

Jones chewed his mustache as he contemplated us. "So he's got a job there and a job here, does he. Lucky, lucky him." Reciting straight out of the put-upon ranch foreman's book on rules on dealing with the odder elements of a crew, he let us know, "Out here, we're not big on previous, wherever or whatever a person comes from, understand? Just so's you can do this job."

"Ja, we savvy," Herman forced out more loudly than needed. I gave him a look, wondering what could be spooking him when everything was going so slick.

Before I could nudge him aside and ask that question, Jones halted us, saying "Hold on a sec, here's somebody you might as well meet and get it out of the way." He called across the yard to a man limping along toward the chickenhouse carrying a pan of feed. "New hands, Smiley, come get acquainted."

The choreboy, as I recognized him to be and Herman was destined to find out, swerved toward us swinging a leg held out stiff. Holy wow, I thought to myself, first Louie Slewfoot and then the gimpy bus driver Hoppy, and now this lame specimen, all in one summer. Yeeps. Maybe they came in threes, like when famous people died, according to Gram.

Now came our introduction to Smiley, former rodeo clown, whose name outside the costume might as well have been Cranky As Hell. Clowns as I have known them, essential performers at rodeos in drawing bulls and mean horses away from bucked-off riders at the risk of their own lives, those entertainers in baggy overalls and whiteface makeup stayed physically fit from all the running and ducking and dodging in the soft dirt of the arena. This one had gone to flab and deeper ruin from the look of him, with a beer gut that might have looked comical in a costume but in ranch jeans hung precipitously over his belt. Facially he seemed to be sucking on something sour all the time, lips twisted and eyes narrowed. An encounter with a Brahma bull, we discovered soon enough from bunkhouse

gossip, left him with what is called a cowboy leg, crooked and off at an angle, causing that stiff-limbed gait. He seemed to resent the world of the able-bodied with every step he took. Certainly he acknowledged Herman and me with minimum enthusiasm, muttering "How ya doin'" without interest and immediately turning to Jones to demand, "When you gonna let me shoot that cow?"

"How many times do I have to tell you," the foreman gritted out, "no one is shooting any livestock on a ranch owned by Rags Rasmussen. He'll can your ass and you'll hit the skids so fast your head will swim." Herman's brow furrowed as deep as it could go as he tried to decipher all that, and I was in no position to help out. "Waltzing Matilda is only a damn cow," Jones went on as if this had been said too many times before, too. "Don't make her out to be some kind of out of this world critter that's got you buiffaloed."

"A bitch from hell, is what she is," Smiley whined. "Shat on me again." The evidence was fresh and green all over the bottom half of his pantleg. "Did her best to kick me, too. I tell you, she's a killer."

"It is your job to milk the cows, damn it," Jones declared, "and Waltzing Matilda is the best milker on the place, enough said."

Unsatisfied, Smiley scowled--a severe contradiction in terms, but that was Smiley for you--toward a pasture next to the barn where three cattle were grazing as peacefully as a Wisconsin dairy picture, or rather two of them were. The other was a bony brown and white Guernsey with jutting hipbones and a sort of outlaw longhorn look about her, even though she had been dehorned to stubs. Merely from the way she switched her tail, as if spoiling for a target to use it on, I would have bet solid money that was Waltzing Matilda. Herman, maybe from his own alien notoriety, studied the scandalous cow with interest.

"I have some actual good news for you, if you'll simmer down a minute and listen," Jones informed the would-be cow shooter, who dubiously clammed up

and waited. "You're off of grinding sickles. One Eye here will be handling that chore."

"Ja," Herman put in as if sickles were his ordinary diet. "Like in the old country."

"He's welcome to all those sonofabitching things in the whole Godblasted world as far as I'm concerned," Smiley accepted that with a fresh twist of the lips and lumbered crookedly off to the chickenhouse, bawling in a voice that had not lost any of its arena volume, "Chick, chick, chick, come and get it, you damn featherdusters."

Well, evidently not everyone thought the Diamond Buckle ranch was perfect.

Although Herman was furrowing his brow again after the encounter with Smiley, it took more than a used-up rodeo clown to dent my spirits, and I nearly trod on the foreman's heels into the bunkhouse. The one long single room was the ranch standard in those days, never any bargain, with discolored tan beaverboard walls and bare wooden floor and ironframe cots in two rows and a potbellied stove and a battered table with chairs that had rungs missing. Merely quarters for drifting laborers who came and went with the seasons, the bunkhouse for me was a palace where I'd be in with grown men, actual haymakers, a full-fledged member of the crew. Beat that, at eleven going on twelve.

Gab stopped as the foreman stepped in, the hoboes apparently not short of conversation anytime and anywhere. As Herman and I closely followed Jones in, I looked around real quick in concern about the bunk situation, and saw there were two empty ones off in a corner. Highpockets told me simply with the shift of his eyes in that direction that he had saved those for us, and we lost no time in unrolling our bedrolls and chucking the duffel out of the way.

"We'll get going on the machinery pretty quick, the mowers and stacker can be greased up and the rakes can have new teeth put in, any fixup you see that needs doing," the foreman was addressing us all. "First order of business, though, is right here." Reaching into his hip pocket, he began handing out small leather belts of a kind Herman and I alone recognized.

"What's these for?" Peerless asked suspiciously, turning his over like it was a snare of some sort.

"Those beat-up lids of yours," Jones made plain with a tap to his own trim Stetson. "Diamond Buckle hatbands. The owner thinks these'll add a bit of style, he's big on that. Give you the feeling of working on a first-class place."

There was a general moment of uncertainty, going back to the rants in the hobo jungle about the rich with their heel in the face of the poor. This was a step up from that, for sure, but even so it took some thinking about wearing another man's brand on yourself.

"Might as well tell you the rest now that you're signed on," the foreman said into the general silence. "It's Rags Rasmussen that owns this spread. World champion bronc rider, got the diamond belt buckle to prove it. Heard of him, haven't you?" he appealed to Highpockets.

"More or less," Highpockets squared himself up as the Big Ole for the hobo contingent. "We don't exactly ride in the same fashion, boxcars instead of broncoes."

Peerless couldn't keep from harping. "If I had any kind of a diamond and this Rasmussen had a feather up his butt, we'd both be tickled."

"You're bellyaching over nothing," Highpockets shut him down. "If you'd ridden as many killer horses as that man must've, you might have something to show for it, too." He returned his attention to Jones. "We can maybe stand a little fancying up, if that's all there is to it," he decided for the hobo group after a glance

around at how the hatbands were being received. Midnight Frankie was scratching the back of the clasp of his with a jackknife to see if it was real silver. "Imagine, the head that wears the crown sharing a touch of it," Shakespeare said, installing his band on a hat that had seen thousands of suns and the grime of countless fields. Pooch watched to see that it was all right to put his on. Harv pondered his, taking no account of what anyone else was doing, then shined the buckle up on his sleeve and fitted the band on. With ours, Herman and I had no qualms about dressing up our battered Stetsons, proud to share the Diamond Buckle, even it was the size of a locket. All we lacked now was the owner of that championship brand, and of the hay land that would give us work and wages and withdrawal from the treacherous world for the rest of the summer.

"All right, let's get to work," Jones led the way out of the bunkhouse, the crew so various in so many other ways in hatbanded unison as we followed him across the yard toward the machine shed, a structure open on one side so the workhorses could be backed in to the tongues of the mowers and dump rakes and buckrakes and hooked up right there under shelter, a perfect setup most ranches were too lazy to do and left the haying equipment scattered around to rust in the weather. Let's hear it for the Diamond Buckle, my head sang with the help of my hatband. I had to stop myself from skipping, everything in me going pitty-pat about this haymaking dream come true.

Until Herman once again dropped back, motioning me to come close enough for a whisper. When I did, he made my heart stop by asking:

"Donny? What are sickles?"

“They’re the thingers you cut hay with!” I had trouble keeping my voice down when I really wanted to screech, *“Fuck and phooey, Herman, you have to know what sickles are or we’re fired and kicked off the ranch to walk to town and right back to where we started in the hobo jungle, only worse off because Highpockets and the others aren’t there to stick up for us and that deputy sheriff could come back and recognize you from a poster and then we’re sunk.”*

Instead, I sort of hissed desperately, “Didn’t you have sickles of some kind in Ger--the old country?”

His face lit up. “Scythes, you mean, I betcha.” He gestured as if swinging that oldfangled curved implement Father Time is always carrying in cartoons.

“No, no!” I bleated. “Nobody has used those since the Pilgrims or somebody. Sickles, see, go in mowing machines,” I tried frantically to assemble an explanation of modern haying, “and cut back and forth like crazy when the horses pull the mowers, and there’s all these teeth that need sharpening a couple of times a day and that’s what you’re supposed to do, what they call riding the stone.”

“Sorry as all git out”--Herman wrinkled up, trying to imagine--“but riding some kind of rock, I do not savvy.”

“It’s a *grindstone*, get it?” I practically chewed the words up for him. “There’s a seat on it and you sit there and pedal it like you would a bicycle and it makes the stone go around fast and--”

I was growing a little hysterical, trying to conduct a lesson in sickle sharpening, with Herman not comprehending that his chore was the absolutely essential first task in haying. As sure as Murphy’s law, the heavy green hay would clog the mowing machines if the teeth were dull when Peerless and Midnight Frankie pulled in to the first field to start cutting, and we’d be hoofing it back to town on that long road, right back to being on the run from WANTED posters and orphanage nightmares. And wouldn’t you know, with the rest of the crew busy on their machinery with grease guns and oil cans and general fixing up, now here came Jones to deal with us.

“One Eye,” the foreman was in his usual hurry, “let’s get you squared away at the blacksmith shop so you can start right in on the sickles.” As for me, he jerked his head toward the towering wooden framework of the stacker parked behind the shed. “I guess you know where you’re headed. Give all those pulleys a helluva good oiling.”

“Uhm, I’ll get right at it,” I claimed, not moving an inch. “Maybe it’d be a good thing for me to stick with Gramps a little bit while you get him started, though? To, ah, translate, sort of.”

“Come on, the both of you,” Jones said as if it was his own idea, “I don’t have time to parley voo in some other lingo.” He set off in his bustling stride toward a low old log building near the barn. Trailing him just out of his hearing, I managed to whisper to Herman to simply watch me when we reached there.

"I'm just about to be there," I maintained, waltzing wide around the sickle as Herman shakily balanced it while climbing onto the grindstone seat. "I need to tell Gramps one last thing about how we do it in this country."

"Hurry up about it," Jones warned, "standing around gabbing doesn't put up any hay."

As he departed, I took a reluctant deep breath and pulled the medicine pouch out from under my shirt and over my head. "Here, I'll leave this with you a while to go by," I told Herman, unsheathing the arrowhead and placing it on the frame of the grindstone in front of him. "This is what he means about sharp and not rounded off, see? Grind them until they have an edge like this and no more, savvy?"

"Like maybe so?" He tentatively pedaled and sent sparks flying from the bevel of steel meeting the grindstone. Then, though, he halted the encouraging screech of the grinding to pick up the arrowhead and feel its whetted edge with his thumb.

"Lucky one more time, you and it, Donny," he said so softly I didn't correct him to *Scotty*. Holding the charmed piece, he gazed around at the prosperous-looking buildings of the ranch and the shielding mountains beyond and past even that horizon, I believe, to the ups and downs the dog bus had carried us through all the way from Manitowoc; then at me, the hunted look gone from him at last.

"Knocked, we have still got it, ja?"

"Close call," I expelled in relief, relaxing back into the haze of well-being that came with a Diamond Buckle hatband. "But yeah, we still do."

In that summer of flying calendar pages, Big Hole haying was a streak of time, when I take account of myself then, that I can scarcely believe packed so much into my life in so short a period. I suppose it would be like a kid of today

thumbing through the holdings of some smart phone that shows him himself and realizing that a couple of years and robust inches have been slipped onto his pouty eleven-year-old self without notice. Electrifying, to use a word that still holds true of such a shot of overnight growing up.

Exactly as I had seen myself when I ventured into Wendell Williamson's lair to offer myself as stacker team driver in Double W haying before the sparrowhead turned me down in favor of a dumb truck, I proudly was in charge of my own pair of workhorses and a steel cable that the team pulled to hoist the stacker fork laden with hay, and--here truly was the weight of responsibility to rest on eleven-year-old shoulders--of halting the horses every time at just the right instant to drop the thick cloud of hay atop of the stack wherever Harv indicated with his pitchfork.

In doing so, I had to manipulate a ton and a half of actual horses at the end of leather reins, back and forth the fifty-foot-length of the cable each time Shakespeare or Highpockets delivered an overflowing buckrake load onto the broad stacker fork for sending up. Horses are not thrilled with walking backwards--me either--yet that was half our job, backing to the stacker after the hay was dumped at Harv's altitude, and I needed to steadily cluck and coax and tug the reins just so to return us to our waiting spot for the next load. My salvation was Queen, as magnificent to me as the Trojan horse must have been in that age-old tale and as smart as she was grand, dutifully tugging Brandy, dumb as they come except when oats and the barn stall were involved, along with her in the pulling power that ran the stacker.

Love is a strong word to use any time, but I loved that big gray mare, already taking a giant step or two before I could say "Giddyup" or "Whoa back," her big hooves largely responsible for the steady path we wore into the stubble beside each stack, like the front walk to the mansion of hay Harv was building with

his pitchfork. Without Queen's steady horse sense, in the true meaning of that, I would have been sunk those first few days of trudging that same line of march over and over with the sun beating down and no rest for the weary, in Jones's unrelenting way of putting up hay.

All in but my toenails by quitting time, I was anxiously asked by Herman one of those times when I dragged myself into the bunkhouse to wash up for supper, "Tell the Jones it is too much for you, can I? He can put Fingy on stacker team and you on dumping rake, you can sit at your work like me."

"Don't you dare," I found the strength to sound offended. "I'll toughen in." Which I did, day by day, that path worn into the earth beside the haystacks leading me into the gritty line of Camerons and Blegens who had hunched up and taken it since time immemorial.

And see, by the end of the first week of Big Hole haying I held a triumphant mental conversation with Gram, I wasn't too young to live in a bunkhouse like a regular ranch hand.

The cast of characters Herman and I joined were proof that the Johnson family tree had branches of all kinds. Midnight Frankie was from what he called Lousy Anna, and spoke with the *dem* and *dose* of a Creole accent. Shakespeare's tale was one of youthful indiscretions, when he became adept at what he called dialing the treasury, which amounted to safecracking, and it drew him an education written on jailhouse walls and in prison libraries. Peerless had hit the road during the Depression, starved out of an Oklahoma Dust Bowl farm to the California orchards, where the miserable Okie migrant camps turned him into an agitator and bunkhouse lawyer, and aggravating as his mouthing off on practically anything could be, he was not often wrong. Skeeter went farther back in the workingman's struggle against the crapitalists, as he called them, when he

fought the cops in the Seattle general strike of 1919 that got beaten down . Fingy never brought his background out except once when Smiley, obnoxious as usual, asked, "How'd you lose them fingers anyway? She close her legs on you too quick?" Fingy gave him a look as if about to squash a bug and only said, "Two Jima."

Then there was Pooch, who seemed to be the sad sack of the crew, his contribution to conversation almost entirely "Damn straight" and "You said it" as he plodded through life. At first I wondered at the lack of teasing him by these often rough-mouthed men, because in a schoolyard anyone with a slow mind was in for it. But I overheard Highpockets take Jones aside in the barn and explain that Pooch had been seriously worked over by a sap-wielding railroad bull in the Pocatello yards, notorious as the toughest anywhere, and been a little off in the head ever since. Jones, to his credit, said nobody needed to be a mental giant to drive a scatter rake, and he'd make sure Pooch was given the tamest team of horses, after my own.

The one among them who did not share much about what turned him into a hobo was Highpockets himself. He did not need to, so obvious was he as a "profesh" who could make things happen in a collection of men otherwise as stray as cats.

And of course, Harv was Harv.

So, life in the bunkhouse was much like an extended version of that last bus from Wisdom, crowded and crude and somehow companionable almost in spite of itself. But also, with that many of us rubbing elbows in so small a space, an existence in which some friction was bound to occur.

Reading material in the bunkhouse never approached the Condensed Books level, and I was propped in my bunk after supper spending time with one of the

pink *Police Gazettes* that were passed around until they fell apart. Ostensibly deep into "Is Marciano a Cheese Contender Or a Legit Champ?" and the amazing number of secret lives of Elizabeth Taylor, I was all ears for Smiley's latest lustful tale of conquest. Herman was in the crapper, as the convenience with the toilet and sink and shower was always called in a bunkhouse, shaving as he did each evening to stay out of the morning crush for the sink, so I was free of frowns warning me not to listen too much. Smiley was a surprise candidate for rodeo Romeo, to call it that, with his moonface and globular belly, but to hear him tell it he was God's gift to women.

This particular tale of lust involved a devastating Canadian blonde fence-sitting at the Calgary Stampede, who couldn't keep her eyes off Smiley as he went through his clown routine in the arena. To make a really long story short, he got word to her to meet him in back of the chutes while the chuckwagon race was being run, when he'd have a break from clowning. "And we hightailed off to the little trailer I traveled the circuit in back in them days," he finished triumphantly, his rubbery face stretched into a triumphant leer. "Probably in record time, we done the deed every which way. Didn't even have to shed my overalls."

"Ye never even took off your clown outfit first?" Skeeter registered probably everybody's shock at the lack of etiquette. "What are ye, some kind of deviated prevert?"

"You're just jealous," said Smiley smugly, "of how them rodeo sweethearts liked to play rooty toot toot on my gazoot flute."

I was working on that rooty toot toot part and and not really getting anywhere when Highpockets raised onto his elbows on his bunk and spoke up sharply, "Watch your mouth around the kid, can't you?"

"I ain't burning his ears off, am I, Snag," Smiley protested. "He has to learn the facts of life sometime."

“Sure, I’m kind of interested,” I encouraged Smiley. “What’s that flute business mean?”

This brought about rare hesitation in the ladykiller choreboy as he studied me there propped on my bunk, rough-clad in a thousand-miler shirt like the rest of the crew but still plainly a youngster, although a husky one. Whatever other changes the summer may have produced in me, I had grown considerably, right past any semblance of eleven going on twelve. Even so, young, young, young was still written all over me from freckles to boyish oversize feet despite my efforts to camouflage it.

“Come on, everybody, it ain’t nothing but the facts of life,” Smiley defended his position to the bunkhouse generally but Highpockets in particular. “When I was his age, I knew plenty. Ain’t it about time he learned about sailing around the world?” By now I felt like Herman when he’d listened to the hoboes rattling on in their lingo and asked me, “How many languages does English come in?” It was years down the line before I fully understood that Smiley’s lip-smacking phrase meant something like learning the encyclopedia of sex by hand.

“It’s up to One Eye,” Highpockets ruled, sharp again. “None of your concern, so can that kind of mouthing off and--”

“The Pockets is right.” Herman loomed into the room, there is no other word for it, knuckles clenched white on his straight razor as he fixed a snake-killing look on Smiley. “Scotty is good boy. I will take care of his educating.”

“Don’t get your dander up,” Smiley backed down at the sight of Herman and that razor. “I was only funnin’ with the boy, no harm in that, huh?”

“Do your funnying on somebody else,” Herman’s warning hit home on the now wordless Smiley, most of the rest of the crew sitting up and watching, with Highpockets and Harv half onto their feet to head matters off if that razor came into play. But Herman with a contemptuous “Puh” at Smiley crossed the room to his

duffel bag and tucked the ivory-handled cutter away, snapping me to attention with, "Let's catch air. Come help me with sickles."

Neither of us said anything as we crossed the yard to the blacksmith shop in the waning daylight, our long shadows mixing together on the ground in our strides. I felt guilty, although not sure why, and sneaking a look at Herman's set face was no help.

I trailed him into the blacksmith shop past the grindstone, much too plainly sickles not the first thing on his mind. He pulled out a pair of stout boxes from under the workbench and upended them for us to sit on. The sagging old shop which had been a shambles at first, littered with stray tools and rusting pieces of metal and anything else that collects from breakdowns and repairs on a ranch, he had made tidy as a hardware store between his sessions of sharpening sickles. It has taken me until now to fully realize he had repeated the greenhouse, far, far from Manitowoc, an orderly haven for himself.

"Donny," he made no pretense at Scotty or Snag, "I am having doubts about this place."

"W-why?" The Big Hole was showing off in the evening light, the mountaintops still goldenly sunlit while dusk softened the valley of hayfields to buckskin color, with the first town lights of Wisdom sparkling in the distance. To me, the Diamond Buckle ranch right then could not be beat, in any way I could think of.

Herman crouched forward toward me, as if making sure his words penetrated. "Bad company, you are keeping. Not your fault. My own."

"Aw, come on, Herman, don't let what happened in there get you down," I pooh-poohed the bunkhouse episode. "Smiley is as loose as the spool on a shithouse door and you shut him up good and that's that."

Herman passed a hand over his face. "There is some of what I mean. You are picking up language like from the garbage dump."

"So what?" If he was wrought up, so was I. "Goddamn-it-to-hell-anyway, this is what it's like on a ranch. I know the bunkhouse guys cuss like crazy and carry on like outlaws sometimes and all that. But they've been places and done things." I looked him straight in the eye, the good one. "Like you have."

"I have been"--his voice rose, then dwindled--"maybe too much places." He gazed off into the mountain shades of evening, as he must have gazed into many a night since that one in a Munich beer hall. "I am not example to follow. Life plays me big tricks--"

"Not your fault," I defended him against himself, my entire unasked-for summer of being cast to the fates backing up my words.

"--and I do not want same happening to you."

That jolted me. "Look at me here," he went on in the same grim tone, "and you with me, holed up like two Killer Boy Dillingers."

"But it's working out okay, isn't it?" I mustered in response. "We've got jobs, we're making wages, you're safe from the cops-- Herman, what more do you want?"

He was searching so hard for how to say the next I could see it on him. "I am thinking you should go back to your grossmutter some way."

That, I was relieved to shrug right off. "Well, sure, we both know that. After haying and when school starts, if Gram is, is herself again, I'll have to. But that's a real while yet."

"Now, I mean."

His Hermanic word "horrorfied" exactly fit my reaction. "Just up and leave you? W-why?"

Behind his glasses he was blinking hard, and I realized his eyes were moist. "I am doing poor job at being grandpa. You are living with men who have no home except the boxedcars, and are always after by sheriffs, and speak I don't know what language, and the Smiley who is all dirty mouth. It can not be good for you, in bunkhouse. And I can not do anything about it except put the Smiley in his place once in blue moon."

"Skip it. I'm not leaving."

That stopped him cold. "Not yet anyhow," I rushed on to keep him that way. "Not until after haying and then we can figure out what we're gonna do. Each." I was not far from tears, either, at the thought of going our separate ways. But that was not going to happen for as long as I could put it off. "Don't let the bunkhouse stuff throw you, okay? I won't listen any too much, I promise," I tried a ridiculous grin to help both our moods.

Herman wiped the corners of his eyes, blew his nose, sighed a deep surrender. "You are loyal. What can I do but try be same." He reached over and gripped my shoulder in a way that said more than words could. Both of us were one snuffle from breaking down.

He managed to be first at swallowing away the emotion, saying huskily, "Donny, if you are not going to your Gram, very least you must call her, ja? Like when we were on bus trip. If she does not hear from you once in while, she will worry too much and call Manitowoc, and there the Kate is and you are not. And then we are--"

"I know, I know. Kaput." Did I ever have that terribly in mind. Nun, Gram, Jones, they lined up like poles of the telephone line and all scared me. One wrong word to any of them could do us in. Put yourself in my place: Gram was not even supposed to exist, according to what I had told Jones about me and Herman being all each other had, and any slipup on my part that let on to Gram

about the Diamond Buckle ranch would be surefire disaster, and even Sister Carma Jean as suspicious keeper of the phone was no cinch to get past unscathed.

No surprise, then, that I lamely alibied to Herman, "I, I'm working on it. Gonna tackle Jones somehow about using the phone in the boss house, honest. Just haven't got around to it."

He appeared no more eager than me to tackle a foreman who was as gruff as any top sergeant, but gamely volunteered, "Ask him for you, can I, you think?"

"Better let me," I could see no way around the risky business of negotiating a phone call. "He still thinks you don't know diddly about things in this country and can barely spikka the language. We need to keep him thinking that."

"Ja, do not upset the cart of apples," Herman resigned himself to our situation. We stood up, man and boy and more than that through the bonds tying us together this life-changing summer, and he squinted wryly at the bunkhouse as if seeing through the walls to its inhabitants. "Sickles can wait until morning. Let's go be Johnson family."

Just as we were about to step into the yard, however, we heard the *whump* a car makes crossing a cattle guard too fast, then the crushy sound of tires speeding on the gravel road.

Putting a protective arm to me, Herman stepped back into the shop doorway exclaiming, "Emergency, some kind? Look at it kick up the dust."

The car swept into the ranch yard past the outbuildings, scattering the chickens Smiley had neglected to put to roost yet, and easy as the toss of a hat, glided to a halt in front of the boss house.

"Emergency, nothing," I yelled. "It's Rags!"

The purple Cadillac pulled up to the house and Rags climbed stiffly out from behind the wheel, still in his classy bronc riding clothes. For once he was not the absolute feature, though, because with him was a blackhaired beauty who instantly made me think of Letty, except that this one's uniform as she popped out of the convertible with a flounce and a laugh was a fringed white leather rodeo outfit like palomino troupe riders wear.

Herman and I tried not to gawk, without success. "Go on in and make yourself comfortable, darling," we heard Rags shoo her into the house with her ditty bag. "I need to act like a rancher a little bit. Catch up with you in no time."

"Promise?" said she, the words dripping with honey.

As she sashayed on in, Jones came hustling up to greet Rags. "Got a visitor, I see. Another buckle bunny?"

"Naw, she's a performer," Rags drawled, flicking a fleck of arena dust off his lavender shirt.

"I bet," Jones said with a straight face.

"Suzie Q there," Rags said offhandedly, "is only gonna be here overnight until we pull out for the Reno show, first thing in the morning. She's an exhibition rider, stands up in the saddle at full gallop and that sort of thing. Came along with me because she says she needs a refreshing whiff of country air."

Jones actually laughed. "Is that what it's called these days?"

"Don't have such a dirty mind, Jonesie," Rags drawled. Herman's expression said he wished he'd kept me in the man talk in the bunkhouse. "Saw on the way in you're managing to put up some hay," we heard Rags turn businesslike in his casual way. "How'd you make out on the hiring?"

"Old hands from the jungle same as ever, except for"--Jones swept a hand toward where we were standing stock-still as doorposts in the shop doorway--"our Quiz Kid stacker driver and his one-eyed grandpa from the Alps."

"That's different. Gives the place a little foreign flavor." Rags cocked a look across the yard at Herman and me. "Let me take a wild guess," he said as he came over to shake hands, "which of you is the Alpine one-eyed jack?"

"Hah! I fit that description, right up to the glass peeper," Herman proclaimed, delivering him a handshake that made him wince. "Hey, be careful," Rags protested good-naturedly enough, "that's the hand I dance with."

Pumped up as I was in other ways, I took care to shake with him almost soft as Indian style, blurting, "We saw you ride at Crow Fair!"

"Did you now." Rags showed a long-jawed grin. "You had to look quick, the way that hoss had me coming and going."

"Buzzard Head!" Herman exclaimed. "You rided him until the whistler."

"I'm a fortunate old kid," the best bronc rider on earth said modestly. "Old Buzzard could have piled me half a dozen times in that ride, but I could feel every move he was gonna make just a hair ahead of when he'd do it. It's all in the timing, you know, making the right move at the right time."

Holy wow. Hearing the inside skinny from Rags Rasmussen on a winning ride had both Herman and me listening open-mouthed.

“Well, glad to have you on the crew,” Rags said by way of excusing himself as he turned to head for the house. “Got company waiting.”

I don’t know how it is with everyone, but conscience could strike me like lightning. Here was my chance and it would be gone by morning. Recklessly I requested, “Uhm, can I please ask a favor? I need to make a phone call real bad. I mean, I won’t get in your way with the company or anything, honest.”

That set off foreman alarms in Jones in a big way. “Hey, you, anybody who’s ever been on a ranch ought to know better,” he put me in my place with a warning finger and simultaneously accused Herman with a scowl. “We can’t run the damn outfit with every yayahoo in the bunkhouse trotting up here whenever he wants and tying up the phone and costing us--”

“Simmer down, Jonesie,” Rags held up a hand to quell the outburst and asked me curiously, “What’s all the hurry-up on a phone call?”

“To my sick grandma.” Seeing Jones look suspiciously at Herman, supposedly my only relative, I hastily inserted, “On the other side of the family. She’s in the hospital in Great Falls, from an awful operation she had to have, it’s a way long story.”

Rags rubbed his jaw, a gesture I have always associated with sharpening what comes out the mouth next, as smart guys seem to do it. “Sounds like you have reason enough to get on that phone. Come on in and use the one in my office.” He held up a soothing hand to stop Jones’s sputtering protest. “It’s all right, Jonesie. The exception proves the rule or something like that.”

Somehow I had not anticipated this, being led in to the inner sanctum of the ranch owner; it had taken me two years to so much as creep into Wendell Williamson’s office at the Double W. I felt elevated, there at the side of of the

buckaroo lord of the Diamond Buckle, world champion in more than bronc riding, as far as I was concerned.

On his way into the house, Rags limped more than a little, which alarmed me no end. Manners flung to hell, I outright asked the worst: "Did a bronc bust you up, there in Helena?"

"Naw, I drew a sidewinder hoss called Snow Snake that gave me a bad time and sort of banged my knee against the chute gate coming out, is all." He grimaced a way that nothing to do with the knee. "What's worse, I rode the crowbait, but only placed." He raised his eyebrows to indicate upstairs where a certain somebody was getting herself comfortable. "Luckily a consolation prize was waiting."

Noticing my open-mouthed worship of his every word and move, he then and there gave me a pearl of wisdom. "Putting yourself on dodgy horses all the time is a tough go, amigo. I hope you don't have your heart set on being a bronc rider."

"Never. I mean, you're awful good at it and all, but I don't think I could be." His long legs and rider's body next to my chunky build pretty well confirmed that at a glance. "Can I tell you something, though? What I most in the world want to be is a rodeo announcer." I sent my voice as deep as it would go. "Coming out of chute four, it's Rags Rasmussen, champion of the world, on a bundle of trouble called Snow Snake. Like that."

Then the most wonderful thing. The greatest rodeo cowboy on earth, who had heard announcers all the way from rickety roping club arenas to Madison Square Garden, paused at the screen door and offered his hand. His grave experienced eyes met mine. "Let's shake on you making it to the top, son. I think you have the gift." He grinned as I hypnotically shook his hand. "I'm sure not gonna bet against you."

In the magic of that moment, the dream began to turn real. With his spirit in the world of rodeo as great as that of Manitou in the ghostland of the past, the vision never left me. I could foretell it clear as a mirror, the fancily painted broadcast crew bus with the bright red lettering emblazoned on its side where the silver dog used to run.

THE VOICE OF THE ARENA

SCOTTY CAMERON

BRINGS YOU THE WORLD OF RODEO

Fame and wealth, along with the cartoon tribute in Believe It Or Not! for the hundreds upon hundreds of rodeos witnessed at the announcing microphone, those all became within reach with that extended hand of Rags Rasmussen. I had but to live up to what he called the gift.

Way ahead of that, I had to deal with a phone call I did not want to make, hiding my whereabouts and Herman's very existence from Gram.

No sooner were we in the house than a gale in woman form swept down the hallway to us. Not, unfortunately, the trick performer but the cook, Mrs. Costello, who liked to have her nose in everything.

"Oh, Mrs. Rasmussen, you're home! What a relief, I always worry about you." A rawboned woman who looked like she could fight a bear with a switch, she normally ran a backyard laundry in Wisdom, but was a last-minute desperation hire by Jones. When Highpockets on behalf of the crew took the foreman aside after one too many servings of the cooked liver the hoboes called gator bait and asked if there wasn't better grub to be had somehow, Jones threw up his hands and said he had scoured all the way to Butte for a haying season cook, with no luck. Which left us with Mrs. Costello, as addicted to radio soap operas as Aunt Kate,

chronically resorting to dishes featuring canned tomatoes, and making a racket in the kitchen as if the pots and pans were taking a beating while she hashed meals together. Milking time brought another uproar almost daily. She and Smiley hated each other, with her regularly complaining loudly about the splatters of manure on the milk buckets the choreboy would bring in after milking Waltzing Matilda. I have read that the finest Persian carpets would have one strand deliberately left astray, to avoid the sin of pride that perfection might bring. Mrs. Costello was something like that loose thread in the pattern of the Double Buckle, and of course I regarded her as poor material compared to Gram.

But that was neither here nor there; Mrs. Costello obviously had to be put up with, as I could read in Rags's face as she butted in on us before we could reach his office.

"Can I get you and your guest"--she didn't mean me--"some rhubarb pie with whipped cream and coffee?"

"No thanks, we'll save our appetites," Rags said politely. "Excuse us, we've got business in the office."

With a final lingering curious look at me, off she went down the hall, next making an anvil chorus of pots and pans as she started doing the dishes.

Rags wagged his head and said something under his breath which sounded like, "It takes all kinds." He ushered me on into the office and said to make myself at home, which was like telling me I had come a long way from a hobo kip in the willows. I wished Herman were in there with me to share the giddy experience.

Turning to go, Rags thought to add: "Just so we're straight on this phone business. You can check on Granny every so often even if I'm not here. I'll tell Jones and Mrs. Costello it's okay." Somewhere upstairs a radio was going, nice and soft. He winked at me and headed for the stairs, calling, "I'm coming, Delilah."

I sat down at the desk big as a dining room table, trying to take in the whole office. Around on all the walls were framed photographs of Rags riding twisty broncs, and championship awards, the kind of marks of fame I had hoped to see on Aunt Kate's walls when I was under the impression she was Kate Smith. This was worlds better, leaving me open-mouthed as I gazed around at the collection. Wowie. Also, from right there at the seat of Rags Rasmussen's ranch empire, I could see the daybooks arranged as neatly as you would expect from the most scrupulous bronc rider in the world, and fine old furniture which put the Double W's to shame. One item was what I recognized from reading about the Pilgrims as a sinner's bench, a straightbacked hardwood church pew which must have been a rare antique. On it sat one of those hand-carved signs sold at the craft booths outside rodeo arenas, with the wording WHY IS TEMPTATION ALWAYS THE TASTIEST THING ON THE MENU? Well, nobody said Rags lacked a sense of humor.

I knew I had to get down to business and across the summerful of distances make the phone call to Gram, putting on miles in her wheelchair, reading my weekly letters supposedly chronicling the good times I was having in Manitowoc with Aunt Kate. I absolutely had to pick up the phone and do it, but was afraid to. What if she had decided to make up with her stuckup sister, found out I was no longer in Wisconsin, and demanded to know where in tarnation I was and what I was up to?

I'd have to face that if and when it came. Meanwhile, I dialed.

The phone line hummed, Sister Carma Jean answered and for once did not give me a bad time about asking to talk to Gram, instead springing on me the equivalent of, "Here she is."

“Donny! I was starting wonder if the phone line between here and Wisconsin is down.”

“I’m real sorry, but I’ve been awful busy, we’re putting up so much--” I barely caught myself in time--“jam. Strawberry. Jars and jars of it. Aunt Kate has a sweet tooth, you know.”

“I never knew Kitty could find her way around a kitchen. Tell her for me I just knew cooking runs in the family.”

“Oh yeah, I sure will.”

“It’s getting awful late in Manitowoc, isn’t it?”

“We’re just back from the show,” I scrambled to account for the hour of time difference that had slipped my mind.

“I hope it was a razzle-dazzler,” Gram sounded pretty much like her old self. To check on that, I asked, “Are you out of that wheelchair yet?”

“Oh, not just yet. Around here, they call me Helen Wheels.”

I was trying to digest that when Gram was right back at me, laughing and letting me know, “That’s a joke, boy. Has your sense of humor dried up and blown away?”

“Oh, yeah, now I get it. Heck on wheels, that’s you for sure, Gram.” I wasn’t going to let her joke me off what I really wanted to know. “But when are you gonna be up and around?”

She groaned a little, at me rather than her condition. “All right, you with the one-track mind. The sawbones has to check me over some more before he’ll let me up. They’re slower than the dickens about it after this kind of operation.” I felt a kind of guilty relief. It distracted me enough that I missed her next topic of conversation.

“I said,” she repeated and as ever she was not one who liked having to repeat, “how are you and Laddie doing?”

In that summer of many names, Donal and Donnie and Red Chief and Snag and Scotty, and Dutch and Herman and One Eye and Fritz, not even to mention the hoboos' variety, I drew a blank on that one. "Uh, who'd you say, again?"

"The collie dog Aunt Kate got for you, it's right here in your letter, silly."

"Oh, *Laddie*. You know what, he ran away. Quit the country." I dropped my voice. "Couldn't take any more of Aunt Kate, I guess, she ordered him around all the time, poor pooch. Anyway, nobody knows where he went."

"That's awful," she exclaimed, "the poor thing just loose like that."

"Yeah, but maybe he's better off, without being bossed to death like that."

That carried us through, until we wished each other the very best and hung up until the next time.

The good weather of that Big Hole summer and the bountiful windrows of a record hay crop turned the Diamond Buckle crew into haymaking fiends, the loaf-shaped stacks rising in the fields fast enough to please even Jones. Harv really did prove to be a man and a half on the stack, handling many tons a day with his tireless pitchfork. Some days we skidded the stacker to three new fields, we were such scorching haymakers.

Those days fell away like fleeces, and I was caught by surprise when payday abruptly arrived, along with lifted spirits in the bunkhouse that it happened to be a Saturday night and time to go to town. Which of course meant to the Watering Hole.

I was ecstatic at getting my first paycheck. Until I looked at it and looked again, made out as it of course was to Scotty Schneider.

For an instant, Herman raised an eyebrow at Fritz Schneider on his, then grinned. "The Kate would have a cat fit, if she could see."

"Yeah, but," I still was seeing trouble in the way the checks were written out, "what are we going to do with these? I mean, since they're not in our real names, isn't it forgery or something to cash them?"

"Ja, probably," he met that crime with the usual salute, "but no choice do we have if we want our money." Seeing that didn't reassure me one least bit, he tried a lighter approach. "One more name maybe can't hurt, Red Chief."

"You're the one who made us into Schneiders," I reminded him shrilly.

"Scotty," he bore down on the word, "calm down some, please. All is not lost. Maybe they do not ask any too much questions in Watering Hole. Isn't that how they do in the West?"

"It still feels to me like something against the law," I muttered.

"Hah. Add to the list," said the most wanted man in the Big Hole.

Going to town on a Saturday night meant spiffing up, baths having been taken in a galvanized tub filled from buckets on the stove--we cut cards for first water and on down the line, and Midnight Frankie with mysterious inevitability won the right to squat and bathe in the clean tubful with the rest of us to follow in the increasingly gray bathwater. Now what passed for town clothes had been dug out, clean shirts and hair slickum so prevalent on the crew it was remindful of kids dressed up for the first day of school. Herman was the true fashion plate, sporting the mermaid tie which drew winks and remarks about what he was fishing for with it. My rodeo shirt, somewhat faded and showing wear from its summer of long bus rides and strenuous occasions, was the best I could do, but I was trying to buff my stubble-scuffed shoes into respectability when I happened to notice that my moccasins were not where I kept them beneath the foot of my bunk.

Alarmed, I scrambled down onto hands and knees to search under the bed, but they were definitely missing.

Seeing me down there on all fours looking stricken, Herman caught on immediately. Jumping to his feet from his bunk, he shook the bunkhouse rafters with the outcry, "Someone is thief! Scotty's moccasins is gone. I thought Johnson family does not take from its own."

Everything stopped. Skeeter and Pooch and Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare and Fingy and Harv halted in mid-motion at whatever they were doing, their eyes cutting to one another for some kind of answer to Herman's charge. It was bad luck that Highpockets had gone out to make sure with Jones that the crew would have a goodly amount of time to carouse in town, leaving Peerless to niggle at the moccasin matter as Herman stood there with clenched fists. "Now, now, don't get carried away, One Eye. Maybe them slippers just got misplaced. What makes you think any of us--"

"WAHHOO!" resounded from the crapper, and as we all jerked around in that direction, Smiley came prancing out, wearing only his shorts with a towel tucked in like an Indian loincloth, and my moccasins.

The spectacle was as grotesque as it was unexpected, his big belly jiggling over the scanty loincloth and his stark bony bad leg stuck out stiff, as if he was half tub of lard and half stick figure. Poking two fingers up behind his head like feathers, he cavorted around in a crazy lopsided dance, the beautiful beadwork fancy dancers captive on his big feet with him warhooping and bellowing, "Wampum night! Hot time in town! Big chief Geronimo hitting the warpath!"

At first too stunned to do anything, the next thing I knew I had let out a howl of my own and launched into Smiley, grabbing him at the knees. Herman was right behind me, jamming him against the wall as I tried to wrest the moccasins off.

"Hey, don't you know entertainment?" Smiley croaked out, struggling against Herman's grasp. He was a large and fleshy man, almost too much for the

two of us, but we heard Peerless warn the others of the crew, "Better stay out of it, this isn't any of our business."

"I'm making it mine," Harv's voice reverberated, or at least I felt it so. In no time the bigger better-muscled man had Smiley squashed so tight against the wall he couldn't even squirm as Herman lifted one of his feet like the hoof of a horse and I stripped the moccasin off, and we did the same on the other foot.

Right then coming through the bunkhouse doorway to be met by the three of us grappling with the various parts of the nearly naked Smiley, Highpockets let out, "What in tunket is going on?"

"Highjinks of the wrong kind," drawled Harv.

"Joke not funny one least little bit," Herman attested.

"The dickhead swiped my moccasins," I made the matter clear.

"You're the crappiest audience I ever been around," Smiley complained, yanking the towel out from the vicinity of his private parts. "Hell, I was only trying to draw a laugh, get everybody in the mood for town."

"Ye dumb damn piece of maggot bait," Skeeter piped up, "don'tcha know better than to put your meathooks on somebody else's property in a kip like this? People've been knifed for less than that. Ain't I right, One Eye?"

Taking the cue, Herman drew down the eyelid over his glass eye and thrust a hand into his pants pocket as if fondling something there besides lint, sounding amazingly menacing in uttering, "Lost count of stitches I have schneidered, ja."

"Gramps means he's next thing to a killer," I furthered the bluff, rewarded by seeing the ex-clown's fat red face drain of color until it matched his lardy body. "Nobody told me he packs a shiv," Smiley whined.

Highpockets took all this in and restored order. "Everybody shape up or Jones won't let us off the place. Throw some clothes on," he bossed Smiley even though he did not belong to the hobo contingent, "and let's get to town."

—————
The ride into Wisdom was a carefully spaced truce, with Smiley hunkered broodily near the tailgate and Herman and me with our backs against the pickup cab with everyone else between as a buffer, and the miles down the valley of green haystacks passed as agreeably as a picnic outing, the soft and warm summer evening a rare pleasure for men who roughed it in the weathers of hobo life. Naturally Jones drove like the pickup was on fire and quickly enough the little town made itself known, beer signs glowing in most colors of the rainbow at The Watering Hole and the milk-white false front of the mercantile standing out in the dusk. Additionally, there were a couple of sheepwagons that hadn't been there before, prominent now in the vacant lot between the saloon and the gas station. Fingy was the nearest of our bunch to me and I asked in curiosity, "What're those doing here? I thought this was cattle country."

"It's where, ehh, some sales ladies from Butte set up shop on Saturday nights," he answered delicately, and at least I knew enough not to ask what they were selling.

Jones pulled in right at the swinging doors of the Watering Hole. As the crew filed into the joint joshing and laughing, I held back, uncertain. Herman had no such hesitation.

"Wages, remember, Mister Scotty Schneider?" he said firmly, guiding me with his hand on my back to the entrance to I didn't know what.

The Watering Hole inside stopped the two of us in our tracks, maybe even thrust us back a step and much farther than that in remembering. Festooned with lariat ropes and leather reins draped in graceful arcs from the ceiling and the side wall hung end to end with bridles and harness and tacked up ten-gallon hats beyond their days and even angora chaps reminiscent of the leggings I had worn in the fancy

dancing exhibition, the ageless old saloon was like a western dryland cousin of the Schooner, back in Manitowoc. Herman made it official with the exclamation, "Is like home!"

As the crew trooped to the long bar, Skeeter by seniority took the lead, comically doffing his hat and holding it over his heart as he addressed the woman of about Gram's age standing ready at the cash register. "If it ain't Babs, my favoritist bartender in all of Creation."

"My, my, if it don't look like they let the rogues gallery loose," she bantered back. "How's tricks, Skeets?" Spotting the Diamond Buckle hatband on him and the rest of us, she let out a teasing hoot. "Oh ho ho, fellas, you've come up in the world."

"We like to think so," the Jersey Mosquito dropped his hat on the bar to claim his drinking spot as the rest of the crew settled onto bar stools like a flock of birds alighting. "And just to prove it, tune up your cash register, Babs honey, we have got checks galore to cash."

"Again this year," the bespectacled bartender sighed, "fancy that." She fussed with her cash register, lifting out the coin drawer entirely for the fat stash of cash underneath. "Okey-doke, highrollers, the First National Bank of Babs is now open."

Herman still was gazing affectionately around at the saloon trappings, but I watched furtively as Pooch slipped his paycheck to Highpockets to endorse for him, recalling Skeeter's admonition on the last bus that certain people's education did not necessarily include reading and writing. Well, hell, that told me, if forgery was in the works we weren't the only ones, and I got on line with Herman close behind me.



Only to have the bartender pin my check to the bar with an unyielding hand before I could endorse it. "Uh-uh, not so fast," she peered at me through her wire-rim glasses. "What's the story here, Pockets, you taken on a mascot these days?"

"Our stacker driver," Highpockets right away spoke up for me, Skeeter pitching in, "I's his age when I hit the road, so that just goes to show you he's a functionin' employee."

She was unmoved. "By rights, I'm not supposed to allow kids in here, let alone be shoveling money to them."

"Hey," I tried indignantly, "I'm thirteen." Herman nodded maybe too vigorously in backing that up.

"And I'm the Queen of Romania. Sorry, sonny, but I can't accommodate you."

"Have a heart, Babs, he's with us," Highpockets argued, sticking up for me in the good name of the Johnson family insofar as that existed.

"Pockets, I can only cash checks for paying customers or I'd be banking for the whole town right down to the dogs and cats."

"Nothing to worry," Herman asserted with the smack of a hand on the bar so loud everyone jumped a little. "Bar maiden, enough business for us both and then some, I will give you."

The bar maiden, gray-haired as could be, smirked with pleasure at the compliment, intended or otherwise. "You sound like you mean business, sure enough, buster," she allowed, looking him over from the mermaid tie to his strong eyeglasses that pretty much matched hers. "All right, everybody saw the miracle, the flower of youth here grew up while we were watching." She lifted her hand off my paycheck with the freeing instruction: "Dab your name on it and hand it over."

Fingers mentally crossed, I wrote *Scotty Schneider* on the back of the check. The bartender did not even look at the signature, simply stashed it in the

cash register with the others and counted out my wages in nice green bills. "Here you go, angel."

Angel. That was a new one.

As I soaked that in, she cashed Herman's check the same way she'd done mine, and suddenly we were flush with money of the sort we had not seen since the fingersmith preacher robbed us. With that soul-shaking bump in the road now only a bad memory, Herman was in the best of moods, twirling his finger double speed at his temple as if strenuous thinking was required for the big decision he was making.

"Guess what, Scotty. I am having a schooner, hah"--he cocked his eye at the line of spigots along the bar with blazoned handles that were a far cry from the labels of the multiple beers of Great Lakes ports, but indisputably promised the same intoxicant--"to celebrate that we are haymakers, got the smackers to prove it." He dropped his voice. "And no posters of Killer Boy Dillinger out easy to be seen, I watched buildings careful on way in. Saving my neck, the Big Hole is," he grinned triumphantly. "Drink to that, let us."

Signaling the bartender from where she was busy setting up glasses of beer for the rest of the crew, he sunnily included me. "You want bottle of Crushed Orange, I betcha."

"Not now, maybe later." I had been weighing watching people guzzle beer against what was nagging at me, and conscience was winning out. "I need to go do something. It was so busy all week, I forgot to call Gram at the ranch."

"Ja, I was nearly to say so." Herman shooed me toward the swinging doors. "Go, do. I will hold fort here."

As I was pretty sure of, the Wisdom store had an arrangement common to mercantiles in those days before telephones were everywhere, a nook in the back

where a wall phone was available along with an egg timer so you could pay for the length of your call on your way out.

The familiar hum of distance, the suppressed ring at the other end which always went on for a long time at the Columbus Hospital pavilion ward, until some busy nun set aside a bedpan or some other ministrations for the nuisance of the phone, as I imagined it. Then Sister Carma Jean, who by now was getting used to my calls briskly told me Gram would be there in a minute, no mention of fetching her in a wheelchair.

When Gram promptly came on and sounded like her old self in declaring she'd been waiting for me to call so she could share the nicest conceivable surprise with me, I skipped hello to go right to what I believed it was. "You're not in that two-wheel contraption any more, I bet."

"Oh, that," she dismissed those scary weeks of being so bad off she had to be loaded up and pushed anywhere. "I'm up and around and helping in the kitchen. Between you and me, nuns are terrible cooks."

"Jeez, Gram," my voice topped out in relief, "that's really terrific--"

"That's not the surprise, though," she busted right in as if the other news wouldn't keep. "You'll never guess who I've heard from." She could not have been more right about that. "Letty. She called me from Glasgow in her new job there."

I was boggled by that, the entire picture of the lipstick-implanted bus encounter scrambled in my head. "What happened to Havre?"

"A boss who pinched her bottom one time too many. Like once. Donny, why in heaven's name didn't you tell me in one of your letters you met up with her on the dog bus?"

"Uhm, I had a lot I was trying to get in the letters," utterly true, "and must have missed out on that somehow."

"She thinks the world of you, anyway. Said you were real good company riding together." My pride started to swell at that, but Gram was not nearly done spilling the surprise. "She's working at the Glasgow Supper Club now. Here's even better news. She can get me on as night cook."

"In *Glasgow*?" I asked dumbly. "Just like that?"

"Didn't I say so, silly?" she retorted as if I'd better wash out my ears. More of me than that needed clearing to hold what she said next.

"I know it's different country over there for us and we'd rather be on a ranch, but we'll have to tough through it. Letty and I have things worked out, there's an apartment right by hers. When you get home from Aunt Kate's for school, we'll be together under one roof. Doesn't that beat all?"

Yes, no, and maybe fought over that in me. There it was, imagination more or less come true, Letty embossed into our patchy family as niftily as her name on her blouse. And even better yet, maybe Harv too, except he was a wanted man there in the jurisdiction of that snotty little sheriff. By and large, Gram's report was the jackpot of my wishes, but also a king hell dilemma. The best I could manage into the receiver was, "That's--that's really some news."

"You sound like the air has been knocked out of you," Gram said, perfectly pleased. "I can't wait to see you again--you'll have so much to tell me about your adventures back east there, won't you." Not if I could help it. "Donny? I think it'd be only fair if I let your Aunt Kate know how peachy the summer is working out, thanks to you being there with her and Dutch, don't you? Call her to the phone, pretty please. Tell her I said what's past is past, I'd like to talk to her, sister to sister."

"You know what," panic spoke for me, "that's not a good idea right now. Any time I bring you up, see, she snorts like a hippo--"

"I didn't quite catch that, the connection must have gone bad. Like a what?"

“--uh, a gyppo, you know, those chainsaws gyppo loggers use that start up *hnnngk hnnngk*,” my nose came to my rescue, I had to hope. “Anyhow, she’s awful touchy about you, and I wouldn’t want her saying something that would hurt your feelings and make the situation worse and all on account of me.” I made a shameless play for sympathy. “I’d feel real bad about that.”

“I guess you’re the best judge of the situation in *Wiss-con-sun*,” she gently mocked my butchering of the destination which she thought had worked out so peachy. “When the doctor turns me loose for good any day now and Letty helps me get established in that apartment, though, and you can come home whenever you want, I’d like the great Kate to know how much your stay there has meant.”

“Oh yeah, she’ll know.”

I paid up to the merc clerk for the phone call and traipsed the darkened street of Wisdom back to the Watering Hole, weighed down with feelings that did not match up. Unspeakably relieved and glad that Gram was herself again, nonetheless that emotion was shot through with remorse, already halfway to longing, for all I would be abandoning at the Diamond Buckle ranch and the Big Hole. The honest-to-goodness genuine job as haystack teamster. The bunkhouse hoboes who in their coarse generous way had taken me into the Johnson family right there on the last bus to Wisdom and ever since. The prestige of being a ranch hand for Rags Rasmussen, a source of pride I knew I would carry with me all my life.

Against those hard-won rewards, I now was free almost any time to go and be with Gram and Letty as well, a dream ready to come true, but only if I paid up with either deceit or confession about my time on the loose. Did I dare to simply show up in Glasgow, shiny as the silver greyhound forever fleet on the side of the bus, and start spinning extravagant tales about how terrific my summer in

Manitowoc had been? That felt treacherous. The truth had a nasty habit of coming out. At least sometimes.

Before any of that, however, dead ahead through the swinging doors of Wisdom's sole saloon was the matter of Herman. It was only fair to let him know I'd have to leave him sooner than later, wasn't it? Hadn't he brought it up himself, back there in the bunkhouse? So why was part of me wrestling so hard against telling him, at least yet?

The atmosphere in the Watering Hole had turned very beery in my absence, the crew doing its best to drink the place dry in record time. Babs was behind in clearing away empty glasses as she filled fresh ones and scooted them along the bar to the hobo lineup laughing uproariously at some limerick Shakespeare had just composed. I was surprised to see two empties in front of Herman already, plus the one becoming that way in a hurry as he drank with lip-smacking gusto. Elbow to elbow with him there at the quieter end of the bar, Pooch was working on his latest golden schoonerful in his dim deliberate way.

"Scotty!" Herman let out as if we hadn't seen each other for ages.

"Welcome back to Watering Hole, such a place. How is the grossmutter?"

"Up and around," I hedged.

"Good, good. What a woman she is. Time for Crushed Orange, hah, to celebrate her recuperation."

At his arm-waving signal, Babs worked her way along the bar to us and produced a bottle of Orange Crush for me, with the remark to treasure it, it'd be the only drink she'd sell all night that a person didn't get a beer mustache from.

Herman chortled almost into hiccups at that and clinked his schooner gaily against my bottle and then Pooch's schooner with the toast, "The devil's eyedrops cure sorrow," wherever he picked that up. I gulped on more than the orange pop,

unsteadied about cutting into Herman's happy night off from MOST WANTED notoriety and other concerns. Still trying to brace myself up to tell him Gram's news, I was overridden by Babs announcing as if she was directing traffic:

"Make way, boys, you got company. Here comes the Tumbling T crew."

Just as rowdy and ready for moonhowling as our bunch, the newcomers swarmed in and established themselves along the other end of the bar brandishing their paychecks. There was no mistaking who was the Big Ole of this contingent of hoboes turned haymakers. The Tumbling T's leader was nearly Highpockets' height, but could not have been built more differently, with what's called a cracker butt, nothing back there as if that share of the anatomy had gone onto the front in his hanging belly. He turned out to be a boxcar acquaintance of the Jersey Mosquito, who called out, palsy-walsy as could be, to the Tumbling T's main man, "Deacon! You old sidewinder, c'mon over here and pretend you're social."

"Still pestering the world same as ever, are you, Skeeter," Deacon barked a laugh as he joined him. Quick as anything, he spotted the Diamond Buckle hatband on Skeeter's battered headgear. "But what's this?" His laugh became nastier. "You let the rancher slap his brand on you these days? What's next, holding hands and singalongs on the old rancheria?"

Overhearing, Highpockets said with cold control, "Rasmussen just likes to show off that world championship he won the hard way. I'd say he's entitled."

"If it don't bother you to have the boss's loop around your brain," Deacon responded with a slick smile, "it's no nevermind to me. Where's your hospitality, Skeeter, I could use a drink."

While that touchy reunion of sorts was going on, I sipped at my pop, pretty much matching Herman's and Pooch's downings of beer, while conscience worked me over from one direction and then another. I felt I couldn't hold Gram's news to myself, even though I hated to let it out, either. But driven to it at a more or less

decisive moment, I mustered myself as much as I was able. "Herm--I mean, Gramps, I need to talk to you about something."

"Has to wait, please," he said, somewhere in another world as he hoisted his glass for an appreciative sip. "Pooch and me, we got big thoughts to think. Don't we, podner."

"Damn straight," Pooch said mechanically.

"Yeah, but I really need to tell you--"

"Saturday night is to howl," Herman formulated as if it had come from Longfellow. "And lucky us, here we are, south of the moon, hah?"

He shut me down with such a fond grin--for me, for the decorated saloon so much like the Schooner, for the company of our hobo pals--that I did not have the heart to tear him away. There are times when mercy cancels anything else.

As he and Pooch lapsed back into their mute pleasure of imbibing, I tried to clear my head by seeing what else Saturday night in the Watering Hole had to offer, and it was then that I began to catch the drift of the Jersey Mosquito's earnest jawboning of the Tumbling T boss hobo.

"Haven't seen you since we was in that boxcar on the Ma and Pa"--the Maryland and Pennsylvania Railroad in hobo nomenclature--"and that Baltimore yard bull came callin' with a billy club in one hand and handcuffs in the other. I swear, Deac, never saw a man bail out the other side of a boxcar as fast as you. Left me to deal with that railroad dick by my lonesome, you sonofagun."

"Survival of the fastest," Deacon stated his philosophy smugly. The two of them batted boasts and putdowns back and forth like that until Skeeter sprung the trap I realized he had been baiting all along.

"I'm telling ye, Deacon, I know you think you're a helluva drinkin' man. But we got a fella who puts you to shame when it comes to lickin' a glass. Our

man here can take the least leetle sip of anythin' captured in a bottle and tell you just exactly what it is."

"Skeets, you're so full of it your eyes are turning brown," Deacon dismissed that boast with a laugh.

"By the grace of whatever ain't unholy, I swear it's true, Deac," Skeeter persisted. "Seen him do it with my own two eyes." Sensing a chance to hold forth, Peerless had moved in and backed that with, "I'm a witness to that my own self. Damnedest stunt since Jesus turned ditchwater into muscatel."

His interest piqued now in spite of himself, the Tumbling T haymaker peered along the bar at our crew carrying on in Saturday night fashion, hoisting drinks and gabbing as if they hadn't seen each other for weeks. "Where's this miracle of nature you're bragging up?"

"Sittin' right there, answerin' to the name of One Eye," Skeeter pointed a skeletal aged finger toward Herman.

Deacon followed that up with a dubious look, then the even more skeptical inquiry to Herman. "So you're this hipper-dipper sipper who can identify every beer this side of horse piss, huh?"

Herman drew himself up with pride. "Ja, is true."

"Tell ye what we're gonna do, Deac," Skeeter followed right on the heels of that, "if you got any guts left in that stewpot belly of yours. We'll bet that our fella here can have a swig of any of these"--the sweep of his arm indicated the line of beer spigots half the length of the bar, as any serious Montana bar had--"let's say, oh, half a dozen just to make it sporting, and tell you like that"--a snap of his fingers like a starter's gun going off--"what every by God one is, without him knowing aforehand."

Deacon took another look at Herman, who gave him back a vague horsy grin and drained his glass as if in challenge, and it all of a sudden occurred to me

how many empty glasses were in front of him when I came back from the telephone call. "Hey, though, he's already had--" I tried to warn Skeeter, but Deacon overrode me with the shrewd conclusion, "Beer gets to be plain old beer the more you drink of it. What do you think, boys? Shall we call this windjammer's bluff?"

That brought cries of "Hell, yeah!" and "I'm in!" from the Tumbling T crew.

"This suit you okay?" Highpockets shouldered in to make sure with Herman.

"Ja, betsa bootsies," said Herman, with a wink at me which I found alarmingly woozy. "Suits me to a T Tumbler!" he ambitiously tried a joke.

"Babs, set him up six of the Montana brews, shotglasses only," Deacon directed. "We don't want him swilling the stuff long enough to get familiar with it. The Muskeeter here claims he only needs a first swig anyway."

"STOP WITH EVERYTHING!"

Herman had resoundingly slapped a hand on the bar in a manner that indeed did slam the proceedings to a halt. Gesturing in rather grand fashion at the long line of beer spigots as everyone watched wide-eyed, he elucidated, "Not all of these wild woolly brewings am I acquainted with. Samples first, please, bar maiden."

Immediately Deacon was suspiciously accusing Skeeter and Highpockets of trying to pull a fast one by having our man wet his whistle too familiarly before the real taste test, while they hotly argued back that the man was new to Montana and it was essential to the bet for him to learn Babs's stock first so he'd have comparisons to go on. I could not deny the logic--even Pooch delivered "Damn straight" in recognition of it--but was leery of how much beer Herman was taking aboard before the drinks that counted. I did not even know enough then to have the bigger worry, that in the era when almost every Montana city had its own brewery, the brewers almost to a man were of German origin, leading to a certain sameness of

product. It had been nearly thirty years since Herman was testing steins of beer in Munich; did his sense of taste have that much memory of the Germanic tricks of the trade, such as they were?

We were about to find out, because Deacon and his side grudgingly gave in, and Babs the bartender, smiling to herself at all the fresh commerce, set up half a dozen shot glasses. As she named off each beer, I as our chosen representative in this--Highpockets firm that Herman savvied me better than anyone else and we wanted no monkey business in making the individual beers known to him--wrote each on a cash register slip and put it face down under the respective brew. Highlander, out of Missoula. Kessler from Helena. Great Falls Select. The beer from Butte, baldly named Butte Beer. Billings Yellowstone Brew. Anaconda Avalanche Ale.

Unsteady but unconcerned, Herman winked at me with his glass eye, wrapped a hand around the first shotglass, for some reason unleashed the toast, "To the health of all lovers!" and lifted the Great Fall Select to his lips.

Eyes half-shut in concentration as I called out the name of each one, he sipped his way through the preliminary beers. When he was done and jovially declared that Montana beer at least was better than the product of any horse, as quick as the laughter died down Skeeter flapped some money under Deacon's nose and flopped it down on the bar as the start of the pot. "Now about them bets, if ye haven't lost your nerve."

Experience sometimes lives up to its reputation as a teacher. From my time of hanging around the Double W bunkhouse and its card sharks, I was keeping an eye on Midnight Frankie. When he stayed perfectly poker-faced but flipped a nice fresh twenty-dollar bill into the pot--a lot of money, on our wages--saying, "Let's get some skin in the game," I tremblingly stroked the arrowhead pouch for luck

and dug out twenty dollars from the front of my pants and secured the same from Herman's change laying on the bar without him noticing. Nor was I the only one promptly following Midnight Frankie's lead, Highpockets thumbing out the sum with the declaration, "I'm in for a double sawbuck, too," and Harv thinking it over for a moment and then silently doing the same, followed in quick succession by Peerless, Shakespeare, Fingy and Pooch.

"There's our chunk of the jackpot, Deacon," Skeeter crowed in challenge. "Decorate the mahogany or say uncle."

Faced with our crew's total backing of Herman, the Tumbling T outfit looked uneasily at one another, but when Deacon demanded, "C'mon, don't let this gang of broken-down blanket stiffs buffalo us," they all matched our bets. Just like that, a couple hundred dollars lay in a green pile on the bar.

"All right, One Eye, hoist 'em and name 'em off," Skeeter led the roof-raising chorus of encouragement from our side. But before Babs could move to the taps to repeat the beers, Deacon stopped her and everything else with a shrill two-fingered whistle, evidently a hobo signal for something like stop, look, and listen.

In the immediate silence, the Tumbling T chieftain swelled up with the full attention he had drawn, and sprung his demand. "Nothing against PeeWee here"--that again! I could have been put on trial for the murderous look I gave him--"but I want to handle them shot glasses and slips of paper myself, starting behind there at the taps. Just so there's no wrong impression of anything funny taking place along the way. You mind, Babs?"

The bartender backed away to lean against her cash register. "Since whichever bunch of you wins that jackpot is going to pay full price for shot glasses of beer, you can keep on all night for all I care."

Highpockets checked with Herman, who replied that as far he was concerned any fool who wanted to could pour the beer. Establishing himself at the

taps, Deacon made a big deal of drawing the six small glasses of beer, as I hung over the bar watching to make sure he assigned the right slip of paper to each one. Then he arranged the setup on the bar, five glasses in a row in front of Herman with one held back, the hole card, so to speak, so Herman could not figure out the final sample by process of elimination. "We'll let him off with five out of six, if I have the option of switching this one in," Deacon peeked secretively at the slip under it, "so he don't pull some memorization trick on us. Fair enough?"

Skeeter and Highpockets mulled the proposition but could see nothing wrong with it, while Herman pittypatted the bar impatiently to start the tasting. It was agreed that as Herman named off the brand of beer, I would read out its slip of paper to verify he had it right, or heaven and earth forbid, he didn't. With a flourish Deacon mixed around the shotglasses along with their accompanying slips to his contentment and the great drink contest got underway.

Reciting "Ready on right, ready on left, ready on firing line!" in soldierly fashion, Herman reached for the first slug of beer, swilled it briefly before swallowing, and declared "Bee-yoot!" which I verified as the Butte brew. "Attaway, One Eye!" and "Show 'em what the Diamond Buckle stands for!" came the shouts of encouragement from our crew, while the Tumbling T outfit groaned in disbelief.

So it went, down the line, each beer identified correctly at the first sip, until there stood the last two shotglasses, the one Deacon was holding back and the other resting in front of Herman.

Grinning tipsily but still in command of himself, he threw the challenge to Deacon. "Which one is to tickle my tonsils?"

"You're lucky so far," Deacon said sourly, "but let's see if that luck ain't due to run out about now." So saying, he switched the hole card shotglass in for the other one.

This beer I couldn't even guess at. A darker foamy brew than the others, it had to be either Yellowstone Brew or Avalanche Ale, but with everything riding on Herman's final feat of swilling a mouthful and identifying it, fifty-fifty odds all of a sudden didn't seem anything like a cinch. But quite nonchalantly, he raised the shotglass, said "Bottoms upside," and in one motion swigged the mystery beer.

To my alarm, he chugged it too much, more of it going down him than the other beers had. Not for long, because what was left in his mouth he spewed onto the bar, his face contorted. Gagging and trying to speak, he was making a *k-k-k* sound like a car trying to start on a cold morning, as our crew watched in horror, me most of all. Whatever was wrong with him was calamity enough, but I could also see a major portion of our wages about to vanish in front of our eyes.

"Told you," Deacon crowed as he moved along the bar toward the pot. "Wore out his gullet after so many beers. Let's have that money and we'll even buy you a consolation round, Pockets," he couldn't hide his smirk.

"Herman, what is it?" I quavered as he kept trying to work his throat. "What's wrong?" Not knowing what else to do, I slammed him across the top of his back with my open hand as hard as I could.

The blow must have loosened up something somehow. "K-k-k-cough drop," he spluttered, pointing shakily at the offending shotglass.

"Deacon, you cheating bastard," Highpockets caught on to the dodge ahead of the rest of us, but not by much. "Grab him." Harv already had accomplished that, locking the protesting Deacon to his chest from behind as casually as gathering an armful of hay. "Frisk him good," Highpockets ordered, Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare quick on the job.

Into sight came an orange box bearing the words LUDEN'S MENTHOL
COUGH DROPS LEMON FLAVOR.

"I'd say you just forfeited, Deacon," Highpockets pronounced, while I did my best to attend to Herman as he stayed bent over the bar, wheezing and still trying to clear his voicebox.

"Can't you take a joke?" Deacon squawked in Harv's steely grip. "Let's call it a draw and just scrap the bet."

"Draw, my rosy red butt," that brought Peerless into it in full mode. "You can't pull a fast one like that and crawl out of it like a snake on ice."

His Tumbling T equivalent argued right back. "Hey, your fella tumbled to the cough drop, but he never did name the beer. So by rights, we win the bet."

"Tell it in church, ye whistledick," the Jersey Mosquito put a stop to this. "We're claimin' the pot fair and square," he declared, whipping off his hat and scooping the pile of money into it. Then with surprising agility, he hoisted his bony old rump onto the bar, swung his legs over as the Tumbling T gang made futile grabs at him and Babs screeched a protest, and disappeared down among beer barrels and such, clutching the hatful of cash to him.

That set off general mayhem.

Each crew charged at the other, swearing and squaring off. Harv seemed to be in his element, flooring one Tumbling T opponent with a roundhouse punch and taking on the next without drawing a breath. Fingy and Pooch between them were fending with a burly member of the other crew. As befitted their leadership positions Highpockets and Deacon singled each other out, locked together in a revolving grapple along the length of the bar that sent beer glasses shattering and stools tumbling like dominoes. Peerless and Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare each were honorably engaged in tussles of their own with Tumbling T bettors yowling for their money back.

Amidst the battle royal I saw that Babs the bartender, repeating "Hey, settle down! Pay up for those beers!" to no effect, had pulled out a pool stick sawed off

to the right length to make a good club and was starting around the end of the bar to put it to use.

Taking that as a clear signal this was getting serious, I tugged at Herman for us to clear out of there. Blinking his good eye at the melee around him, he resisted my pulling, saying thickly, "Wait, Donny. Oops, Scotty. You know who I mean. Let's don't go, I have to help fellas fight."

"Nothing doing. You've had your war," I gritted out and hauled at him with all my might, yanking him off the bar stool in the direction of the door. In my death grip on his arm, he stumbled after me as we skinned along the bar, ducking and dodging swinging fists and reeling bodies as much as we could, out into the street and to where the pickup was parked.

After manipulating him into sitting on the running board, still protesting that he wanted to join the battle that could be heard raging on in the Watering Hole, I said loudly and clearly: "Don't move. Sing a song, say poetry, do something."

"Good eye-dea," he said dreamily, and began to recite the rhyme we fashioned on the last bus:

*"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."*

Lovely sentiments, but I had to leave him deposited there while I raced off to the mercantile, on the chance Jones might still be in there buying groceries. I couldn't help looking wildly this way and that along the moonlit street of Wisdom, hoping that deputy sheriff who had shown up out of the dark when we were in the hobo jungle would not choose now to pay another visit.

As I burst into the store, Jones glanced around in surprise from chucking an armload of loaves of bread onto the counter while the storekeeper kept tally. Before

he could ask what my rush was, I stammered, "The fellas are ready to go back to the ranch."

"What, they drank the town dry already? Pretty close to a new record, I'd say." He turned away to grab boxes of macaroni off a shelf. "Tell them I'll be there by the time they can piss the beer out of themselves. I'm not stopping every two minutes on the way to the ranch so somebody can take a leak."

"Uhm, if you could hurry. They're sort of in a fight. With the Tumbling T crew."

Jones swore blue sparks into the air, instructed the storekeeper to load the groceries in the pickup and put the bill on the Diamond Buckle tab, then took off at a high run for the bar, with me trying to keep up.

"STOP IT!" he roared before he was even half through the swinging doors. "Or I'll see to it that every one of you sonofabitches of both outfits is fired and your asses run out of town before morning!"

That put a halt to everything, except a belated "Yow!" from Peerless who had received a late whack from Babs's pool stick. Sitting on Deacon's chest where he had him pinned to the floor while they arm-grappled, Highpockets looked down at his adversary. "Your call."

Deacon squirmed as much as he could, very little, then managed to turn his head toward Jones. "Since you put it that way, we're peaceable."

"Us, too," Highpockets agreed, climbing off him. "You heard what the man said, boys. Let's take our winnings and evaporate out of here. Right, Skeeter?" He whirled around, looking in every corner. "SKEETER? Where the hell did he and that hatful of money go?"

The Jersey Mosquito popped up from behind the far end of the bar, grinning devilishly and holding the upside-down hat as if it were a pot of gold.

"Just bein' our Fort Knox till you fellas got done socializin'. See you on the Ma and Pa sometime, Deacon," he called over his shoulder as he scampered out of the bar to jump in the back of the pickup.

Following his lead, laughing and hooting like schoolboys, the Diamond Buckle crew piled into the box of the pickup, Jones counting us with chops of a hand like you do sheep. He came up one short. "Who's missing?"

Skeeter giggled. "Smiley, natcherly."

"He cut out of the saloon through the back door soon as his check was cashed," Peerless testified. "Wouldn't even stay and have one drink with us, the stuck-up bugger."

"Then where the hell is the knothead?"

Silence. Until Skeeter further provided:

"Gettin' his ashes hauled."

That puzzled me, but not Herman, who let out a wild drunken laugh. Revelation came when Highpockets swiped a hand toward the sheepwagons where the sales ladies had set up shop. "He claimed he had a lot of Butte nookie to catch up on."

Jones checked his watch against what he was hearing. "Ever since we hit town, the sonofabitch has been at it? That don't take forever."

"More's the pity," said Shakespeare, to stifled laughs from the hobo audience.

Catching a second wind of swearing, Jones clambered into the driver's seat, saying the goddamn fornicating stud rooster Smiley could walk back to the ranch with his pants around his ankles for all he cared.

#

The ride to the Diamond Buckle was riotous, as fight stories were traded on their way into legend. You would have thought the Watering Hole was the Little Bighorn, and our crew was the victorious Indians. Better yet, under the watchful eye of Highpockets the jackpot winnings were being counted out by Skeeter, hunched over so the cash would not blow out of his hat and carefully holding up greenbacks one by one in the moonlight to determine whether they were sawbucks or twenties, doling out the proceeds of the bet evenly among us. Fingy clutched his with all eight fingers as if he could not believe his good fortune. Pooch burst into more words than he ordinarily issued in a week: "First time we ever come back from town with more moolah than we went in with."

"Hee hee, stick with me and I'll have you boys livin' on the plush," Skeeter took all due credit. He judiciously handed a fistful of money to me instead of Herman, slumped against the back of the pickup cab singing softly to himself in German. "Here be your and his share, Snag."

For a long wonderful moment I clutched the winnings in triumph, over Aunt Kate's careless tossing away of my safety-pinned stash and the preaching pickpocket's cunning theft of Herman's wallet and for that matter, the slicked-up ex-convict vying for my suitcase with everything I owned in it. Then, grinning back at the moon over the Promised Land that was the Big Hole, I stuck the folded bills down the front of my pants for safety.

The crew hit the bunkhouse still high as kites, but mostly from exuberance rather than what they had poured into themselves at the Watering Hole. The chilly ride in the back of the pickup had even sobered up Herman appreciably, so much so that he made it to his bunk without my help. He sank onto it, rubbing his head with both hands as if to get things operating fully in there. "Big night, hah?" he said

thickly, blinking at me as I proudly patted the wad of cash pouched down there in my underwear. "How much did we winned?"

"Enough to get married on," Harv's serene answer took care of that, from where he was already fixing up an envelope to mail his windfall to Letty. The rest of the crew all were in the crapper at once, oddly enough. It sounded like some kind of hobo palaver going on in there, maybe something mysteriously connected to Skeeter's ability to generate a jackpot. Pretty quick, Highpockets could be heard checking with the bunch one by one, "You for it?" and the answering Yeahs! and Yups!

They filed into the bunk room like men with a mission, Highpockets in the lead, the others crowding behind him with a mix of expressions, from Skeeter's crinkled countenance to Shakespeare looking wise to Pooch wearing an anxious attempt at a grin.

"The Johnson family has had a little powwow," Highpockets announced as the hoboes gathered around us. "One Eye, we're hoping you can stick with us after haying. Orchard country next, apple-knocking out in Washington." His gaze shifted to me. "Snag is welcome to come along, too, if that's in the cards."

Herman was unable to say anything for some seconds. "Honored, I am," he finally got out. "Good eye-dea, for me." He struggled even more for the next words. "The boy," he swallowed so hard that it brought an awful lump to my throat too, "has somebody to go to."

"Any way you two work it out," Highpockets left it at and turned away. "Let's hit the sack, boys. Jones will be on a tear in the morning to make us earn those wages."

#

Now Herman and I adjourned to the crapper. He put a steadying hand on the sink and studied his somewhat haggard reflection in the mirror, my drained one alongside his.

“Donny, it is for best if I go with them. When haying is over, no more sickles, and I am *ptttht* here.”

“I know.”

“Will miss you like everything.”

“Me, too. I mean, I-I’ll miss you, too.” It took all I could do to stay dry-eyed and keep my voice from breaking. “Walk tall, podner.”

“Ja, you do same,” he managed. Tall over me, he looked down at me, the miraculous glass eye and the good one blinking with the same emotion as mine.

“We were good pair on the loose, Red Chief.”

Amid the settled snores and nose-whistlings of the sleeping crew, I lay sleepless for a long, long time, as haunted as I’d been by the damnable wall plaque of the praying boy in Aunt Kate’s attic. This time by life, not death. For the first time since the Double W cookhouse I whined, only to myself, but the silent kind is as mournful as the other. The miles upon miles of my summer, the immense Greyhound journey right down to the last bus to Wisdom, were simply leaving me torn in two, between Herman and Gram. She and Letty seemed like, what, mirages, distant and beckoning, but Herman was my indispensable partner from the depths of the Manitowoc stay to the ups and downs of the open road.

My imagination failed me as I tried to conceive of life without him, or his without me. How can you ever forget someone you will think of every time you eat a piece of toast? Or whenever you touch a map, your fingers bringing memory of red routes once followed to adventure of whatever kind? Or even catching the wink of an eye, sparkling as glass, from someone you are devoted to?

As bereft as I was for myself, I was just as afraid for what waited ahead for him, on the move with the hoboes and on the run at the same time, always with the threat of some yard bull or hick dick matching him up with a MOST WANTED poster, and I would not be there to rescue him with some tall tale that we were actually Schneiders back to when people ran around buck naked in Switzerland.

As for counting on luck to help us out of our divided fate, phooey and you-know-what. In my misery I felt I might as well throw the black arrowhead into the Big Hole river. The cheerful sentiments in the autograph book seemed sickly against the true messages of life. Loco things happened without rhyme or reason, and that was that. The most hard-hearted set of words in the language, and the only ones that seemed to count in the end. Overwhelmed with those bleak thoughts, I gradually drowsed off clinging to what I would possess forever, the time of dog bus enchantment when Herman the German pointed a finger west and said, "Thataway."

In the Big Hole, there was something to the saying that when it rains, it pours, because sometime later that night, the heavens opened up, one of those sudden summer storms that flash through with crackles of lightning and rolls of thunder half drowned out by the downpour drumming on the roof. And the next morning came the deluge of the other sort, events cascading on the Diamond Buckle ranch as if the clouds had brought in every reckoning waiting to happen.

It began at breakfast, where black coffee was the main course as hangovers were nursed. I was groggy myself from the restless night of rainbursts and so much on my mind. Along the table, Skeeter had the shakes so bad he used both hands to lift his coffee cup, but still was grinning like the wisest monkey in the tree. Highpockets managed to look as capable as ever except for bloodshot eyes. The rest of the crew was in states of morning-after between those extremes. Except, that is, for Herman, appearing not much the worse for wear, an advantage he had by always looking somewhat hard used. Meanwhile Mrs. Costello made a nuisance of herself by nagging about the lack of enthusiasm for the runny fried eggs and undercooked sidepork, until Jones snapped at her that the crew wasn't in a mood for hen leavings and pig squeals this morning, and she stomped back to the kitchen.

Despite the aftereffects, the triumphant night in Wisdom cast a good mood felt by everyone but Jones, grumpy over being rained out of haying. "Looks like the bunch of you have the day off," he conceded with a sniff at the weather, "mostly."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Highpockets was on the case at once.

Jones jerked a thumb at the empty chair next to his. "Smiley is no longer employed at the Diamond Buckle." That sank in to me as almost too good to be true, my jubilant reaction helped along by Herman's turning toward me and silently mouthing, "*Good riddance, hah?*" Versions of that were on the faces around the table.

"Hee hee," Skeeter uncorked, "he can try for pimp with them sheepwagon lovelies."

"So," Jones ignored the interruption, "I need a volunteer to be choreboy until I can drive to Butte and scare up a new one. The rest of you, sure, you can pitch horseshoes or lay around and scratch your nuts or whatever you want to do with the day, but somebody's got to step up and do the chores."

Peerless lawyered that immediately. "That would include getting a milk pail under *Waltzing Matilda?*"

"She's a cow," Jones tried to circle past that, "so she needs tending to like the others."

"I'm not milking any crazy cow," Peerless stated his principle.

Grinning, Fingy waved a hand lacking enough fingers to squeeze a teat.

"I'm out."

Harv silently shook his head an inch or so.

"I'm allergic to titted critters," Skeeter announced, drawing a volley of hooty speculations about how far that allergy extended and when it had set in.

So it went, man by man, around the long table, no one willing to risk limb if not life in taking on the treacherous dairy cow. "Damn it," Jones seethed, "all in hell I'm asking is for some one of you to pitch a little hay to the horses, slop the hogs, gather the eggs--"

"--and milk an animal you won't go anywhere near yourself," Peerless inserted with a smirk.

"Now listen here," Jones tried to shift ground from that accusation, "it's only for a couple of days. It won't hurt--embarass any of you to do it that long." A foreman is not supposed to be vulnerable to anything, even the truth he was trying to sneak past. I felt some sympathy for him as one by one, the crew shook off his appeals for someone, anyone, to do the chores, roadblocked from the start by Waltzing Matilda.

Actually, I had a bit of experience at milking under my mother's tutelage during one of our holed-up-to-get-by seasons while my father was out looking for bulldozer work, and might have been moron enough to tackle this cow situation to show off my prowess, but some inner angel of good sense told me to sit there with my mouth closed.

Finally Jones looked pleadingly at the one last figure that gave him any hope. "Pockets, can't you talk them into--?"

Highpockets was as firm as the others, in shrugging off the suggestion he wield his influence. "The boys are in their rights. We hired on to put up hay. Nothing else."

Whether it was that or inspiration circling until I could catch up with it, I suddenly realized: Wide open for the taking, the job of choreboy would not end with haying. Before the chance was lost, I crept my foot over to Herman's nearest one and pressed down hard on the toe of his shoe, causing him to jerk straight

upright. Now that I had his attention, I cut a significant look toward Smiley's empty chair. He followed my gaze and after a squint or two, my thinking.

Clearing his throat as if he had been saving up for this announcement, Herman spoke out. "Nothing to worry. I am champ milker. Famous in old country."

"You are? I mean, are you." Jones turned to me, as he so often did when it came to figuring out Herman.

"Yeah, well, if Gramps says he can do a thing," I put the best face on it I could, "he generally pretty much can."

Jones took one more look at Herman, sitting there with a grin skewed up toward his glass eye. "Okay," he dragged the word out, "let's see how they do it in the old country. He can even yodel if he wants. Snag, go get the milk pails for him."

Need I say, the breakfast table was abandoned in a hurry and the barn gained a full audience to watch Herman take on *Waltzing Matilda*.

Dairy cows normally plod willingly to their stanchions, ready to stick their necks into captivity in exchange for being relieved of their milk. The other two cows did so, nice and docile, when Herman and I herded them in to the milking area, while the angular brown and white Guernsey lived up to her name by sort of dancing sideways and snorting a shot of snot toward us and the stanchion. Bawling like she was being butchered, *Waltzing Matilda* then backed into a corner and rubbed a stub of horn on the barn wall as if trying to sharpen it.

"So-o-o, bossy," Herman approached her using the handle of a pitchfork to prod her out of the corner. I crept along right behind him, wishing he had used the sharp end of the pitchfork as the cow eyed us malevolently. Giving another snort,

Waltzing Matilda plowed past the two of us as we jumped back and, as if it was her own idea, plugged along to the waiting stanchion.

“There, see, that’s half the battle!” Jones called from the safety of half the barn away, where he and the rest of the crew were clustered to watch.

“Stand away,” Herman warned me as he sidled in to shut the stanchion on the cow’s bowed neck. I thought I was, but still had to leap back when Waltzing Matilda shifted hind feet, flashing a kick that would have taken out a person’s kneecap.

“Jeezus,” Peerless cried, “watch yourselves, fellas. That critter’s a killer.”

Herman and I would not have disagreed with that as we huddled to consider our next move. “Any eye-dea?” he started to ask, interrupted by Waltzing Matilda loudly breaking wind and then letting loose as if to empty her bowels to the last degree. In dismay, we both stared at the switching tail now coated with manure, perfectly capable of swatting a person hunched on a milking stool.

“Puh,” said Herman. “Maybe Smiley was right, a dose of lead is best answer to this creature.”

“We have to do something about that tail,” I was thinking hard, warily watching the crap-covered pendulum swing back and forth. “How about if we--” I outlined the only scheme that had popped to mind.

“Worth every bit of try,” Herman agreed, both of us aware of Jones prowling impatiently back and forth in front of the other spectators. “You go git the tool, I git the other. Bunny-quick.”

I ran to the blacksmith shop and grabbed the longest tong off the forge, about two feet in length. While I was at that, Herman ducked into the tack room of the barn where saddles and such were kept, and came back with a pigging string, such as was used to tie up the legs of calves during branding.

Our audience craned their necks in curiosity, their mutterings and whispers not exactly a full vote of confidence. “No betting,” Highpockets decreed, to the evident disappointment of Skeeter.

Experimentally working the tongs that were usually used to pick up red-hot metal, I made sure with Herman: “Ready?”

“Betsa bootsies,” he sounded like he was calling up confidence from wherever he could get it. “If sailors know anything, it is knots.”

Standing carefully to one side, I grappled the tongs in and caught the hairy end of the cow’s filthy tail, tugging the whole thing snug against the nearest rear leg. That brought out a fresh green splurt of manure as expected, but I was out of range. Herman moved in and swiftly tied the tail tight and firm to the joint of the leg. Waltzing Matilda did not know what to make of this and kicked. Which yanked her tail hard enough to make her bawl at top volume.

“Quick!” I cried, and Herman already was sliding the milking stool into place and in no time milk was streaming into the bucket like hail hitting. There is the old braggart joke about milking a cow so fast she would faint away, and while Waltzing Matilda showed no sign of swooning, Herman was working those teats at incredible speed, his hands flying up and down as the level of milk in the bucket rose perceptibly. The angriest Guernsey on the planet attempted a few more tugs of leg and tail, only to bawl in frustration. Either out of confusion or an inkling of sense, she did not crap like Niagara any more.

While Herman was milking like fury, I took another pail and went out and filled it at the pump at the watering trough. When he had stripped the teats to the last drops and set the frothing and nearly full milk pail safely away, I recited, “Ready on the firing line?”

“Ja, shoot it to her,” Herman sang out. I tossed the pail of water on the bovine rump and hind legs, washing at least the worst of the manure away to tidy

up matters for the future choreboy. Our defeated adversary started to try a kick and thought better of it. Herman gingerly reached in from the side and undid the pigging string. Eyeing him as best she could from the stanchion, Waltzing Matilda now switched her tail, but neither kicked nor unloosed manure. I swear the cow got the idea.

And Jones surely did.

“One Eye, I want to see you after you get that milk up to the house,” the determined foreman headed us off as we were leaving the barn and everyone else had dispersed. Me, he provided, “You’re on your own for the day, laddie buck, find something to do to keep yourself out of trouble,” fairly civilly for him.

At loose ends, I drifted across the ranch yard, habit directing me to the bunkhouse while my mind sped to every here and there. In contrast, the hoboes had an enviable talent for taking time off, and the crew was a hundred percent at leisure. Sunning themselves in chairs propped against the bunkhouse, Shakespeare was working a crossword puzzle and Harv was deep in a *Police Gazette*. At the horseshoe pit, the others were trying to solve Midnight Frankie’s evident ability to win at any game of chance ever invented, without success according to the clangs of his ringers and their echoes of frustration. I went and sat on the steps, waiting.

It did not take long. Herman emerged from the boss house and headed straight for me, the shift of his eyes as he neared telling me he wanted to talk in private.

That meant conferring in the crapper again. With our reflections registering us in the silvered mirror, Herman in high spirits and me still emotionally back and forth, he horse laughed as he described Mrs. Costello nearly fainting away at receiving a milk bucket without Waltzing Matilda’s splatter on it.

Then his words slowed, half proud, half cautious. "I am choreboy for good, Jones telled me. More wages, a little," he held his thumb and first finger apart just barely.

"I was hoping," was as much as I could say.

"Ja, is what we wanted, hah? I hole up in Big Hole."

"I'll come see you sometimes," I blurted.

He drew a breath through his teeth as if the next words hurt, and they did. "Not a good eye-dea, Donny. There is trouble in that for us both. Your Gram and the nice lady might get too much curious about how I am here. And I can not have the Kate know my whereabouts." He paused before making himself say the rest. "So, Fritz Schneider of the Diamond Buckle and Wisdom town I am from now, someone you met on your travelings but must only remember, not come see. Savvy?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"Many times have I said you are some good boy. Never more than now." His eyes damp, matching mine, he looked off past me. "I must make sorry to Highpockets about not going with them."

"Yeah, you'd better go do that." Still neither us moved, and to break the awkward silence, I asked, "Where'd you learn to milk like that?"

He managed to smile. "Telled you the cows lived downstairs in Emden."

I laughed, a little. With neither of us finding anything more to say, Herman stirred himself. "Now I must see to chickens and hogs, big new responsibilities."

"I'll feed the horses for you," I volunteered, wanting something to do besides letting our separation eat my guts out.

The barn was as quiet as it ever got, the workhorses standing idle in their stalls, straw on the floor absorbing the shifting of their hooves except for a whispery rustle. I was welcomed with some snorts and a neigh or two as I picked up the pitchfork, shiny as new from Herman's sharpening of everything that would hold an edge, and climbed to the haymow to fork alfalfa into the manger in front of each horse. That chore done, I shinnied down and played favorites as I felt entitled with Queen and Brandy after the distances we had covered together, stacker path upon stacker path, and treated them to a half pan of oats apiece. As they munched there in the stall, I stroked the gray expanse of Queen's neck and shoulder, reluctant to start yet another goodbye. Smartly the big mare flickered an ear. Laying my head against her in full confusion of emotions, I clung there with my cheek to the warm smooth hide, unable to do more than sob, "Queen, what am I gonna do?"

"I'm curious to hear how she answers that."

I jerked away from Queen's side, startled out of my wits by the tall figure shadowed in the doorway from the horse corral. At first I thought it must be Harv, at that size, but no. The unmistakable saunter and lanky presence told me even before the easygoing drawl. "Anything wrong we can fix with something besides spit and iodine?"

"Rags!" As he materialized out of the shadowed end of the barn, I saw he was in regular ranch wear except for the conspicuous belt buckle, the diamond buckle brand on him the same as on those of us in the crew with our hatbands. In everyday getup or not, though, he carried himself like a champion, and I had to gulp hard to speak up adequately as he moseyed toward me. "Sorry, I--I didn't know you were here, didn't see your car."

"Aw, that weather last night will teach me about having a convertible," he said ruefully while he came and joined me in the stall. "It was raining like a cow taking a whizz on a flat rock when I pulled in from the Billings fair, so I stuck the

Caddy in the equipment shed.” He patted his way along Queen’s side softly chanting, “Steady, hoss, stand still, old girl,” until he was alongside me and could reach up and fondly tug at her mane. “A horse and a half, isn’t she. Seems like she just naturally lives up to her name. Pretty good listener, too, I gather.” He looked down at me with a long-jawed grin, but his eyes a lot more serious than that. “Maybe I ought to lend an ear, too--Snag, do I remember you go by?”

“Uh-huh, when I’m not Scotty,” I broke out of being tongue-tied. “You know how the ho--the crew does with names.”

“A little of that got on me ever since I dressed up to ride,” rodeo’s leading fashion plate acknowledged the way of such things with an amused nod.

Horseman that Rags Rasmussen so famously was, he murmured something as he scratched behind the mare’s ear that made her nicker and try to nudge him gently with her nose, an intelligent blue eye seeing into us, I swear. Casual but to the point, Rags glanced down at me standing at his side as if I was glued there.

“Better let it out. What’s got you talking to the Queen here?”

How many chances in a lifetime does a person have to bare his soul to a Rags Rasmussen? If confession was good for the soul, mine was being reformed with every word that tumbled out of me. “I’m sort of caught between things. See, I’m supposed to go back to my grandmother, she’s better after her operation and can be a cook again like she’s always been, except it’d be in dumb Glasgow, and we’d live together with Letty, she’s a waitress but a lady, too, and you’d really like her, everybody does, Harv especially, and I thought that’s what I wanted most in the world. But I’m a handful for her, Gram I mean, she’d be the first to tell you, and I haven’t exactly done what she thinks I was doing, all summer. She’ll think I got too redheaded, as she calls it.”

I faltered, but had to put the next part together to my intent listener. "What happened was, I met up with, uh, Gramps I call him although he's a sort of uncle." I sent a despairing look out the line of barn windows to where Herman could be seen joining the horseshoe players, still receiving slaps on the back for his triumph over Waltzing Matilda. "And now I don't want to leave him, he needs me too much."

"The new choreboy, while Smiley follows other pursuits," Rags made sure he was tracking the dramas of the ranch correctly. "What makes you think this gramps of yours needs you more than your granny does?"

There was a whole list of that all the way back to *fingerspitzengefühl* in the Milwaukee bus depot, but I made myself stick to the simple sum. "Bad stuff happens to him when he's on his own. And to me when I am, too. But when it's both of us, we sort of think our way out of things."

Not in a wiseguy way but just prodding me a little, he pursued that with, "That's a pretty good trick. The two of you together amount to more than one and one, you figure? Like Queen and Brandy here?"

"Yeah, that's it! Something like that."

"And you need to stay on here for that to keep happening."

"You got it." My hopes rose to the rafters of the barn.

Only to be dashed again as he contemplated Herman out there jawing happily with the horseshoe players, and then me dippily telling my troubles to a horse. "Nothing against being redheaded, understand," he began. "But we're running a ranch, not a charitable institution, and Jones is a bearcat about everyone on the place pulling his own weight. I don't see--"

The thunderous *whump* of a car on the livestock crossing took care of whatever he was going to say. Even Queen sharpened her ears at the telltale sound.

Rags and I watched wordlessly as the Wisdom deputy sheriff's car, the star on the door a blaze of white, pulled into the yard.

My mouth went dry and Rags whistled silently through his teeth as the arriving car drew us out of the barn toward what could amount to trouble. "You happen to know anything about why we're being honored by this visit?"

Reluctantly I enlightened him that the crew had been in a little bit of a fight at the Watering Hole with the Tumbling T outfit. He frowned, saying that was simply Saturday night behavior and for as long as he had known her, Babs always wrote off fights as the cost of doing business. "This must be some other can of worms."

Right. "Excuse me," I threw over my shoulder, already on the run, "I have to get over there to Gramps."

By the time I dashed across the yard to where Herman stood caught motionless beside the horseshoe players, the deputy sheriff from Wisdom was climbing out of the patrol car and giving a sickly smile all around.

"Sorry to disturb you, gents." Which every one of us there knew meant disturbance of some sort was about to reach into our number. But I in particular should have seen what was coming when, on the passenger side, a big crow-black hat barely appeared above the top of the car.

His first step out of the patrol car, the mean little sheriff from the first dog bus of all, back at the start of summer, spotted Harv taking life easy in the shade of the bunkhouse.

"Well, if it isn't the object of my affection," Sheriff Kinnick, as I couldn't help but remember his name was, made a mock simper. "Harv the Houdini of the stony loneseome. Took me a while to run you down, but here we both are, just like old times."

“Howdy, Carl. You out seeing the country?” Casual as anything, Harv unfolded out of his chair and sauntered toward the lawmen, although not too close. Veterans at knowing trouble when they saw it, the rest of the crew guardedly drifted near enough to follow what was happening, with me doing all I could to steer Herman--looking guilty as sin the way he did in the Butte depot--to the rear of them in the hope we wouldn't stand out. In the meantime, Skeeter set the tone for hobo attitude toward visits from the constabulary by piping up, “Shouldn't ye be tracking down horse thieves or somethin' instead of botherin' honest citizens?” He was more or less backed in that by Jones arriving at a high trot and caterwauling, “What the hell's this about?”

“If you have to know, I been on the track of this character”--the sheriff from Glasgow pointed an accusing finger at Harv, standing quietly there looking like the least troublesome man on earth--“every chance I got all summer. Talked to bus drivers until they was running out my ears, but I lost his trail in Butte. Then I got smart and asked myself who else makes regular runs to burgs off the beaten path. Beer truck drivers.” He let out his mean little laugh. “You make sort of a conspicuous hitchhiker, Harv.”

“You're barking up the wrong gum tree, big hat,” Highpockets took that on, bringing no small challenge with his height as he stepped forward and confronted the much shorter wearer of the badge. “Got the wrong man. I'll testify Harv's been with us following the harvests, California fruit to this here hay.”

Hand it to Sheriff Kinnick, he didn't give ground, only chuckled that chilly way. “Nice try,” he said up into Highpockets' face, “but no hearing judge in his right mind is gonna take the testimony of a hobo over the Wolf Point jailers who had Harv for company days on end, when the fool wasn't busting out. Besides,” he looked over the rest of the crew scornfully, with me half tucking out of sight behind Herman, standing so still he barely breathed, “you get in court, and there

might be some natural curiosity about this crowd's propensity for law abiding or not."

Harv followed that with a warning hand to the angry circle of men. "It's my tough luck, Pockets, Skeets, the whole bunch of you, thanks anyway."

Jones still was stomping mad at the intrusion, arguing to the deputy sheriff from town, "Goddamn it, Mallory, can't this wait until we're done haying in a few weeks? Harv's the best stack man I'll ever have." Looking sheepish, the local lawman replied that his colleague from up north seemed to be in more of a hurry than that.

By then Rags had strolled up. Mild as the day is long, he drawled, "What seems to be the difficulty?"

Mallory looked like he wanted to go someplace and hide rather than get into the difficulty, but he did his duty, introducing Rags to the strutting little visitor who barely came up to the shoulder of anyone in the gathering around him except me.

"Thanks for nothing, Mallory," the Glasgow sheriff huffed out. "You didn't tell me this is his spread." He rocked back on his pointy heels, impressed in spite of himself as he took in the most famous cowboy conceivable. "Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede," he told Rags as if that amounted to a private audience. "You do know how to stick on a horse."

"It's an honest living," Rags replied, glancing at the tin star on Kinnick's narrow chest as if comparing not that favorably. He turned to the other lawman. "What is this, a badge toters' convention? Should I be charging rent?"

"Sheriff Kinnick says your man here broke out of jail, more than once," came the reluctant answer.

"We could have told you he's a hard worker," Rags said. "Harv, what were you in for?"

"Fighting in a bar."

Harv aside, every man there gave Sheriff Kinnick a sideways look. Rags scratched his head and spoke the common thought. "Something like that means you could arrest just about everybody on the place, starting with me."

"That's as may be," the little sheriff muttered, glancing around the hostile ring of faces, "but none of you acted up any in my jurisdiction. I'm only interested in this knothed. Or am I."

It happened then. He peeked past the men in front, spotting me as I tried to fade behind Herman without appearing to. Parting the onlookers, the sheriff headed straight for me, prissing out, "Who's this I see over here?" with all too much recognition registering in the apple-doll face. "Huh, I thought you was going to visit relatives, punkin. Back east someplace. Doesn't look like that proved out, does it." He stopped short as Herman put a protective arm around me. "And just where do you fit into this, Horseface?" he asked suspiciously.

I knew it. The arrest-happy little meanie was out to get us, was going to get us. Our life together, our lives separately, was going to fizzle into separation and incarceration, nightmare coming true.

Herman did his best to face down the challenge, looking squarely at the sheriff with his good eye. "Fritz, is the right name. Scotty's grandpa, I am."

"You sure sound like it, Scotch as all get out," the sheriff said cynically. "Rasmussen, I'd bet my boots you're harboring a runaway," he crowed to Rags, who took that in mutely. "And maybe worse. Seems to me I've laid eyes on this mug before--how about you, Mallory?" the preening lawman spoke over his shoulder to the local deputy. "Got the latest WANTED posters in my bag, brought 'em for us to go through, just on the chance."

"Hey, no, you don't want to do that," I tried desperately as Herman's clasp of me held firmer than ever. "He didn't use to look anything like this, but now he

has a glass eye, see, and usually his face is all scrunched up and everything, and you'd hardly recognize--"

Harv had started forward to our aid, but Highpockets stopped him. "You better think twice about this, Johnny Law," he warned, stepping in beside Herman and me. The scar at the corner of his mouth was white with anger. "These fellas are with us, they're not causing you any trouble. You can't breeze in here from bare-ass nowhere and start picking us off just because you feel like it. Take a look around you. This isn't some goddamn freight yard and you're the yard bull." Behind him, Skeeter and Peerless and Fingy and Midnight Frankie and Shakespeare and Pooch ranged around us in support.

"Oh, can't I breeze in here, like you say, and make an arrest?" The sheriff smirked and fingered his star as a pointed reminder. "Who's wearing the badge around here?"

That was the wrong thing to do. Something like a spell came over the hoboes, if a general sense of fury can be called that. I could see it in their eyes, the pent-up rage and hate from years of railyard bulls and Palookaville hick dicks beating them and throwing them into jail and kicking them out of town, the badge of authority the mark adversity in their lives, Pooch a living reminder among them of the billyclubs of the law. As the sheriff turned and strutted toward Harv, after warning Herman and me not to move, Highpockets murmured without moving his lips, "Skeeter, pass the toothpicks." Discreetly the old hobo drifted off to the shop where Herman sharpened things.

"C'mon, Harv, let's arrange some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point for you," the sheriff busied up. "Get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers," he glanced back to check on Herman and me. I kept looking to Rags, still standing easy to one side, keeping Jones under control. If things were a matter of timing like he said, wasn't it about time to rein in this

busybody lawman who was ready to cart Herman and me off to our doom along with Harv?

Meanwhile Harv folded his arms on his chest. "No."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The sheriff cocked a look up at the much taller man.

"Just what it sounds like. No."

"God damn it," the sheriff erupted, "if you do the crime, you're supposed to do the time! That's practically in the Bible! Now get in the patrol car!"

"Still no," Harv declared, not budging. "Not until we work this out. That jurisdiction you talk about so much--it maybe's slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that's not in your county, the way I see it."

The Glasgow sheriff scowled. "You're turning into a regular jailhouse lawyer, are you, all the experience you're building up behind bars." He poked his hat higher on his head to try to look taller as he faced Harv. "All right, let's get down to the pussy purr here. I'm taking you in for violating my custody, not once but twice when I packed you over there to the Wolf Point stony lonesome. Like I'm gonna do again, damn it."

Listening hard, the deputy sheriff from Wisdom appeared uneasy but didn't say anything. Harv did, though.

"Carl, I'll go with you, on a couple of conditions. First one is, you leave these other two fellows alone. You don't have to play bloodhound where you don't belong." The sheriff started to shake his head, but Harv lifted a warning hand. "Hear me out on the rest of this. I serve my sentence, how much was that again--?"

"Forty-five days," the sheriff answered peevishly.

"That's way to hell and gone too much for fightin' in a bar," Peerless objected, while others in the hobo circle whistled in disbelief.

"And they're brothers!" I could not hold that in any longer. "I heard them both say so, and I've got their names in my autograph book as proof!"

"*Step*-brothers, damn it, don't make it worse than it is," Sheriff Kinnick snapped, glowering at me. "But that don't matter," he plodded on, glaring around at the derisive audience as Highpockets coldly mocked, "Of course not. You just didn't have anything better to do than track your own kin down across half the state."

"Like I was saying," Harv put the rest of his proposition, "I serve my sentence, but in your jail there in Glasgow. That way," he said as if it made all the sense in the world, and to me it did, "Letty can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won't need to bust out all the time."

"Nothing doing," the sheriff turned the proposition down flat, still a stickler or worse. "The foreign geezer and the loose kid ought to be hauled in for investigation, they're suspicious characters if I ever saw any, and that's that." He brushed his hands together as if we did not count for much, his real ire directed at Harv's other stipulation. "Wolf Point is where you broke jail, that's where you're going back in, period and end of sentence."

Harv shook his head that minimal way of his, enough and no more. "Carl, I'm sick of you yanking me around just to prove you can, and you shouldn't be arresting these other two for no good cause, either." He looked unflinchingly at the smaller man, the doll-like face turning red under his gaze. "As to packing me back to Wolf Point, they'd be happy not to have me back in that two-bit slammer of theirs, it'd save them them a lot of trouble. Juggling me in Glasgow instead of booting me to the far end of the state isn't that much to ask, and you know it."

In my eyes and Herman's fully as stalwart as any hero who ever faced a six-shooter, Harv stayed set as stone in front of his step-brother lawman. "If you won't do that for me, Carl, you'll have to shoot me to take me."

"You damn fool," the sheriff raged against being defied, dropping his hand to his holster. "That can be arranged, too, according to this pistol."

The moment seared into me, I can feel it yet. Was this how shootouts happened in the old West? Some dumb pistoleer goes for his gun and next thing, there is bloodshed everywhere? Both of us tense as sentinels, Herman and I could see it happening, clear as a bang-bang page out of Karl May. Except that Herman in a swift move rewrote that ending, thrusting me aside to safety and crying out, "No need for shooting! I will go with sheriff!"

"No, you're won't," Highpocket's voice cut into the scene, the other hoboos fanning out around him and us as he spoke. "Harv has his reason to be hauled off with this little jaybird, but you don't need to." His words were backed up by the pitchforks Skeeter had distributed upon his return from the blacksmith shop, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone.

The sheriff stared in disbelief at the cordon of grim men holding pitchforks at the ready. "If that's the way you want it," he unsteadily tried to bluster, "getting a helping of lead for obstructing justice--"

"Whoa."

The word soft as a coax in a horse's ear came from Rags. "Let's sort the situation out a little bit," he ambled around to the far side of the confrontation.

"Mallory, if I was you, I'd be looking the other direction during this."

"I was thinking that myself," the deputy sheriff said, moving off with his back turned to the situation created by the furious Glasgow sheriff.

"Jonesie, keep an eye on this with me," Rags resumed, still softly conversational. "Somebody's got to be witnesses if this buck fever sheriff cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay, don't you think?"

"I'm seeing the same thing ahead you are," the foreman agreed, sending the sheriff a look that meant it, "manslaughter, if not murder, way beyond the performance of duty."

"Doesn't look good, does it," Rags suggested at large. Then said to the outfoxed sheriff as if calming him, "Maybe you ought to consider Harv's offer a little more. Sounds like a fair deal to me."

Scanning around furiously at man after man with a tool that could stab hay but more than that, too, Sheriff Kinnick still held his pose, his hand twitching over his gun butt.

"Carl, none of us are any use to you dead," Harv put in on him with surprising gentleness. The frustrated lawman cast one last look around at the united bunch of us, then slowly let his gun hand fall to his side.

Breathing hard, he faced Harv, who still was standing there waiting him out. "All right, you win. Glasgow and Letty it is, loverboy. I've got to put up with you under the same roof just like when we was kids, do I," he complained as if he'd been sentenced to his own jail. Trying to fluff himself up, he turned to the waiting deputy sheriff and made another swipe of the hand at Herman and me. "On second thought, these other two yahoos aren't my worry. Harv, grab your stuff and we'll head for Glasgow," he said as if it had been his own idea all along.

First shaking hands all around with the crew, Harv went to fetch his bedroll from the bunkhouse while Skeeter collected the pitchforks and Highpockets kept an eye on things, and in a daze I realized Herman and I were free again.

Almost. Behind us, Rags proved that he had a boss voice when he wanted to. "Now let's sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I've let on the place. Come on up to the house."

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Leading us into the office, Rags seated himself at the big desk as if he'd rather be in a saddle somewhere and pointed us to the pew bench used for sinners, not the most comfortable spot for us to be on, either. He turned first to Herman. "Fritz, as I guess I better get used to calling you until further notice," he said as if grading his behavior in the presence of a pistoleer, "you could have got your cozies shot off, you know, making that move when that peewee sheriff was itching for his gun."

"I did not think of myself," Herman answered simply. "I taked a leap of fate."

Rags digested that, long enough that the sinner's bench was growing pretty hard. Then he sat up a bit and sighed. "Better to be lucky than smart, I suppose. All right, tell me the rest of it, why fate had to plunk the two of you down on my ranch out of all the places in the Big Hole."

Between us, Herman and I owned up to everything, with Rags listening hard. When we finally ran out of confessions, he rubbed his jaw longer than usual before saying that sneaking into America to get away from Hitler probably was the kind of infraction that would die away with time, and any choreboy who made Jones happy was worth keeping. That took care of Herman, and that left the matter of me.

"A kid kicking around on a ranch is a tricky proposition," Rags came right to the point, looking at me the frank, open way he'd done when it was the two of us in the stall with Queen, the crucial listener this time Herman. "I know first-hand--I was one, and I could be a champion nuisance sometimes." That description gripped me so squarely I couldn't even swallow.

"But that comes with ranch life, I suppose," Rags looked around the office as if reminding himself he was sitting in the owner's seat of the Diamond Buckle, "sorting out which nuisances to put up with or not." He straightened up while I

slumped to my fate. "What I started to tell you back there in the barn, before all the commotion," I heard him say as if we were taking this ride into the unknown together, "is I don't see why it wouldn't work for you to stay on here with Gramps, if he'll be responsible for you. If he can stand the nuisance, I suppose I can," he said half humorously, then studied me soberly. "That's if you make up your mind to stay on here."

Fate or not, my mind leaped, in one direction and then the other. My choice was wide open now, Herman or Gram, heart against conscience, if it is ever that evenly divided. I heard my decision the same instant the two of them did.

"I--I want to stay."

I shall see the two of them forever in that moment, Herman looking like he was trying to catch his breath, Rags awarding himself a little grin before turning serious again.

"Since you're gonna stick around with us," he started as if just making talk with me, "that opens up something else." He grimaced toward the kitchen where Mrs. Costello had the radio blaring away and was making a racket with pots and pans as she clattered together the resemblance of a meal. "Cook, did you say your sainted granny is?"

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