

These pages were found on Ivan's desk at
the time of his death, April 2015

Betty Mayfield

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

The swarm of apprehensions nibbling at me had not included this. Sure enough, no sooner did we pull out for Great Falls and the Greyhound station there than my more than substantial seatmate leaned my way enough to press me into the mailbag and asked in that tone of voice a kid so much dreads, "And where are you off to, all by your lonesome?"

How things have changed in the world. I see the young people of today traveling the planet with their individual backpacks and weightless independence. Back then, on the journey that determined my life and drastically turned the course of others, I lived out of my grandmother's wicker suitcase and carried a responsibility bigger than I was. Many, many miles bigger, as it turned out. But

that lay ahead, where fame sometimes was on the list of attractions and sometimes cruelly crossed off, and for now I heard myself pipe up with an answer neither she nor I were ready for, that my destination was none other than Pleasantville.

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

Even yet I wonder what made me say any of that. Maybe the colorful Greyhound wall map of TRANSCONTINENTAL ROUTES--THE FLEET WAY, back there in the hotel lobby that doubled as the Gros Ventre bus depot, stuck in my mind. Maybe my imagination answered for me, like being called on in school utterly unprepared and a whisper of help arrives out of nowhere, correct or not. Maybe the truth scared me too much.

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

"Oh, my daddy works there."

"Isn't that interesting. And what does he do?"

It's funny about imagination, how it can add to your peril even while it momentarily comes to your rescue. I had to scramble to furnish, "Yeah, well, see, he's a digester."

"You don't say! Wait till I tell the girls about this!" Her alarming exclamation had the other ladies, busy gabbing about mountain goats and summertime snowbanks and other memorable attractions of Glacier National Park, glancing over their shoulders at us. I shrank farther into the mailbag, but my fellow passenger dipped her voice to a confidential level.

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

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

There was a story behind this, naturally. I lived with my grandmother, who was cook at the Double W, the big cattle ranch near Gros Ventre owned by the wealthy Williamson family. One of the few sources of entertainment anywhere on the ranch happened to be the shelf of sun-faded Reader’s Digest Condensed Books kept by Meredice Williamson in the otherwise unused parlor of the main house, and in her vague nice way she had allowed me to take any of them to the cook shack to read, as long as Gram approved. Gram had more than enough on her mind without policing my reading, and lately I had worked my way through the shipboard chapters of *Mr. Roberts*, not so condensed that I couldn’t surmise what those World War Two sailors were looking at through binoculars aimed to the bathroom on shore where nurses took showers. Probably during that reading binge my eye caught on the fine print Pleasantville NY in the front of the book as the source of digested literature, and it did not take any too much inspiration, for me at least, to conjure a father back there peacefully disassembling books page by page and putting them back together in shortened form that somehow enriched them like condensed milk.

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

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

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

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

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

That settled matters down, thanks to a war-time story cooked down to the basics of bare-naked nurses and a helping of my imagination. The spacious woman took over the talking practically nonstop and I eased away from the U.S. mail a bit in relief and provided *uh-huh* or *huh-uh* as needed while the small bus cruised at that measured speed buses always seem to travel at, even in the widest of wide open spaces like Montana’s. There we sat, close as churchgoers, while she chatted away the miles in her somber best dress that undoubtedly had seen service at funerals and weddings, and me in stiff new bluejeans bought specially for the trip. Back then, you dressed up to travel.

And willing or not, I was now a long-distance traveler through time as well as earthbound scenery. When I wasn’t occupied providing two-syllable responses to my seatmate, this first leg of the journey was something like a tour of spots of my existence since I was old enough to remember. Leaving behind Gros Ventre and its green covering of cottonwoods, Highway 89 wound past the southmost rangeland of the Two Medicine country, with Double W cattle pastured even here wherever there were not sheepherders’ white wagons and the gray

spread of ewes and lambs on the foothills in the distance, with the familiar sawtooth outline of the Rocky Mountains all along the horizon to the west. There where the South Fork of English Creek emerged from a canyon, during the Rainbow Reservoir construction job my folks and I crammed into a humpbacked trailer house built for barely two. I had to sleep on the bench seat in back of the table, almost nose to nose with my parents squeezed into their bunk. But the thrill of being right there as bulldozer operators such as my father--the real one, I mean--rode their big yellow machines fearless as knights of old while building the dam that bottled the creek into the newest lake on earth was comfort enough.

Next on the route of remembering, however, butted up against a rocky butte right at the county line as if stuck as far out of sight as possible, a nightmare of a place reappeared, the grim rambling lodginghouse and weatherbeaten outbuildings of the county poor farm, where my father had graded the gravel road and dozed out ditches and so on while my mother and I spent creepy days watching out a cabin window at the shabby inmates pottering listlessly at work that wasn't real work, just tasks to make them do something. Seeing past the talkative woman to that frightening institution again where the unluckiest people ended up gave me the shivers, but I found I could not take my eyes off the poor farm and what it stood for. It did not seem fair that the worst of life crowded so close onto the best of it.

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

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

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

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

I must have been better than I thought at hiding my double-edged fear, because the chatterbox at my side seemed not to notice anything troubling me until I shifted restlessly in my seat because the object in my pants pocket had slipped down to where I was half sitting on it. "Aren't you comfortable? Heavens to Betsy, why didn't you say so? Here, I'll make room." With a grunt she wallowed away from me a couple of inches.

"It's not that," I had to confess because I still needed to squirm around and reach in to do something about the thing. Knowing I dare not show it to her, as I pawed around in the pocket adjusting matters I alibied, "My, uh, good luck charm kind of got caught crosswise," while she watched my contortions with concern. "A rabbit's foot on a key chain," I thought up, hoping that would ward her off.

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

"Donal," she eventually got around to pondering my name as if it was one of the mysteries of the ages. "Without the *d* on the end? That's a new one on me."

"It's Scotch, is why," I came to life and informed her quick as a flash. "My daddy said--says Camerons, see, that's us, were wearing kilts when the English still were running around buck naked."

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

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

She tittered. "Now you're spoofing."

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

"No, huh-uh, honest!" I protested. "It's because of my hair, see?" My floppy pompadour, almost always in need of a haircut, was about as red as anything from the Crayola box. And if that didn't earn me a tribal alias, I didn't

know what did. Maybe, as Gram would tell me when I got carried away with something, this was redheaded thinking, but it seemed only logical to me. If Donal was tagged on me when I came into the world bald as babies are, didn't it make sense to have a spare that described how I turned out? Indians did it all the time, I was convinced. In the case of our family, it would only have complicated things for my listener to explain to her that my alternate name came from my father's habit of ruffling my hair, from the time I was little, and saying something like, "You've got a head on you, Red Chief."

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

That fixed smile was really slipping by the time we pulled in to the Great Falls bus station and everyone piled out. As the club ladies tendered their goodbyes to each other, in one last gush my backseat companion wished me a safe trip and reminded me to be sure to tell my father how much she enjoyed digested books. I blankly promised I would, my heart hammering as I grabbed my suitcase and headed on to the next bus ride which, while way short of transcontinental, was going to carry me far beyond where even my imagination could reach.

“Why dumb old Wisconsin, though?” I’d tried not to sound like I was whining, at the beginning of this. “Can’t I just stay here while you’re operated on?”

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

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

“For one thing, Donny, you’re not old enough for that.” Trying not to cross with me but awful close to it, she squinted my direction through the bifocals that made her look like her eyes hurt along with the rest of her. “For another, Wendell may be short on brains, but he’s still not about to let you gallivant around the ranch on your own. So don’t talk just to hear your head rattle, we need to get a move on or you’ll miss the mail bus.” After more or less dusting off the

suitcase, which was the best that could be done with wicker, she flopped the thing open on my bed. I didn't care that it came from the old country with my grandfather's father or somebody, to me it was just old and rickety and I'd look like some ridiculous comic-strip character--PeeWee, the dimwitted little hobo in "Just Trampin'" readily came to mind--carrying it around. Ignoring my fallen face, Gram directed, "Hurry up now. Go pick out your shirts. Three will have to do you, to start with."

I stalled. "I don't know what to take. What's the dumb weather like back there?"

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

Grudgingly I went over to the curtained-off nook that substituted for our closet. "Fuck and phooey," I said under my breath as I sorted shirts. I was at that stage--part of growing up, as I saw it--of learning to effectively employ cusswords, and this set I'd lately heard one of the cowhands utter when sent out in the rain to ride herd on stray cattle all day. Perfectly expressive of a bus trip to Wisconsin, it felt like.

"What was that?" Gram queried from across the room.

"Fine and dandy," I mumbled as if I'd been talking to the shirts, and grabbed a couple I usually wore to school and my dressy western one. "Put that on to wear on the bus," Gram directed from where she was aggregating my underwear and socks out of the small dresser we shared, "and these," surprising me with the new blue jeans still in store folds. "People will think you're a champion bronc rider."

"I bet they haven't even got rodeos in *Wiss-con-sun*."

"Don't whine." Cheering me up was a lost cause, but she made the effort. "Honest to goodness, you'll look swayve and debonure when you get on the

bus.” I took that as a joke in more ways than one, suave and debonair the farthest from how I could possibly feel, packaged up to be shipped like something out of a mail-order catalogue. She gave me a wink, not natural to her, and that didn’t help either. Folding things expeditiously like the veteran of many moves that she was, she had the suitcase nearly packed while I wordlessly changed into the stiff pants and the wine-red shirt with pearl-colored snap buttons which ordinarily would have lifted my mood, but not today. Back and forth between gauging packing space and my long face, Gram hesitated. “You can take the moccasins if you want to.”

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

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

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

“Donal, you could have talked all day and not said that.” She took off her glasses, one skinny earpiece at a time, to wipe her eyes. “I’d rather take a beating than have to send you off like this.” She blinked as if that would make the glistening go away, and my own eyes stung from watching. “But these things happen, that’s how life is. I can hear your granddad now, ‘We just have to hunch up and take it.’” Gram kept in touch with people who were no longer living. These were not ghosts to her, nor for that matter to me, simply interrupted existences. My grandfather died long before I was born, but I heard the wise words of Pete Blegen many times as though he were standing close beside her. Straightening herself now as if the thought of him had put new backbone in her, she managed a trembling smile. “Nell’s bells, boy, don’t worry so.”

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

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

She maybe was persuading herself, but not me; in no way was that like this. “Donny, please,” she begged, reading my face, “it is all I can think to do.”

“But I don’t know Aunt Kitty and him,” I rushed on. “I’ve never even seen a picture. And what if they don’t recognize me at the bus station back there and we miss each other and I get lost and--”

Gram cut me off with a look. As red-headed as a kid could be, a wicker suitcase in hand, I was not especially likely to escape notice, was I. No mercy from her on the rest of it, either. “I seem to remember,” she said flatly, “telling

you not five minutes ago that I wrote down their address and phone number and tucked it in your memory book, just in case. Quit trying to borrow trouble, boy.”

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

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

Whatever that was supposed to mean, she lost no time changing the subject, saying my big trip was a chance that did not come often in life, really, to get out in the world and see new sights and scenes and meet people and have experiences and all that. “You could call it a vacation, in a way,” she tried hopefully.

“It’s vacation *here*,” I pouted, meaning school was out and I had the run of the ranch and could do pretty much what I wanted without being shipped off to complete strangers back east in Wisconsin.

“Oh, Donny,” she groaned and let loose with, “I swear to Creation, I don’t know up from down anymore,” one of her standard sayings when things became too much for her. Outbursts of that sort scared the daylights out of me at first, but I had learned such squalls passed as quickly as they came. Certain complaints gathered on a person with age, it seemed. This woman who meant

everything to me carried the burden of years and deprivation along with all else life had thrust on her, including me. As much as I adored her and tried to fit under her wing without causing too much trouble, my grandmother was from another universe of time, another century, actually. My six grades of schooling already were twice what she ever received in backwoods North Dakota, if North Dakota had woods. She read recipes with her finger, her lips silently moving, and had to call on me to help out with long words such as *pomegranate*. Not that she lacked quite a vocabulary of her own, for besides sayings that fit various moods and occasions, she possessed a number of expressions that edged right up to cussing, without quite qualifying. The way she'd meet something dubious with "That's a load of bulloney" always sounded to me suspiciously close.

At least she didn't resort to any of that now, instead telling me to temper my attitude in what for her were measured terms. "It's not the end of the world, Donny," a look straight at me came with the words. "School starts right after Labor Day, you know that, and this is only till then. Kitty"--she loyally amended that--"your Aunt Kitty will make sure you're back in time, and I'll be up and around by then, and we'll get on with life good as new, you wait and see."

But I didn't need to wait to see, plain and simple, that if what was happening to us wasn't the end of our world, it was a close enough imitation. Just the sight of Gram, the way her apron bagged on her never very strong build, caused a catch in my throat. There was not much of her to spare to surgery, by any measure. And while I did not fully understand the "female trouble" discovered in her by some doctor at the Columbus Hospital in Great Falls, I grasped that the summerlong convalescence in the pavilion ward run by the nuns made her--us--a charity case. If that, plus losing our only shelter on earth--the cook shack, for what it was--did not add up to the edge of disaster, even without

my banishment to a town in Wisconsin I wasn't even sure how to spell, I didn't know what did. This awful day, the second worst of my life, both of us were becoming medical casualties. Gram was the one with the drastic condition, but I was sick at heart. For I knew if this operation of hers did not come out right, we were goners, one way or the other. If something went wrong, if at the very least she could no longer work, she would be put in the poor farm as down-and-out people, wards of the county, were. And what I knew with terrible certainty would happen to me then was keeping me awake nights.

Argument over as far as she was concerned, Gram gave a last pat to my packed clothes. "That's that, the suitcase is ready and I hope to high heaven you are."

By now I didn't want to look at her and couldn't look away. My mother's face was legible in her drawn one at times like this, women without any extra to them to start with and hard luck wearing them down even more. It was showing every sign of being a family characteristic, if I didn't dodge it.

Call it luck or not, but right then I had an inspiration. An impulse on top of an inspiration, more like. "Can I run up to the main house for a minute? With my autograph book?"

"Not unless you want Sparrowhead's," she dismissed that out of hand. "And you know how he is. Sometimes I think that man has a wire down," a particularly unflattering saying from her collection which meant a brain on the blink. Adding as if I had forgotten, "He's the only one there, with Meredice away."

"Yeah, well, that's sort of what I had in mind," I fumbled out. "It's just, you know, I have everybody else's."

Gram's pursed expression questioned my good sense, judgment, and maybe other qualities, but she only said, "Child, you get some of the strangest notions."

Biting her tongue against saying more on that score, she checked the clock. "All right, I suppose if you have to. But make it snappy, pretty please. You need to catch your ride to town with the vet as soon as he's done in the cow shed."

My mind buzzed as I crossed the grassless packed earth of the yard, so called, that separated the cook shack and bunkhouse and horse barn and sheds and corrals and the rest of the sprawl of the Double W from the mansard-roofed house that was the stronghold of the Williamsons. Rather, of the Williamson men who had ruled the huge ranch for three generations, while the Williamson wives of equal duration had as little as possible to do with the baronial dwelling poking up out of the prairie.

"I don't blame Meredice for scooting off to California every chance she gets," Gram sympathized wholly with the current lady of the house, "it's like living in a hide warehouse in there." That may have been so, but the house with its dark wooded rooms and manly leather-covered furniture and bearhide rugs and horned or antlered heads of critters on the walls--most spectacularly, that of the bull elk shot by Teddy Roosevelt on one of his visits to the ranch before being president took up his time--held a sneaking allure for me. Cowhide furniture and trophy heads can do that to you when you've lived the bare-bones style Gram and I were stuck with.

I went in the kitchen door without knocking, as the kitchen and the adjoining windowed porch where the ranch crew ate at a twenty-foot-long table were Gram's domain, where I hung around to lick the bowls and such when she

was baking and even did small chores for her like taking out the ashes and filling the woodbox. Pausing in the familiar surroundings to gather myself, I gazed around for possibly the last time at the cookstove of the old kind that cooks called a hellbox and the creaky cupboards and the rest of the tired kitchenware Gram had made do with, three times a day, three hundred sixty-five days a year, as the latest in the succession of Double W cooks fending with a shortage of modern conveniences and a surplus of Wendell Williamson, classic tightfisted employer. I swallowed hard. What I was about to do was a gamble, but I was a hundred percent sure it would work. Well, fifty percent sure, the rest maybe the kind of hope only someone at that age can have. "Hunch up and take it" was good enough advice if you were willing to go through life like a jackrabbit in a hailstorm, but I was determined to try for better than that.

Getting ready, I smoothed open the autograph book. A memory book, was another name for it, because collecting autographs really was an excuse to get people to dab in some indelible bit of wisdom, humor, or simply something supremely silly along with their signature.

What would I have done, in that difficult period of life, without the inch-thick cream-colored album with the fancy lettered inscription YE WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES embossed on the cover in gold or at least gilt? Autograph books were one of those manias that sweep through a student population, and at our South Fork one-room school it started when Amber Busby, as spoiled as she was curly-haired and dark-eyed, showed up with a fancy leatherette one she'd been given for her birthday and began cornering all of us to write in it. Immediately everybody, from the littlest kids just able to print their names to the seventh and eighth grade galoots edging up on the fact of a world half filled with girls, had to have an autograph book; it's a miracle how something ceases to be sissy stuff when

everyone does it. Like other schoolyard manias, this one wore itself out in a week or two, but I kept at it, away from school as well as in. Gram, always desperate to keep me occupied--over time I had worn out enthusiasms on jigsaw puzzles, pen pals, board games, and things since forgotten--wholeheartedly encouraged this particular diversion, not that I needed extra motivation. The variety of things people came up with to be remembered by appealed to the grab-bag nature of my mind, and by now I had a good start on filling the pages. I felt there was a long way to go, though, because I wanted to set a record. This was because I loved the Ripley's Believe It Or Not! panel in the Sunday funnies of the *Great Falls Tribune* that the Williamsons passed along to us when they thought of it, with its incredible facts that a North Dakota man ate 71 pancakes in one sitting and that the Siamese twins Eng and Peng shared a total of six wives in their lifetime and so on. I could just see myself in a full-color drawing, Donal Cameron--my name correctly spelled and everything--the Montana boy who collected more autographs and their attached memories than any other known human being. What that total was, of course, remained to be determined, but I was working at it. And this next autograph request counted double, in a sense.

Flipping past the scrawled sentiments of my classmates and the other schoolkids--*When you see a skunk in a tree/Pull his tail and think of me* was pretty typical--I picked out a nice fresh page, holding the place with my thumb, and set off for the office down the wood-paneled hall.

Only to slow to a halt as ever at the display table in the hallway nook. The show-off table, Gram called it, there to impress visitors with items discovered on the ranch from pockets of the past. I never passed without looking the fascinating assortment over. A powder horn and bullet pouch from the days of the fur trappers. A long-shanked jinglebob spur a cowboy lost on a trail drive from Texas. A big bone of some beast no longer seen on earth. All things like that until the

array of Indian stuff, spearpoints and hide scrapers and flint skinning knives and other remnants of buffalo hunts long before Double W cattle grazed the same land. And resting there prime amid those, the object I longed for, the dark black arrowhead that was my find.

I was heartbroken when Gram made me turn it in. I'd been hunting magpies in the willows when I spotted the glassy sparkle in the gravel bottom of the creek crossing. When I reached in the water and picked it up, the glistening triangular shard of rock was sharper and more pointed than other arrowheads that sometimes surfaced after winter frosts or a big rain. Much more beautiful, too, solid black and slick as a jewelry stone as I held it in the palm of my hand. My excitement at gaining such a treasure lasted until I burst into the cook house and showed it to Gram, and was given the bad news.

"Donny, I'd rather pull my tongue out than tell you this, but you can't keep it."

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

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

"Good eye, Buckshot." was all the thanks I got from Wendell Williamson when I did so. "These are hard to find. It's pre-Columbian." He liked to say things like that to show he had been to college, although Gram claimed it only went to

prove he was an educated fool. Anyway, when I looked up the meaning of the phrase in the Webster's dictionary Meredice Williamson kept in the bookcase with the condensed books, I was awed. Older than Columbus! That made the black arrowhead even more magical for me. Just think, it had lain there all those hundreds of years, until I was lucky enough to be the one to find it. Equally unlucky, it had to be admitted, to be forced to part company with it. Well, that would not have to happen for good if my gamble of calling on the boss of the Double W paid off in that way, too.

With hope and trepidation, I now approached the office. The door was open, but I knew to knock anyway.

When he saw it was me, Wendell Williamson sat back in his swivel chair behind the desk which Gram claimed was the only thing on the ranch he knew how to operate. "What can I do you for, Buckshot?"

This was new territory for me, as I had only ever peeked in when he was not there, taking in with with all due curiosity the large Charlie Russell painting of riders wrangling cattle with a picturesque square butte opportunely in the



background, the many years of maroon ledgers shelved along the walls, and the surprisingly rickety mahogany breakfront where whiskey surely was kept. The room smelled of tobacco and old hides like the mountain lion skin and head draped over a cabinet in one corner, enough to set a visitor back a little, but I advanced as though life depended on it. "Hi," I said, my voice higher than intended.

The man behind the desk, no taller nor heftier than average, had a kind of puffy appearance, from his fleshy hands to a pillow-like girth to an excessive face, his hairline in deep retreat until a cluster of curly gray in the vicinity of his ears. Gram called him Sparrowhead behind his back because of what she believed was the quality of birdbrain under that jag of hair. Or sometimes her remarks about her employer were more along the line that he was the sort of person who'd drown kittens to keep himself busy. Regardless of what she thought of him, or he of her, they had maintained a prickly standoff, the boss of the ranch reluctant to fire the tart-tongued cook because of her skill at feeding a crew on the cheap, and the often-disgusted mealmaker who ruled the kitchen putting up with his stingy ways on account of me.

Gram's bad turn of health was about to bring all that to a crashing end, if I couldn't do something about it. Wendell--I didn't dare think of him as Sparrowhead just then--was examining me as if he hadn't seen me every day of the past couple of years. "I hear you're getting a trip to Minnesota."

"Wisconsin."

"Nuhhuh." This strangled utterance was habit of his. Gram said it made him sound like he was constipated in the tonsils. "It amounts to about the same, back there." I suppose trying to be civil, he drawled, "Come to say 'Aw river,' have you?"

The joke about "Au revoir," if that was what it was, went over my head. "Uh, not exactly," I stammered in spite of myself. "It's about something else." He waited expressionlessly for me to get it out. Heaven only knew what rash requests had been heard in this office down through the years by one poker-faced Double W boss or the next. None quite like mine, though. "What it is, I want to get your autograph."

Suspicious I was making fun of him for booting us out of the cook shack, he gave me a beady look. I quickly displayed the autograph book. "I've already got Mered--Mrs. Williamson's."

That did not seem to cut any ice with him. Before he could say anything, I hurriedly added: "And the Major's."

That, now, registered on him. The old gentleman, as Gram called the elder Williamson, showed up from New York only a time or two each year, but his presence changed the feel of the ranch, as if Wendell's wiser father--actually his uncle--had taken charge. Silver-haired and tailored to the last thread, with the limp of a wounded war hero, a handsome man even with age on him and tragic story trailing him--the bunkhouse gossip I managed to pick up on was that he lost the love of his life to a famous colored singer, no less--he had smiled through his white mustache when I waylaid him with the autograph album. Confiding that he was a collector of the written word himself and welcoming me to the club, he jotted a quote in a firm hand, the one about the pen being mightier than the sword, and signed his name with a flourish. Wow, I thought, my eyes big at the beautifully written passage he handed back, complete with *Wesley Williamson, in fellowship.*

"You landed Unk, huh?" Thinking it over to the very end, the current Williamson reluctantly put out a paw-like hand. Taking the autograph book from me, he splayed it on the desk with the practiced motion of someone who had

written out hundreds of paychecks, a good many of them to cooks he'd fired. I waited anxiously until he handed back what he wrote.

In the game of life, don't lose your marbles.

Wendell Williamson

Double W ranch

June 3, 1951

"Gee, thanks," I managed. "That's real good advice."

He grunted and fiddled busily with some papers on his desk, which was supposed to be a signal for me to leave. When I did not, he frowned.

"Something else on your mind?"

I had rehearsed this, my honest reason for braving the ranch boss in his lair, over and over in my head and even so it stumbled out.

"I, uh, sort of hoped I could get a haying job. Instead of, you know. Wisconsin."

Wendell could not hide his surprise. "Nuhhuh. Doing what?"

I thought it was as obvious as the nose on his face. "Driving the stacker team."

This I could see clear as anything, myself paired with the tame old workhorses, Sadie and Irish, just like times on the hay sled last winter when whoever was pitching hay to the cows let me handle the reins. The hayfield job was simpler yet, merely guiding the team of horses back and forth pulling a cable that catapulted a hayfork load onto the stack. Kids my age, *girls* even, drove the stacker team on a lot of ranches. And once haying season got underway and gave me the chance to show my stuff with Sadie and Irish, it all followed: Even the birdbrain behind the desk would figure out that in me he had such a natural teamster he'd want to keep me around as a hayhand every summer, which would

save Gram's spot as cook after her recuperation, and the cook shack would be ours again.

I waited expectantly for the boss of the Double W to say something like, "Oh man, great idea! Why didn't I think of that myself?"

Instead he sniffed in a dry way and uttered, "We're gonna use the Power Wagon on that."

No-o-o! something inside me cried. The Power Wagon for *that*? The thing was a huge beast of a vehicle, half giant jeep and half truck. Talk about a sparrowheaded idea; only a couple of horsepower, which was to say two horses, were required to hoist hay onto a stack, and he was going to employ the equivalent of an army tank? There went my dream of being stacker driver, in a cloud of exhaust. I was always being told I was big for my age, but I couldn't even have reached the clutch of the dumb Power Wagon.

"Cutting back on horses, don't you see," Wendell was saying, back to fiddling with the papers on the desk. "Time to send the nags to the glue factory."

That did that in. If charity was supposed to begin at home, somehow the spirit missed the Double W by a country mile. Apprentice cusser that I was, I secretly used up my swearing vocabulary on Wendell Williamson in my defeated retreat down the hallway. I can't account for what happened next except that I was so mad I could hardly see straight. Without even thinking, as I passed the show-off table and its wonders for the last time, I angrily snatched the black arrowhead and thrust it as deep in my jeans pocket as it would go.

Gram watched in concern as I came back in to the cook shack like a whipped pup. "Donny, are you crying? What happened? Didn't the fool write in your book for you?"

“Got something in my eye,” I alibied. Luckily, the veterinarian’s pickup pulled up outside and honked. In a last flurry, Gram gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Off you go,” her voice broke. “Be a good boy on the dog bus, won’t you.”

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

At the top of the steps I stopped short, not sure where to sit. The long aisle between the seats must have been easily twice the length of the Rocky Mountain Stage Line sedan, and the double sets of high-backed seats on each side made my experience of riding from Gros Ventre squashed between the mailbag and the bulky woman seem like three in a bed with room for two, as Gram would have said. This was a vehicle for a crowd, and it already was more than half full. Way toward the back as though it was their given place sat some soldiers, two together on one side of the aisle and their much more sizable companion, who needed the space, in the set of seats across from them. Slumped in front of them was a bleary rumped guy in ranch clothes, by every sign a sheepherder on a spree, who appeared to have been too busy drinking to shave for a week or so. Across from him, like a good example placed to even him out, rested a nun in that black

headgear outlined in white, her round glasses firm on her set face. Then toward the middle were scattered leathery older couples who I could tell were going home to farms or ranches or little towns along the way, and some vacationers dressed to the teeth in a way you sure don't see these days, coats and ties on the men and color-coordinated outfits for the women. One and all, the already seated passengers were strangers to me, some a lot stranger than others from the looks of them, which didn't help in making up my mind. Much more traveled than I ever hoped to be, Gram had told me in breaking the news that I was being shipped halfway across the country by Greyhound, "The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself." Yeah, but where?

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

And no sooner had done so than I changed my mind. About potluck, I mean. What was I going to do if the bus filled up and whoever sat next to me was anything like the nonstop talker about the digestive system? Or if the drunk sheepherder toward the back, recognizing me as somebody fresh off the ranch--my shirt said something like that--came staggering up the aisle to keep me company? Or the nun decided to sneak up and get going on me about God? I

didn't know squat about religion, and this wasn't the time to take that on. It panicked me to think about trying to keep up with conversations like those all the way to the next stop, Havre, or who knew, endless hours beyond that.

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

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

He gave me one of those *Now what?* looks, the same as when he'd punched my ticket and realized I was traveling by myself at my age. Straightening up, he asked with a frown, "Not parting company with us, are you? There's no refund once you're checked onto the bus, sonny."

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

"That serious, is it." He seemed more amused than compelled by my newfound swearing skill. "Then I guess I better pitch in. But make it quick. I can do my tire check while you're at that. Remind me, which bag is yours?" When I pointed, he gave me another one of those looks. "Don't see that kind much any more."

Kneeling on the concrete while the traffic of the busy Great Falls depot went on around me--"NOW LOADING FOR BUTTE IN BAY THREE," the loudspeaker intoned, "ALL ABOARD FOR BUTTE"; why couldn't Aunt Kitty and her Dutch live there instead of dumb Wisconsin?--I unlatched the wicker suitcase and dug out the autograph book, stuffing it in the pocket of my corduroy jacket. While I had the suitcase open, I reluctantly tucked the black arrowhead in under

the moccasins; I hated not to be carrying it as a lucky piece, but I didn't want to risk sitting on it all the way to Wisconsin, either. Missions accomplished, I returned the suitcase to the baggage compartment as best I could, then as I headed to climb back on the bus, I nearly bumped into the driver coming around the front. He gave me another of those looks, as if I still was on his mind. "Say, I saw you come straight off the Rocky bus--did you get your Green Stamps?"

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

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

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

"Uhm, I forgot to ask. How much do they cost?"

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26A

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



Really? Nothing? Skeptically I made sure. "The dog bus just gives them away?"

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

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

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

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

Already this was some trip, I thought to myself as I dodged through the depot crowd, enriched with a pocketful of trading stamps and a blessing, the latter I was not really sure I wanted because that implied I might need it. In any case, I hustled out and vaulted back onto the bus. The same seat was available and I dropped into it as if I owned it.

There. I felt more ready. Now if I was trapped with someone who wanted to talk my ear off about canned succotash or similar topics, I could head them off by asking for their autograph and get them interested in my collection. It was at least a plan.

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

Sure enough, the sound of that someone setting foot on the steps. I reared up half out of my seat to look, startling the driver as he climbed into the bus. Guiltily I sank back down. Shaking his head to himself, he did a passenger count, starting with me, then slid in behind the steering wheel and started the motor. In no time we were pulling out of Great Falls, past the smelter and its gigantic smokestack that was the city's signature all the way to the horizon, and lurching onto the highway that ended, as far as I was concerned, a million miles from Gram and the cook shack.

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

Watching the miles go by, with no company but my indistinct reflection, loneliness caught up with me. It had been held off by the woman talking a blue

streak at me on the ride from Gros Ventre and then the confusion of getting settled on the Greyhound, but now if I could have seen myself, hunched in that seat amid the rows of passengers confined within themselves by the cocoon of travel, surely I would have fit the picture of despair in one of those sayings of Gram's that said it so well, lonely as an orphan on a chamber pot.

Life was against me, was all I could think, Gram and me both. I resented the human plumbing or whatever it was in her case that produced this situation. If that nun wanted to do something useful, why didn't she pray up a better system of women's insides so a boy wouldn't worry himself sick about losing his grandmother, all he had, to some kind of operation? And getting booted out of the cook shack and off the ranch like we were nobody--if that wasn't enough cause for resentment, I didn't know what qualified. I could have driven that stacker team just fine, and if Wendell Williamson didn't think so, he needed his sparrow head examined. Then the relatives I was going to be stuck with for an endless summer--why hadn't this Kitty and Dutch pair ever visited us, so I'd at least know what they looked like? Even if they were dried-up old coots who probably kept their teeth in a glass at night, as I figured they must be, it would have helped if I could picture them at all. I sat there, nose against the window, viewing the whole matter as unfair, unwanted, and unsettling. In other words, fuck and phooey.

Yet I couldn't just sit there feeling sorry for myself and staring at plowed fields hour after hour. To be doing anything, I took out the autograph book and opened it. *In the game of life, don't lose your marbles.* Right. If you were lucky enough to own any marbles to start with. Moodily I moved on from the Double W brand of advice, flipping to the front of the book. Gram's was the very first inscription. Wouldn't a person think, in a nice autograph book that she'd spent real

money for, she would have carefully written something like *To my one and only grandson...* Instead, in her scrawl that barely did for grocery lists:

My love for you shall flow

Like water down a tater row.

Your Gram

Dorie Blegen

I was finding out that people came up with surprising things like that almost automatically when presented with the autograph book. It was as if they couldn't resist putting down on the page--their page, everyone got his own, I made sure--something of themselves, corny though it might be, and happily signing their name to it. Wistfully thumbing through the inscriptions even though I knew them by heart, I lost myself for a while in the rhymes and remarks of my school friends and teachers and the ranch hands and visitors like the veterinarian and once in a while when I hit it lucky, bigshots like Senator Ridpath when he spoke in the Gros Ventre park on the Fourth of July, and Major Williamson straight from New York. Those were my prize ones so far. The Senator was surely famous, if for nothing more than having been in office almost forever. And though I could only guess at the Major's measure of reknown in a big city such as New York, on the ranch he was "well thought of," a substantial endorsement from Gram if there ever was one, and it sounded to me like a sizable step toward fame. What a pretty piece of writing his was as I looked at it with admiration again, every letter of the alphabet perfectly formed and the lines about sword and pen as balanced as a poem.

More than that. The Major's elegant citation stirred me to appreciate the ink it was written in, another thing to thank Gram for. Along with the autograph book, she had given me my very own ballpoint pen--not the common brand then that was an ink stick with a cap on the end, but a fancy new retractable kind called

a Kwik Klik. It wrote in a purplish hue that seemed to me the absolute best color for an autograph collection, and I made sure to have people use it when composing their ditties rather than just any old writing instrument. Of course, there were exceptions--Wendell Williamson was represented in that deathly black Quink stuff--but page to page, the creamy paper showed off the same pleasing ink, like a real book, thanks to my fervor for the Kwik Klik. And then and there, the way a big idea sometimes will grow from a germ of habit, it dawned on me that the dog bus with its captive audience presented a chance to fill a good many more of those pages with purplish inscriptions.

I sat up as if I'd had a poke in the ribs. What might have been just a stray thought meant turning my thinking completely around, from resorting to the autograph album if necessary as a defense against being talked half to death--as a conversation stopper, really--to taking the initiative and striking up conversations that would lead to words on paper. Not as simple as it might sound, for I wasn't over being leery about close contact with other passengers for hours on end. That sort of thing could wear out a person's eardrums, my experience on the mail bus taught me. Still, if I wanted to give the autograph book its due--and, admit it, boost myself toward the record number that would enroll me in Believe It Or Not, early fame of a kind--I would need to approach people and tell them what was what, wouldn't I.

Uncertainly I snuck a look toward the back of the bus for candidates. The soldiers were talking up a storm, joking and laughing in their own world. The tourists yakked on across the aisles, a gauntlet of talk. A number of passengers were napping. The only ones not occupied, so to speak, were the nun and the shepherd.

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

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

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

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

"What's doing, buddy?" he drawled.

My voice high, I hurriedly told him, displaying the autograph book. His eyebrow stayed parked way up there, but he kind of smiled and broke into my explanation.

"Loud and clear, soldier. If there's a section in there for Uncle Sam's groundpounders, you've got them up the yanger here." Holding out a hand that swallowed mine, he introduced himself. "Turk Turco." Rubbernecking for all they were worth, the soldiers across the aisle--Gordon in the near seat and Mickey by the window--sent me two-fingered salutes and chipped in their names.

"Mine's Donny," I said to keep things simple. "Where you guys going?"

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

"Where we'll get our asses shot off," Mickey said glumly.

Turk sharply leaned over, practically obliterating me. "Lay off that, will you, numb nuts. You're scaring the kid. Not to mention me."

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

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

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

Mickey was not to be swayed. "I wish to Christ they were shipping us to Germany or some other place where we wouldn't get our asses shot off, is all."

"Yeah, right, Mick." Gordon rolled his eyes. "Someplace where you could put on your jockstrap spats and wow the frauleins."

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

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

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

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

"A landing craft?" Turk whistled through his teeth, looking at me a different way. "Outstanding! D-Day was hairy. Came back in one piece, did he? Listen up, Mickey."

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

Gordon leaned across the aisle. "So what's your old man do?"

"He's a"--it's amazing what a habit something like this gets to be-- "cropduster."

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

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

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

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

So, there it went, again. Out of my mouth something unexpected, not strictly true but harmlessly made up. An experimental fib, maybe it could be called. For I still say it was not so much that I was turning into an inveterate liar around strangers, I simply was overflowing with imagination. The best way I can explain it is that I was turned loose from myself. Turned loose, not by choice, from the

expected behavior of being "a good kid," which I was always a little restless about anyway. "Don't get rambunctious," Gram would warn whenever I got carried away about one thing or another. Now, with no check on my enthusiasm when it started playing tricks upstairs in me--the long bus trip seemed to invite daydreaming, mine merely done out loud--I was surprising myself with the creations I could come up with, rambunctious or not. I mean, what is imagination but mental mischief of a kind, and why can't a youngster, particularly one out on his own, protectively occupy himself with invention of that sort before maturity works him over? One thing sure, the soldiers on their way to their own mindstretchng version of life ahead did not doubt my manufactured one in the least.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Life is like a deck of cards.

When you are in love it's s.

Before you are married it's s.

After you are married it's s.

When you are dead it's s.

May your long suits be hearts and diamonds.

Alvin "Turk" Turco, Pfc.

TIME FLIES LIKE AN ARROW,

WHY I'VE NEVER UNDERSTOOD.

FRUIT FLIES LIKE A BANANA,

NOW THAT SOUNDS PRETTY GOOD.

Gordon Jones

General Nuisance, US Army

Mickey O'Fallon is my name

America is my nation

Butte, Montana, is my home

Korea is my destination

Like the Turk one had said, outstanding! Three fresh pages of inscriptions, just like that. Now, though, I faced a dilemma. Stretch my luck and go back for Kwik Klik tidbits from other passengers, or quit while I was ahead? The bus was belting along through nondescript country with nothing much to show for itself except a brushy creek and flat buttes, so Havre or any place else

was not in the picture for a while yet, and I had time if I wanted to brave the gauntlet of strangers again. But if I wasn't mistaken, the nun had looked about ready to pounce as I hustled past from keeping company with the swearing soldiers. Was it worth it to risk falling into her clutches, or for that matter, end up with some talky tourist bunch like the ladies' club on the Chevy bus?

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

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

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

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

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

Uncomfortably I owned up to "Almost."

"Takes some getting used to, especially in the sitdown bones," she said with a breezy laugh. Just then a shiny new two-tone Buick passed us like the wind. "What has four wheels, big ears, and chases cars?" she playfully sent my way, not really asking. "A Greyhound full of elephants."

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

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

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

A flea and a fly in a flue

Were caught, so what could they do?

"Let us flee," said the fly.

"Let us fly," said the flea.

And away they flew through a flaw in the flue.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So why do you wear them ever?”

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

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

Frowning ever so slightly, she made a shooing motion in front of her face. “Flies around the mouth,” she warned me off that kind of language. She glanced over her shoulder toward the soldiers, shaking her head. “Poor babies.” Going back to her writing, she finished with a vigorous dotting of *i*’s and crossing of *t*’s, and handed book and pen back to me. “Here you go, pal. Signed, sealed, and delivered.”

I saw she had done a really nice job. The handwriting was large and even and clear, doubtless from writing meal orders.

*Roses are red,
violets are blue.
The other way around,
we’d have something new.*

Not bad as such things go, I thought. Reluctantly about to thank her and excuse myself to get up and leave, I was stopped cold by the signature. *Letty Minetti.*

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

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

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, expert, I mean,” my sentences stumbled in retreat. “More like interested, is all. See, my grandmother used to cook there, you maybe knew her?” This was not much of a shot in the dark, if at all. Clear as anything, I could hear Gram reciting, singsong, what she habitually said when she fell behind and had to busy up in the kitchen to provide more potatoes and gravy or some other

fare to meet the appetite of the ranch crew: "Heavens to Letty, how many stomachs do these men have?"

"Dorie?" Letty, as she was to me now, spoke with deliberation as she sorted this out. "Sure, great old gal, best fry cook I ever worked with." She sucked in her cheeks as if tasting the next before she said it. "So you're him."

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

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

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

Letty bit her lip, then uttered the rest. "When she left to be with you, she had me put flowers on the crosses every month."

White as bones, the trio of short metal crosses stood in memoriam at roadside on the long slope up from the Two Medicine River. One for my father, one for my mother, and although I could not see why he deserved the same, one for the drunk driver whose pickup drifted across the centerline and hit theirs head-on. Only once had I seen the crosses, on a school trip to the Blackfoot Museum in Browning not long after the funeral, and I had to swallow sobs the rest of the trip. I almost wished the American Legion post would quit marking highway deaths like that--for some of us, too much of a reminder--but my father had been a favorite at Legion halls, someone who came out of the D-Day landing badly wounded but untouched in his personality, ready with a laugh and a story any time he and my mother blew in for a drink and a nice supper and some dancing. The flowers, which I remembered were yellow, must have been Gram's own ongoing remembrance, by courtesy--a great deal more than that--of Letty Minetti.

—————

A jolt went through me like touching the hot wire of something electric. Connected by accident, she and I were no longer simply strangers on a bus. This woman with the generous mouth knew all about me--or at least enough--and I was catching up with her circumstances. Wherever she was headed with her name on her uniform, it was not to work the counter at the Browning truck stop, a hundred miles in the other direction. "You do that any more?" I rushed out the words, then hedged. "The flowers, I mean?"

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

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

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

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

That didn't sound good. People were always saying about Havre, off by itself and with not much going for it but the railroad that ran through, *You can have 'er*. Chuck Manning, one of the younger cowhands in the Double W bunkhouse,

had been a flyboy at the Air Force radar station there and claimed even migrating birds avoided the place.

Something of that reputation must have been on Letty's mind, too. "Hey, you know any French?"

"Aw river, maybe."

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

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

She caught me at it. "You don't miss much, do you," she sighed, flexing that finger away from the others. "My husband's still in Browning, he's got a job at the government agency."

She shrugged as if the next didn't matter, although even I knew it was the kind of thing that always does. "We split. He was jealous. There was this one

trucker, Rudy, I got a little involved with. But never mind. What's done is done. You ought to have that in your book." She mashed out the latest cigarette. "Hey, enough of the story of my life. How's Dorie these days? Why isn't she with you?"

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

When I finally ran down, Letty bit her lip again. "Jeez, that's rough on both of you. Tough deal all around." The bus changed speed as the driver shifted gears on a hill, bobbing us against our seatbacks, and when that stopped, Letty still rocked back and forth a little. "You know what? You need something else to think about."

Reaching in her purse, she took out a compact and redid her lipstick. That surprised me, but not nearly as much as what she now said:

"Ever been kissed?"

"Well, sure," I stammered. "Lots."

"Besides nighty-night?"

"Uh, not really, I guess."

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

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

We broke apart, her first. "There you go, kiddo, that's for luck." Grinning broadly, she opened the compact again to show me myself plastered with the red

imprint of her lips, as if I needed any evidence, before tenderly wiping away the lipstick with her hanky. "First of many smackeros in your career," she said huskily, "you'll get good at it. Now you better scoot back to your own seat, sugar, we're just about there." That was true of her and the pink tittytatting that pointed the way. I still was trying to catch up with the dizzying twists and turns of the day.

“Havre, the Paris of the prairie,” the lanky driver called out in a mechanical way, “you may disembark if you so wish and stretch your legs. The Greyhound bus depot, proud to serve you, has full conveniences.”

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

I could have used some by the time I emerged from the men’s rest room and tried to navigate the waiting room crowded with families of Indians and workgangs of white guys in bib overalls and a mix of other people, the mass of humanity causing me to duck and dodge and peer in search of something to eat. My meal money, a five-dollar bill Gram tucked into my jeans before I caught my ride to town for the mail bus, was burning a hole in my pocket. Besides that, on the principle that you never want to be separated from your money while traveling among strangers, I had a stash under my shirt, three ten-dollar bills which she had folded snugly and pinned behind the breast pocket with a large safety pin, assuring me a pickpocket would need scissors for hands to reach it. These days, it is hardly conceivable that three perforated tenspots and a fiver felt to me like all

the cash in the world, but at the time a cup of coffee cost only a dime, as did that stimulant for the younger set like me, comic books, and a movie could be seen for a quarter, and a pair of blue jeans would set you back two bucks and a half at most. It's funny how dollars and cents can change so much from then till now, but that's the story of money. Be that as it may, besides providing me with a bit of bankroll for spending during the Wisconsin stay, the shirt stash was meant to outfit myself with school clothes back there to come home with, as well. Scraping that much cash together to send me off with was no easy thing--it amounted to half of Gram's last monthly paycheck from the stingy hand of Sparrowhead--and that's why I had firm instructions from her to stretch the pocket fiver through the trip by confining lunches to a sandwich. No milkshakes, no pieces of pie, no bottles of pop, in other words no getting rambunctious with the tantalizing fivespot, and that way I could splurge on something like chicken-fried steak for supper, she topped off the menu for me.

Which sounded okay in theory, but less so in a a thronged bus depot. The problem was that the lunch counter, offering greasy hamburgers if a person did not want runny egg salad sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, was jampacked by the time I got there and service was slow as ring-around-the-rosy. Havre really needed Letty. Desperately looking around as my stomach growled for something to be done, I spied the newsstand that sold magazines and cigarettes and other sundries. Gram had not thought to say anything about candy bars. I hurried over, one eye on the clock. No one else was buying anything, but the gum-chewing woman clerk had to tend to freight parcels as well as the candy counter, and it took a very long couple of minutes to get her to wait on me. "A Milky Way, please"--creamy chocolate covered with dark chocolate, you can't beat that--I said rapidly as I could. Then I remembered that supertime would not be until North Dakota, as distant to me as the cheese side of the moon. "Make it three."

not be until North Dakota, as distant to me as the cheese side of the moon. "Make it three."

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

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

Oh man, here was my chance! A seatmate I could talk to about all kinds of Indian things! I knew the Fort Belknap Reservation was somewhere in this part of Montana, and he and the Indian families taking up about half the bus must be headed home there. My head buzzed with the sensation of double luck. Here delivered right to me was not only someone really great for the autograph book, but who could palaver--that's what Indians did, didn't they?--with me about the black arrowhead if I went about it right.

"Hi!" I chirped as I joined him.

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

The bus lurched into immediate motion, as if my fanny hitting the cushion was the signal to go, and I settled into eating my candy bar and sneaking looks sideways at my traveling companion. He was dressed not all that different from me, in bluejeans and a western shirt with snap buttons. All resemblance ended there, though, because his buckskin face could have posed for the one on nickels,

and then there were those braids, even. I envied him his straw cowboy hat, beat-up and curled almost over on itself at the brim and darkly sweat-stained from what I would have bet was life on one of the little ranches scattered around on the reservation, riding appaloosa horses and hunting antelope and dancing at powwows and a million other things that beat anything I had been through at the Double W.

Mind your manners no matter what, so people won't think you were born in a barn, I could all but hear Gram reciting in my ear, and so I politely turned away to the window to wait until we were out of town and freewheeling toward the reservation before striking up a conversation about him being an Indian and my second name or nickname or whatever it was being Red Chief. That ought to get things going. Then when black arrowheads became the topic, should I tell him, just kind of casually, that I had one in my suitcase? For all I knew, possessing such a rarity maybe made a person special in the tribe. Possibly I was already a sort of honorary chieftain and didn't know it, from whatever sacred quality--to me, that meant pretty much the same as magic--a glistening dark treasure like that carried. Yet there was another consideration, wasn't there. While I was surer than sure that Wendell Williamson did not deserve an arrowhead older than Columbus, what about the Indians from that time on? What if my braided seatmate were to tell me the black arrowhead was a lucky piece that they worshiped, and there was a whole long story about how tough life had been for Indians ever since it was lost? I'd feel bad about having it. I decided I'd better play it safe at first and start with his autograph.

To be prepared, I extracted the album out of my jacket and made the Kwik Klik ready to perform. I could hardly wait to see what he would write on the page, what his own name would be, Buffalo Belly or Son of Sitting Bull or something else great like that.

My manners were strained pretty thin by now. Havre was turning out to be a town strewn along the highway for a long distance, the bus taking its sweet time to gravitate past stretches of stores and gas stations and farm equipment dealerships, so I tried to keep busy with myself, working my mouth over with my handkerchief for any trace of chocolate candy bar, stowing the other two Milky Ways in my jacket, fussing with the bulge of change from the fiver in my pants pocket, general housekeeping like that. If I was lucky, this activity might inspire the kind of comment I'd already gotten once today, that I was a livewire who reminded my seatmate of someone--maybe a kid of his own, with an Indian name! That would put us right smack to Red Chief.

Finally the bus labored out of the last of Havre and we were rolling ahead on the open prairie. Expectantly I turned toward my braided seat partner for conversation to be initiated, by me if not him.

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

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

Retrieving one of the Milky Way bars, I noisily unwrapped it, crumpling the wrapper as loudly as possible while I munched away. No result on the sleeper.

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

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

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

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

Here goes nothing fom nowhere, this one of Gram's old standards was more encouraging, and I was perilously up and with one leg spraddled over his round midriff as if mounting a horse from the wrong side, when the fact struck me. *Dummy, there aren't any empty seats*. I'd have to stand up all the while as I went along the aisle visiting with people to introduce them to the notion of giving

me their autographs and whatever else they wanted to put on the page, and I saw in the rearview mirror the driver already had his eye on me.

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

“Twenty minute stop, folks.”

The driver's droning announcement that we could disembark if we so wished and use the full conveniences of the Greyhound terminal woke me. Yawning and groggily forcing my eyes open, I looked up and down the aisle of the bus, trying to come to grips with my surroundings. Then looked again, blinking to see whether I was in a dream, not a good one.

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

I still couldn't get my bearings. The bus already had slowed to a town speed, we must be nearly to a depot and those conveniences. I whirled to see out

the window. A Stockman Bar, a Mint Bar, a Rexall Drug, a Buttrey's grocery, those could be anywhere. Then I spotted a storefront window with the lettering, GLASGOW TOGGERY--MEN'S WEAR AND MORE. Glasgow! I had slept away a sizable portion of Montana. The Indians, including my seatmate whom I had only managed to coax the single word "Howdy" out of, must have got off long since at Fort Belknap, the oil roughnecks likewise somewhere along the way. I felt cheated, yet with no one to blame but myself. Staying awake on a once-in-a-lifetime journey should not be that hard a job, I could about hear Gram echoing in on my sense of guilt. Swallowing hard about all the unfulfilled pages of the autograph book and the lost chance to palaver about the black arrowhead, I scrambled off for the rest room the moment the bus door whished open, vowing to get the Kwik Klik into action from here on, no matter what it took.

When passengers filed on again, things looked more promising, several fresh faces, although no obvious Indians. I was nothing if not determined, singling out seats I could pop in and out of as the autograph book and I made the rounds. Itching to start, I waited impatiently for the driver to finish some



paperwork he was doing on his lap. All at once, I saw him look up in surprise, spring the bus door open, and address someone outside.

“Afternoon, Sheriff. Prize customer?”

“A steady one, for damn sure,” an irritated voice replied. “Turning him in at Wolf Point again. He’s their prisoner. Supposed to be anyhow, if the lamebrain didn’t keep showing up here. I’ll catch the local back after I dump him.”

Sheriff. Prisoner. I sat up sharply.

Sure enough, up into the bus stepped a rangy man with strong movie magazine features like Gary Cooper or Randolph Scott or one of those. A figure of few words, his stony expression doing the talking for him, you could tell by looking at him; someone who could tame a town just by stepping out of the shadows at high noon. He, though, was not the sheriff, according to the handcuffs on his wrists. Right behind him came a sawed-off guy not much more than half his size, wearing the biggest kind of Stetson and a star badge. “Here, stupid,” the runty one directed. “Across from the kid will do.”

Oh man! Not only had my luck changed, the rush of it flattened me back against my seat as I watched the pair of them settle in as the bus started into motion, the prisoner by the window and the sheriff on the aisle. The butt of a revolver protruded out of a well-worn holster on his hip like a place to hang his hat.

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

“Yeah! How come you take him by bus?”

The lawman grimaced as if he’d been asking himself that very question. “My deputy’s out on a domestic dispute call, and the jail’s full of rangutang drunks from Saturday night. Not the way I want, doing this by Hound,” he looked around the bus with distaste, which sort of bothered me as a full-fledged

passenger by now. "But it'd be just like the dimwit to bail out of the patrol car if I drove him. Tried that last time, didn't you, Harv."

"Weren't going that fast."

The sheriff laughed nastily. "You're not gonna be bailing out of the bus, are you."

"Don't see how."

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

"I 'splaind that, Carl," the prisoner drawled. "My girlfriend Janie waits tables at the Glasgow Supper Club. How else am I 'sposed to get to see her?"

My imagination lit up at that. Just think: If Leticia kept working her way job by job in the direction she was, she might well reach the supper club frequented by the escape-artist convict, as I thought of him, in pursuit of his waitress girlfriend, and there she couldn't help but become acquainted with the pair of them and in all likelihood the ornery sheriff as well. And I'd have witnessed the whole sweep of coincidence, from Letty's flowers on the roadside crosses to Harvey carrying on a romance in spite of jail, incredible as it all added

up to. One of the lessons of the dog bus seemed to be that everyone stood a chance of meeting everyone else, by the end.

The sheriff sighed in exasperation at the stoic explanation about Janie, sweetheart of the supper club. "Honest to God, Harvey, if brains was talcum powder, you couldn't work up a sneeze."

"Besides," the prisoner righteously gestured, handcuffs and all, to the green countryside as though the evidence there ought to be plain enough, too, "haying season is gonna be late this year, on account of the weather."

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

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

His eyelevel the same as mine, this tough kernel of a man simply stared across the aisle at me. "Traveling on the cushions, huh? Pretty good for a kid your age. Where you from?"

"Gros Ventre," I said distinctly, as people from over east, which was most of the rest of Montana, sometimes didn't know it was pronounced Grove On.

"That's some ways from here. I didn't hear you say how come your folks turn you loose to--" The bus suddenly humming in a different gear, it dropped down in a dip and showed no sign of coming out, the road following the Missouri River now. The wide river flowing in long lazy curves with thickets of diamond willows and cottonwood trees lining the banks impressed me, but the sight

seemed to turn the sheriff's stomach. Beside him, though, his handcuffed seat partner smiled like a crack in stone.

"There she be, Carl. What's left of the river, hey?"

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

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

"I know," I nodded sagely. "I'm from there."

That was a mistake. His apple-doll face turning sour, the sheriff spoke as if he had caught me red-handed. "You wouldn't be pulling my leg, would you?"

So much for the value of the unvarnished truth.

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

Caterpillar bulldozer, manipulating the scraper blade down to the last chosen inch of earth, on some raw slope of the colossal dam.

I may as well tell the rest of the Cameron family story, what there is of it. My mother, teenage girl with soft eyes and fashionably bobbed dark hair according to the Brownie box camera photos from the time, was waitressing there at the damsite in an around-the-clock cafe where Gram was day cook. I imagine Gram met it with resignation, much as she had met roustabout Pete Blegen in the cook tent of a Glacier Park roadwork construction camp twenty years earlier, when her daughter Peggy fell for the cocky young catskinner across the counter. Fell right into at least one of his capable arms, I can guarantee, because this livewire who became my father always had a necker knob, the gizmo that clamped onto the steering wheel for handy one-fisted driving, on every car he ever owned, from Model A to final Ford pickup. Marriage came quick, and so did I. I had my footings poured, to use the Fort Peck term, in a thrown-together shacktown called Palookaville; later, whenever we were living at some construction site or another in crude housing, my parents would think back to that time of a drafty tarpaper shack between us and weather of sixty below, and say, "Well, it beats Palookaville." Once the Fort Peck work shut down for good, we began a life of roving the watersheds along the Rockies. My father was six feet of restlessness and after the Depression there were irrigation and reservoir projects booming in practically every valley under the mountains, where a man who knew his stuff when it came to operating heavy equipment could readily find work. For her part, my mother learned bookkeeping, and jointly employable Bud and Peg Cameron moved from one construction camp to the next, with me in tow.

The war interrupted this pattern. In 1943 my father went in--enlisted or drafted, I have never known; it is one of the mysteries of him--and at Omaha Beach on D-Day he was badly shot up in the legs. He spent months in a hospital

in England where surgeons put in rods and spliced portions of tendon from elsewhere in him into his knees and on down. Eventually he came home to my mother and me, at least to Fort Harrison hospital in Helena where he advanced from casts to crutches to learning to walk again. Perhaps it says most about my father that he went right back to being a catskinner, even though you operate a bulldozer as much with your legs, working the brake pedals, as with your hands. Whatever it cost him in pain and endurance, Bud Cameron never veered from that chosen line of work, and in a way his stubborn climb from a cripple's life summed up our family situation, because we were always getting on our feet. Money was tight when earthmoving jobs shut down for the winter, and Montana winters are long. Hopping to whatever water project was first to hire 'skinner when the ground thawed, with me attending whatever one-room school happened to be anywhere around, my folks had hopes of moving up from wages to contracting projects on their own. They had managed to take out a loan on a D-10 Caterpillar dozer and were on their way to the Cat dealer in Great Falls to sign the final papers, when the drunk driver veered across the center line on the Two Medicine hill.

If the big-hatted lawman poking his nose into my life had asked about any of that, I was ready to tell him.

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

"That's as maybe," he allowed, leaning toward me as if to get a better look. "Tell me something, laddy boy." His tone turned ominous. "You don't happen to be running away from home, do you?"

"No!" I was scared, alarmed, dumbfounded--could a person be arrested for riding a Greyhound bus? And if so, would my suitcase be searched? How

could I explain the black arrowhead to a sheriff already full of suspicion? *It's really mine, see, because I found it, but my grandmother made me hand it over to Sparrowhead and so I got it back when he wouldn't let me stay on the ranch and--* That sounded fishy even to me, let alone a skeptical law enforcement officer. Then and there, with that star badge full in my face, the consequences of my impulsive grab off the show-off table at the Double W went through me like an electric shock. I could howl to high heaven maintaining that in pocketing the precious arrowhead I was only retrieving what was right fully mine, finder, keeper. But Wendell Williamson never in his stingy life was going to accept being loser, weeper.

Panicked, I tried to think how to head off the inquisitive sheriff. The prisoner sent me a sad look of sympathy that didn't help. Somehow I had to dodge incrimination by proving I really was going to Wisconsin to visit relatives like I'd said. "Here, see?" Frantically I dug out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and produced the slip of paper Gram had written the address on.

Fear has a mind of its own. It can be blind, deaf and dumb, and still exert a superhuman sense of touch, an unshakable feeling of danger pressing in. Even if it had no business to, fright gripped me across the aisle there from the scowling little man with a badge for a simple reason, lodged backward in that accusing question of his but no less hazardous for that. Home was running away from me, and had been ever since some doctor's dire words to Gram. For if I lost the last of my family to the poor farm or worse, with it went all that connected to that, the familiar, and I would be cast into that other terrifying institution that turned a person into a ward of the county, so-called foster care. Full of instinct and intrigue as a schoolyard is, kids grasp what losing the world you have known means. Too many times I had heard the whisper race through recess, jackrabbit

telegraph, that So-and-so was a foster now, packed up and dumped on total strangers, poor kid, news that always came as grim in its way as a hushed remark at a funeral. Being taken over by foster parents truly did sound to me fatal in a way, the end of a childhood in which my real parents literally moved earth, and would have done the same with heaven had it been within immediate reach, to keep me always with them no matter how unhandy the circumstances. My father once bulldozed out a mile of irrigation ditches in exchange for an Indian rancher enrolling his three kids long enough to keep open the foothills one-room school for me to ^{go} go to. At other places construction jobs took us, my mother bucked snowdrifts winterlong in our chained-up pickup to get me to and from schoolhouses tucked into creek valleys where the Rockies were practically straight overhead. Gram kept up the tradition by pitching in gas money, and occasionally a dozen eggs the Double W henhouse would never miss, for neighbors to swing by the ranch and pick me up on the way to the Noon Creek school with their own kids. Everybody stretched for my sake, and it could be said I came out of such care selfish. By which I mean self-ish, highly aware of my self and what it had taken in family sacrifice to shape a boyhood like mine. To make me the self-conscious--that word again--striver that an only child can be, with flights of imagination as natural and common as the turning of the earth.

All of which now threatened to go out the bus window. Still spooked to my eyeballs, I held my breath as the sheriff studied Gram's spidery handwriting. If he was overly suspicious of what he held in his hand and hauled me back to Gros Ventre and turned me over to the county authorities there without her on hand to straighten things out, to me that was the first awful step to becoming a foster, permanently a handed-around orphan by any other name. Worse yet, with "thief" added on if Wendell Williamson learned I was back and went to those

same authorities about me taking the arrowhead. My whole life to come teetered on jottings on a scrap of paper.

“Hell if I know what people are thinking anymore, the things they do these days,” the sheriff muttered as he kept squinting at the scrawled set of numbers and street name. Finally the evidence seemed to convince him, if reluctantly. Handing back the address slip, he rasped, “It’s still bad business, turning a kid young as you loose in the world.”

The prisoner Harvey guffawed. “How old do you always say you was, when you set out on your own? Barely out of short pants, right?”

“Nobody asked you, lunkhead,” the sheriff sighed. His attention diverted from me, he folded his arms on his chest and shook his head at the lovelorn suitor in his custody and the dammed river that had saddled him with wide-open boomtowns, the things a lawman had to put with.

Although I was still shaky from the close call, my impulse was to get back to an even footing as a legitimate Greyhound passenger if I possibly could. Screwing up my courage, I took a gamble. “Sheriff?” I tried to keep the squeak



out of my voice. "Could you--I mean, would you sign my autograph book for me, please?"

He glanced over at me and made a face. "I don't have time for foolishness."

Harvey came to my rescue. "Aw, come on, Carl. Don't you remember at all what it was like to be a kid?"

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

Like they say in Fort Peck, keep your pecker dry.

--Carl Kinnick, Sheriff, Hill County, Montana

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

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

With great concentration, the arrested man went to work at writing. It took him a long time, even considering the contorted way he had to hold the pen and book. "What in hell-all are you writing, the Bible?" the sheriff derided.

Finally the prisoner was done and thrust his manacled hands across to give me the finished product, only to have it intercepted, the sheriff growling, "Not so fast. Let me see that."

Reading it with a pinched look, the sheriff finished with a "Huh." Saying "Huh" again, he sourly passed the opened album for me to take in the painstakingly written words.

*When in life
the sign by the side of the road
is a curve or an arrow
Hesitate not, shoulder your load
And follow the straight and narrow.*

Harvey Kinnick

I blurted, "Y-you've got the same last name?"

"We're brothers," the prisoner drawled. "Ain't we, Carl."

The sheriff folded his arms on his chest in a huff. "*Step*-brothers."

The pair of them got off at Wolf Point, a town so small it was no surprise that it couldn't hold Harvey the jailbreaker. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, button," the sheriff left me with. I thought to myself, as I have ever since, that left a large margin for error, given the behavior of some adults.

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

in the album, daydreaming of more that surely were to come, the one good thing about this forcible trip, until the Greyhound pulled in at the Williston depot.

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

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

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

The bus added a dozen or so passengers in Williston, but I was too played out by the full day to go up and down the aisle with the autograph book. Instead, I settled in for the night, which took a long time coming in horizontal North Dakota. First thing, making sure no one was watching, I took out my wallet and put it down the front of my pants, another of Gram's strict orders. It felt funny there in my shorts, but nobody was going to get it while I slept. Then I remembered the Green Stamps, of inestimable or at least unknown worth, and stuck those down there to safety, too.

Bundling my jacket for a pillow, I made myself as close to comfortable as I could and thought back on the day while waiting for sleep to come. Oh man,

was Gram ever right that the dog bus gets all kinds. The soldiers going to meet their fate in Korea. The nun and shepherd, both of whom I had miraculously escaped. The hibernating Indian. Heavenly Letty. The cantankerous little sheriff and the stone-faced prisoner. And that didn't even count the digestive woman back at the start of the trip. They all filled in the dizzying span of my thoughts like a private version of Believe It Or Not! And wherever life took them from here on, most of them had left a bit of their existence in my memory book. A condensed chapter of themselves, maybe, to put it in Pleasantville terms. I had much to digest, in more ways than one, as I lay back in the seat going over experiences which began at the low end with Sparrowhead and peaked in the middle at being kissed by a woman the way grownups kiss, as far as I knew.

That spot of time, the night hours of my lone journey, has stayed with me everlastingly. There was no such thing as a divided four-lane Interstate yet, and so the oncoming headlights and the bus's lit up the white centerline in overlapping beams--jackrabbits trying to cross didn't stand a chance. While the Greyhound advanced steadily into the Dakota darkness, making quick drop stops in silent towns with only street lights on, the other passengers one by one nodded off around me, until my only company besides the driver was the same moon over a square state as shone down on puzzle-piece Montana behind me, with a lot of road in between. I had probably traveled more miles that day than in the rest of my life combined. On my own. Halfway there, to whoever and whatever awaited in Wisconsin. But was it the big half or the small half, as another of Gram's sayings posed the question. Sleep had a lot of competition.

The sun glinting in the panel window my jacket pillow was crammed against, I woke up confused about where I was. Blinking and squinting, I wrestled

myself upright until it all began to become familiar, the ranks of seats around me, some with heads showing and some not, the road hum of the bus tires, the countryside--greener than it had been the day before--going past at a steady clip. Sleeping had been a tussle, trying to stay comfortable while sitting up, coming half-awake when the bus sighed to a halt at some little depot or another. At the wheel now was a driver I had never seen before, another switch having been made sometime deep in the night. It crossed my mind whether I was passed along as a stray to this one, too, branded that way for as long as I was on the dog bus.

“Sir? Mister?” I called to the driver, still foggy. “Where are we?”

“Minnie Soda,” he responded in a mock accent. “Meal stop coming up in Bemidji.”

What language was that? Actually, my stomach didn't care. It was ready for one of Gram's prescriptions that I could obey to the letter, a big breakfast.

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

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

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

I desposited myself in my same seat, feeling restored and ready for whatever the day brought. I thought.

"Hello there, cowboy. Mind some company?" The man, whom I had not really been aware of until right then, paused beside the aisle seat next to me, looking around as if I was the prize among the assortment of passengers.

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

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

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

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

"Fourteen," I told him, and for once my voice didn't break.

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

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

"Eh?" He glanced at me as if I'd jabbed him in the ribs.

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

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

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

"You're really something, aren't you." He rubbed his jaw as he appraised me. "Where've you been anyway, donkey school?"

Mystified, I furrowed a look at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

“They were made a long time ago for the best Blackfoot fancy-dancer there ever was, that’s how.” I didn’t need to fumble for a name. “Red Chief, he was called.” My enthusiasm built with every detail that flashed to mind. “See, when there was this big powwow about to happen with Indians coming from everywhere, the tribe gathered all its beads on a blanket, and the best moccasin maker chose the prettiest ones and spent day and night sewing the design.” Expert of a kind that I was from donning the soft leather slippers for so many middle-of-the-night calls of nature, I lovingly described their blue and white prancing figure that seemed to lighten a person’s step, like wearing kid gloves on the feet. “They’re real beauties,” I assured my blinking listener, “and when the guy, Red Chief I mean, put them on for the fancy-dancing contest against all the other tribes, he won everything. And so, after that the moccasins were called ‘big medicine’-- that’s Indian for ‘magic,’ see--and nobody else in the tribe could even touch them but that one fancy-dancer. When he got old and died, though,” my tone hushed just enough to draw my audience of one in closer, “the tribe was going to sell them to a big museum, but the dude ranch owner heard about it and traded a bunch of horses to the Blackfeet for them.” For all I knew, this part approached the truth. Admittedly in very roundabout fashion, but the fact was that my grandmother the sharp-trading fry cook there in the Reservation town of Browning had bargained someone out of the impressive moccasins somehow. I had to stretch a little for the next portion, but I got there. “When the dude rancher tried them on, they had shrunk up and didn’t fit him, so he made them the grand prize for the roping contest. They’re just right for me,” I finished modestly.

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

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

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

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

Innocent as it sounded, the utterance from this complete stranger echoed in me until my ears rang. Gram was more used to this sort of thing, the sound of someone speaking from past the grave. Past a white cross on the side of Highway 89, in this instance. How many times had I heard it, waiting with my mother in a kitchen table game of dominoes or some such while my father scouted for work, for the next construction camp that needed a hotshot catskinner, and in he would come at last, smiling like the spring sun as he reported, "They're hiring at Tiber Dam," or the Greenfield irrigation project it might be, or the reservoirs capturing creeks out of the Rockies, Rainbow and Pishkun and those. Each time his voice making the words wink that certain way, "We've got it knocked." Wherever it came from--World War Two? the Depression?--for me the expression indeed meant something solid we were about to tap into, wages for my folks after a lean winter and a firmer place to live than wherever we had fetched up when the ground froze hard enough to resist a bulldozer blade. It entered me deeper than mere words generally go, as Gram's sayings did with her, to the point where I perfectly well

knew, even though I wasn't there, that starting out on that trip to take possession of the bulldozer that would set them--us--up in life for once and for all, Bud Cameron and his wife Peg declared in one voice or the other that they had it knocked. Until they didn't.

If my temporary companion hadn't prodded me with what he said next, I don't know when I would have snapped out of the spell his intonation had put me in. Tugging at his suit coat cuffs, he asked briskly, "Where's home? Minneapolis?" as if it was what we had been talking about all along.

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

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

"Huh?"

"You know, a cop on the beat?"

"Huh-uh. Detective. He solves murders."

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

"Nope. A rodeo announcer. 'Now coming out of chute four, Casey Tibbs on a bronc that takes a dim view of these proceedings, called Skyhigh,'" I gave him a sample. My parents never missed a Gros Ventre rodeo, and given all the hours I had sat through bareback and saddle bronc riding, the announcer's microphone spiel was practically second nature to me.

My seatmate gave that little shake of his head again as if I was really something. He leaned my way as if he had just figured me out. "You an only?"

"Only what?"

"Child. No brothers, no sisters, I'm betting?"

That stopped me momentarily. People usually said that sort of thing when heavily hinting a kid was spoiled. They should try a couple of years in the Double W cook shack. I wasn't about to let a total stranger lay a pampered existence on me. "Pay up then. Three of each."

"That so? What're their names?" he pressed, the look on his face not the best.

"Alvin and Gordon and Mickey and Leticia and Dorie and Peggy."

"Some family." Without my understanding how, this had turned into a contest, with him trying to catch me out. "Yet you're the only one that gets a trip to a dude ranch, why's that?"

"We take turns, Leticia's is next, she's going to Yellowstone Park with her Girl Scout troop. What about yours?"

"My--?"

"Family. Are you married?"

He rubbed his nose. "Sure. The little woman's waiting to welcome me home, she's a peach."

"Outstanding! Where do you live?"

"Oh, near Minneapolis." That wink again, as if only the two of us were in on something. "That's why I thought maybe you were from there, big city boy who knows the ropes."

If I knew any, it was that it was time to quit fooling around. He wasn't as good at making up things as I was, whatever that was about. Maybe he was embarrassed about being a headbolt heater salesman and not able to afford to dress better than he did. In any case, I didn't have time for bulloney from him, I needed to get going with the autograph book. In several seats not far behind us was a group of women all wearing hats with various floral designs, and from what I was able to overhear of their chatter they were a garden club who called themselves the

Gardenias, and were out for fun, which seemed to consist of staying at a lakeside lodge with a flower garden. I didn't want to miss out on the bunch of them, so I produced the album to deal with my seatmate first and then scoot down the aisle to those hats bursting with blossoms.

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

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

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

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

I don't know what would have happened if the bus hadn't starting slowing way down, for a reason that caught me by surprise. And one that made him change his mind surprisingly fast about keeping me for company.

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

I dropped back in my seat, stretching my neck to see too. We were pulling in to what looked like an old mercantile store with a gas pump out front and a faded sign under the Mobil flying red horse, LAKE ITASCA GARAGE--FUEL, FOOD, AND FISH BAIT. Half the building appeared to be the post office and a little grocery shop. The rest of the crossroads settlement was a bar or two, a small cafe, a whitepainted church, and a scattering of houses, not many. It looked to me like a Palookaville. And the driver was announcing this was only a drop stop, as soon as the passengers getting off had their luggage we'd be on our way.

Although we were nearest the door, my companion in conversation was super polite in waiting for the garden club to file off first, before winking me a goodbye along with, "Say hi to Chi," which it took me a moment to translate as Chicago, and then launching himself to the bus door as if he had to get busy.

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

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

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

"He's after my suitcase!" I shrieked. A cry that carried with it moccasins, arrowhead, money, clothing, my entire trip, everything I foolishly was about to lose.

At my hollering like that, the flowery hats scattered far and wide, but the driver bravely spun right around and clamped the sneak's wrist before he could bolt. Wresting my suitcase from the thief, he roughly backed him against the bus.

"Yardbird on the wing, are you," the driver sized him up with distaste. "Suit from the warden and all. How'd you like the accommodations in the pen?"

The penitentiary! Really? I goggled at the ex-convict, or maybe not so -ex. Trying to display some shred of dignity while flattened under the racing silver greyhound, he maintained in a hurt voice, "Paid my debt to society. I'm a free man."

"Swell," the driver retorted, "so you go right back to swiping things like a kid's suitcase."

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

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

How I wished for that halfpint sheriff in the big hat right then. This town, if it even was one, didn't look like it had any such. I could tell that the driver was antsy about the delay it would take to deal with the criminal, and come right down to it, I did not want my trip, complicated enough as it was, to be hung up that way either. "Let him go," I said, sick of it all. When the driver turned the thieving so-and-so loose--my swearing vocabulary wasn't up to the description he deserved--he swaggered off in the direction of the cafe, adjusting his suit, careful not to look back. The garden club ladies cooed at me in concern, but I only looked at the bus driver with a long sigh. "Can I get something out of my suitcase again?"

“Paint it red” was my father’s backhand way of saying “Forget it,” and I did my best to follow that advice after the close call with the jailbird. But it was the sort of thing you can’t get off your mind simply by trying. Even after I hurriedly fixed the money matter by retrieving the stash from the shirt in the suitcase and pinning it under the pocket of the one I was wearing, there was no covering over the fact that I had nearly lost just about everything I owned--the precious autograph book excepted, thank goodness--by my bragging about the fancy moccasins. Plain as day, the master criminal, as I now thought of him, zeroed in on me as a jackpot of his own, and why hadn’t I been smart enough to see that coming? *That’ll teach you, Red Chief*, I mentally kicked myself, and for the rest of that morning on the ride down to Minneapolis I kept to my seat and watched the other passengers out of the corner of my eye lest I be invaded by some other wrongdoer.

That did not happen, the bus inhabitants minding their manners and leaving me alone--maybe I was painted red to them--and around noon my attention was taken up by the way the Greyhound little by little was navigating streets where the buildings grew taller and taller. We were now in the big half of the

Twin Cities, according to the driver's good-natured announcement, and whatever the other place was like, everything about Minneapolis was more than sizable as I perched on the edge of my seat peering out at it all, the first metropolis--it puffed itself up to that by stealing half the word, didn't it--of my life. Wide as my eyes were at the sights and scenes, it was hard to take it all in. Even the department store windows showing off the latest fashions seemed to dwarf those in, say, Great Falls. Likewise, the sidewalks were filled with throngs that would not have fit on the streets back in Montana. People, people everywhere, as traffic increasingly swarmed around us, the tops of cars turtling along below the bus windows barely faster than the walking multitudes. As the Greyhound crept from stoplight to stoplight, I couldn't help gawking at so many passersby in suits and snappy hats and good dresses on an ordinary day, each face another world of mystery to me. Where were they going, what drew them out dressed to the gills like promenaders in an Easter parade? Where did they live, in the concrete buildings that seemed to go halfway to the sky or in pleasant homes hidden away somewhere? I wished this was Wisconsin so I could start to have answers to such things, all the while knowing I was many miles yet from any kind of enlightenment.

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

Son. My chest was out, I'm sure, as I charged through the double doors of the bus station. I knew the driver had only said it because we were practically

buddies after dealing with the larcenous man in the suit, but no one had called me that for the past two years.

In high spirits, I gazed around the teeming depot to scout out the conveniences. The big surprise was an actual restaurant, tucked to one side of the majestic space, with a full menu posted. It hooked me at first sight; all due apology to Gram and her decree of sandwich for lunch, my stomach was only interested in a real meal. Hadn't I been through a lot since Bemidji, coping with the danger of being robbed blind? That kind of narrow escape was bound to cause an appetite, right? Besides, I still was carrying loose change wanting to be spent. Anyway, feeling highly swayed and debonure out on my own in grownup territory, I found a table where I could see the big clock over the ticket counter--most of an hour yet until the bus was to leave, but I wasn't taking any chances--and was served Swiss steak by a pleasant waitress, although I didn't know her name because it wasn't written on her breast. When I was done, I left a dime tip as I had seen the person at the next table do, and with still plenty of time until I needed to be back at the bus, wandered over to the news and candy stand.

The stand was piled on all sides with newspapers and magazines, and after buying a Milky Way that I justified as dessert--it took the last of my pocket change, but by supertime I would be sitting up to the table with Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch, the dog bus willing, so no big deal--I circled around looking at the the magazines to see who was famous just then. A Senator McCarthy was on the cover of TIME and NEWSWEEK and LOOK and some others. One cover identified him as **Wisconsin's Tailgunner Joe, Scourge of the Communist 'Menace'**, which sounded to me like he ought to be in uniform over there in Korea helping out Turk and Gordon and Mickey against the million Chinese. But who knew, if he was all over Wisconsin as much he was the newsstand, maybe I would run into him and land his autograph. On other publications, but not as many, President Truman

stared out, his mouth pinched shut in contrast to the senator's open one. Being careful not to get anything on the glossy covers as I munched chocolate and almonds, I moved on to the next section, where everyone on the covers was smiling big. Movie stars, Elizabeth Taylor again, and Ava Gardner and Gregory Peck and Robert Taylor and several I had never heard of until that moment, but they were clearly famous. How I envied every gleaming one of them.

Perhaps it goes without saying that my fame fever was a product of imagination, but there was greatly more to it than that. Call me a dreamer red in the head, back then, but becoming famous and well off--well thought of wouldn't hurt, either--looked to me like a way out of a life haunted by foster care and the county poor farm. A change of luck sort of like winning a real jackpot, in other words. Wouldn't we all take some of that, at eleven going on twelve or any other age? The missing detail that I had no fixed notion of what I might best be famous at, other than a world-record autograph collection, maybe even constituted an advantage, giving me more chances as I saw it. In the next newsstand section, SPORT magazine showed the pitcher Bob Feller on the mound kicking high to throw his famed fastball, and while in my case work-up softball in rural Montana's pebbly schoolyards was a long way from the Cleveland Indians, he had started off as a kid on a farm in Van Meter, Iowa; I knew because Believe It Or Not! said so. If I didn't make it in baseball, there were other fields, weren't there. Judging from the magazine faces at least, politics and movie acting seemed on the lookout for people to make famous.

Dreamily I drifted past to a selection of photography magazines, something else new to me. There was one I picked up, *Photoplay*, with pictures of women that interested me increasingly since that kissing experience with Leticia. The newsstand clerk glanced at me a few times, but apparently assumed I was too young to be on my own and my parents must have told me to wait there

while they were using the conveniences. I became more engrossed in photography than I knew. When I remembered to check the clock, I looked twice, the second time in shock. The hour was up, the bus would be leaving in less than a minute.

I flung the magazine into the rack and ran as hard as a frantic human being can with a depot full of travelers in the way as I raced for the departure gate, but too late. By the time I scrambled past passengers lined up for other buses, drawing cries of "Hey, don't shove," I could see mine rumbling onto the street and pulling away.

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

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

"I missed my bus," I babbled, "it left without me and my suitcase is on it and my jacket and autograph book and moccasins and Green Stamps and--"

"Them Greyhound dickheads," he said with disgust. "'At's about like them. Which way you goin'?"

"W-W-Wisconsin."

He waved me toward the green van with TWIN CITIES NEWS AGENCY on its side as he trundled the handtruck over and heaved it in with a clatter. "Hop in."

"Are you gonna take me there? To Wisconsin?"

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

"Is it very far?"

He gave me a look as if I was mentally lacking. "They don't call these the Twin Cities for nothin'." Hunched over the steering wheel, he goosed the van out into the street traffic, blaring the horn at anything in our way. "They went up Hennepin," he calculated aloud as I hung on to one of the newspaper bin dividers behind him, "the doggies take the long way around to get anywhere, so we'll cut over the Washington Bridge. How's that sound to ya?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, but the big buildings and fancy stores were clipping by us pretty fast. "Don't that beat all," my samaritan kept up a one-sided conversation as he willy-nilly changed lanes and ran stoplights on the blink between green and red. "Pullin' out without even lookin' around for you any. What kind of bus drivin' is that?" He shook his head at the state of Greyhound affairs. "Dickheads," he repeated.

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

"Hah. You don't know the half of it."

Before I could ask about the half I was missing, I was distracted by the high bridge we were atop without warning, over a river that seemed to go on and on. Which is basically what the Mississippi does. The Greyhound driver

question dogged me, so to speak. As the van rumbled across the seemingly endless bridge and the chasm below, I kept my death grip on the divider and leaned down to speak into my escort's ear. "So how come you think they're all"-- I tried out the new word--"dickheads?"

"They ain't union." He pointed to an encased certificate up by the visor. I squinted and at least could read the large type, INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF TEAMSTERS.

At last, something I knew about! "Horses!" I burst out. "You drive those, too?"

He cast me a grin over his shoulder. "In the old days, everybody did, you bet your pucker string they did."

"Me, too! I mean, I know how to harness horses and drive a team and everything. See, I woun'dn't be here at all if Sparrowhead back at the ranch had let me drive the stacker team like I know I can and--"

"Life's tough, ain't it?" He held up a hand as if letting the air rush through his fingers. "Feel better? We're in St. Paul."

"Really?" It looked the same as Minneapolis to me, the Identical Twin Cities. The van kept up its rapid clip, the rush of wind through the open side making my eyes water. I had to hope my fellow teamster could see all right, as we were cutting in and out of lanes of traffic by the barest of space between us and other vehicles. "Ace work!" I let out like one race driver complimenting another when he skimmed us around a double-parked delivery truck by inches and blazed on through a changing traffic light. "Nothin' to it," he claimed, flooring the gas pedal in a race to beat the next light, "you just gotta keep on the go."

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

buildings. "When we reach the station, you be ready to jump off and tell that dickhead driver you belong on the bus, 'kay?"

"S-s-sure," I said uncertainly. I didn't have time to worry about how I would do at that, because ahead in blinking neon was a towering sign that read from top to bottom, GREYHOUND.

"Damn," the teamster muttered as an unwavering red light held us up at the cross street. Fancied up with plaster-like decorations of flowers and fruit, the St. Paul terminal was older and smaller than the Minneapolis one, and must not have dealt in as many passengers, because fewer buses with the familiar dog symbol were backed into the loading area in the open-arched driveway. I had eyes only for one, with EASTBOUND in the sign slot above the windshield, and I spotted it immediately, its door cruelly folding closed as if shutting me out.

"There it is! It's leaving again!"

"That's what he thinks, the dickhead." The newspaper van revved and so did the teamster, bouncing slightly in his seat, as the stoplight took agonizingly long to change. The instant it did, we shot across the street and along the arches of the terminal driveway, directly toward the warning sign at the far end, reading in red letters of descending order EXIT wrong way DO NOT ENTER.

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

By reflex, the wide-eyed Greyhound driver had hit the brakes, and even more so the horn. In the blare resounding in the arched driveway, I could barely be heard thanking my good samaritan daredevil at the wheel as I leaped out and he gave me a little bye-bye wave.

Peering down at me through the broad windshield, his eyebrows dark as thunderclouds, the bus driver at last let up on the deafening horn as I edged through the slit of space between the facing vehicles and popped out at the bus

door. Faces watching curiously in the windows above the ever-running streamlined dog, I wildly pantomimed that I needed in, until the driver, keeping his hand dubiously on the door lever, cracked things open enough that I could make myself heard.

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

“That's yours?” Looking more upset than ever, the driver fished my jacket from behind his seat. “You should have kept better track of it, kid. I didn't see it in time or I'd have turned it in back there before we started.” As I gulped at one more near miss, he pointed a further accusing finger at me. “And technically, if a passenger misses the bus, it's his own tough luck.” I was so afraid of exactly that, I couldn't form words. “It says right in the regulations,” he kept on reading me the dog bus version of the riot act, “it is the passenger's responsibility to--”

Just then a sharp blast of horn from the van made him jerk his head around, glowering back and forth from me to the motionless teamster, unbudging as a bulldog. In exasperation, he yanked the bus door open. “Okay, okay, step on and show me your ticket.”

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Milwaukee. The last hazardous place I had to get through appeared to me endlessly gray and runny, drizzle streaking the bus window, as though the church steeples every block or two caused leaks in the clouds. Either a very religious spot or one in serious need of saving from its sins, this big city looked old and set in its ways, streets of stores alike from neighborhood to neighborhood even when the spelling on the windows was foreign. ^{different and} Hunched there trying to see out to the blurred brick buildings set tight against one another, I was as bleary as the weather. Ever since Wisconsin Dells, I kept going over my all too adventurous day, the close calls with the badly dressed master criminal and the wild ride to catch up with the bus in St. Paul--luck on my side but only barely until the Zimmermans came along to stick up for me when I most needed it--my imagination zigging and zagging to what could have happened instead of what did. Yet, already those things seemed farther past than they were. In some way that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around, distance messed up time, the miles accumulating since I climbed on the dog bus in Great Falls putting me

unfathomably farther from life up until that point than just the count of hours could show. I had to think what day it was--Monday?--and from that, it hit me full force that while I was going through a day of scares not enough to kill me, Gram had gone into the hospital for her do-or-die operation.

That thought ballooned my imagination almost to bursting, my head crowded with doctors and nurses and nuns clustered around one familiar frail form, talking their hospital talk in tones as hushed as any in the gloomy Milwaukee churches the Greyhound was nosing past. Determined as I was not to cry, my eyes were as blurry as the watery bus window by the time the dumb driver called out the announcement about the depot's conveniences and so forth.

Jumpy at having to change buses at what was bound to be another overwhelmingly busy terminal, I scrambled out directly behind the driver and seized my suitcase as soon as he heaved it out of the baggage compartment, packing it protectively to the rest room with me. Done there, I headed straight for the long bank of swinging doors with arrivals and departures posted beside them, not even pausing at the newsstand and its lure of Milky Ways, my stomach losing out to what happened in Minneapolis. Only a complete moron would miss the bus a second time, right? The challenge, though, was to find mine in the listings of dozens of stops, until way down at the end of the doorways past ST. LOUIS and KANSAS CITY and even BEMIDJI, I finally spotted a sign like a string of letters in alphabet soup.

SHEBOYGAN MANITOWOC WAUSAU EAU CLAIRE

Out in the boarding area, I planted myself beside the still empty bus. When the new driver showed up, burly and black-mustached and still settling his company crush hat on his head, he looked me over enough that I was afraid he'd heard about me, the entire Greyhound fleet alerted about the stray whom trouble followed like a black cat's shadow. ⁹⁴ But he only remarked, "Early bird, aren't

you,” and stuck the wicker suitcase safely in the baggage compartment. I went up the steps right at his heels, and for quite some time we were the only ones on the bus, me securing a window seat partway down the aisle but away from the bumpy ride over the back tires, and him behind the steering wheel dealing with paperwork.

Waiting there like that, one stop from my destination, something came over me, a feeling sort of like the start of a cold, but in this case recognizably homesickness about to happen. The funny thing about it, though--odd funny, not funny funny--was that what I was about to miss in the way a person does when familiar surroundings are gone was not the Double W cook shack, nor even the ranch nor Montana itself, but the bus. Sitting there in a usual window spot that my fanny by now knew as well as the seat of my pants, the long aisle somehow invisibly crowded with fellow passengers who had come and gone, the whole Greyhound-grey upholstery of seat cushions and backrests as comfortable around me as a traveling living room, I wished for the first time I could stay on, keep on going, ride the dog bus on through the treacherous summer snug and safe. Half wished, rather, the other part of me, the more-or-less wised-up traveler one, all too aware that I had lucked out of ~~some tough situations~~ ^{manitowoc}, and if I knew anything about life by then, it was that there did not seem to be any limit on tough situations. Imagination and a lot else had carried me this far, but I knew deep down that Manitowoc unavoidably was the end of the line for all that, in more ways than one, and the sooner I got there, maybe the better?

Was I ever going to get there, though? Time seemed to slow to a crawl during this. The driver kept on dabbing at his paperwork. I continued to be the one and only passenger. At last a few others dribbled aboard, but to my

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

I was growing really antsy, willing the driver to start us rolling, when I heard him say to himself, "Hoo boy, here they are," and watched as he climbed off one more time to do his baggage job. I turned to the window, and gasped.

A disorderly line of kids, snaking from side to side like one of those Chinese dragons in a parade, was pouring out of the depot, each with a suitcase in hand. There was an absolute mob of them, and worse than that, entirely boys, and even worse yet, the worst I could imagine, they all were about my age and there were more than enough redheads among them to confuse anyone. Just like I had tried to tell Gram, there was no conceivable way Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch could pick me out, confronted with red mopheads everywhere they looked. I despaired, trying to think how I was supposed to connect with total strangers when everything was working against that.

The whole bunch stormed onto the bus laughing and ^{now} pushing and talking at the top of their voices as I sat frozen watching the pandemonium. A couple of fretful adults were in charge, or trying to be, but they were no match for the stampede. The kids swarmed as they pleased through the aisles, claiming seats and instantly trading. The bus filled up, and the next thing I knew, three boys descended on where I was sitting, one of them flopping down next to me. As sharp-featured as if he'd been whittled, ^{my new seatmate} he had a natural nose for poking into other people's business, eyeing me with squinty curiosity. "What'ja do, get on the bus early?" ^{or y. others across aisle}

"Sort of. Yesterday."

"Yeah? Where ya from then?"

I told him, his pair of chums across the aisle nosily listening in. If the new bus riders were impressed by my distant point of departure they had a funny way of showing it. "Montana? Know any cowboys? Like Gene Autry?" They snickered roundly at the idea.

What to do? Lay it on them about the past two years of hanging around the bunkhouse with the Double W riders every chance I got, sometimes even being ^{permitted} allowed--if I could catch Gram and Sparrowhead both in the right mood--to saddle up and help move cows and calves to a new pasture, riding right next to cowboys as genuine as they come, as shown by ^Y their adventurous cussing? These kids, not a freckle from the outdoors on their milkwhite faces, did not seem like the audience for any of that. For once, I figured I'd better tone matters down.

"Well, sure, I couldn't help but know the ranch hands, could I," I said offhandedly, "my grandmothers's the cook, see, and we all eat together at a table as long as this bus." That did stretch the matter a little, but not unreasonably so, I thought.

"Huh. Sounds like basement supper at church," ~~my seatmate~~ ^{my seatmate} mouthed off, but if it didn't get any worse than that I'd be fine.

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

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

The way kids will do, we gingerly got around to names. The one sitting next to me was Karl, with a K, he informed me, as though that made him something special and not just a poor speller. The duo across the aisle weren't named much better, Gus and Mannie. They looked like brothers but didn't act like it, Gus nervous as a pullet and Mannie the kind who would stare you in the eye while he took your lunch. Karl was the leader, I was sure. Leaders always

sat by themselves, or in this case by the seatfiller I happened to be. I wished I had drawn the set of boys directly behind us, who were quietly reading comic books.

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

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

"Sleep outside?" Why on earth would anyone with a home and a bed, as these milksop kids surely had, spend the night on the cold ground? "What for?"

"Outside, nothin'," Karl made a face at that. "We're goin' to Camp Winnebago. It has cabins and everythin'."

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

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

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

"Give that man a dicky bird." With that, Karl pinched the back of my wrist black-and-blue.

"OW! Hey, quit!" Trying to shake the sting out of my hand, I at least had the consolation that Karl was groaning as he rubbed his ribs and complained, "Hey, you gave me a real whack," which, in all justice, my elbow automatically

had done when he pinched the bejesus out of me. Somehow it seemed to make him think better of me.

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

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

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

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

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

Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,

Mutilated monkey meat.

Dirty little birdie feet.

Great green gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts,

And me without my spoon.

That was impressive, I had to grant, as did the harried grownup who came rushing down the aisle and told them to quit showing off. As one, they snickered at his retreating back. The candy company should have put the three of them on the Snickers bar, like the Smith Brothers on cough drop boxes. I didn’t have much time for that kind of thinking, however, as they turned their attention back to me, the Mannie one looking particularly hungry for a crack at me.

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

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

Oh, the temptation that brought on. To see the look on their faces when I coolly announced that when it came to things like arrows, I just happened to have a lucky arrowhead older than Columbus. The only shortcoming was, if they clamored to see it I'd have to confess it was in my suitcase and they'd give me a hard time about why I didn't carry it on me all the time if it was so lucky. I could just hear them yapping away like that. I hated to miss the chance to be superior about the archery matter, but maybe I had something better up my sleeve.

"How about guns?"

My question silenced them for a full several seconds. Mannie was the first to recover and break out a sneer. "What, cap pistols? Little kid games ain't for us."

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

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

"Magpies."

"Yeah? What's those?"

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

"Naw, I don't think so." He looked across uncertainly at Gus and Mannie, who were shaking their heads in slack-jawed ignorance of one of the

most common birds in Creation. Talk about having a wire down; if any of these three had a brain that worked, it would be lonesome.

“Then how do you make any money?” I pressed my advantage, Karl still leaning away as if his ass might get shot off from my direction. “See, there’s a bounty on magpies, on account of they eat the eyeballs right out of calves and lambs and things, and”--I had a moment of inspiration-- “they really do gobble



down gopher guts.” At that, my audience was agog, if slightly green around the gills.

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

By now I was being looked at as if I was either a gunslinging hero of the eleven-year-old set or the biggest liar on the face of the earth. But it was totally true that Wendell Williamson, tightwad that he was, ponied up for dirty little birdy feet, magpies being the hated nuisance they were on ranches, after Gram vouched that my father had taught me how to shoot and she swore I was responsible enough to hunt along the creek willows without endangering the cattle.

My listeners stirred uncertainly. Gus’s lips were moving as he worked out fifty cents times seventeen, while Mannie gauged me more warily than before. It was up to Karl to rally the campers. “Yeah, well, bows and arrows can kill stuff, too. Like, uh, frogs. We’re goin’ frog huntin’ the first night at camp, ain’t we, guys.”

“Sure!” and “You betcha!” from across the aisle backed that up as if hunting hopping amphibians in the dark, Indian style, was a tried-and-true camp activity, which I seriously doubted.

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

— Really? The comprehension began to sink in that finally I was nearly there. Fifteen minutes sounded like no time after all the long hours on the bus, the encounters I'd had, the close calls. In an odd way, I started to miss all that, the bits and pieces of my journey coming to mind while my latest companions thought it was a big deal to go up the road a little way to the same stupid camp year after year. But the mind does funny things, and half listening to their razzing back and forth about which of them was most likely to shoot himself in the foot with an arrow, I had a sudden itch toward the autograph book. After all, here was my last chance on the dog bus for who knew how long, and three candidates right here handy. So what if they behaved like complete morons, when they knew stuff like that campers' song. Goofiness had its place in the pages of life, too.

Impulsively I pulled out the album, its cream-colored cover a little smudgy from so much handling but overall a good deal less the worse for wear from its trip than I was, and showed it off to Karl.

"Yeah?" his answer to almost everything. He fanned through the pages like a speed reader. "So you want us all to put somethin' in it." I said I sure did, which brought about quite a reaction across the aisle. Gus giggled in Mannie's face. "Gonna write *My name is Manfred Vedder, I'm an old bed wetter, aintcha?*"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Still cussing to the best of my ability, I was grappled by one of the adults into the seat across the aisle, Karl having retreated to the window as far as he

could get from me. "We wasn't gonna keep it, honest," he whined, the liar, as I furiously checked things over. The autograph book miraculously had survived without damage, but my shirt was ripped all to hell, a pocket dangling almost off--fortunately not the one with the money pinned to it--and a number of buttons were missing. I gave Karl another murderous look, not that it repaired anything but my feelings, and he kind of whimpered, the fearless frog hunter.

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

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

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

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

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a bit of me
showed the

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

My eyes stayed busy as could be, my mind trying to keep up with all the different sights and scenes--Gram had been right about that, I had to admit--as the bus approached the more active downtown section, with long lines of stores appearing. There I was especially on the lookout for any with an S&H Green Stamps sign hung out, but all those I spotted seemed to be selling sofas or refrigerators. Beyond those, the storefronts were somewhat mystifying. We passed a business calling itself a SCHNAPPS SCHOP, which looked like a bar, and the bars I could recognize all had a glowing blue neon sign in the window proclaiming SCHLITZ, THE BEER THAT MADE MILWAUKEE FAMOUS, which was news to me--it hadn't done so in Montana--while what looked like restaurants commonly had the word SCHNITZEL painted on the plate glass, and an apparent department store had SCHUETTE'S, a very strange-sounding product if it wasn't a name, written in large letters above its show windows. Next thing, though, along came a hotel called SHEPHERD'S, nice and normal as if sheep herders stayed there.

Mil, city
of churches
& many
than small
of identical
w/ gray siding

spelled

Talk about confusing. In school I always won spelling contests, but I wouldn't want to try here.

Finally my edge-of-the seat vigil through the windshield produced something I really wanted to see. A movie marquee, and marvel of marvels, what was playing surely was absolutely great--TOMAHAWK with Van Heflin and Yvonne DeCarlo. Oh man, if I played my cards right, possibly I could talk Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch into taking me! Maybe Manitowoc had a little something to offer after all.

While I still was caught up in that hope, we rumbled across a drawbridge over a murky river, with half-killed weeds clinging to its banks. But out past huge shed-like buildings with signs saying they were enterprises unknown to me such as boiler works and coal yards, I caught a glimpse of a grey-blue lake that spilled over the horizon, and the real surprise, a tremendously long red-painted ship in the harbor, all by itself.

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

"Manitowoc, the pearl of Lake Michigan. Everybody off."

I was thunderstruck, but not for long. "HEY, NO, EVERYBODY SIT TIGHT! YOU'RE NOT THERE YET!" My outcry froze the driver and probably everyone else on the bus. "You're taking them to Camp Winniegoboo!" I instructed the open-mouthed man at the wheel. "They told me so!"

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

I nodded dumbly, and followed him off the bus into the unloading area. There still was a chance, if I could grab my suitcase and hustle into the waiting room ahead of the throng of campers. But of course at Milwaukee mine had been the first suitcase stowed in the baggage compartment, and as infallibly as Murphy's Law that anything that can go wrong is bound to go wrong, every camping kid received his bag and filtered into the depot before the wicker suitcase was reached. Directly ahead as I slogged in dead last, Karl and his gang looked back and gave me various kinds of the stink eye, but stayed a safe distance away.

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

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

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torn seam
w
my
elbow

Then I slapped my pants pocket, remembering. I'd spent the last of my loose change topping off lunch in Minneapolis with a candy bar, hadn't I, like a complete moron. I would need to break a ten-dollar bill from the stash under my remaining shirt pocket, undressing even further right here in the most public place there was, where anyone like the convict in the suit and tie could be watching as I unpinned the money, because I didn't dare retreat to the men's room to do it out of sight--that was a guaranteed way to miss Aunt Kitty and Uncle Dutch should they show up looking for me. This was becoming like one of those nightmares in which the predicament gets deeper and deeper until you think you never will wake up back to sanity.

Trying to fight down the jitters, I cast another wild gaze around the teeming waiting room hoping for salvation in the form of anyone who might resemble Gram enough to be her sister. But no such luck. I was stuck. There was no help for it, I was going to have to throw myself on the mercy of GREAT LAKES PAYPHONE. Setting down my suitcase to try to get things in order, especially me, I first of all reached out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and flipped through the pages to find the slip of paper with the phone number. Then again. My fingers began to shake.

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

Distress became panic, like an instant fever, as an awful omission caught up with me. Worse, what might be called the commission of an omission. Stupidly I hadn't bothered to so much as glance at the phone number or street address even when showing those to the Zimmermans. If I had any excuse--which I glaringly didn't--it was that those would be right there written down in case of emergency. But here was the emergency, landing on me with both feet, and I did not have a clue in the world to the existence of people called Kitty and

People of
even
map of
form &
way of
area, but
none

Dutch except that their last name was Schmidt. And if the alphabet meant anything in this crazily named city where nearly every store sign spoke whatever language Schlitz and Schnapps and Schnitzel and Schuette were, I dimly understood that Schmidts similarly were probably beyond number.

Damn and goddamn and every dirty word beyond. I had hit rock bottom and I knew no way out of it. This was my absolute lowest point since Gram told me I was being shipped to Wisconsin for the summer. Unmet, my clothing half torn off, as good as lost in a strange city, with night coming on and not even the dog bus as a haven any more. I was dissolving into utter despair, tears next, when I heard a melodious voice behind me.

“So here you are, sweetie pie.”

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

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

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

Blinking my way out of one surprise after another, I simply stood in awe and stared at the two of them, one tall and stooped, the other nearly as broad as the fat lady in a carnival. Longfaced and with that horsy grin and glasses that made his eyes look larger than human, with an odd glint to them, he was quite a sight in his own right, but it was her I was stupefied by. I could only think Gram

we
wondered

hadn't spelled her out to me to save the surprise. *She* was in our family, what there was of it? This was magical! I almost couldn't believe it, but the more I looked at this unexpected person, the more excited I became. I would have known her anywhere, an unmistakable figure in more ways than one, big around as a jukebox, jolly double chins, wide-set doll eyes, hairdo as plump as the rest of her, the whole picture. The face from the cover of LIFE magazine and from the opening credits of the flickery *American Parade* instructional movies that I had watched projected on schoolroom walls the length and breadth of the Two Medicine country, and the unmistakable voice that soared out of the radio regularly in those years. My Aunt Kitty was clearly none other than Kate Smith, "America's favorite songstress" as the radio program always said. The famous performer of "God Bless America," right up there next to the national anthem, and every other song worth singing.

At last, I had it knocked.

It made perfect sense to me. Although the mention went in one ear and out the other at the time, hadn't Gram herself spoken of her little dickens of a sister--although that description was a quite a few sizes too small any more--as "the great Kate," in saying the two of them just could not make music together from girlhood on? Well, who could, with a singer whose voice carried her to the very top? Back then, I could not have defined palpitations, but did I ever have them, so excited was I to possess this famous woman for an aunt. Great-aunt, but close enough. I gazed raptly up at her, top-heavy as she was with that mighty chest but as cool and composed there in the hubbub of the bus station as if posing for her picture in a magazine. And wasn't she smart to digest "Schmidt"--no insult intended to husband Dutch or rather, Herman, standing there grinning his face off, but that last name sounded sort of like sneezing into your hand--to good old condensed "Smith" to sing under? Believe It Or Not! disclosed this kind of thing all the time, you could hardly read the Sunday funnies without learning that Patti Page before she reached the hit parade with songs like "Tennessee Waltz" was plain Clara Ann Fowler, a name switcheroo if there ever was one. Besides, as Red Chief myself, I was naturally in favor of sprucing up what you called yourself in any way possible.

So the great Kate Smith, dressed in a peach-colored outfit that made her look like a million dollars, monumental in every way as she peered down at me

with a perfectly plucked eyebrow arched, represented rescue, relief, reward, a miraculous upward turn in my luck.

And I needed whatever I could get, ragged in appearance as I was. Her expression turned to immediate concern as she tallied my missing buttons, dangling pocket, and the rest of my shirt pretty much torn to shreds. "Heavens, child, you look like you've been in a dogfight."

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

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

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

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

Paying no attention to that, she seemed to make up her mind to smile at me, the extra chin and the famous chubby dimples involved. "If you're ready, honeybunch," she was saying in that voice so melodious I was surprised she could pass herself off in public as Aunt Kitty at all, "we may as well go."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, it was all I could do not to bounce up and down with delight at her pronouncement. The station! This was so good. The dog bus, that loping

mode of transportation full of starts and stops and disruptions and tense connections, somehow had delivered me right in time for the radio show. "Kate Smith Sings," all anyone needed to know about it. I glanced at her hopefully. Maybe she even could slip into the program some hint that I had arrived, and Gram would hear it in her hospital room and know I had come through my harrowing journey safe and sound. I didn't want to ask that yet, shy about bothering someone getting ready to perform for a national audience. I would not have been surprised if she exercised her vocal cords right there in the car, but the only sign she gave of impending performance was tapping a hand on the round rise of one thigh as steadily as a telegraph operator in a shoot-'em-up western.

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

"How is Montana?"

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

"Yah, I betcha."

His laugh came from the bottom of his throat, like his words. While his broken English came as a surprise, it didn't really bother me, accustomed as I was to hired hands in the bunkhouse or the barracks at a construction camp who were called Swede or Ole or Finnigan if from Finland, and spoke more or less the way

he did. Squarehead, was the catch-all term for such types. Admittedly, I couldn't see any real resemblance between Herman, at his size, and someone like Dutch Pete, a longtime sheepherder in the Two Medicine country so squat and blocky he stood out like a stump, but I figured nationalities must come in all sizes and sounds. Literally over my head, Herman's choppy voice now reached a wistful register as he declared, "Out in cowboy land, you are lucky."

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

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

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

"Yeah!" Only minutes before I would have had to fake this kind of answer, but landing in the spacious lap of Kate Smith, in a manner of speaking, I had no trouble whatsoever being enthusiastic. "This is so much better than there, it knocks my socks off."

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

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

Tentatively I sneaked a peek at the illustrious figure next to me. Speaking of writing, if she wanted there was enough room on her bosom to sew not only her name waitress-style but something like, *America's favorite singer and sweetheart of the airwaves*.

Letting that thought pass, I cleared my throat to make my request. "Can I ask you for a big favor?"

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

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

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

"Why, of course you can, adorable," she nodded into her second chin in relief. "Most people do. It's only that sister of mine who hasn't got over childish names."

Such as Dorie, did that mean? I squirmed at anything said against Gram, but maybe that was the way sisters were.

Herman returned, having paid for the gas and taken care of the other business, and went through the dashboard maneuvers and what else it took to start the DeSoto. "Home to the range," he sang out, earning a sharp look from Aunt Kate.

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

It was dark by the time the DeSoto rocked into a bumpy driveway. The house, painted white as sugar and with a peaked roof and lit sort of ghostly by the nearest streetlight, appeared big as a castle to me after the cook shack, although looking back, I realize that only meant it had an upstairs as well as a downstairs.

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

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

I stepped in to the indicated bedroom, adult territory where kids usually set foot at their own risk, and too timid to put the light on, swapped shirts as fast as I

could. Straining to take in the exact place where Kate Smith slept, even in the dimness I was convinced I could see a telltale sag in the near side of the double bed.

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

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

Herman had immediately disappeared, saying with a mysterious grin he had something to show me and he would bring it, you betcha. In the meantime I edged into the living room and onto a pea green shag rug so thick I left footprints wherever I stepped. It was like walking on a mattress. Intimidated, I crept across the room, studying the unfamiliar surroundings. A big long leathery davenport, also green but closer to that screaming shade of lime Kool-Aid, sat prominently in front of a bay window where the sill was crammed with potted plants. Pretty interesting, I thought, going over to the whopping davenport, that as funny green as it was, right here in Wisconsin was furniture made from cowhide or something

like it. I laid my hand on the covering and sure enough, it had that clammy feel like the seat of a saddle when you settle into it on a chilly morning. So I figured at least a person's fanny would be cooled down by plopping onto the davenport on a warm day, somewhat like Kool-Aid does for the tummy.

Continuing my inspection of the new and unusual, on an end table next to the arm of the davenport rested a phone, pink as bubblegum, of another type I had no experience of, with a cradled receiver and a circular dial full of numbers and letters. Whatever else this strange territory of the summer proved to be like, it definitely did not seem to be party-line country.

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

Unquestionably Aunt Kate went in for wall decoration, so I searched around for what I was eager to see, photos of her singing for the troops and overseas in palaces and such. Wouldn't it be great if she went on one of those singing trips and took me along, to Scotland or somewhere! But the other walls held only framed scenes of dairy cows and countryside in what appeared to be plain old Wisconsin, so I concluded she kept mementos of her singing career somewhere special, probably at the radio station.

What really had me interested now, though, was the cubbyhole room off the far end of the living room. The door was partway open and I glimpsed what

appeared to be a day bed under a plain gray cover. Lured by hope, when I poked my head in and saw piles of cloth of different colors atop a table and spilling onto a chair, I knew at once this must be the sewing room, even before I spotted the shiny electric Singer machine by the window. Who would have thought Kate Smith sewed her own clothes, right? But everyone needs a hobby, I reminded myself, or maybe in her dress-size situation, doing it herself was a necessity. Any fat girl at school got teased about her clothes being made by Omar the Tent Maker, and while I felt guilty about that uncharitable thought, there was the big-as-life fact that Aunt Kate was a much larger woman than clothing stores usually encountered. Of greater significance to me was that day bed, just my size, really-- I'd slept on any number of cots like that, jouncing through life with my parents-- and I'd have bet anything this nice snug room was where I was going to be put up for the summer, special guest in a special place of the house. Oh man, how lucky could I get?

Now that I was through taking in these new surroundings, something else needed taking care of, and I had to retreat to the kitchen to ask. "Aunt Kate? I have to use the convenience."

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

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

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

I most certainly did remember, but even over the rush of the faucet, all of a sudden I could hear singing. Distinct as anything, from the direction of the kitchen. A solo, to keep her voicebox tuned up, I bet. And not just a song, but *the* song! Oh man, this was almost like going to the radio show!

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

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

Herman had reappeared, sitting at the table paging through a book and not even particularly listening, he evidently was so used to the glorious sound. Rocking ever so slightly side to side to the rhythm, Aunt Kate stood at the stove with her back turned to us, as if it was nothing to be pouring out the best-known song since “Happy Birthday” while cooking ’kraut and weinies. I stood entranced there at the other end of the kitchen, listening to her sing just for me. Then as the most soaring part rolled around again, the beautiful voice reaching its height--

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She looking down and me looking up, we gazed at each other in soemthing like mutual incomprehension. I squirmed a little, and not just from the clammy touch of the davenport through the seat of my pants. Dismayed as I was,

she too appeared to be thrown by the situation, until with a nod of resolve she sucked in her cheeks, as much as they would go, and pursed her lips to address the matter of me.

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

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

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

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

“Me? No! I get straight A’s. Honest!” I babbled further, “I heard Mrs. Petrie”--my latest teacher, at the Noon Creek school--“say to Gram I’m bright enough to read by at night.”

My panicked blurts eliciting the throaty response “I see,” although she didn’t seem to, Aunt Kate tapped her hand on her thigh the jittery way she’d done when I assumed singing to all of America was upmost on her mind. ^{9/1} Before she could say anything more, Herman stuck up for me from the kitchen doorway.



brante

"Notcheral, like I telled you," his guttural assertion made us both jump a little. "Donny is not the first to find the resemblance, yah? If it bothers you so great to look like the other Kate, why do you play her music on the radio?"

"When I want your opinion, Schmidt, I'll ask for it," she flared, giving him a dirty look. I breathed slightly easier. If they were going to have a fight, at least that might put me on the sideline temporarily.

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

"Maybe a little bit," I owned up to.

My modest admission, she rolled over like a bulldozer. "You mustn't let it run away with you," her voice not Kate Smith nice now. "You know why you're here, because of Dorie's--your grandmother's operation. We can't have you going around with your head in the clouds while you're with us, we all just need to get through this summer the best we can." Another glare in the direction of the kitchen doorway. "Isn't that so, Schmidt?"

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

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

"I see," she said a little less dubiously this time. She certainly helped herself to an eyeful of the creamy little memory book as she took it from me, her lips moving surprisingly like Gram's in silently reading that cover inscription, YE

WHO LEND YOUR NAME TO THESE PAGES SHALL LIVE ON UNDIMMED THROUGH THE AGES. "So that's what this is about," she said faintly to herself in flipping to one of the entries, I hoped not the Fort Peck sheriff's about keeping your pecker dry.

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

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

Dinner in Manitowoc made me homesick for supper in Montana. First of all, the table cloth was spotless white linen instead of oilcloth, and I was scared of spilling on it. Then there was the meal itself, the sauerkraut so sour it actually made the weinies not bad in comparison. My stomach was finding Wisconsin to be a state of confusion. But then came dessert, something I now realize was a classic sachertorte, a chocolate-frosted chocolate cake with jam between the layers and a mound of whipped cream on the side. Pretty much a meal of sugar and chocolate in itself, that was more my kind of eating, and when I praised Aunt Kate to her face for her baking, Herman chuckled slyly and said Schultz's Bakery would be surprised to hear that. ^A"Hush, you," she told him, but not as sharply as in her earlier exchanges with him.

No sooner was dessert ingested if not digested than Aunt Kate declared in a sweetened mood, "Chickie, you look tuckered out from your trip," which I didn't think I did, but she topped that off with the message impossible to miss, "Your room is ready for you." The night was still a pup compared to the Greyhound's long gallop through the dark, but zingo, just like that, I was bypassing the cubbyhole sewing room and instead trooping upstairs behind Herman, with him insisting on lugging my suitcase--"You are the guest, you get the best, hah!"--while in back of us, Aunt Kate strenuously mounted one tread at a time. And as the stairs kept going, quite a climb by any standard, the suspicion began to seep in on me as to where we were headed, even before Herman shouldered open the squeaky door.

To this day, that 'room', up where the hayloft in a barn would be, is engraved in me. A slapped-together chamber cluttered with this, that, and the other that memory stands no chance in this world of ever clearing out. Aunt Kate could call it what she wanted, but I had bounced around enough with my parents in makeshift quarters to recognize that this was nothing more than the attic. Bare roofbeams and sharply sloping underside of the roof and probably mice and spiders, the whole works. Correction: less than half the attic, with a plywood partition walling off the rest, whatever else was stashed behind one of those outdated doors that open with a skeleton key. Trying to take in the situation, I had the weirdest sensation of slipping into the past, back to Gram's cramped upbringing among shacks of the homestead days as testified by the voices of the departed that spoke through her in terms like *You couldn't cuss a cat in that place without getting hair in your mouth.* That about summed it up for me.

As I tried none too successfully to sort out this conglomeration that was supposed to be my home for the summer, the first thing to strike my eye was the frilly bedspread flowered with purple and orange blossoms the size of cabbages,

instead of the cozy quilts Gram and I slept under every night of our lives, and pillows, pillows, pillows, the useless small square ones with tassels or gold fringe or sentiments stitched on such as *IT TAKES TWO LOVEBIRDS TO COO*. Peeking from the bottom of the pile was a depleted pillow of regular size, which I could tell too many heads had rested on before mine. The top of the cheap fiberboard dresser similarly was snowed under, enveloped in white doilies starched to a stiffness that defied a person to set anything down on them. A rickety straight-backed chair amounted to the rest of the furniture. The remainder of the space was taken up with stacks of storage boxes labeled in ways such as *Xmas tree lights & curtain material* and some stray outmoded suitcases, although none seemed as old and well-traveled as mine. As to the clothes closet in the partition that closed off the area from whatever was in back of it, it was so crammed with winter clothing and coats and, I very much suspected, dresses that Aunt Kate no longer could fit into, that she grunted with the effort of forcing apart the solid wall of garments enough to scrunch in anything of mine worth hanging.

But what made me gulp hardest while moving in, to call it that, was what hung above the bed. The thing on the wall, I immediately thought of it as, and still do. That dimestore plaster-of-Paris wall plaque no kid old enough to be acquainted with death wants to have to see the last thing before the lights are put out, the pale kneeling boy in pajamas with his hands clasped and eyes closed perhaps forever, praying a prayer guaranteed to sabotage slumber:

Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake

I pray the Lord my soul to take.

That spine-chilling ode to death in the night, making it out to be no big deal if you got on your knees right, unhinged me so badly that if someone had

written it in the autograph book, I honestly believe I would have scissored it out. As things were, I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the praying boy as Aunt Kate crooned around the confined quarters instructing me where to put things, while Herman stood well back out of the line of fire.

“There now,” she said when I was installed to her satisfaction, “and you know where the bathroom is.” Yeah, about a mile downstairs. “Nighty-night, sleep tight,” and away she went, clumping down the stairs one by one. Kate Smith would not have left me with anything that babyish, I knew with a sinking heart, but at least Herman came through with “Have a good shuteye” and another of those half cockeyed man-to-man glances as he followed her into the stairwell.

Bunkhouse vocabulary failed me as what looked like endless nights in this miserable excuse for a room stared me in the face.

How did I land in this fix, which made a bus seat look good? The Double W cook shack had been the opposite of elegant, and some of the construction sites lodgings where I had lived with my folks could not be called much more places to get in out of the weather, but never had I been stuck up under the rafters like another piece of the junk that collects there. It seemed unbelievably unfair. I had ridden the Greyhound halfway across the entire country like I was supposed to, doing my best with the limited resources a person eleven going on twelve has to cope with all kinds of utter strangers and unforeseen situations--a trouper, no less, whatever that amounted to--only to end up in a condensed version of Palookaville.

In that mood, I undressed for bed, slung away the decorative pillows, tried to pound some life into the squashed one, positioned the moccasins at bedside for the middle-of-the-night descent to the bathroom, turned out the light,

and slipped under the dank covers in my shorts and undershirt. Like my father, I was never a believer in dressing head to foot to go to bed.

There I lay, trying to stay as still as possible because the least little movement made the bed creak like it was going to fall apart. Every squawk of the springs made me yearn for the tidy sewing room and its day bed. Hell, I'd even rather have slept down there on the chilly-butt living room davenport than on this rusty old thing. Sleep was a distant matter in any case, what with the commotion of both the bed and my head. Literally, what hung over me, nailed to the wallboard, would not leave my mind. The stupid plaster kid, perfectly happy to die because he thought he had a sure ticket to heaven. My guess was they didn't even give Green Stamps on that trip.

The more I thought about the thing on the wall, the more I stewed. Did people such as that, the sunny kid on his knees and whoever wrote the catchy verse, even know anyone who died? They ought to ask me. I could tell them how white crosses on the shoulder of the highway cost far more than any hey-diddle-diddle rhyme about heaven could ever make up for, and what agony it is to wait for the result of something happening in a distant hospital with a white cross out front. Already I was missing Gram so mightily I felt half sick every time she crossed my mind, the cook shack years with her a separate life beyond the inventiveness of even my imagination, not an easy existence in any way yet worth it to have one last guardian to put up with my redheaded thinking.

What was going through me, truthfully, was a new and different fear of losing her, if the day's operation proved not have turned out all right. Queerly, the overwhelming dread I'd had before parting with her there at the ranch, that one way or the other--death and the poor farm went together in my mind--this troubling summer might remove her from my life by the time the dog bus brought

me back to Montana, that original anxiety now gave way for a much more immediate one. Ending up back there as a ward of the county and thrown to chance as a foster child would be awful enough. Yet what if, instead, the only future I had was under jailbar-like rafters in Wisconsin? Captive to an aunt who not only was not Kate Smith, but thought I must be missing a part between my ears?

Nor could I see any clear way out if Aunt Kate as my last remaining blood relative--I wasn't sure what Herman, formerly Dutch, counted as--decided to keep me if Gram no longer was in the picture. Three perforated ten-dollar bills would not carry a person very far in running away, would they. I'd have to think about that a lot more, but for the time being, the only advice I could find for myself was that bit whispered from those interrupted existences Gram kept in touch with. Hunch up and take it.

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

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

"Donny? Are you sleeping?"

"I guess not."

"Good. I come in."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Funny things, words. How they look and how they say.” He broke off, glancing toward his feet. Letting out an exclamation I couldn't decipher, he reached down and picked up one of my moccasins. “I stepped on it!” he cried out as if he had committed a crime. “I hope I didn't break it none.”

The beadwork had survived, I could tell by a quick look the decorative fancy dancer still had all his limbs, and so I reassured Herman no harm had been done, meanwhile scooping the other moccasin out of range of his big feet. “Beautiful,” he said under his breath, pronouncing it *bee-you-tifle*, lovingly turning over and over in his hands the deerskin footwear he had tromped on. When he right away had to know what the beaded stick figure cavorting there on the toe and instep was supposed to be, I explained about fancy dancing contests at big powwows. “Such schluffen!” he marveled, which I figured must be squarehead lingo or Manitowoc talk, of the *schnapps* and *schnitzel* kind, for dance steps, like shuffling or something. Still fondling the moccasin as if couldn't let go, he asked in wonder, “You got from Indians?”

"You betcha." ^AThis time I couldn't resist. Before I could stop myself, I was repeating the tale I'd told the ex-convict about the classy moccasins having been made for a great Blackfoot chief, temperately leaving out the part about my having won them in a roping contest on a dude ranch and instead circling closer to the truth by saying Gram had lucked onto them on the reservation. Herman did not need to know they'd been hocked at a truck stop by a broke Indian, I figured. ²

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

He ran his fingers over the beadwork and soft leather one more time and carefully put the moccasin side by side with the other one. "So, now you know about Winnetou and I know about fancy dancing. Big night!" He grinned that horsy way and clapped *Deadly Dust* shut. Evidently gauging Aunt Kate's bath was about done, he rose from his chair. "We palaver some more tomorrow, yah?" he whispered from the stairwell as he sneaked back downstairs.

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

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

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

And so, determined to make up for my dumb jump to the wrong conclusion last night and mistaking her for Kate Smith--although was it my fault they both were the size of refrigerators and shared jolly numbers of chins and dimples and other characteristics?--I dressed quickly and headed downstairs. *Nice manners don't cost anything*, Gram's prompting followed me down the steps. C'mon, Donny, Donal, Red Chief, I pulled myself together, it shouldn't be all that hard to remember to be polite and to speak mainly when spoken to and and to not mix up when to look serious and when to smile, and similar rules of the well-behaved. Hadn't I gotten along perfectly fine with the strangers on the dog bus? Well, a couple of drivers, the ex-convict, and one fistfight aside. Surely those didn't count toward the main matter, which was to survive for the time being in a household where Aunt Kate seemed to wear the pants and Herman tended to his knitting in the company of beings with names like Winnetou and Old Shatterhand.

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

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

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

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

"Toast does not need help!"

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

Whoa. I backed off to the bathroom, out of range of that, in a hurry. *no quarrel*
Staying in there a good long while, I ran the faucets full blast and flushed the toilet a couple of times to announce my presence, and finally cracked the door open to

test the atmosphere. Silence. That was at least an improvement, and mustering my bravery again, I approached the kitchen.

Aunt Kate was sitting by herself there, in a peppermint-striped flannel robe and fuzzy pink slippers that would never be mistaken for part of Kate Smith's wardrobe, drinking coffee while reading the newspaper spread open on the table. "There you are, sugar plum," she looked up as if reminding herself of my existence, before I could say anything. "Did you sleep well?"

"Oh, sure. Like a log."

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

"Now then," Aunt Kate said with no urgency, turning a page of the *Manitowoc Herald Times*, "what in the realm of possibility can we get you for breakfast?"

In Gram's domain, that question never came up. I simply took my place at the long table along with Meredice Williamson and Sparrowhead and the riders and the choreboy, and ate what a ranch cook cooked, mush and hotcakes and fried eggs and bacon or sidepork and cinnamon rolls if a person still had room. There was no reason to think past the end of a fork. Surprised to be asked such a thing, I answered with more manners than good sense, "Oh, just whatever you've got."

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

Swallowing on that fact, if not much else, I found a bowl in the cupboard as she directed and a milk bottle in the refrigerator and did what I could to turn the dry cereal into a soup of milk and sugar. A parent would have jumped right on me for that, but she paid no attention. Evidently the kind of person who did not have much to say in the morning--although that was not what it had sounded like from the stairway--she kept on drinking coffee and going through the paper, occasionally letting out a little hum of interest or exasperation at some item, as I spooned down the puffed-up cereal. The scatterings of crust on what must have been Herman's plate seemed like a fuller meal than mine. Finally I saw no choice but to ask, polite or not. "Suppose I could have a piece of toast, please?"

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

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

"Donny, come to the phone."

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

"Hello? This is... he."

"I am Sister Carma Jean," the voice sounding exactly like a nun's would come as crisp as if it was in the room, instead of fifteen hundred miles away at

Columbus Hospital. I was dazed, unsure, afraid of what I might hear next.

“Your grandmother wished me to tell you yourself”--echo of *last wish* in that; I froze tighter to the phone--“she has come through the operation as well as can be expected.”

I breathed again, some.

“Of course, there are complications with that kind of surgery,” the sister of charity spoke more softly now, “so her recuperation will take some time. But we have her here in the pavilion, where she is receiving the best of care. You mustn’t worry.”

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

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

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

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

“I guess not,” I quavered, squeezing the phone. Then erased that in the next breath. “No, wait, there is too. Tell her”--I could feel the look from across

the room--"the dog bus worked out okay." Mentally adding, *But Manito Woc or however you say it is even a tougher proposition than either you or I ever imagined, Gram. So please get well really, really fast.*

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

"I guess." That word *complications* rang in my ears, and no doubt hers, as we faced each other's company for an unknown length of time ahead. She chewed the corner of her lip a little, and mine probably received the same.

"Well, now, we must keep you entertained, mustn't we." Her next remark made my heart drop as much as it would have soared had she really been Kate Smith. "I know you like to be busy, so I set up the card table and got out a jigsaw puzzle. Those are always fun, aren't they." Maybe I was not the absolute shrewdest judge of character, but I had a pretty good hunch that habit of agreeing with herself covered up her desperation at not knowing what to do with a kid. This household didn't have so much as a dog or cat, not even a goldfish. By all evidence so far, Aunt Kate was only used to taking care of herself and the war with Herman, if that's what it was.

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

Ready to leave me to the mountain of puzzle pieces and my cold toast, Aunt Kate headed for the basement to see if the laundry was finished yet. "Oh,

just so you know," she sang out as she started down the cellar stairs, "I put your snapbutton shirt in with our washing, but the other was torn so badly I threw it away. It wasn't worth mending."

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

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

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

For someone of her heft, she came up out of those cellar stairs in a terrific burst of speed, turned the hall corner at full tilt and barreled through the kitchen and out to the garbage can at the top of the driveway, flannel robe billowing behind her, me at her heels. Her backside was too broad for me to see past as she flung open the lid of the can and looked in, and I was afraid to anyway.

"Too late," she moaned, "it's been picked up."

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

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

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

increased
reaction

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

I babbled another apology to try to make amends, although I wasn't getting anything of the sort from her for failing to go through my pocket before junking my shirt and costing me every cent I possessed, was I. "Why don't you start on your puzzle," she said darkly, starting for the basement again.

"Maybe later." Even if I was in the wrong, I didn't think I was the only one that description fit, and was not going to let myself be sent to the permanent dunce corner, which the card table with Mount Rushmore in a thousand pieces amounted to. It occurred to me that with this woman as mad at me as a spitting cat, it would really help to have someone on my side, or at least another target to draw her fire. "Where'd Herman go?" I wondered, hoping he might show up any moment to get me off the hook.

No such luck. Gone to "work," where else, she huffed, the quotation marks speaking loudest. Then when I asked what his job was, she sorted me out

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

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

Right away, I was leery. One thing you learn on a ranch is to not let stray tasks be loaded on to you, such as feeding bum lambs and calves on a bottle or tending the vegetable garden. Gram's response when Wendell Williamson once tried to put her in charge of the garden about took his head off: "Do you want a cook, or a choreboy? You're not getting both on the kind of wages you're paying me." Helping in the greenhouse sounded dangerously close to choreboy territory, unpaid at that. However, Aunt Kate was looking at me forcefully enough to budge a pillar of stone my size.

"Maybe I'll go say hello," I mumbled, and trooped out to the back yard where the odd shed of glass gleamed in the sun. Already at that time of the morning the air felt heavy to me, as if it could be squeezed out like a sponge, and I plucked at my one wearable shirt of the moment and unbuttoned my sleeves and

rolled them back onto my forearm for a bit of ventilation as I crossed the lawn, Herman's big footsteps ahead of me fading with the last of the dew.

I had been curious about the mysterious structure when the DeSoto's headlights reflected off it as we pulled up to the house the night before, which now seemed another lifetime ago. Halfway hiding in a corner of the hedge at the rear of the yard, the greenhouse, as I now knew it, seemed like it ought to be transparent but somehow could not actually be seen through, whatever the trick of its construction was. It did not reveal much more about itself in broad daylight as I approached it past a neatly marked out vegetable patch, the small windows splotchy as if needing a good washing. Funny way to grow things, the soot smears or whatever they were blocking out full light that way, I thought.

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

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

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

Properly impressed with his green thumb, I stood back and watched Herman fuss over his crop, pot by leafy pot. Pausing to tap the ash off a smelly cigar that undoubtedly would not have been allowed into the house, he made a face that had nothing to do with the haze of cigar smoke that had me blinking to keep my

eyes from watering. "You have escaped with your scalp, yah? I heard the Kate on the warpath again."

"Yeah, well, she's sort of pee o'd at me," I owned up to, making plain that the feeling was mutual. Herman listened with sympathy, as best I could tell behind his heavy glasses and the reeking cigar, while I spilled out the story of the torn shirt and the fatally safety-pinned bills. He tut-tutted over that, saying throwing money in the garbage was not good at all. But he didn't lend me any encouragement as to how I was supposed to get through the summer stone broke. "The purse is the Kate's department," he said with a resigned puff of smoke. Reflecting further, no doubt from a lot of experience, he expressed effectively: "She is tight as a wad."

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

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

I nonetheless made the offer, the lukewarm way--"Uhm, anything I can do?"--a person does just to be polite.

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

That got me started, almost as if I was back on the dog bus telling yarns free and easy. For Herman's benefit as well as my own longing for the Double W, I visualized the crew as they sat up to the long table laden with Gram's cooking, everyone taking the same place every meal strictly according to longevity in the bunkhouse or higher rank in running the ranch, Wendell Williamson of course by inheritance at the head of the table in spite of the fact, as I made perfectly plain to an intrigued Herman, that the cows had more brains than he did, then Meredice doggedly next to him when she hadn't managed to scoot to California, and beside her, Gram's spot, when she was not on her feet hustling food dishes to and from the table. At Sparrowhead's other side presided the foreman with a drooping gray mustache, Cal Petrie, who actually divvied out the day's orders to the crew, then came the choreboy, always some old hand too crippled up to ride horseback any more, slowgoing Thurl Everson the current one. By some kind of ranch creed strict as the Bible, those five all rated chairs, and the bunkhouse men lined themselves out on backless benches down both sides of the table. Cowboys such as them were a shifting picture, honesty compelled me to stress to my one-man audience, with somebody like the oldtimer Joe Henty, bowlegged as a pair of pliers, practically spending his life riding the range where cattle with the Double Dub brand roamed hither and yonder, while someone else--a widely known wrangler of recent vintage called Runaway Shea came to mind--barely mussed the blankets on his bunk before blowing his wages in town on a weeklong drunk and moving on to the next ranch that would take a chance on his corral skill with its ponies.

Puffing away on his stogie and babying his plants with spoonfuls of fertilizer and careful irrigation from a long-necked watering can--a couple of times I interrupted myself to go and fill it for him from the spigot at the back of the house--Herman listened to all that as though I were a storyteller right up there with his idol who wrote the pile of books about cowboys and Indians, encouraging me with an occasional "Hah!"

In the end, my try at telling about life on the Double W naturally led around to the whole thing, Gram and I being chucked out of the cook shack and her into the charity ward and me onto the dog bus, when I could just as well have been in the hayfield ^{earning wages} ~~driving the stacker team~~ the whole summer, and while I couldn't quite bring myself to lay out my full fear about the poor farm looming in her future if medical things did not go right and ward of the county starkly in mine, he grasped enough of the situation to tut-tut again. ^{as well} ~~grandy~~

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

Somehow I felt better for having poured out that much of the tale, even if it went into squarehead ears, so to speak. Whatever his background, Herman was the one thing about Wisconsin that I felt vaguely comfortable with, despite his evident quirks and odd appearance. In most ways, he was homely as a pickle. That elongated face and the prominent teeth, taken together with the cockeyed gaze magnified by his glasses, gave him the look of someone loopy enough that you might not want to sit right down next to, although of course there I was, plopped beside him like just another potted plant. Together with everything else in the humid greenhouse, he himself seemed to have sprouted, his stooped shoulders topping my head as he stretched from his stool here and there to reach into his menagerie of vegetation, his big knuckles working smoothly as machine parts in

crimping a leaf off a tomato plant near its root--"Pinch their bottoms is good for them," he told me with a naughty grin--or tying a lagging beanbush stem to a support stick. The dappled light streaming through the glass ceiling and walls brought out the silver in his faded fair hair, which I suspected made him older than Aunt Kate, although there was no real telling. I'd have bet anything gray hair did not stand a chance on her; she would rather, as not much of a joke had it, dye by her own hand.

About then, as I was yammering away with Herman, I noticed a smudge of some sort on the back of my hand. Dirt is to be expected in a greenhouse, so I went to brush it off, but when that didn't get rid of it, I peered more closely. Then gasped. A ghostly scrap of face, an eye clear and direct, feminine eyebrow and ladylike cheekbone distinct in outline, had scarily materialized on my skin.

Yanking my hand away as if burned, I sent Herman one hell of a look. Whatever this stunt was, I didn't like having it pulled on me.

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

I tipped my head back and must have gaped, my eyes adjusting even if my brain was lagging. When looked at closely, reversed faces spookily gazed down from every glass pane, eyes and hair empty of color while the rest of the countenance was dark as night. Bygone people, for I could make out old styles of men's collars and women's hairdos--the lady who appeared on my hand again when I hesitantly put it out and held it at the right distance to bring her portrait pose into full miniature was done up in marcel curls, her probably black tresses tumbling ever so neatly down the sides of her head. Agog, I kept looking back and forth from her image there on me to the shadowy section of glass overhead, still not seeing how this worked. "These--these things were in cameras? How?"

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

"So, Donny," the master of the house of glass went on with a squint that was all but a wink. "When Schildkraut's Photography Shop went *pthht*," he made the noise that meant kaput, "these are for the dump but I get there first. The Kate thinks I am crazy to do it, but glass is glass, why not make a greenhouse, hah?" He tapped his forehead, then pointed to the plates pintoed dark with people. "Makes it not too hot in here." He had a point. Without those clever dabs of shade and a pair of hinged windows that let some air through, the greenhouse would have been an oven by the afternoon.

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

"Who are they?"

"Manitowocers," he said around the stub of his cigar. At the time, I assumed he merely meant those who had but to walk around town to hear their blest souls talk, according to the cross-stitched sampler hanging in the living

room. I was disappointed the figures preserved in glass were as ordinary as that, but maybe that was Manitowoc for you.

Just then, the back door of the house banged like a shot, making me nearly jump out of my skin, Herman reacting with a jolt too, the ash spilling off his cigar. A dressed-up Aunt Kate was advancing on us with quick little steps, high heels tricky on a lawn. Again my heart twinged, that someone who was such a perfect mirror reflection of Kate Smith was not the real thing. I didn't have time for much of that kind of regret, as she minced right up to the doorway of the greenhouse but plainly was not setting foot in the place, and announced, "I'm going to canasta." *over why*
cd. be
you two are on your own if you think you can stand

At first I took that to mean another town with one of those Wisconsin names, Kunazdah or something, until Herman said without a trace of expression, *packing up & leaving w*
calling
"Play honest," and I realized she was off to a card game.

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

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

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

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

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

I watched her pick her way to the DeSoto, and drive off speedily. Showing less interest in the tomato plant now, Herman peered at me through his specs. "The Kate thinks we can't feed us. Puh." Given what the woman of the house had put on the table so far, I was perfectly willing to try bachelor grub if it came to that.

"Now then," he luxuriously mimicked that word combination of hers that made less sense the more you thought about it, patting around on himself to find his matches and light up another cigar, as if in celebration of the Kate being gone. He gave me a man-to-man grin. "So how do you like Manito Woc?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yah, like Gitche Gumee, from the poem?"

He looked saddened when I had to tell him I was not up on Hiawatha.

"*By the shore of Gitche Gumee,*" he recited, his accent thumping like thunder. Again, I had to shrug. "*By the shining Big-Sea Water,*" he persisted. I shook my head, wishing he would try me on something like "*A flea and a fly in a flue...*" Despairing of my lack of literary education, he held up crossed fingers. "Longfellow and Karl May were like so. Poets of Gitche and Winnetou." 10x

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

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

Supposedly it takes one to know one, and right then and there my own sometimes overly active mind, red in the head or however the condition of seeing things for more than they are can best be described, was forced to acknowledge that this odd bespectacled yah-saying garden putterer and henpecked husband, fully five times older than me, had a king hell bastard of an imagination. Possibly outdoing my own, which I know is saying a lot. Wherever Herman Schmidt got it from, he'd held onto the rare quality that usually leaves a person after a certain number of years as a kid, to let what he had read possess him. I saw now why Aunt Kate was ^{always} at him ^{too much} about taking to heart the writings of Karl May in what seemed to be, well, squarehead Westerns. Not that I wanted to side with her, but from my experience of his mental workings so far, notions Herman had picked up out of books did not appear to be condensed from their imaginative extent, let alone properly digested.

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

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

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

With an opening like that, how could I resist?

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

“Heart? Like gives us life?”

“Yeah, you betcha--I mean, yes, you bet.”

Herman leaned way toward me, cigar forgotten for the moment. “Be-you-tiffle name. Tell more.”

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

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

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

Herman puffed on his cigar, maybe seeking smoke signals, as he thought
how best to answer. Finally he said, "An Apache knight, he was."

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

Herman laughed. "Not iron clothes, hah. Leather leggings and a hunting
shirt, he dressed in, and, you betcha"--he nodded approvingly at me--"fancy
moccasins." Turning serious again, he went on, "Karl May calls him a knight
because he was honorable. His word you could trust. He fought fair. Like a
chief supposed to, yah." He nodded at me gravely this time.

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

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

One thing about hanging around with Herman, time went by like a breeze.
That noontime, with Aunt Kate gone to canasta, the house was without
commotion as Herman assembled lunch, laying out the kind of store bread that
came sliced and without taste, but cutting into a loaf of what I figured was
lunchmeat. In the living room trying to find jigsaw pieces of Lincoln's beard,

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

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

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

I still didn't get it, and said so.

Looking pensive, the former 'Dutch' reached for the sugar bowl. "You know about ore boats any, Donny?" At the shake of my head, he instructed, "This is ore boat. *Badger Voyager*, pretend. Table is the Great Lakes. Gee-oh-graphy lesson, hah?"

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

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

"But what about--"

"'Dutch', yah. Coming to that." He peered at the sugar bowl through his strong glasses as if encouraging me to have a close look, too. "He is on the ore

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boat, see. Me, I mean. Twenty years.” Pride shown out of him as he sat back and made the pronouncement, “I was a stoker.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I show you.”

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

”Strait of Mackinaw,” he pronounced the word that is spelled *Mackinac*. “Bad place any old time, but big storm comes up. Worst I was in, ever. The *Badger Voyager* sunked, like I say. Big waves broke her in half.” Abruptly he lifted his hands and mimicked snapping a branch. “Raining and wind blowing like anything when order comes, Abandon ship. I go to climb in the lifeboat, and a

pulley swings loose from the davit and hits me, like so." All too graphically, he clapped a hand over his left eye and I couldn't help wincing in horror.

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

"Ace work!" Wowed, I let out loose with "Holy crap, Herman, doesn't that hurt at all?"

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

"That's really something! Can you do it again?"

He obliged. I couldn't get over the stunt; the carnival sideshow that set up camp in Gros Ventre at rodeo time didn't have tricks nearly as good as playing *shave and a haircut, four bits* on an eyesocket. Still overcome with enthusiasm, I pointed to that left eyeball or whatever the substitute ought to be called, politeness gone to hell. "What's it made of?"

"Glass," he said drily, donning the eyeglasses again. "Like a greenhouse of the head, hah? Only it grows this, from the ship company." He rubbed his thumb and fingers together, which with a penniless pang I recognized meant money.

That was Herman in the ways most meaningful that first adventurous day, or so I thought. I can't really say a glass eye he could play a tune on sold me on spending a stifling summer in Wisconsin, but he did make things more interesting than expected.

Aunt Kate was another matter, a sizable one in every way. After the morning's disaster with my money and our general lack of meeting of minds--if she

even thought I had one--I didn't know what I was going to be up against when she came home from canasta, but suspected it probably would not be good.

So, after lunch when Herman went off for a nap --"Shuteye is good for the digestion," he surprised me yet again--I figured I'd better show at least a bit of progress on the jigsaw puzzle, boring as it was to even think about it.

I had quite a stretch of the sky-blue top edge pieces fitted into place, strategy recalled from having done the damn thing before, working my way down onto George Washington's acre of forehead, when I heard the DeSoto groaning up the driveway and then Aunt Kate's clickety high heels on the kitchen floor, instantly stilled when she reached the plush living room rug.

"Yoo hoo," she called as if I wasn't just across the room from her.

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

"A disaster," she moaned. "Of all the bad luck, why did this have to happen on top of everything else?"

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

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

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

To think, Kate Smith might have uttered those exact last couple of words. But this decidedly was not her, with me as the only audience trying to take in the canasta catastrophe.

“And now, can you believe it, Minnie Zettel is going off on a long visit,” Aunt Kate said as if Minnie Zettel was also going off the rails. “Why anyone would traipse off to St. Louis in the middle of summer, I do not know. The other girls and I are beside ourselves with her.”

Having been beside herself with me not that many hours ago, she was having quite a day of it, all right. I made the sound you make in your throat to let someone know they have a sympathetic audience, but maybe I didn't do it sufficiently. Still practically flat in the recliner, Aunt Kate regarded me narrowly through that divide of her chest. ^A“Donal,” she startled me by actually using my name, which I think was a first time ever, “do you play cards?”

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

“I thought so,” she mustered the strength to nod her head. “When we were girls, Dorie was always one to haul out a deck of cards when nothing else was doing.” ^AShe swelled up and exhaled in relief. “Good. Then you can learn canasta and fill in for Minnie.”

I reacted to that as if she had said I was to put on a girdle and a dress and sit for hours on end at a card table with three gossipy women. Rummy, poker, cribbage, the bunkhouse pastimes I had soaked up by looking on as the Double W crew gambled matchsticks or purely poker chips in games that didn't count for anything but bragging rights were, I foresaw with awful clarity, child's play compared to the so-called amusement I was being dragged into. To today's ears, canasta may sound as distant and out of date as a songbook singalong around the

upright piano. But let me tell you, *new* means *modern* in any day and age, and the freshly conceived card game swept like a craze into the living rooms of mid-century America. This I knew only in the vague way a kid picks up on the odd doings of grownups, but it left the definite impression that canasta was something played to the fullest by dried-up old ladies with nothing else to do. Aunt Kate was the opposite of dried-up, for sure, yet the rest of the canasta mandate was written all over her, in voice and manner, to an extent that spooked me silly. Anyone with a brain bigger than a pea should be able to catch on to a dumb card game, right? However, the same panicky feeling I'd had those first moments on the dog bus when confronted with rows of people as strange to me as if they had been dealt off the bottom of life's deck now gripped me again: What was I getting myself into, none of it my own accord?

It must have showed, for Aunt Kate busily began dismissing my doubts, cranking her chairback up higher with every burst of sentence. "There's no way around it, we need a fourth for canasta and that's that. Don't you fret, darling, I'll teach you." Upright in the chair by now and facing me dead-on, she manufactured a sort of smile. "It will help take your mind off your imagination, hmm?"

Feeling vaguely traitorous but instinctively trying to save my own skin, I asked, "Why can't Herman? Play cards with you, I mean."

"Him?" The one word did that idea in, but she added for good measure, "He calls our little canasta parties the hen roost. You can see he'd be impossible."

What I could see was that I was being drafted to fill in at something where impossibility was in the air. Talk about a disaster. "Gee, Aunt Kate, it's nice of you to ask," I tried to wiggle out of it, "but I just don't think I'm slick enough at cards to--"

"It won't hurt you to do it one time in your life." I knew that look from her. Gram had one just like it whenever she prodded me into some task I didn't want to be within a mile of. True, there was about a hundred pounds of difference behind the gaze, but it was all in Aunt Kate's favor. Knowing when I was licked, I mumbled, "I guess I can try."

"Now then. It's too bad, but we need the card table." Before I could react, she was crumbling the sky-blue edge and George Washington's forehead and scooping the pieces along with the rest of the jigsaw puzzle into its box. "Don't worry, sweetheart, you can start over on it once you've learned canasta."

(blank) 