didn’t have any money. Now we didn’t even have a real Herman.

He turned to me, his expression the most serious yet. This next, I will never forget.

“Donny, I am so much sorry”--if spoken words ever shed tears, it happened now in his broken apology-- “for what is happened. Miles from anywheres, we are, and money gone, trip kaput.” In that moment he looked so much older, the way people do when they are terribly sad. I felt as awful as he looked.

“Hey, it wasn’t just you,” I felt compelled to take my share of the blame, “it was my bright idea for us to go to sleep to get rid of the goddamn minister. If I hadn’t thought that up--”

“*If* is biggest word there is,” he saved me from myself. Or maybe himself along with it. As I watched, he drywashed his face, holding his head in his hands while trying to think. For some moments I held my breath, until he came up with, “No sense beating ourselves like dead horse, hah?”

Just like that, he straightened up, unhunching his shoulders for the first time since the words *enemy* and *alien*, and tipped his cowboy hat back, if not the Herman of the dog bus again a pretty good imitation of it. "We got to git in for the night," cocking his good eye toward the fancy Inn, "into the Waldorfer, someways, Donny."

"But what are we gonna do after that?" I spread my arms helplessly.

"About everything."

He gazed off into the distance, as he must have gazed countless miles that way since that night in a Munich beer hall. "We take a leap of fate."

Believe me, I have looked this up, and the roots of fate and faith are not the same. Nonetheless, I picked up my wicker suitcase to follow Herman the German into the Old Faithful Inn.

Ever stepped into an aircraft hangar? The lobby of the elaborate old Inn was like that, only roomier, largely higher. In the big open area I had to tip my head way back to count balcony after balcony held suspended by beams thick as logs, the supports all the way to the towering roof peak positioned each on top of the one below like those circus acrobats standing on one another's shoulders. Except for a mountainous stone fireplace, every single thing in the Inn--walls, balcony railings, chairs, benches, ashtray stands, light fixtures--seemed to be made of timber, actual trees, freaks of the forest according to the fantastic twists and turns of some of the trunks and limbs. Dimly lit only by old electric candles which threw about as much light as Christmas tree bulbs, the place struck me as creepy, as in those fairy tales where bad things happen to travelers in shadowy old inns.

Herman seemed unperturbed. "Like Der Kaiser's hunting lodge, but built by beavers," was his estimate of the pine-forest lobby as we entered, baggage in hand.

“So, Donny, do like I told,” he whispered as we headed toward the front desk. “Pretend you own the place, whole schmier is your vacation palace.” Before coming in, he had dug down in the duffel bag and found his tie, the out-of-date one with mermaids twined coyly in seaweed, but a tie. He similarly dressed me up by making me put on my moccasins. “Now we are not looking like hoboes so much,” he appraised us with a lot more confidence than I felt.

Or for that matter, the sleepy night clerk, who blinked himself more alert at the sight of us, glancing with a growing frown at his reservation book and our approach. He did take a second look at my impressive moccasins, although that may have been canceled out by his beholding Herman’s dangling mermaids. Whatever he thought, he cleared his throat and addressed our coming:

“Checking in late, sir? Name, please?”

“No, no, got room this afternoon,” Herman waved a hand at the first question and simultaneously erased the second. “Boy here can’t sleep, so went for his souvenir collection from the car and laundry bag along with,” he accounted for our conspicuous odd suitcase and duffel. “Back to room we go, everything fine and jimmydandy.”

“Oh, say, Grandpa,” I spoke my part as we had to march right by the clerk’s still inquisitive scrutiny, “did you lock the Caddy?”

“Ja, don’t want bears in the Cadillac, hah?” Herman laughed in such jolly fashion it infected the clerk.

Chuckling, the man behind the desk all but ushered us past. “You’re a hundred percent right about that, sir. Good night and sleep tight.”

Up the plank-wide stairs we went, climbing to the absolute top and darkest balcony and passing by rows of rooms until reaching a far corner, as Herman had calculated, out of sight from the front desk. Also as he had counted on, there was more of that wildwood furniture, massive chairs made out of lodgepole, parked

along the balcony for lobby-watching. Grunting and straining, between us we wrestled two of those into our corner and tucked the duffel and suitcase in behind. Ourselves we tried to fit into the rigid wooden seats in some semblance of bedtime positions. "Beds a little hard tonight," Herman tried to joke, patting the tree limbs under the not very thick cushions.

"About like sleeping on a lumber pile, yeah," I muttered, squirming in vain to get comfortable at all, missing the upholstered seats of the dog bus as if they were the lap of luxury. For that matter, the screeching springs of the attic bed Aunt Kate consigned me to would have sounded like the best of Kate Smith music just then. But I had to admit, we were in for the night, flat broke though we were.

Herman shook me awake when the first hints of dawn shown in the upmost windows of the timbered lobby, whispering, "Up and at. Outside we must get before hotel people come around."

After peering cautiously into the canyon of lobby to make sure a different desk clerk had come on duty, we headed down, with Herman saying, "Leave to me. We must go out like kings."

Or freeloaders to be arrested on sight, I thought to myself.

As we approached the obstacle of the front desk again, I tried to appear as prosperous as royalty who went around in Blackfoot moccasins, meanwhile hoping the clerk would be impressed by a matching suitcase woven out of willows.

Striding as if he genuinely did own the place, erect as the timber of the lobby and his nose in the air, Herman gave the clerk the barest of nods and a guttural "Guten morgen."

"Ah, good morning to you, too. May I help--"

“Checked out, we already are,” Herman growled impatiently, throwing in some more gravelly German. “How you say, grabbing early bus.” In the tone of a grouchy weary parent, he indicated me with a swat of his hand as we kept on going, past the desk. “Liebchen too excited to sleep. Pah. Park not made for night’s rest.”

“Wait, your room number is--?”

Herman threw over his shoulder some rapid incomprehensible number in German and a farewell wave. “Auf weidersehn.”

With that, we were outside in the fresh Yellowstone morning, fresh enough to make my teeth chatter.

“Lived through the night, hah, Donny?” I could see Herman’s breath as he made this pronouncement.

I simply looked the real question to him: Now what?

A *whoosh* growing louder and louder in the still air, Old Faithful percolating out of the mound again, spared him from answering that. “Notcheral wonders we are not short of, anyways,” he stuck with, gazing at the plumes of hot water shooting skyward.

Yeah, right. Stranded and broke in a natural wonderland was still stranded and broke. Stiff and sore and tired of Old Faithful butting in every time I pressed Herman for some way out of the hot water we were in, I was feeling out of sorts. Doubly so, actually. Because along with our predicament, something about Yellowstone itself kept tickling my mind, to put it in Herman’s terms. One of those itches in the head that a person can’t quite scratch. Some out-of-this-world fact from Believe It Or Not? Something digested way too deep from a Condensed Book? But whatever the teaser was, it kept refusing to come out from behind the

immediate matter of Herman and me being the next thing to hoboes and maybe even having crossed that line.

As if to rub it in, the tourist world was comfortably coming to life, people moseying out onto the deck from breakfast, while my stomach was gnawing my backbone, and tour busses were pulling up in front of the Inn with baggage wranglers busily piling suitcases into luggage compartments. I watched the busses with envy, another gnawing sensation, longing for a Greyhound to take us somewhere, anywhere.

Herman read my mind. "Better look for a safe harbor, hah?"

"Right," I said crankily, "let's go see where we could go if we only could."

Trying to appear like travelers actually able to buy tickets, we hefted our baggage over to the loading area, skirting a line of chattering tourists boarding to see mud volcanoes and other sights, as we made our way to the extensive bulletin board where in routes of red sheeted over with weatherproof plastic, THE FLEET WAY once again was promised

"Guess what, Donny," Herman began as we approached the map, wagging his fingers piano-player fashion to encourage mine, "time for you to--"

"Huh-Huh-Herman!" I gasped. Unable to get out the actual word "*Look!*" I pointed an unsteady finger, not at the map but toward the opposite end of the bulletin board.

Like me, he stared in disbelief, then shock. There, past the park's announcements of the day's activities and its lists of don'ts and tacked-up tourist messages to other tourists, was a lineup of FBI MOST WANTED posters of the kind that kept a gallery of hardfaced criminals scowling from the wall of every post office in the land. Prominent in its glossy newness was the one featuring HERMAN "DUTCH" BRINKER in bold black letters, full face on. The photo was many years

old, without glasses or for that matter a glass eye, back when he was a Great Lakes seaman, but the similarity to the Herman stunned motionless at my side popped out all too clearly.

A soft strangled sound, which I suspected must be the German cussword of all cusswords, escaped from his lips. Recovering before I did, he glanced around and around, pulling me close as he did so. Whispering, "What we must do, quick, quick," he rapidly told me how to proceed, and I followed his instructions as blankly as a sleepwalker, edging along the bulletin board as though every piece of paper was of surpassing interest, with him leaning over my shoulder. Reaching the MOST WANTED lineup, he shielded me with his body, checked around again to make sure no one was looking, and when he whispered, "Now!" I ripped down the poster with the awful words ENEMY ALIEN and VIOLATION OF and CONTACT YOUR NEAREST FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION OFFICE AT ONCE IF YOU SPOT THIS SUSPECT and stuffed it inside my jacket.

Deed done, we grabbed up our luggage and retreated to the deck of the Inn yet again, depositng ourselves in a corner farthest from the latest batch of sitters waiting for Old Faithful to live up to its name, which I could have told them it relentlessly would. With a ragged sigh, Herman held out his hand for the poster. Both of us studied the slightly crumpled likeness of the sailor Dutch, as he was then, and the paragraph of official language fully describing him and his offense. He shook his head in despair at the MOST WANTED treatment, definitely the wrong kind of being famous. "You would think I am Killer Boy Dillinger, Public Enemy Number Ein."

"One," I automatically corrected. "But why are they after you so bad?"

He passed a hand over his face as if to clear something away, although from his expression it wouldn't go. "Wisconsin has a Senator, like they say, who sees

Red anywheres he looks. 'Foreign' spells 'Communist' to him. And here was I, mystery man with no proof of being American, under his nose all this time, ja?" He bit out the next words. "The FBI, excuse how I must say it, is kissing this Senator McCarthy's hind end by making me big fugitive."

"Yeeps, Herman! That's not fair!"

"No, is politics gone crazy." He fell silent, looking downcast, the WANTED poster trembling a little in his hand. At last he said almost inaudibly, "Turned me in, she did."

It took me a moment to gather that in. "Aunt Kate? Aw, she couldn't, could she? I mean, isn't there a law or something? Holy smokes, Herman, she's your *wife*."

He stared at the WANTED poster in his big hands as if asking the same of it, then looked away from the photo of his younger self, from me, from anything except the real question that invaded the beautiful park, taking over his voice.

"Who said we are married?"

You could have knocked me over with the blink of an eye. Speechless at first, I tried to get my mind around the pair of them living under the same roof, sleeping in the same bed, fighting the same battle every breakfast, all these years without ever--as the saying was--visiting the preacher.

Thickly I managed to stammer, "But she's a Brinker, like you. You've got to be married for that, don't you?"

He shook his head. "She took the name, is all. Easier that way. Keep people from thinking we are living"--he really gave his head a shake now, as if trying to clear it--"in sin, hah. More like, in duty. Drafted soldiers, both of us, if you would imagine," he put it in starkest terms. "From time of Witch of November when--"

The story was, when Fritz Schmidt was lost in the storm that sent the *Badger Voyager* to the bottom of Lake Michigan and Herman survived but with an eye gone, the new widow Kate, stranded now in her waterfront waitress job, came to see him in the hospital. "All broke up, crying like cloudburst. Tells me she knows what friends Fritz and I was, how hard it is for me, like her. And this"--he tapped alongside the substitute eye--"meant I was without job." You can about hear her, he mused, declaring this was too much on both of them, it wouldn't hurt them one time in their lives to do something out of the ordinary. "Said if I wanted place to stay," he drew the tale to an end, "I could come to the house." Gazing off, maybe looking back, he shrugged. "Never left."

Bewildered anew, I blurted, "But all the time I was there, the two of you fought like--"

"--alley cats at table scraps, ja. Not at first," he tempered that, his look at me a plea for understanding. "But you think about it, the Kate was used to Fritz away most of time, on boat. I was not away, ever, and it got on the nerves. Me on hers, her on mine, fair to say." He spread his hands, as if balancing choices. "Not good way to live together, but both too stubborn to give in to situation. Until--"

He did not have to say the rest. Until I showed up, a stranger off the dog bus, bringing with me old baggage in more ways than one for Gram's sister and a jolt of imagination for the man going through life not being Dutch, not being an actual husband, not really grounded in much of anything but dreams of adventure in the Promised Land, out west.

Feeling I was to blame, while trying strenuously to deny it to myself, I started to throw a fit. "Goddamn-it-all-to-hell-anyay, why didn't you and her get married in the first place like you were supposed to and we wouldn't any of us be in this fix and, and--"

My tantrum dwindled as the answer caught up with me. "The alien thinger?"

"Ja," he acknowledged wearily. "Marriage license could not be got without naturalization paper. Not worth the risk to go and say, after all the years, here I am, how do I make myself American?" With a last blink at the WANTED poster, he creased it to put in his pocket, still speaking softly. "The Kate believed same as I did, more so, even. As much her eye-dea as mine, pretend we're married. Worth it to have a man around, she telled me, somebody she can boss like she is used to with Fritz. Joke at the time," he sighed, "but she meant it, you maybe noticed."

I was listening for all I was worth, but Aunt Kate's bossy tendency that had driven both of us batty shrank to nothing compared to picking up the phone and turning in her imitation husband to the FBI. That truth rattled through me--the clank of a jail door closing behind Herman--shaking me to the core. The hard knocks of history were not done with him yet. Or for that matter, with me. Eleven going on twelve abruptly seemed way too young to be the seasoned accomplice of a fugitive, or when you came right down to it, a criminal whom the FBI put up there with the bank robbers and murderers as some breed of desperado. But what else was I?

The one thing clear was that the face of Herman the German, enemy alien, was plastered here, there, and everywhere on bulletin boards throughout Yellowstone National Park, as public as the sun. "Now we really need to get out of here," my voice broke, Herman chiming "Ja, ja, ja," as I scrambled to my suitcase and he to his duffel. That was as far ahead as either of us could think. That and the FLEET WAY map back at the bulletin board.

Skirting the tour bus lines and trying not to notice the bare spot among the MOST WANTED posters which itself seemed to gape with guilt pointing our

direction, we edged up to the Greyhound map in search of inspiration as much as destination. We needed a fortunate break in some direction, north, south, east, west, it didn't matter. Somewhere to hole up, until people's possible memories of a horse-faced man with a German accent waned with the passage of time and the fading away of FBI posters. But where? Make a run for the coast, to Portland or Seattle or Frisco? Hide out in some Palookaville? Hightail to Canada, on the chance they wouldn't know an enemy alien when they saw one?

Still putting his faith in *fingerspitzengefühl*--not that we had much else to draw on--Herman began waggling his fingers again to encourage mine. "Ready, Donny? Find us somewheres to git to, ja?"

"Nothing doing." I tucked my hands in my armpits. "You choose this time. My finger-spitting got us into this."

"Then must git us out, hah?" Herman said a little testily.

Hard to argue with that. But *fingerspitzengefühl* and its outcomes unnerved me and I determinedly kept shaking my head, nothing doing, absolutely not, *you* do it for a change, when a certain dot of all those on the map caught my attention. Before I quite knew what I was doing, my finger flew to it.

"Here," I said, decisive as Napoleon or any of those, "this is what we want."

Startled by my abrupt choice, Herman peered at the map as if my finger was pulling the wrong kind of trick. Making sure of the small lettering beside the tiny red dot of bus stop, he turned huffy. "Funny as a stitch, Donny. No time for piddling around, please."

"I'm not!" My exasperation at his short-sightedness, both kinds, boiled over. "You're the one who's piddling!"

He retorted to that, and I retorted to his retort, and in no time we were in a slambang argument, the kind where tempers go at one another with all they have until someone's hits its limit and backs off. In this case, Herman's.

"You are not making joke like I thought, hah?" he more or less conceded. "And maybe your finger is on the nose about where we must git to," he went even further after I'd raved that I was stroking the arrowhead in its pouch under my shirt, commanding it to show it was big medicine, damn it, make some luck for a change, and I could feel it working, all the way to the tip of my pointing finger.

"You are powerful sure about spot on map." Eyeing me in my most rambunctious red in the head state of mind, Herman spoke very carefully. "Big question is, Donny, how to git anywheres." He glanced over his shoulder at the busloads of tour groups coming and going as free as the breeze. "Can't talk sweet to a driver, don't we wish it was easy as pies, and go on dog bus like seeing the sights, tra la la," he said with a deep and helpless longing for our old days as comparatively innocent cross-country passengers.

Who knows how these things happen, what whiz of a trick the mind will pull when you're least expecting it. Suddenly my thinking apparatus was jogged, the teasing smidgen about Yellowstone standing out clear as purple ink on the white paper of the autograph book. "Herman, I've got it! What you just said! Idea!"

Misunderstanding me, he shook his head so hard it was a wonder his hat didn't fall off. "Donny, no! We can not go begging drivers for tickets or sneaking on bus or such. They will report us, snap like that," he snapped his fingers like a shot, "to rangers and rangers to sheriff and sheriff to FBI and I will be locked up until cows trot home and you, you will be put in--" He hesitated to even say my jail word, *orphanage*.

“Huh-uh, that’s not what I meant,” I feverishly shook off his concern in turn. “I just finally got reminded of something. Listen up, okay?”

Duly hanging on my every word as I explained my brainstorm, he couldn’t help still being dubious.

“It better work right. Or *ptfft--*” He nodded an inch, plenty indicative, to a passing pair of park rangers looking as seriously loaded with authority in their flat hats and badges as any Crow cops.

With no other real choice, he accompanied me to the park headquarters, and in we went to the WONDERS OF YELLOWSTONE exhibit, and up to the information counter manned by a veteran ranger who no doubt had heard every possible tourist tale of mishap, including the one we were about to try on him. It didn’t help, either, that despite my coaching, Herman pronounced what we needed as the *infirm-ary*.

Maybe his sympathy was simply feigned, but the ranger did peer over the counter as I made myself look miserable as possible, and accorded me, “Oh, the poor kid.” Poor, yeah, little did he know. Anyway, he directed us to the infirmary, and down a couple of hallways and around enough corners, we came to a door with that sign on it.

As he found a place to sit and wait outside the office, Herman had some last jitters about me doing this alone, but I pointed out that we didn’t want the enemy alien matter to crop up somehow due to a mess of paperwork, did we, and he had to agree he’d better stay absent. “Be brave as anything, like Winnetou and Red Chief,” he resorted to the same encouragement as when I had passed myself off as a fancy dancer, not bad advice any time, really. I fished the necessary item out of the duffel and into my jacket pocket, and with heart pounding, bravely I hoped, stepped into where they treated the infirm.

In the waiting room, a full-lipped and generously lipsticked young woman who reminded me strongly of Letty, except her crisp uniform was a nurse's and I could not spot her name stitched on in the best place, was busy opening up for the day. Probably figuring I had taken a wrong turn in seeking the rest room, she smiled at me in a seasoned way. "Hello there, can I help you find something?"

"Fishbone," I croaked, pointing to my throat.

"My goodness," her manner changed that quick, "we need to take care of that, don't we." Plucking up an admittance form and sitting right down to administer it, she peeked past me, beginning to look perturbed. "Isn't there anyone with you?"

"They're at the geyser," I gagged some more. "I was supposed to catch up. Slept late, breakfast was slow."

The perturbed expression did not leave her, but she dropped the form. "We'll have to get you on paper afterward, it sounds like. Right this way." Her uniform swishing, she escorted me to the office off the waiting room and stuck her head in. "Throat case, Doc, the rainbow trout special strikes again. Give a shout if I'm needed, I'm still catching up at the desk."

The doctor was slipping on his starched clean white office coat as I entered the medical inner sanctum trying to keep my chin up like the bravest Indian who ever walked in moccasins. Not anything like I expected, with a surprising amount of gray in his crewcut and a twinkle in his eye, he greeted me with a smile as professional as the nurse's even though I was a surprise patient.

"Hello, buddy. Don't I wish the dining room would stick with hotcakes and eggs for breakfast." Busying himself with a tray of instruments to explore my throat, he maintained a soothing manner, observing that swallowing a fishbone was not a good way to start the day but at least I was not scalded or mauled.

Ready, he patted the operating table that I couldn't help looking at without thinking of Gram. "Hop up here, friend, and open wide so I can have a look."

"Uhm," I jerked back to reality, "it's no use." The doctor stopped short at picking up a tongue depressor so he could go to work down my gullet. "I mean, I didn't swallow a fishbone or anything."

Accustomed as he must have been to all kinds of odd cases, he nonetheless scrutinized me with a puzzled frown. "Then what's your problem, hmm? Nothing broken, I hope?"

"Yeah, that's it! Me," I seized my opening. "Flat broke."

"Are you telling me," his tone turned as starchy as his medical coat, "you came in here to ask for--"

"Eleven dollars and forty cents, is all," I made it sound as reasonable as possible.

That brought me a stare nearly strong enough in itself to throw me out of the office. "Starting kind of young, aren't you?" he said along with it, more sternly yet. "At bumming?"

"No, no, this isn't that!" I protested, my voice taking off toward the high country. Prepared as I thought I was in asking for the money as nicely as I could, I fell apart at being thought some kind of a moocher.

"What it is," I sort of whimpered out, "I know Mae and Joe." Shakily I pointed to the name plate on his desk identifying him as PAUL SCHNEIDER, M.D., his gaze following my gesture uncomprehendingly. "Your mom and dad?" I provided as if he needed reminding of the fact.

He still looked so baffled that I yanked out the Bible in desperation. "See, I'll swear on it," I clapped a hand over the chintzy paper cover, "we were friends right away fast. They were awful good to me, took my side against the dumb bus

driver and everything, so I thought maybe you would be, too, at least a little bit, and really, all I need is eleven dollars and--”

“Whoa, slow down.” A strapping guy as big as both of his parents put together, Dr. Schneider bent way down with his hands on his knees as if I needed closer examination. “The folks? Where do they come into this?”

“On the dog bus. Just before the rolycoaster.” Herman’s lucky mention of the Greyhound driver community and seeing the sights, tra la la, popped the happily traveling Schneiders from that itch spot in my mind, along with their vital mention of a son who fixes up people who fall into hot pools or get mauled by grizzlies in Yellowstone. None of what I’d try to say so far enlightened the doctor son nearly enough, I could tell, but desperation sometimes grows into inspiration. “Here, look, they wrote in my memory book.”

To some extent, amusement replaced bafflement in his expression, I was relieved to see. “You’re a regular traveling library, aren’t you,” he kidded--at least I took it as kidding. Carefully grasping the autograph album, he studied the pair of inscriptions while rubbing a hand through his iron-gray bristle of hair. “That sounds like the old man, all right. And that mother of mine--” He silently read over the neatly composed lines, as did I, my eyes moist.

I won’t say her contribution to poetry ranks up there with Longfellow, but I still think Mae Schneider’s tidy verse is so beautiful.

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

After that, again bending close to listen when I told of getting robbed on the last Greyhound by the sonofabitching phony preacher, whom I barely restrained

myself from calling that and more, the doctor frowned as if still working on his diagnosis. "Then where's this uncle of yours? Why isn't he here with you?"

"Uhm, he's sort of, you know," I twirled my forefinger at my temple, "from the war. Scared of people in uniform. Like rangers. Or your nurse, even. What do they call it, nervous in the service?"

He mm-hmmed the way someone does to acknowledge they've heard what you've said, whether or not they believe it. "Why eleven dollars and forty cents?"

"Bus fare. Like my uncle says, we're just trying to get someplace south of the moon and north of Hell."

"Your uncle has a strange sense of geography," he was half laughing. Turning serious again, he parked his hands in the side pockets of his office coat the way doctors do when they're about to deliver the news, good or bad.

"I've had some dillies come in here, but you beat all." I swallowed real hard at that. Then that twitch of smile showed up on him again. "Nellie," he called out to the front desk, "I've invented a new cure. Bring me a ten and a five from the cash drawer, please."

Looking at me curiously, the nurse swished in, handed him the money, gave me another look and left. Dr. Schneider started to pass me the ten-dollar bill and fiver, but then hesitated, giving me a heart flutter. "If you're so confounded broke, what are you eating on?"

"Nothing, really."

"Nellie," he called through the doorway again, "the case has grown more serious. Bring me another five."

He added that fiver for something to eat to the pair of bills and handed me what amounted to a junior fortune, compared with my situation a minute before. Thanking him six ways to Sunday, I pocketed the money in a hurry and held out

the autograph book. "Write down your address, please, huh? We're gonna pay you back, honest."

"Are you. When Uncle Wiggly gets over being nervous in the service, hmm?" Skeptical as he may have been, he wrote his name and address in, topping it with what he said was a prescription for a conditon like mine.

*I met a boy with hair so red  
it lit up whatever he said.  
He does not need a lucky star,  
his gift of gab will carry him far.*

Passing the album back, Dr. Schneider gave me a last curious look as if still searching for a diagnosis. "You haven't told me, buddy, where that bus fare is supposed to take you."

When I did so, he half laughed again, ending up with what I hoped was just a snatch of philosophy or something. "Good luck and Godspeed. Normally it takes most of a lifetime to reach there."

Herman hardly let our newfound wealth rest in his hand before buying bus tickets out of the natural wonderland of Yellowstone, but then tucked away the remainder of the money, this time in a shirt pocket that buttoned tightly, with the firm pronouncement, "Belly timber must wait, up the road. No candy bars even, until we git where we go."

So it was that we arrived worse for wear inside as well as out, several hours and a couple of bus changes and long stretches of highway later and not done yet, at the Greyhound terminal in Butte, of all places, with Herman unshaven for a couple of days and badly looking it and me in a wrinkled rodeo shirt showing every sign that I had been living in it day and night. Grooming was not foremost on our minds, however. Hunger was making me so cranky Herman had to relent on the candy bars, and he wolfed into the first of his as readily as I did mine while we hustled from the Greyhound newsstand on into the waiting room. For once, we did not have to run eyes and fingers over the almighty map lettered COAST TO COAST THE FLEET WAY for our connection and destination. Up on the

Departures board along with bus times to Denver and Seattle and Portland and Spokane and other metropolises of the West was all we needed to know.

3:10 TO WISDOM.

# —————  
 “Donny, no time to smart ourselves up like Einsteins,” Herman had scolded me in our slambang argument outside the Old Faithful Inn when I blurted that what we needed was Wisdom. “They throw me in the stony Lonesome, like you say,” he grumbled with another furtive look over his shoulder, “I will have plenty time to git wise.”

“No, no, not that kind,” I held rock-solid to my inspiration, surer than sure. “Wisdom is a real place we can go to, honest! See, it’s a town called that.” My finger had punched the map dot beside the name as if it were the doorbell button to the Promised Land. “Wisdom must amount to something, it has a bus depot and everything, way down there in the Big Hole.”

Leaning in and skeptically adjusting his glasses, Herman tried to fathom all this. “Something been digged deep, and the town fell in?”

“Huh-uh, the Big Hole is a sort of a, oh, what do they call it, a real round valley with everything like this.” I cupped my hands as if carrying water, Herman widening his good eye as he followed the description. Giving a little think, he soon had the word.

“Basin? Like to wash face in?”

“That’s it! The Big Hole Basin. It’s famous in Montana, honest.”

“Famous, what for?”

“Hay.”

That had set him off again. “Cow food? Donny, are you lost in your mind? What good is hay to us? We cannot be cow farmers.”

He continued to balk like that until I managed to spell out to him jobs on a ranch in the best hay country under the sun.

“That’s the really great thing about the Big Hole,” I pressed my argument as I saw him waver in the face of facts such as actual wages to be made in a hideyhole off in a corner of gee-oh-raphy from anywhere. “There’s hay up the yanger there, they’ll be putting it up the whole rest of the summer. Time enough for--”

“--Killer Boy Dillinger to go away from public eyes,” he thought out the rest for himself, nodding his head sanely now instead of shaking it like a rattle. “I take back that you left your mind, Donny,” he apologized with a sort of laugh dry as dust. “Let’s go to Wisdom place. Maybe some rub off, hah?”

So here we were, only a pair of dog bus tickets short of the half-hidden town that was the gateway to hay heaven. I couldn’t wait to get there, brimming as I was with visions of driving the stacker team on some well-run ranch with no Wendell Williamson to say Nuhhuh, horsepower over horses, the birdbrain, while Herman was hired on as--well, that would have to be determined. Now that we had made it as far as Butte and one last change of busses, the ride of what appeared from the route map to be only a couple of hours at most should be a snap of the fingers for seasoned travelers like us.

On the other hand, the distance to the ticket office on the far side of the jampacked waiting room gave us both cause to pause. From the moment we stepped in through the ARRIVALS swinging doors, the Butte bus depot looked like a tough proposition. Throughout the waiting room, hard-eyed men with bent shoulders and faces with an awful lot of mileage on them, the best description was, were slouched on benches that would never be mistaken for church pews, and the women perched next to them in their none too good Sunday best for traveling did not look much better. Even more unsettling to me were scruffy boys my age roving

through the crowd, shrilly hawking newspapers at the top of their voices. Orphans! was my immediate thought, captives of that close relative of the poorfarm, the state orphanage right here in the infamous mining city. Around the corner with its door wide open and just waiting, for all I knew, for Herman to be nabbed as a MOST WANTED and me to be dumped into that so-called home for outcast children.

Through time, it did dawn on me that citizens of a famously tough copper company town with neighborhoods called Muckerville and Dublin Gulch where miners with names like Maneater Duffy and Monkey Wrench Mike and Luigi the Blaster and hundreds of others worked in mines such as the Destroying Angel and the Look Out were not likely to be a greeting committee of fashion plates. Even had Herman and I been given that realization then, there was a prickly feel that we had better watch our step--that was Butte for you, if you were an outsider--as we cautiously moved off from the Departures board toward the ticket office.

And then we both saw it at once. The bulletin board alongside the ticket window with all manner of things posted as usual, but standing out like a billboard to us the bold black lettering NEW THIS WEEK FROM YOUR FBI and that lineup of posters with Herman's mug prominent on the very end.

Stopping dead in his tracks, he stared at himself across the distance of the long waiting room. "Are they after me everywhere?" a whisper of despair escaped him.

Did it ever seem so, at our each and every turn, but since then I have caught up with the lore that the dictatorial boss of the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the time, J. Edgar Hoover, used Butte as a Siberia for agents who had fallen out of his favor. Having too little else to do, the local FBI band of exiles was notorious for plastering the city and the country around--even unto Yellowstone National Park, in

our experience--with the latest MOST WANTED posters, apparently in the hope of netting criminals in the backwaters of Montana. It was simply our rotten luck of the moment that with his face here, there, and anywhere, their most likely catch was Herman the German.

"Come on," I said through my teeth. "Here," I handed him what little was left of my candy bar, "hold this in front of your face and pretend to eat it while we go across there. We need those sonofabitching tickets right now." Queerly, the schedule board did not show any Wisdom bus beyond the one, even the next day. If I had learned anything from experience, it was to catch the bus first and deal later with whatever came along.

Herman may have agreed in principle, but in practice he lagged badly as we started to the ticket window, overtaken by understandable reluctance to show himself with his fugitive likeness mirrored on the wall. Nerves all but making his skin jump, he kept neglecting concealment by the candy bar to shoot furtive glances over his shoulder into the swarm of people as we tried to edge through the waiting room without attracting notice. "Ssst," I hissed at him to quit it. Things were bad enough without him acting like a master criminal trying to slink out of town.

About then we passed the usual sign for the conveniences, and before I knew it, he had faded like a shadow into the men's rest room, leaving me abandoned with "Donny, wait here. I be right back."

Oh, great. The worst possible time for a call of nature. Now I was stranded there trying to seem inconspicuous while minding the duffel bag and wicker suitcase, both of which looked suspiciously ratty even alongside the Butte mode of dusty old luggage probably pulled from under the bed. Right away I caught Herman's case of jumpiness. My imagination could feel the entire depot

population looking at me hanging around that moronic way on the path to the toilet with baggage bigger than I was, and while that may not have been purely the case, the sharp-eyed newsboys roaming the waiting room like coyotes on the hunt, constantly sorting people out as likely customers or not, I tensed up at as an immediate distinct threat.

“Hey, looka the greeny,” one of them jeered as they circled past me the first time, which I knew damn well meant greenhorn.

“Yah, fresh off the boat,” laughed another. “Probably got that willow yannigan from his granny in the old country.”

I couldn't tell which made me madder, the slam at me as the rawest of travelers or the crack about the wicker suitcase, which for the first time I stuck up for. Hard as it was, I had to ignore the mouthy newsboys--surer than ever that they were the type of dickheads produced by orphanage life --because it would only take one of them wondering who I was hanging around waiting for so long and then catching sight of Herman's likeness on the WANTED poster and yapping, “Say, ain't he the one just went into the johnny?”

Determinedly looking casual, I tried to kill time by gazing around and around the terminal with surpassing interest except at the incriminating bulletin board. No Herman, no Herman, as minutes ticked away. Now I was the one with nerves making my skin crawl. What the hell was Herman doing in there all this time? At this rate, we would never get anywhere, most especially the Big Hole. Butte had us like quicksand, was my fear. Mired in a mass of people with nothing better to do than to stare at strangers, one of whom was a walking target of the FBI. At the other extreme, I couldn't help but dwell on the ex-convict singling me out in the rest room in Bemidji and what followed from that. Had Herman been rolled by some thug in there who thought he carried substantial money on him, maybe

knocked out or worse and stuffed in a toilet booth? My worry grew every time I checked the depot clock.

At last, thanks be, Herman emerged, still in one piece. Although not quite. I had to look twice to be sure of what I was seeing. Surprise enough, he did not have his eyeglasses on, which he all but slept with. But the shocker was that he had taken out his glass eye.

Face squinched out of shape to stretch the eyelid down and cheek skin up to cover the empty eye socket, he looked different from his WANTED picture, for sure. More like a sideshow freak winking gruesomely.

Words failed me as he said out of the twisted corner of his mouth, "Ready to git, Donny."

Talk about walking like Winnetou and Manitou in the tracks of braves through all time--I was overawed at the amount of guts it took to bring out that grotesque wound for the world to see. I could not help staring, and no doubt people would. But chances were the only resemblance anyone could take away would not be to a years-old picture of a seaman turned fugitive, but more like one of those illustrations of a beached one-eyed pirate in *Treasure Island*.

It was too much for me to tell Herman he only lacked a parrot on his shoulder, though. I barely got out, "Didn't know you could do that with your peeper."

"All kinds advantages to have glass in your head, ja," he said tartly. "Hurry, buy tickets before somebody sees Killer Boy Dillinger under my hat."

At the ticket counter, the clerk idly doing a crossword puzzle took in my suitcase and Herman's duffel with a bored glance as we stepped up. The missing eye didn't faze him a bit. "You boys for the special?"

Herman gave an elaborate shrug as if he didn't grasp that, pretty much the case for both of us, and left the matter to me. Accordingly I answered with a question. "How do you mean?"

"The special," the clerk recited as if it was common knowledge. "Last bus to Wisdom."

The last?

That makes a person think. As in, last chance ever? Or something like dead last, some kind of bus especially for unswift customers who missed out on the real thing?

I still was trying to digest the meaning, Herman now squinched up in thought as well as one-eyed nearsightedness, when the clerk put down his puzzle and pencil and took fresh account of the two of us and our ratty luggage. "Or am I seeing things, and you aren't that sort?"

"Uhm, sure, that's where we want to go. To Wisdom, you bet."

"Then let's see the color of your money, gentlemen." As Herman dug out the fare, which may have been special but still took nearly all of what we had left, the clerk spun on his stool and called to an arthritic-looking man dabbling away at paperwork in the cubbyhole office behind the counter. "Two more, Hoppy."

"The merrier," the man croaked, clapping on a battered-looking Greyhound driver's hat and strapping on the holster for his ticket punch. "Makes a full house, Joe, any other 'boes are gonna have to hoof it." Rounding the counter with a hitch in his gait about like Louie Slewfoot's, he jerked his head for us to follow him. "Let's git to gitting," he said, instantly winning Herman over.

As we trailed the gimpy driver past departure gate after departure gate to the loading bay at the very end of the depot platform, I was more than curious to see what was up with this special bus. As we neared, it became evident this was not

one of the sleek modern fleet, but a stubby early model that had seen more than its share of miles--even the galloping greyhound on its side looked like time was catching up with it, its coat of silver dimming to dusky gray--and plainly was brought out only as a spare. That description probably fit the aged driver hopscotching along ahead of us as well, Herman and I realized with a glance at each other.

What really caught our attention, though, was the horde waiting to board. It was all men. If we thought the Butte waiting room crowd were tough lookers, they were an Easter parade compared with this ill-assorted batch of customers, lounging around on bedrolls that looked none too clean and smoking crimped roll-your-own cigarettes, giving every appearance of having come straight off freight train boxcars. Most of them wore the cheap dark-gray work shirts known as Texas tuxes which didn't show dirt, but even so, the wearers appeared to be badly in need of a washday. I know Herman was squinting apprehensively at this down-on-their-luck collection of mankind who would be our fellow passengers, and surely I was doing the same.

Apparently we were on the driver's mind as much as he was on ours, because he halted under the overhang of the depot just out of earshot of the waiting passenger mob, and gave us a dubious look.

"Free advice, worth what it costs, but maybe you gents ought to find some other way to git to Wisdom. 'Gainst regulations, but I can sneak you a refund." He inclined his head toward the squat old bus. "This is what's called the hay wagon, unnerstand. These scissorbills aim to hire on in haying, down there in the Big Hole."

"Yeah, well," I spoke right up, Herman backing me with vigorous nods, "that's us, too. Haymakers."

"I dunno," the driver looked us over even more skeptically. "Nothing personal, but one of you seems sort of young and the other one pretty much along in years, to keep up with fellas like these."

To my surprise, Herman now said a piece. "Not to worry. Ourselves, we are from Tough Creek, where we sleep on the roof of the last house."

Wherever he had that from in Germanic shoot-'em-up westerns, it was enough to make the driver croak out a laugh and stump off toward the bus. "Join the fun, then. Let's go."

I didn't, though, holding Herman back by his sleeve, too. A vision had come to me from the funnies, unsought but vividly there, of PeeWee the dimwitted little bum and his shabby pals mooching along in "Just Trampin'," from the looks of it about like these hardboiled excuses for humanity we were about to join. The question quavered out of me.

"W-Wait. Are all of them--bums?"

Quick as I said that, the driver turned to us in a sort of crowhop. "You got that all wrong, sonny," he schooled me, "bums don't ride busses. Tramps, now, they maybe might if somebody was to give them the money," he furthered my education. "Been known to happen. But these fellas," our gaze followed his to the waiting men, "are hoboes, whole different thing. They ain't your total down-and-outers, more like hard-luck cases. Got to hand it to them, they travel around looking for work. Seasonal, like. Apple glommers, almond knockers, sugar beeters"--Herman's expression skewed even more as he tried to follow the driver's tally---"what hoboes do is follow the crops. Haymakers, about now, tough a job as any," he added pointedly with another skeptical look at the pair of us. "You better unnerstand, living rough like they do, hoboes by nature are a hard lot. Have to be. For them, it's root, hog, or die."

He paused to make sure the lesson about the harum-scarum nature of our fellow passengers was sinking in on us. "That refund is still ready and waiting."

Herman must have given that the quickest think in history, for I immediately felt his bolstering hand in the middle of my back, making our decision. I spoke it, in our biggest leap of fate or faith yet. "Nothing doing. We're going with on the what's it. The special."

Shrugging as if our blind determination was water off his back, the driver crowfooted away toward the waiting bus. "Hop on."

The last two seats were way at the back of the bus, which meant the entire hobo contingent had a chance to look us over from stem to stern as we wove up the aisle. Stepping aboard right after us, from tossing my suitcase and Herman's duffel into the baggage compartment with a collection of bedrolls and what looked to me like bundles of belongings but for some reason were called bindles, the driver sang out, "Okey-doke, final call. Last bus to W-I-S-D-O-M, for those of you who know the alphabet."

"We're all scholars of the Braille sort," a man taller and brawnier than the rest called out.

"I bet you've put the touch on many a thing all right, Highpockets," retorted the driver, counting heads to make sure the total matched the number of tickets he had punched. "Talk about faces a person can't forget even if he tries. Druv the majority of you scissorbills at this same time last year, if I don't miss my guess."

"That's us, Hoppy, last but nowhere near least," a scrawny old fellow with a cracked voice was heard from next. "Had a chance to take drivin' lessons since then, have ye?"

The driver snorted and made as if to fling his cap at the offender. "I have druv longer than you been off your ma's hind tit."

"That makes you older than the pharoah's dick, don't it, Hop," the fellow plenty far along in years himself cracked back, to hoots of encouragement and cries of "Lay it to him, Skeeter." Of course I was following this like a puppy lapping milk, until Herman tugged my ear to bring me close enough for a whispered, "Phoo. Rough tongues. Don't listen too much."

"Let's can the mutual admiration and get this crate goin'," the one called Highpockets spoke with authority. "Else the best kips are gonna be taken at the Big Hole Riviera."

"Birds like you can always roost in the diamond willows," the driver responded crossly. Nonetheless he dragged himself into place behind the steering wheel, managed to find the clutch and brake pedal with his feet, fiddled around some on the dashboard, and eventually ground the starter--it growled so much like the DeSoto back in Manitowoc that Herman and I couldn't help trading bemused glances--until it eventually caught, and the bus bucked its way out of the depot driveway as if hiccuping.

Hoppy mastered the gearshift somewhat better on the downhill run from the Butte business district and away, I could now hope, from the nightmarish orphanage. Herman was breathing easier, too, as the bus hit the highway, with the splash of MOST WANTED posters receding behind him. The tortured side of his face missing its eye relaxed a little, even.

Pretty quick we had something new to worry about as big Highpockets, who by all indications was some sort of topkick of the hoboos, made his way to the rear and squatted in the aisle by us. Up close, he showed more wear and tear than at first appearance, what Gram called weary lines at the corners of his hooded eyes.

Some time back, his nose apparently had been rearranged by a fist--quite possibly from battling his way into being hobo boss--and he bore a sizable quarter-moon scar at the corner of his mouth. But I would not want to have been the other person in a fight, strong as his unrelenting gaze was and the rest of him more than enough to back it up. Cordial but direct, he asked, "You fellows going calling on the near and dear, down in the Hole? Or what?"

*Or what* required some answering on this bus, all right, as it bucketed along making exhaust noise as if it needed a new muffler, or maybe any muffler. Catching on to the situation if not the conversation level, Herman intuitively sealed his lips in favor of mine.

"Huh-uh, we're going haying like everybody else," I launched into. "See, I'm a stacker team driver, and my grandpa here is a sort of a roustabout, good at lots of stuff. But you need to excuse his not talking," the story built as fast as I could get it out of my mouth, "he's straight from the old country and doesn't savvy English very much. He's over here taking care of me because"--I had to swallow hard to move from invention to the real answer about near and dear relatives--"my parents passed away, and we're all each other has." That at least was the truth of the moment, although Gram was due a major mental apology for substituting Herman for her in the larger picture of life.

Highpockets heard me out with scarcely a blink, his scrutiny all the more unnerving for that. More than a few of the other hoboes were swung around in their seats taking all this in. Like them, Highpockets had on a shapeless old hat that signified rough living and outdoor labor, more than likely the mark of being a true hobo, I saw too late. Sitting back on his haunches, he skeptically eyed our fresh Stetsons and my fancy rodeo shirt. "You trying to tell me you and Gramps are on your uppers?"

Fortunately I had enough bunkhouse lingo to answer, "We're not broke, but we can see it from here." All the honesty I could summon seemed to be called for. "What it is, we got robbed blind. Back on the dog bus, the one from Billings, I mean." Herman, who had gone stiff as a coffin lid at my designation of him as grandpa, unbent enough to bob his head in confirmation of "robbed blind." I plunged on. "A sonofabitching phony preacher gyppo"--my vocabulary gleaned from the Double W riders fit right in with this audience, it seemed--"picked Gramps's pocket and wiped us clean, so that's why we're on here with you." I made myself shut up, praying that was just enough and not too much or too little.

It at least worked with Highpockets, who relaxed and bounced on his haunches a bit, glancing around at the other listening hoboes. "Their bad luck to run into a fingersmith, pulling the old sky pilot dodge, eh, boys? Seen that one put over on many a pilgrim." He slapped my knee, startling the daylights out of me, and gave Herman that round O sign of forefinger touching the tip of the thumb, the rest of the fingers up, which means OK. Herman smiled weakly. "Stealing isn't our style," Highpockets was saying, his gunsight gaze sweeping around to take in the whole set of rough-and-ready men, "at least from each other." Unfolding to his full height, nearly scraping the ceiling of the bus, he gestured around. "You're gonna be with us, better howdy up with the boys."

Right then the bus jolted off the highway, slewing somewhat too fast onto a gravel road headed south. Highpockets grabbed a seatback to keep his balance, laughing. "Hold on to your stovepipes," he advised about our Stetsons, "here comes the real haywagon ride." Another of the hoboes yelled to the driver, "Kick 'er in the ribs and let 'er buck, Hoppy!"

"I'll do the driving, you do the sitting with your thumb up your butt, how about," the driver hollered back, wrestling the steering wheel as the shuddering bus adjusted to the gravel surface, more or less. Which had suddenly narrowed to what

my father the construction catskinner would have scoffed at as a goat trail, so much so that Herman and I now were peering almost straight down the steep bank of a fast-flowing river on our side. I gulped, and Herman narrowed his good eye in concern. I know it wasn't possible for the rear tires to be traveling on thin air over the water, but that's how it seemed.

Unconcerned about the Greyhound flirting with the fishes, Highpockets got back to introductions up and down the aisles. The Jersey Mosquito. Oscar the Swede. Midnight Frankie. Snuffy. Overland Pete. Shakespeare, who looked to me like any ordinary human being.

"Then there's Fingy," Highpockets pointed to a squat swarthy man who gave Herman a comradely wink and waved a hand short of two fingers.

The roster of the last bus to Wisdom went on pretty much like that. Bughouse Louie. Pooch. Peerless Peterson. The California Kid, who was the most gray-haired of the bunch. So many others of the sort that I was losing track, and Herman looked swamped from the first by the roll call of nicknames.

No sooner had Highpockets finished than the scrawny one with shoulderblades jutting high as his neck, the Jersey Mosquito known familiarly as Skeeter, leaned into the aisle and addressed me. "That's us, to the last jot and tittle. Now who be ye?"

At least I had no trouble figuring this out, although I had a pang at forsaking Red Chief.

"I'm Snag." My jack-o'-lantern smile showed off the jagged reason. "And him here," I indicated Herman, "is One Eye," no explanation needed there either.

"Good enough for me." Highpockets credited us both and flashed that OK sign again. "Welcome to the Johnson family," he left us with and worked his way seatback by seatback, the aisle a lot like the deck of a rolling ship as the bus galloped along on the unpaved road, up front to where he sat.

To my relief and no doubt Herman's, the other hoboes took his lead, everyone settling in for the ride, which may have looked short on the map but wound along the twisty river which would head one direction and then another, with timbered mountains hemming it in so close it was hard to see the sky. I began to wonder about this route that hardly seemed to rate being marked in red on a map. Why were there no towns? Or ranches? A forest ranger station, even. Out there in back road nowhere, I grew more jittery as every riverbend curve threatened the Greyhound's groaning springs and Hoppy's straining grapple with the steering wheel, the water always right down there waiting for a bus to capsize upside down.

Soon enough, I had something else to worry about. When a swerve around a pothole the size of a washtub swayed Herman halfway into my seat, he glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then took me by the ear again, this time with a harder pinch. His whisper was all that much sharper, too. "Why am I grossvader all the sudden?"

Uh oh. I didn't have to understand German to know his meaning and that he was put out about being designated grandfather.

"It's to cover our tracks," I sped into rapid-fire explanation as low as I could whisper. "See, this way, if anybody ever picks up our trail and starts nosing around, you're not on the spot for being my great-uncle, like they're looking for, you're just my grandpa in the natural order of things." Herman's deep frown did not move a muscle. Casting around for anything that might thaw him, I invoked the Apache method or what I hoped might be. "I bet Winnetou did this all the time, scrubbing out his trail with a batch of sagebrush or something, so his enemy couldn't run him down. That's all we're doing, you being the grossfather is just our, uh, scrub brush, sort of."

Herman did not buy my interpretation entirely, his grip on my ear not letting up. "Your eye-dea, this Wisdom bus is," he cast a dubious look around at our fellow passengers. "Now look who we are with, one step from bums."

"Two," I said, wincing from his hold on me. "Tramps are in between, remember."

He still didn't relent. "What is this Johnsons family?"

I took a guess. "Maybe it means all the hoboes, sort of like a tribe?" This time I harked back to Crow Fair. "Like the Indians we saw in the camp there, but without tepees or braids or moccasins--"

"No fancy dancing, I betcha, either," he said, pretty sarcastic for him.

"Herman, listen," I persevered, ear pinch or no ear pinch, "like it or not, we have to stick with these guys. Think about it, OK?" I managed to flash the hobo sign for that. "You can tell by looking they aren't ever going to turn you in, are they. They've got their own reasons to avoid the cops."

"Ja, I got that feeling," he conceded, finally relinquishng my earlobe. His murmur seemingly from the bottom of his soul surrendered further. "You are total dead sure about this, getting us into this Johnsons family?"

"Sure I'm sure. What else are we going to do, be on our own while you stick out all over Montana like a sore thumb and somebody recognizes you from that WANTED poster in a post office or someplace and next thing we know, you're headed for prison and I'm slapbang into that orphanage in Butte, right?"

Wrinkled in concentration as he did think things over, Herman followed my logic around all the corners he could, finally shaking his head. "If you say so, Donny. I don't got a better eye-dea." He pressed against his seatback as if bracing himself. "Let's go be hoboes, Gramps will live and learn."



No sooner had our whispered conversation ended than a shout from down the aisle roused the Jersey Mosquito, sitting across from us. "Hey, Skeeter, you old skinflint, pass the bugle," the Johnson family member known as Peerless Peterson, if I remembered the roll call right, piped up, spitting a tobacco plug onto the floor evidently to clear his mouth.

Not for the purpose it sounded like, though. "I'm the man what can, ye damn moocher," Skeeter yipped back, but instead of a musical instrument fumbled out from somewhere something long and slim wrapped in a paper bag. Seeing me onlooking in confusion, Skeeter paused to explain, "Hoppy ain't supposed to see any bottles on the bus. This way, he don't. Right, Hop?"

"You have got the only Greyhound driver with blinders on," Hoppy agreed to that, perilously close to the truth according to the way he hunched over the wheel to peer fixedly through the windshield as the bus shimmied on the washboard road.

Skeeter, proper host, was screwing the top off the hidden bottle when he noticed Herman craning over in curiosity along with me. "Hey there, One Eye, you want a swig? This is giggle juice you don't get just any old where, it's--"

"Wait, don't tell him," I jumped in barely in time. "He'll tell you."

Herman received the sacked bottle from the surprised Skeeter, nodded his thanks, tipped it up like sounding the bugle charge, and chugged enough of a drink to swirl in his mouth good and plenty. He swallowed as if the contents were tough going down, but when he got his voice, he announced without a shade of a doubt:

"Fruit wine, plenty fermented. Wild Irish Rose, I betcha."

"Damned if he ain't right," Skeeter said, popeyed with awe. "How'd ye do that? Boys, we got a miracle worker here. At the hooch store I asked for Rosie in a skirt," he displayed the bagged bottle Herman had without hesitation handed back to him, "I was gonna have some fun with you fellas whose tongues has been

worked to leather by too much Thunderbird. But One Eye nailed it first taste. Beat that!"

Highpockets, who didn't seem to miss anything, shifted in his seat and pinned a penetrating look on me. "What's more, his English improves around a bottle, eh? Usually that operates the other way."

"Yeah, well,"--I didn't have time think up any other explanation for Herman's tasting talent as displayed in The Schooner and now in these circumstances, so a sample of the actual story had to serve; he himself still had his mouth busy trying to rid it of the flavor of Wild Irish Rose--"in the old country he worked for a while in one of those places where they make beer, and that was part of his job, guzzling all the other beers to see how those stacked up against theirs."

"That's the job I want in the next life," Fingy was heard from, clasping his hand and a half in prayer.

General acclamation followed that, along with the bottle passing to ready volunteers turning bugler until it ran dry. I sat back to collect myself, the already more than full day which was winding to somewhere along a tightrope-wide back road pressing in on me, filling me with that feeling of being transported in more ways than one. This backroad trip was not the longest of my life, yet was taking me farther than I ever dreamed. Letty's inscription in the autograph book promised *Life is a zigzag journey*, and as she said, truer words were never. By now Maniwoc, the Crow rodeo grounds, the marooned time at Old Faithful, scary Butte, each and every one was in the memory book in my head as well as the one in my pocket, while an unforeseen chapter waited ahead. On the one hand, what was happening now tingled in me as a kind of off-kilter excitement, similar to that dreamy daze between sleep and waking in the morning, when what is real and what the mind has manufactured in the night are not clearly divided. At this point, Gram

would have told me not to get red in the head and over-imagine things, but this last bus carrying Herman and me and our rough-and-ready gang of new companions inevitably made my mind fly around. Here we were, on a journey my imagination couldn't resist playing with, like being on a stagecoach--if the dog bus didn't qualify sufficiently as the modern version, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line and Postal Courier surely did--packed with the equivalent of owlhoots, the roamers and ramblers, taking new names for themselves as they pleased, out to experience everything of the West.

On the immediate other hand, Herman Brinker and Donal Cameron were now masquerading as a gramps and grandson known to the hobo world as Snag and One Eye, and that in itself should have been a wild enough journey to occupy my mind to the fullest.

My reverie was broken when Peerless Peterson, whose nickname became self-evident as he stuffed a chew in his cheek from a packet of Peerless tobacco, leaned toward me and asked confidentially:

"Hey there, Snag, what was it that happened to your grampop's peeper?"

"Knife fight."

That impressed all those listening in as much as I'd hoped. Herman, as surprised as anyone, thought fast and joined the spirit of things. He took me by the ear one more time but only to tug me close so he could go on at whispered length. I almost could not believe what he was coming up with. It was perfect! Herman at his absolute little-think best beat Karl May by a mile, and when he was finished now, I gave my brightest snaggy smile and reported:

"Gramps says to tell you our last name is Schneider, not that it counts for anything in the here and now, we savvy. But he wants you to know schneider

means tailor in the old country, so all he did was cut the other guy some new buttonholes. In his hide.”

The whole busload roared approval of that description, which no doubt went straight into hobo lingo. Relieved, I sat back, surreptitiously stroking the medicine pouch beneath my shirt, thanking the arrowhead for the luck of encountering Mae and Joe and the generous doctor and their fortunate name, while Herman accepted accolades for the Schneider tale with a grin halfway back to Germany.

Things settled down then, the passengers into general gab with each other, trading gripes about railroad bulls who patrolled the switchyards like it was a sin to climb onto a perfectly inviting empty boxcar and countless other indignities the Johnson family had to suffer. I started to relax somewhat, deciding maybe the bus was not going to topple into the river and drown us just yet, although I did not quit stroking the arrowhead every little while to ward that off. But then, as I kept catching snatches of conversation as the Jersey Mosquito yakkety-yakked with Fingy while Overland Pete swapped observations on humanity with Oscar the Swede, a certain feeling came over me. It was unmistakable, and it had me clasping what lay half forgotten in my coat pocket as if it were a precious rediscovery. I had hit the jackpot, I realized. An entire busload of all kinds, here for the taking with a Kwik Klik.

Excitedly I nudged Herman, drawing a grunt and an inquisitive look. “You know what?” I said close to his ear, resisting the urge to grab it as he had grabbed mine. “I need to get these guys in the autograph book. Nobody else has names anything like them.”

“Except maybe for racehorses,” he spiked that with a guttural laugh. “Ja, fill your book with odd Johnsons.” He yawned, the Wild Irish Rose perhaps

having its effect. "Busy day. While you are gitting them to write, I am going to catch winks."

I still don't know how he could do it, popping off to sleep like that aboard a bus snorting its exhaust and rattling like crazy on the washboard road, but there he went, soundly slumbering by the time I had my pen and album ready and intentions sorted out.

I had brains enough to start with Highpockets, and staggered my way down the aisle to his front seat as the bus bucked along. Ordinarily nothing seemed to surprise him, but this did. He eyed the white album none too trustfully as I squatted by him and reeled off my request known by heart. "If I was to dab something in for you," he questioned, "how would you want it signed?"

"Just with, you know, your moniker." Then I got inspired. "How about *Highpockets, on the last bus to Wisdom.*"

"Fair enough." He took the Kwik Klik and as I had hoped, made a little music on the page.

*There's a land somewhere  
so pretty and fair,  
with rivers of milk and shores of jelly,  
where every man has a millionaire belly.*

"There you go, the hobo anthem, verse number about a hundred and fifty probably," he loosened up into almost a smile as he shifted the album back to me.

"It's nice. I like it." Now I had to try Bughouse Louie sitting next to him, who had been feigning disinterest all the while Highpockets was writng. First, though, I needed my curiosity satisfied. "Can I ask you something?" I stuck with Highpockets. "How come you and the other ho--haymakers wait to take the last bus?"

"I might ask you and One Eye the same," he said mildly, but still giving my heart a flutter as the MOST WANTED poster loomed into the picture. "But I won't."

He leaned back, his big frame squashing the seatback cushion, as he scanned the hard-used and unmaintained interior of the bus, which in that respect matched its exterior, with the practiced eye of a lifetime traveler. "Not exactly soft, swift, and smooth, is it, going by dog in the last of the pack." The bus shuddered across the metal rails of a stock crossing in answer. "But the reason we hold off," he resumed, "to catch this old crate on its last run is because that puts us past the green hay, when ranchers who never learn any better start mowing too soon and try to stack the cut before it dries like it ought to. Haying is tough enough without the stuff being heavy and slippery," he glanced at me to see if I knew that, which I did.

"Uh-huh, real smart," I confirmed, thinking past that seasonal maneuver to the larger matter of Wisdom and the Big Hole and the reputation as a basin of prosperity. "But don't any of you ever, ah, hole up there? I mean, stick around in jobs besides haying?"

Highpockets emphatically shook his head. "Hoboes don't stick," he put it in simplest terms. "We're not barnacles."

Bughouse Louie backed that with a smile that displayed gums instead of teeth. "I sure ain't."

Their point fully made, I thanked the one for honoring my album and was about to ask the other to do the same when I was flatly turned down. "Can't possibly," Bughouse Louie cramped a hand to show me. "Got the arthritics."

Disappointed but expressing my sympathy, I moved on from what would have been that terrific name on the page to someone I figured would have no such trouble wielding a pen, the plain-looking hobo called Shakespeare. By appearance, he might have been anything from a bank teller to an actual whey-faced minister,

but for his hat stained dark from sweat and the faded gray Texas tux work shirt. Accepting the album as if by natural right, he scanned the verse Highpockets had written and sniffed, "Pockets sticks to the tried and true." Not him, according to the way he waved the pen over the waiting page while he thought, his lips moving, straining his brain from the looks of it. Then when he had the rhyme or rhythm or something, he wrote lines like a man possessed.

*The king called for his fiddlers three,*

*He bade them, Play for me your fiddle-diddle-dee.*

*The fiddlers cried, Oh no, sire, not we!*

*The queen giggled and said, They only fiddle that with me.*

*--an original rime by*

*Shakespeare*

Sort of dirty though that seemed to me, I minded my manners and thanked its author--you don't get the name Shakespeare in an autograph book just any day--and let the sway of the bus carry me to the next candidate along the row, Overland Pete. Seeing me coming with the Kwik Klik and the open album, he shook a hand as pitiful looking as Bughouse Louie's. "I'll pass. Arthritis is acting up something fierce."

Huh. I had never heard of an epidemic of that, but it seemed to be hitting half the people on the bus. Before I could choose my next candidate, I heard an urgent "Psst." The Jersey Mosquito several seats back crooked a finger at me.

When I went and knelt by him, he brought his face of crinkles and wrinkles down almost to mine to confide, "Ye want to be a leetle keerful with that book of yours, Snag. The learnin' of some of the boys didn't happen to have readin' and writin' in it."

"I'm sorry," my face flamed. "I should have thought of that. B-but I really want to get anybody I can."

“Then all’s you need to do is wait till payday and keep an eye out then,” the man known as Skeeter counseled. “Them that takes their wages in hard money prob’ly can’t write their names to endorse a check. The rest of us is regular scholars enough to cash our skookum paper right there in The Watering Hole, that’s the bar in town. More <sup>ca</sup>efficient that way.”

I thanked him for that vital lesson and scooted back to my seat. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, I hunched there stewing to myself, was there no limit to what I had to learn by hand, this summer like no other? Feeling sorry for myself and the autograph book, I was fanning through the empty pages that would never know Overland Pete and Bughouse Louie and maybe too many others to make the pursuit worthwhile, when Herman came to the rescue. “Donny, nothing to worry. Other people will write in your book up to the full, I betcha.” I hadn’t even known he was awake--it was twice as hard to tell, after all, with only one eye to judge by--but now, same as ever, he took in the passing landscape as if the West still was the Promised Land, rough road to get there or not.

“Tell you what,” he eased my disappointment, whispering low to not attract further attention from the hoboes in their rounds of bottle and gab, “I will say to you by heart an old German verse and we will make it into English, or something like.” That sounded like it was worth a try, and I perked up as he and I went back and forth over how words looked and what they meant, until we were both satisfied.

*When you take a look in your memory book*

*Here you will find the lasting kind,*

*Old rhymes and new, life in review,*

*Roses in the snow of long ago.*

“Wow, that’s pretty nice,” I said when the final version stood out on the album page in Herman’s scrawly handwriting, “although I’m not sure if I get it all.”

“Nothing to worry, you will someday.” He stretched from the exertions of this day, but grinning as he did so. “Last bus is gitting somewheres at last. See, looking more like a basin,” he drew my attention to a broad gap ahead that the river and the road both relaxed into, so to speak, the landscape turning into the best ranching country I had ever seen. In life along the Rocky Mountain Front, I was used to unbroken cliffs and crags always towering to the clouds in the west, but here the mountains circled the entire skyline, an unforgettable surround of peaks painted beautiful with streaks of snow and the blue of distance. My heart dancing, I gazed around and around at the ring of natural wonders, always coming back to the long valley of ranches and their patterns on the land, where the first hayfields lay tawny in the sun.

The scatter of buildings the bus pulled into at our destination did not look like much of a town. Much of anything.

While the tired dog bus chugged along a wide spot in the highway that was the main street, I tallied a couple of gas stations, a mercantile, a farm equipment dealership, a post office, the Watering Hole saloon as mentioned by the Jersey Mosquito, a supper club that looked like it had started life as a hashhouse, and a sprinkle of houses around. I had to admit, I'd seen Palookavilles that amounted to more. Yet the community of Wisdom famously carried one of the best names ever, by way of Lewis and Clark who were thinking big when they passed through the area on their expedition and grandly dubbed three nearby rivers the Philosophy, the Philanthropy, and the Wisdom. None of those graftings lasted through time and local reference--the Wisdom became altered simply to the Big Hole River, which proved to be the roundabout torrent our road had hugged so closely, and still was flowing good and wide here at our destination--but the little town picked up the name and used its remote location to good advantage as the provision point for the

great hay valley; the nearest municipality of any size, Dillon, was sixty-five miles away through a mountain range.

I mention this only because there was something about Wisdom, scanty as it looked from a bus window, that immediately appealed to me. Anticipation can cause that, but somehow I felt Herman and I had arrived at a place that did not make too much of itself nor too little, and that felt about right. So, I was alarmed when Hoppy the driver did not even slow down as we passed the black-and-white enameled GREYHOUND sign hung to one side of the mercantile's display window.

"Hey, wait, he missed the depot!" I burst out, Herman jerking to attention beside me.

Overland Pete and the California Kid and some others hooted as if that was the funniest thing they'd ever heard, but Skeeter again rescued me from further embarrassment. "We ain't there yet. The one thing special about this excursion is, Hoppy dumps us off right where we're puttin' up for the night."

Soon enough, those words bore truth. The bus jounced off the highway onto a stub dirt road, heading straight for the brush along the river. "We want the beachfront accommodations down the road, Hoppy," Highpockets ordered up. Which drew the peevish response, "I know, I know. How Godmany times have I druv the passel of you there?" Not far from town, near a hidden-away clearing in the thick diamond willows, we rolled to a stop. "Everybody off, far as the golden chariot goes," the driver recited, as I'd have guessed he did every year.

As everyone piled into the aisles and out, Herman and I were the last off the bus, and the final ones to have our belongings hurled out of the baggage compartment by Hoppy, who wished us luck with a shake of his head. We turned to have our first good look at a hobo jungle.

Herman, who had witnessed the Depression, chewed the side of his mouth before saying, "Hooverville without shacks, even."

The poorfarm without walls or roof, was my own spooked reaction to the scene of rough-dressed men strewn around a campfire in the dusk as our own bunch from the bus joined them, pitching their bindles and bedrolls into whatever nooks in the brush they could find. I was horribly afraid Herman was going to remind me it was my eye-dea that brought us to this--he was absolutely entitled to--but he confined himself to, "Find ourselves a place for the night, we better."

Since we were too broke to afford a room even if Wisdom had any, our only course of action was staring us in the face. "Okay, we're gonna have to jungle up with the rest of them," I shook myself out of my poorfarm stupor. "First thing is, we don't look right."

Pulling him behind a clump of brush where we were out of sight from the campfire, I rolled up our pants cuffs to the tops of our shoes and generally mussed our clothes up, pulling our shirttails out some to look baggy and so on.

Lifting my Stetson off, I punched my fist up into the crown to take out the neat crimp and make it more like what the hoboes wore. I held out my hand for Herman's eight-gallon pride and joy.

"Do we got to?" he groaned.

"Damn betcha," I said, reaching up for it so he wouldn't have to commit the crime against it himself. "We don't want to stand out like dudes at a testicle festival."

I beat up his hat against the willows, then rubbed it in the dirt for good measure as he watched in agony.

"There you go," I handed him the limp abused Stetson and clapped my own on my head. "Ready?" I inclined my head to the campfire.

"One Eye is with you, Snag," he said as if swallowing hard.

H —————

Hats beaten up and hearts beating fast, we headed into the hobo jungle in the brush beside the Big Hole River. The kip, as they called it, turned out to be a gravel bar down from a state highway department gravel pit and storage area, where culverts and bridge beams and steel guard rails were stacked. Bunched there in the open air kip, maybe twice as many as were on the bus with us, was a band of men sitting around rolling their smokes in brown cigarette paper. Like beached pirates, was my thought, to go with Herman's roguish missing eye. Imagination aside, it was written in the sparks flying upward from the open campfire and the bubbling of the blackened stewpot hung over the flames that we were joining the bottom end of society, manual laborers with leather gloves stuck in a hind pocket, maybe their only possessions beyond a bindle and a bedroll. Now I was the one swallowing hard.

Blessedly, Highpockets intercepted us before we reached the campfire circle.

"Now I'm not saying you two don't know how to take care of yourselves," that point made itself in his tone of voice. "But after dark here, it's colder than old Nick." Night was fast coming on, and I was remembering the gripping chill outside the Old Faithful Inn. Highpockets shifted his gaze significantly to my scanty suitcase and Herman's sagging duffel. "I don't notice any bedroll makings on you. Better do something about that."

"Ja, what is your recommend?" Herman surprised us both.

"Doesn't speaka the English, eh?" Highpockets gave me an unblinking look. "That's your own business. Up town at the merc, they sell bedroll fixings, old army blankets and the like."

"I will get fixings," Herman startled me further. Chicken hunter he may have been, but Wisdom did not seem to offer much prospect along that line.

I would worry about that later, right now I had a basic concern about getting any kind of shelter over us for the night. "Ah, Mr. Highpockets, I was wondering--"

"No misters in the Johnson family," he said not unkindly.

"Okay, sure, uhm, Pockets. Do you suppose Gramps and me could have dibs on one of those culverts?"

"That's inventive, anyway. Sling your plunder in there to stake your claim," he gave his blessing, turning away toward the kip "Then better come on down for mulligan before it's gone."

I hustled to the nearest steel shelter with my suitcase, Herman following with his duffel and looking thoughtful at the prospect of the metal tunnel just large enough to hold us if we slept end to end. "Go be acquainted," he more less shooed me to the hobo gathering. "I will be a little while in town."

Another worry popped out of me. "What are you gonna use for money? We're just about broke again, remember?"

"Nothing to worry. I have eye-dea."

Whatever it was, I left him to go to town with it, in all meanings of the phrase, while I made my way down to the kip and its inhabitants. But beforehand, at the edge of the brush I encountered Pooch hunched over like a bear as he scrounged dry branches along the riverbank for firewood. When I asked if I could help, he replied "Damn straight" without looking up, and I started tromping downed cottonwood limbs in half until I had a good armful.

I don't know that it would be in any book of etiquette, but I was a lot more welcome walking into the hobo gathering with an armload of firewood than if I had merely strolled in with my face hanging out. "Good fella," said Midnight Frankie,

stirring the black pot of mulligan, otherwise known as a kind of stew nowhere in a recipe book. I dumped my armload on the firewood pile and retreated to the farthest spot on one of the logs that served as seating surrounding the campfire, wishing Herman was with me to provide moral support or at least company.

“For any of you who didn’t have the pleasure of his company on the last bus, this here’s Snag,” Highpockets did the honors of making me known to the other batch of hoboes and them to me. Similar to our busload, they had names all over the map, Candlestick Bill and Buttermilk Jack and Dakota Slim and the Reno Kid--not to be confused with the California Kid--and Left-handed Marv, who had an empty sleeve where his right arm should have been, and so on through enough others to confuse St. Peter at the gate. My presence as a kid with no kind of a capital K did not seem to bother anyone since Highpockets vouched for me and he clearly was the topkick of the whole bunch, the Big Ole--the squarehead kind--as I soon learned this unelected but acknowledged type of boss was called. Why the hobo community fashioned an oversize Swede as the last word in leadership, I hadn’t the foggiest idea--it was their lingo, not mine--but in any case, Highpockets saw to things that needed seeing to, including keeping the peace now when Peerless Peterson and the Reno Kid scuffled over which of them had claimed the spot under a favorable cottonwood first. With that settled by Highpocket’s threat to knock their heads together, things went toward normal, with wine bottles appearing out of bindles every so often and lubricating a general conversation that ran toward the unfairness of a world run by fat cat capitalists and sadistic small-town sheriffs.

By now I was nervously glancing out into the dark, wondering what was delaying Herman and kicking myself for not going with him into town and keeping him out of trouble, or at least being on hand when it happened. Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, could even the remotest of towns like Wisdom conceivably be plastered with MOST WANTED posters, and he’d been thrown into whatever variety

of jail the Big Hole held? I was torn, between holding our spot in the campfire community and plunging into the darkness to go searching for him. What was worse, scared stiff about either one, pinned to my place on the log because deciding either way seemed worse than the other.

In the meantime, the hoboese were loosened up by the circulating bottle and another that magically appeared out of some other bindle, to the extent where there was now a jolly general demand, "C'mon, Shakespeare, give us one."

"My kingdom for a source," that individual half comically half dramatically put a hand to his brow as if seeking inspiration. Mimicking a high-powered thinker--or maybe there was no mimicking to it, with him--he pondered aloud, "Now what immortal rhyme would a distinguished audience of knights of the road wish to hear, I wonder?"

"Quit hoosiering us and deliver the goods, Shakey," Highpockets prodded him.

"As you like it, m'lord," the response pranced out, over my head and probably all the others as well. Crossing his legs and leaning on his knees with his arms, the learned hobo lowered his voice confidentially enough to draw his listeners in, me included.

*"There was an old lady from Nantucket--"*

Audience cries of "Hoo hoo hoo" greeted this promising start.

*"Who had a favorite place to tuck it."*

The way this was going, I was momentarily glad Herman was not there to tell me not to listen too much.

*"It slid in, it slid out--"* the recital bounced the springs toward its climax, there is no more apt way to say it. I could see Pooch moving his lips in repetition to catch up with the words, while Midnight Frankie smirked like a veteran of such moves. Other hoboese banged fists on their knees along with rhythm of the limerick

or leaned back grinning expectantly. By now I was thankful Shakespeare's contribution to the autograph book was only vaguely smutty.

*"slick and sure in its route--"* An artful little pause to build suspense, I noted for future reference. Then the culmination, wickedly innocent in tone:

*"under the bed. Her night bucket!"*

"Ye damn fancifier, here we thought we was gettin' somethin' educational," the Jersey Mosquito called out while other critics hooted and kicked dirt in Shakespeares's direction and told him where to stick the old lady's chamber pot. As the merriment went on, I was giggling along until I glanced over my shoulder for any sign of Herman yet and saw a flashlight beam headed straight for our culvert.

I knew it! He'd been nabbed uptown, and here came a cop to confiscate our belongings. With a feeling of doom, I slipped away from the campfire circle and stumbled up the road embankment frantically rehearsing pleas to the law officer now shining his light at the mouth of the culvert and pawing around in there.

And found it to be Herman, stowing two sets of blankets and wraps of canvas to roll them in. He kept dumping goods from his armload. A Texas Tux work shirt for each of us. Leather gloves, ditto. Changes of underwear, even. Not to mention the flashlight. "So, Donny," he said after a flick of the beam showed him it was me panting up to the culvert. "We have fixings to be haymakers."

"Holy wow, how'd you get that much? Weren't we next thing to broke?"

He fussed with a bedroll a bit before answering. "Old-timey wicker will just surprise you, how much it brings."

It took me a moment for that to fully penetrate, but when it did--

"You sold the suitcase? Gram will skin me alive!"

“Don’t be horrified,” he begged. “It was that or the moccasins. No choice did I have. Had to get bedrolls, can’t sleep bare on something like this.” He knocked a knuckle against the corrugated metal culvert making it ring hollowly.

“Take it from old soldier who has slept on everything but bed of nails, ja?”

“I guess so,” I muttered, taking it a different thing from having to like it.

“But my moccasins and the rest--what’d you do with my things?”

“In duffel.” He messed around with the bedroll a bit more without looking up. “I solded my Karl May books too, to make room.”

So we both had sacrificed mightily, for the privilege of living like hoboes.

We reached the campfire circle in time for mulligan, served in tin billies from a stash somewhere in the kip, along with spoons that no doubt were missing from many a cheap cafe. Both of us feeling starved--candy bars had been a long time ago--we dug into the stew nearly thick as gravy and featuring chunks of potato and pieces of some meat everyone knew better than to ask about. Amid the concentrated eating and mild conversing, Highpockets suddenly lifted his head, Skeeter doing the same. Clicks of someone walking on gravel could be heard, and across the campfire from where we sat, a rangy man stepped out of the night into the fireshine. He had something about him that made the circle of hoboos stir nervously.

“Got room for one more?” he drawled in a spare way I’d heard before.

I blinked, but he didn’t change. It was Harv the jailbreaker. Who was supposed to be in that stony Lonesome at the far end of the state, but obviously was not.

Highpockets responded by unfolding to his full height, hitching up his pants and maybe even standing on his tiptoes a little, the Big Ole to the life, but still didn't match the height and breadth of Harv Kinnick.

But doing what he had to do, he challenged: "You smell the grub and figured you'd mooch? Or you got something more permanent in mind?"

"Might have," said the newcomer, still as a statue.

"Sort of a nightbird, aren't you," Highpockets spoke the guarded curiosity of the hobo contingent.

"Takes a while to get here by boxcar and thumb," Harv mentioned.

Highpockets gazed across the leaping flames of the campfire at the taller man for some moments, sensed the unspoken vote of the group that the roadworn stranger qualified to share the kip, and gave in, saying, "If you're bunking rough like the rest of us, there's enough of the great outdoors to go around. Come on in and plant yourself. Any scrapings in that pot for him, Midnight?"

As the man who looked like Gregory Peck if you closed an eye a little strode in with that purposeful amble of a town tamer and took a seat on a community log when the resident hoboes shifted over for him, the Jersey Mosquito recited the who-be-ye. The newcomer considered the question with that distant look of a soldier or, as Herman's nudge and whisper conveyed to me, a knight, and came up with:

"Harv will have to do, I guess."

All eyes except his shifted to Highpockets again, who could be seen weighing whether an actual given name was up to hobo code.

"Whatever a man wants to go by is his own business, I reckon," he decided to make an allowance for the lack of a descriptive moniker for Harv.

Peerless Peterson couldn't stop from meddling a little. "You don't have any too much to say for yourself, do you."

“Still waters can bust dams,” Harv drawled, spooning into the billy of stew remnants Midnight Frankie had handed him. After an unsure moment, general laughter broke out. “Stick that in your rear aperture and smoke it,” the Jersey Mosquito joshed Peerless, who grinned painfully and retreated into silence while conversation built back up to normal among everyone else. Harv in the meantime silently kept at his mulligan.

“Come on,” I tugged at Herman, “let’s scooch around there to him.”

He was as intrigued as I was. “Ja, he is some man, you can see from here.”

Thinking back, I realized my name hadn’t come up back there on the bus in the company of the sheriff, just things like “button” and so on. Relieved that I could stay Snag, I circled around, Herman on my heels, and edged down on the log next to the newest hobo on earth, making us into old-timers. “Hi again.”

He chewed stew which had reached that point, before saying, “You’re the kid with the autograph book.”

“Sure thing, Mr. Kinnick,” I swiftly used his name to emphasize I full well remembered who he was, back there in handcuffs, too.

“Harv,” he corrected that quietly but in a way that told me not to forget it.

Herman cleared his throat, a signal that prompted me to introduce him as One Eye, my grandfather from the old country and so on, and on some sort of hunch, an inkling that we would be wise to have on our side someone with a knack for evading lawmen, I leaned close as I could to Harv, considerably above my head as he was, and confided, “Gramps is sort of staying out of the way of the, uhm, authorities too.”

Herman stiffened at first, then caught up with my thinking and Harv’s apparent circumstances. “We are not much liking jail either.”

“Then we have a lot in common,” Harv said, proffering a hand even larger than Herman’s outsize mitt.

After the handshakes, I had to ask. “How’d you spring yourself from Wolf Point this time?”

“Wasn’t that tough as jailbreaking goes,” the veteran at it reflected, both of us listening keenly but Herman with real reason to. “They have a habit there of making the prisoner mop the cell, and when Baldy, that’s the deputy,” he said as if jailer was an old acquaintance, “had to go to the toilet, I reached the key ring off the wall peg with the mop handle. I was out and hightailing it down to the tracks by the time Baldy pulled his pants up, I guess. Caught the next freight going west and linked up with Lettie after her shift at that Le Havre.” The mention of his girlfriend brought a pining expression, which he resolutely shook off. “Had to move on from Havre, of course,” summing up in an aside to me, “you can guess how Carl is when he heard I’m out free again.” Did I ever, the half-pint sheriff on the bus suspiciously grilling me as if I was a runaway when I wasn’t--yet--still a memory I wished I didn’t have.

From Harv, this had grown to a speech of practically Bible length, and he wasn’t through yet. “I sort of wish Carl would take it easy on me for slipping jail, when it’s not even his,” he said as if there was more than one kind of justice.

“Yeah, he’s a mean little bugger,” I said boldly, Herman’s good eye policing me not to go too far. “He sure did you dirty, back there on the bus to Wolf Point.”

“Aw, Carl maybe means well,” said Harv out of brotherly loyalty or at least step-brotherly. “It’s just that you put a big badge on a little guy, his head swells along with it.”

After that evident truth, he turned reflective again.

“Still and all, he had something there on the bus, that I should go haying. Taking him up on it, though he doesn’t know it,” he concluded. He shifted attention to us. “Do I savvy you’re here to make hay, too?”

“You bet I am. I mean, we are,” I hastily included Herman.

“I thought you were getting sent someplace back east.”

“That, uh, didn’t work out. See, One Eye is my closest relative from back there, and he wanted to see the West.”

“Ought to be able to get your fill of it around here,” Harv smiled a little.

“Can I ask,” I maybe shouldn’t have pressed the question but he was the one who had racyly all but drawn her into the autograph album, “what about Lettie? I mean, you’re here and she’s there, all the way up in Havre.”

That cast him into silence for some seconds, evidently dealing with his longing until he could put it into words. “We’re working on that. I’m going to save my wages and she’s putting away her tips, and after haying we’ll get married and find some way where I’m not running from jail all the time.”

Herman looked as if he would have liked to add advice to that, but only nodded silently.

At that moment--I’ll never forget it, it is clocked into memory as if with a stopwatch dividing that night of my life--came an outcry from Fingy, stumbling into camp still buttoning his pants from taking a leak in the bushes. “We got company! The town whittler.”

The atmosphere around the campfire changed like a gun had gone off. Certain hoboes evaporated into the willow thicket on the river bank, the others sitting up rigid in a collective stare toward the road, where a black-and-white patrol car with a big star on the door luminescent in the moonlit night was pulling up. Harv stayed as he was, as though none of this turn of events applied to him, and

Herman and I were caught up in his example, whether or not we should have taken to the brush.

Right away, Highpockets was on his feet and in charge. "Anybody been yaffled lately?"

"I done a jolt a little while back," Buttermilk Jack, the oldest of the hoboes except for Skeeter in our bunch, owned up to. "Fifteen days, vag, in Miles City."

"Good time, or did you scoot?" Highpockets pressed what must have been the most veteran vagrant to be found anywhere.

"Served my sentence honest and true," the old hobo swore. "Then they run me out of town. If anybody's on the lam, it ain't me."

No, it was the trio of us at the other end of the log from old Jack, broadly speaking a jailbreaker, an enemy alien, and a kid accused of theft, who fit that description up, down, and sideways. Fear gripped me so savagely I could scarcely breathe. Would my all too readable face, between Harv's imperturbable one and Herman's contorted one, give us away, first of all to Highpockets? He had no stake in us, and as the Big Ole, his responsibility was toward the bunch he traveled through the fields of the West with, the Johnson family compressed into that last bus. He could dust his hands of strays like us to any inquiring lawman, to everyone else's benefit but ours. I am sure my eyes were rabbit and my freckles gone to pallor as I apprehensively watched Highpockets read faces in the firelight.

But just before he reached ours, Peerless Peterson spat a sizzle of tobacco juice into the fire. "Why can't the bastards let us alone? We got as much rights as anybody, but they treat us like dirt when we're not sweating our balls off doing the work for them."

"Shut your flytrap," Highpockets snapped at him, "until we see what this is about. You go poking Johnny Law like that and he's likely to poke back with a billy club, you ought to have learned that by now."

The circle around the campfire went tensely silent as he checked from man to man, "Anybody else the bloodhounds might be after, for anything? No? Let's make sure or we're all in for it." On one side of me, Harv looked on innocently, and on the other, Herman somehow was an equal picture of guiltlessness. For my part, I had to sit tight and try not to appear as guilty as I felt about landing the pair of us in this fix, besides associating us with a jailbreaker of Harv's caliber. Luckily, Herman's whisper put some backbone in me. "Remember, big medicine you have. Makes you brave." Newly conscious of the arrowhead and whatever power it carried, there next to my heart, I managed to guilelessly meet Highpockets' eyes as his gaze swept over the three of us, lingered, then moved on.

"All right, we seem to be in the clear. We've lucked out, some," he reported in a low voice as he recognized the advancing lawman in the moonlight, "it's Mallory, the deputy sheriff over here. He's not the worst as hick dicks go." He still was some kind of sheriff and Herman still was featured on a MOST WANTED poster, and I still was his accomplice or something, skating on thin ice over the bottomless depth of the orphanage. I gripped the arrowhead pouch through my shirt, my other hand clasped in Herman's to tie our fortune together, good or bad.

The deputy and Highpockets acknowledged each other by name as the local lawman stepped into the circle of light cast by the campfire. They did not shake hands, which would not have set well with either of their consituencies. This officer of the law was half again bigger than Harv's banty-size Glasgow nemesis, somewhat beefy the way people get from sitting behind a desk too much, but without that air of throwing his weight around unnecessarily. He did not look overly threatening except for the pistol riding on his hip. That six-shooting symbol of authority, however, was more than enough to draw resentment, loathing, hatred

in some cases, from men harried first by railroad bulls and then the lawmen of communities that wanted them gone the minute their labor was no longer needed. The shift of mood in the encampment was like a chilly wind through a door blown open.

“Only checking to make sure you boys are comfortable,” Mallory spoke directly to Highpockets but all of us were meant to hear.

“There ain’t nothing like it, bedroom of stars and the moon for your blanket,” Skeeter contributed every so casually, as Peerless spat into the fire again. “Care to kip with us for the thrill of it all?”

“I think I heard a feather bed call my name,” Mallory chose to joke in return with a hand cupped to his ear. No one laughed. Heaving a sigh, the deputy got down to business. “Speaking of relaxation, maybe it’d help everyone’s mood to know I’m only coming back from a hearing at the county courthouse over in Dillon, not on the lookout for anyone in particular. But,” he paused significantly, “I figured I’d stop by Highpockets’ old stomping grounds here just to keep myself up to date. Any new faces I ought to be acquainted with, on the odd chance they’d show up in town on Saturday night and I wouldn’t recognize them as haymakers instead of plain old drunks?”

Several of the hoboes who were already at the kip when our bus bunch arrived grudgingly owned up to being first-timers in Big Hole haying. The deputy made a mental note of each, then raised his eyebrows as he came to Harv and Herman and me. Harv merely nodded civilly to him. I was tongue-tied, and Herman did not want to sound the least bit German. In these circumstances, muteness could be construed as guilt--we certainly had a nearly overflowing accumulation of that among the three of us--and just as the silence was building too deep, Highpockets stepped in.

“Snag and his gramps there, One Eye, have been with us since we were sugaring, over by Glendive. The big fella, too. They’re jake.”

“If you say so, Pockets.” The deputy apparently could not help wondering about me, though. “Say there, Moses in the bullrushes. You’re sort of young to be hitting the road like this. What brings you to hay country?”

“My s-s-summer vacation. From school.”

“Some vacation.” Mallory was growing more curious, the audience around the campfire restless with his lingering presence. Highpockets was looking concerned. “These your folks here,” the deputy persisted, “this pair of specimens?”

Herman’s hand firmed on mine, helping to take the quiver out of my voice. “You guessed it. My Gramps, here, and my, uh--”

“Cousin,” said Harv offhandedly. “First cousin,” he glanced at the deputy sheriff barely an instant as if that was the issue.

Mallory’s jaw came up an inch, but he did not challenge Harv’s version of family life. He turned to Herman, studying the ruined side of face where the eye had been and the facial wrinkles that looked deeper than ever in the flicker of the firelight. “Must be nice to have a helper in raising the youngster out in the rough like this, huh, oldtimer?” his question was not without sympathy.

Giving the lawman a sad sweet smile, Herman uttered “Ja,” which for once I was really glad sounded close enough to good old American “Yeah.”

“Well, I’ve seen worse bunches of renegades,” the deputy tried joking again, making a move toward leaving but not before a conciliatory nod to Highpockets and a general one to the rest of us. “Just don’t tear the town up on Saturday night and you won’t see my smiling face again.”

“Herman?” My voice sounded hollow in the confine of the culvert where we were stretched feet to feet. “Do you think that deputy sheriff believed Harv?”

“Does not matter much,” he too sounded like he was at the bottom of a well. “Mister Deputy made believe he did. Sometimes make-believe is as good as belief, hah?” I heard him shift inch by inch to try and get anywhere near comfortable on the corrugated metal, the bedrolls literally saving our skins. “Better catch winks, Donny. Tomorrow might be big day.”

They all were big days, in the Big Hole. And I was among the first to see this one come, at least as represented in human form.

Herman and I crawled out of the culvert at earliest daylight, stiff in every joint and sore in corrugated bands across our bodies, the morning chill making us ache all the more. Were we ever thankful that down at the kip Skeeter was already up--hoboes do not sleep late--and rebuilding the fire while Midnight Frankie was working on mush of some kind in the mulligan pot. The encampment was gradually coming to life as its inhabitants groaned their way out of their bedrolls, abandoning the bed of earth to face another day. Harv could be seen rolling up a bedroll no doubt provided by loyal Lettie. As we crossed the road to head on down for whatever this day would bring, Herman blearily said he was going to the river to wash up, while I needed to take a pee so badly after the night of confinement in the culvert that my back teeth were swimming. Off he went to the gravel bar and I ducked into the brush below the road.

I was relieving myself when someone came thrashing through the willows, swearing impressively, right into the path of what I was at. He cut a quick detour, giving me an annoyed look. "Hey, PeeWee. Watch where you're aiming that thing."

"Oops, sorry."

Still swearing enough to cause thunder, he plowed on through the brush toward the encampment, leaving me red with embarrassment, but what was worse, slapped with that tag. There it was. PeeWee, peeing in wee fashion in the bushes, homeless as a tumbleweed. Nowhere near making Believe It Or Not! but already dubbed into the funnies. My shameful fallen state in life, a tramp, a shrimpy one at that.

No, damn it, a hobo. A haymaker, I resolved nearly to my bursting point, if anyone would just let me. Buttoning up quickly, on a hunch I set off after the visitor crashing his way toward the campfire.

As he burst through the brush into the clearing with me close behind, the tandem of us drawing the attention of the entire kip, I saw he was wearing good but not fancy cowboy boots and a stockman Stetson with a tooled leather hatband complete with a miniature clasp. He probably was around forty years old, although his brown soup-strainer mustache was tinged with gray. Halting on the opposite side of the campfire from where Highpockets and Harv and others were lining up for Midnight Frankie's version of breakfast, he held his palms toward the blaze as if needing to take the chill off. "Morning, men."

"We can agree with both of those," Highpockets acknowledged, the rest of the hoboes risking no commitment beyond silent nods. "What's on your mind otherwise?"

"Putting up hay fast and furious, what the hell else?"

By now Herman had silently joined me, ruddy from the cold water of the river and with his glass eye in and his eyeglasses on. I can't say he looked like a new person, but at least he looked like the old Herman the German, the one ready to hop a bus for the Promised Land somewhere south of the moon and north of Hell. His strong hand on my shoulder lent support as we found a place in the growing circle of hoboes crowding around to hear what came next from the man warming himself by the fire.

Identifying himself as foreman on a ranch plentiful with those Big Hole hayfields, the new arrival glanced around the circle, right over me and past Herman, sorting faces with his quick eyes.

"I'm hoping some of you are the genuine haymaking article, unlike your pals next door," he jerked his head in disgust toward some kip farther up the river. "They don't want to hear about anything but tractors and power mowers. You'd think they were all mechanical geniuses." He paused, studying the waiting faces more intently. "What I'm saying, we're still a horse outfit."

Can a person jump for joy standing still? Not really. But his words set off that kind of upspring of elation in me. At last! Surely an outfit like that would need a stacker team driver, wouldn't it? If only one of the older hoboes didn't beat me out for the job. In an onrush of anxiety at that and wild with desire at the same time, I seesawed so nervously that Herman couldn't help but notice my agitation and whispered, "Stand steady as a soldier, Donny."

"We don't have anything in particular against horses so long as they don't have anything against us," Highpockets was saying. "Am I right, boys?" Amid answers such as "Pretty much" and "more or less," Peerless took care to specify, "Although we ain't no bronco busters, either."

"Don't worry, that's taken care of," the ghost of a smile visited under the foreman's mustache. "Here's the setup," he brusquely went on. "The spread I

work for used to be the Hashknife--maybe some of you put in some time there?"

On our side of the campfire, someone muttered, "That sure as hell fit the grub there. All knife, no hash."

"Don't get your feathers up," the foreman forged on. "The spread is under new management. Fresh owner, wants things done right. I was brought in to cut loose anything that wasn't working, which meant just about every stray sonofabitch on the place. So, but for a few riders summering the cows and calves up in the hills, my crew is out of whack."

"Enough said," Highpockets took over. "Try us."

"First of all, I'm looking for a man who isn't allergic to hay by the load and hard work."

A number of the hoboes took a half step forward. "What's the work?"

"Stack man."

The Jersey Mosquito, who looked like it would be all he could do to push around an empty pitchfork let alone one shoving swads of heavy fresh hay into place, asked possibly out of pure mischief, "Do ye favor building them haystacks big as Gibraltar?"

"Sizable," was as close to that as the foreman would come, but it was admission enough about giant haystacks in high old Big Hole style.

The hoboes, even Highpockets, stepped back to where they were. "A strong back and a weak mind, is what he means," Shakespeare expounded.

"Donny, what are they talking?" Herman whispered worriedly. "Nobody wants haymaking job?"

"Shh. Watch Harv."

Without twitching a muscle, the fugitive from the Wolf Point stony lonesome still seemed to be studying the first pronouncement, before the strong

back and weak mind wisecrack. Then, slowly he stepped forward as if to take the world on his shoulders. "I suppose that'd be me. Up top of that Gibraltar."

The foreman sized him up as if he was too good to be true. "You've stacked hay before?"

"Tons of it."

Inasmuch as any haystack held several tons, that was not as impressive as it might have been. But seeing no chance of a miraculous stack man materializing among the rest of us, the foreman made up his mind. "Well, hell, you look the part anyhow. What's your name?"

"Harv."

The foreman waited, then gave up. "If that's the way you want it, I guess I can stand the suspense until your first paycheck to find out if that's a first name or a last or what you call yourself when the moon is full." The wisp of a smile appeared under his mustache again. "Who am I to talk? I go by Jones myself, one hundred percent." Even to the hobo nation that mocked society by calling itself the Johnson family, going through life as just a Jones sounded like quite a dare, but the man by the fire wore the moniker with bulldog authority.

With that out of the way, Jones scanned the collection of ragtag individuals beyond Harv, his gaze passing me--did he show a flicker of interest at how I was all but falling out of my shoes with eagerness?--as he briskly ticked off on his fingers, "Now I need two mower men and a couple of buckrakers and dump rakers each and a scatter raker. Any of you balls of fire ambitious enough some for that?"

"Bucking," Highpockets got his bid in. Followed by Peerless Peterson: "I can handle a mower team if they ain't runaways."

The Jersey Mosquito laid his claim. "Maybe it don't look it, but I c'n still climb onto a rake seat." Pooch mustered, "Damn straight. Me, too." Midnight Frankie chose driving a mowing machine and Fingy the simpler task of riding a

dump rake, while Shakespeare, the last person I would have picked out as a teamster, announced he was a buckraking fool. So tense that my skin felt tight, I prepared to spring up the instant when the man doing the hiring would realize he was one haymaker short and announce he lastly required a stacker team driver.

Instead came the awful words, "Good enough. That finishes the crew, so let's get a move on. The pickup's parked up the road," Jones gestured beyond the brush of the hobo jungle. "Come on up when you've got your bindles together and I'll pull out the daybook to talk wages and catch whatever you're using for names. Soon as we're squared away on that, we'll go make hay."

As Highpockets and Harv and the others started making their farewells to Oscar the Swede and Snuffy and Overland Pete and Bughouse Louie and the California Kid and the others from the last bus who would wait for other haying jobs to come along, I turned as numb as a cigar store Indian. This was clearly inconceivable, that a Big Hole horse outfit would not use a teamster but some automotive monstrosity like a Power Wagon on the stacker. Yet it all too evidently was about to occur, that bright-as-a-new-penny Jones was committing the same kind of sin against common sense as dumb Sparrowhead on the Double W. Some lofty writer who probably had never held an honest job once claimed that the ability to grapple with two contrary facts at the same time was the mark of higher intelligence, but I must not have been marked that way. Trying to do so only made my head swim.

Seeing how stricken I looked, Herman leaned down anxiously telling me there were other ranches, nothing to worry, we would be haymakers yet somewheres.

Then I glimpsed it when the foreman stopped to check on something with Highpockets and turned his head a certain way, the wink of morning light as the

sun caught the small silvery clasp, not much bigger than a locket but distinct as anything, that held his fancy hatband together.

I grabbed Herman's arm so fiercely he drew back from me in a pained squint. "We absolutely have to get on this crew."

"Hah? How?"

That I had no idea of, but I knew our best chance in the Big Hole was about to be lost if we didn't try something. "C'mon, grab our stuff, we need to catch up with him."

We did so, crashing our way out of the hobo jungle so loudly the foreman looked around at us in surprise as he reached his pickup. "Hey, wait, Mr. Jones, sir. Didn't you maybe forget you need a stacker team driver?"

The ranch honcho leaned against a rear fender, crossing his arms at my challenge. "Not really. I figure to handle that myself, be right there at the stack with the crew that way."

"But then what if there's a breakdown and you have to go to town for parts or somebody's cows get into a field and you have to go and dog them out or there's a runaway and a dump rake goes all skoogey from hitting a ditch and maybe the raker does, too" I started down a well-remembered the list of the Double W haying mishaps. "Or what if the cook throws a fit and quits and--"

"Hey, hey, I have enough keeping me awake at night already," the foreman put a stop to my onslaught.

Thinking over what I'd reeled off, he pushed away from the pickup and turned to Herman, who was trying to encourage our way onto the crew with nods and shrugs and grins while keeping a silence and leaving things to me. "Your boy here makes a pretty good argument for you. It's not necessarily nutty to have somebody else drive the stacker team and free me up for whatever the hell else

happens. You do look like you've had experience of some kind"--maybe too much experience, from his tone as he eyed Herman's lined face and general muss from sleeping in a culvert--"but where'd you last do your teamstering?"

"Not him," I rushed the words before Herman could say something guaranteed to confuse the issue. "Me."

"Yeah?" Jones laughed. "You're the horseman of the family?"

"Oh sure, you bet. I've been a stacker driver since I was eight. On a big ranch. Up north."

"Eight, huh." He played that around in his mustache as he studied me. "Just how old does that make you as we're standing here on the green earth?"

I was perpetually being told I was big for my age. Wasn't it logical for that number to grow to catch up with the rest of me, in this instance? "Thirteen," I said. He looked skeptical. "My next birthday." The next after that, at least. An approximation.

He waited for me to say more, but when I didn't, he let it go. Now he scanned Herman from his city shoes to his eyeglasses. "How about the mister here, who you seem to do the talking for? I don't hear him owning up to advanced years like some."

"He's my grandfather, but he married young," I hoped that would help in my fudging away from whatever Herman's age was. "See, we're all each other has," I laid that on thick while Herman instinctively stayed mute, "and we're sort of on hard times. We really, really need jobs."

The foreman still hesitated "Nothing against you, but you're still just a kid, and you can't have been around workhorses any too many years, whatever you say."

“Make you a deal,” I scrambled to come up with. “If I can’t harness a team the way you like, as fast as anybody else on the place, and show you I can handle the reins, you can fire me right away and we’ll walk back to town.”

The man called Jones settled his hat and perhaps his mind. “Now you’re talking about something. I could stand that kind of guarantee on this whole damn crew--these hoboos are sometimes the teamsters they say they are and sometimes not. You’re on. Toss your stuff in the pickup and I’ll test you out soon as we’re at the ranch.”

He started toward the pickup cab for his daybook as Highpockets and Harv and the others emerged from the kip in the brush swinging their bindles and bedrolls at their sides. “One more thing,” I said quick, stopping him in mid-reach for the door handle. “My grandfather has to come with me. Watch out for me and so on. I’m a, you know, minor.”

“Damn it, you’re going to have me hiring the whole hobo jungle before you’re done.” He thought for a second. “All there’d be is grinding sickles and mending broke-down stuff, sort of second fiddle to the choreboy. Not much of a job, general handyman is what it amounts to.”

It was going to take some serious stretching, but I was about to try to make the case that Herman, who never in his life had been on a ranch outside the Germanic pages of Karl May, could somehow be generally handy, when he startled us both with the exclamation “Sickles!” and gave the hiring foreman the thumb and finger OK sign. “Ho ho, handled hundreds sickles in the old country.”

Both the foreman and I drew back our heads to look at Herman in a new way, Jones eyeing him now him with curiosity or suspicion or both. “I thought your grandkid here did the talking for you. That sounded like you found your tongue all of a sudden.”

"I talk broken, but apprehend some, the English," Herman said blandly.

I pitched in, "He means he pretty much savvies what you're saying."

"That's welcome news." He looked hard at me and then at Herman. "You can talk American, but he can't? How's that come to be?"

"My granddad hasn't been here that long from the old country," I made up offhandedly. I still was worried about Herman at large on a ranch. "There's a little something maybe you better know," I dropped my voice, "he needs to keep out of the way of the livestock. See, he doesn't speak enough of our language for the horses to understand him, just for instance."

"What old country is that, anyway?" Jones demanded. "I'd have thought Giddyup and Whoa were pretty much the same anywhere."

"Switzerland," I chose willy-nilly out of Hertman's world of toast maps, because it was neither Germany nor Holland of the world of WANTED posters.

"No hooley? A yodeleer, is he?" The foreman seemed entertained by the idea, insofar as I could tell past his mustache. "All right, you're both hired, long enough to prove yourselves, anyhow. Let's get you down in the daybook." He reached into the seat of the pickup for a big ledger. "Start with you, teamster whiz. You're--?"

"Snag." I bared the sharp stump at him in what I hoped was a grin.

His mouth twitched. "When you're not being a knight of the road."

"Scotty." He waited for more and I produced, "Scotty Schneider."

With a sense of wonder or something very much like it, I saw that instant new name go into ink as he wrote it down. "And what's his?"

"Uh, Gramps."

"You got to do better than that."

"Fritz Schneider, I am," Herman spoke up, and if I kept a straight face, I don't know how.

“There, you’re both on the payroll,” the foreman jotted down Herman’s alias or whatever it was to join mine. Done with us at last, he turned to do the same for the rest of the crew waiting in curiosity at the rear of the pickup, first sorting out me and Herman. “Youth and beauty up front with me. The rest of you, dump your plunder in back and jump in.”

“That was a good think by you,” Herman murmured as we settled into the pickup seat to wait for our new employer. “Some Swiss speak German.”

“They do? I figured they talked Switzer or something. Whoo, that was lucky.”

“Luck is the star we steer by,” he invoked for the how manyeth time. I was in agreement for once.

“You know what, Herman?” My mood was so high it was a wonder my head wasn’t hitting the roof of the pickup. “We’ve maybe got it knocked, once and for all.”

“Donny, you are extra happy. These jobs are that good?”

“Didn’t you see the clasp in his hatband? The livestock brand?”

The French salute, meaning No.

“It’s the Diamond Buckle. Guess who owns the ranch.”

All but exploding with excitement, I managed to pass the harnessing test--I will say, avoiding a ten-mile walk back to town is no small incentive--even though in the team of workhorses I was given, I had to stretch higher than I thought possible to struggle various straps into place on the lofty back of the huge mare, Queen.

Panting as I finished up on the other workhorse, a sleepy-looking black gelding called Brandy, I couldn't help asking about the gray mare looming out of her stall like the giant mother of the horse race. "How come she's called something nice like Queen instead of Big Mama or something?"

All during my flinging on of harness and scrambling to buckle up this and that, Jones was leaning against the barn wall with his hands in his pockets, critically observing. "The owner's idea, from cards," he replied, appropriately pokerfaced. "Named her that way because he always draws to a queen, thinks it brings him luck. Worthwhile females being as scarce in poker as they are in life generally, according to him."

“Hah, he is some thinker,” Herman, nervous spectator, took that way of warning me not to point out half of that problem could be solved with the French bible deck in his duffel.

Curiosity got the best of me, all this talk of “the owner” as if it was some deep dark secret. Feeling invincible after my harnessing success, I rashly brought the matter out into the open.

“Is Rags around?”

The foreman looked at me sharply, then included Herman. “All right, geniuses. How’d you already figure out the place is his? Most of these ‘boes could be working for Hopalong Cassidy, for all they know.”

When I related sighting the purple Cadillac at Crow Fair and what ensued, and with Herman chiming in about what a bee-yoot-iffle ride Rags had made, Jones relaxed his scrutiny of us somewhat. “Well, good for you. I don’t advertise who owns this outfit, right off the bat, because guys can get the idea somebody like Rags ought to pay higher wages. No worries about that with you two who are just lucky to be here, am I right?” he secured headshakes from Herman and me as if Oh no, any notion of a larger paycheck would never cross our minds.

“Anyway, Rags is riding the circuit,” the topic was finished off, “he’ll pull in here big as life sooner or later.” Shoving off from the wall, the foreman headed out of the barn saying gruffly, “Leave the team tied up until I get the rest of this world-beating crew lined out on their jobs. Come on, let’s go to the bunkhouse and settle you in.”

My feet barely tickled the ground, I was on such a cloud as I crossed the yard of the ranch owned by the champion saddle bronc rider of the world. Was this perfect or what? Miles better than my try at talking Gram into letting me hang on at the Double W back at the start of summer. Look at all that had happened since--in

the giddiness of the moment I folded the high points of dog bus life over the low ones--and hadn't I gained not only the black arrowhead that was big medicine, but Herman, who was something of a found treasure himself except for being a few kinds of a fugitive? Out here he was hidden away, in hobo company where nobody inquired too closely about one's past. To top it all, even if I didn't have a framed certificate to prove it like the gallant Twin Cities newspaper van driver, I now was a teamster!

Accordingly, I was half into another world, one totally without any Bible-dispensing pickpocket nor MOST WANTED posters nor the kid prison called an orphanage--nor for that matter, Aunt Kate--when Herman gradually dropped back a few steps behind Jones's purposeful strides toward the bunkhouse and I heard a significant "Ssst."

Slowing until I was next to him, surprised at his perturbed expression, I whispered, "What's the matter?"

"We are hired, ja?" he made sure in a return whisper. "Knocked, we have got it?"

"Yeah! Out the far end!"

"Good, good. But one something is on my mind," he fretted, quite a change from his usual *Nothing to worry*.

Before Herman could go on, Jones glanced back at the pair of us. "Just to scratch my curiosity itch, where do the pair of you fetch up after haying? Where's home?"

"Oh, where we live when we're not with the Johnson family, you mean," I had to do my best to field that because Herman's face went as lifeless as a MOST WANTED poster. "About the time school starts we'll have to go back east to--" Herman went even more rigid--"Pleasantville. It's around New York, you know. Gramps has a job there, he's the handyman at the Reader's Digest place."