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

Betty Mayfield
“I did not think of myself,” Herman answered simply. “I taked a leap of fate.”

Rags digested that, long enough that the sinner’s bench was growing pretty hard. Then he sat up a bit and sighed. “Better to be lucky than smart, I suppose. But let’s get down to the pussy purr,” he mimicked the little sheriff’s expression, “and you tell me why fate had to plunk you down on my ranch out of all the places in the Big Hole.”

I had that answer. “The Diamond Buckle thinger,” I pointed to my hatband. “I saw it on Jones there at the hobo jungle, and figured out you must be the rancher he was foremanning for. It took some luck, but more than that, too. Remember, back there at Crow Fair you wrote in my autograph book, _When you lift your hat, to ladies and that, make sure you have something upstairs—_”

“Okay, okay, done in by my own words, fair enough,” he set his teeth against hearing any more. Then looked at me the frank, open way he’d done when it was the two of us in the stall with Queen, the crucial listener this time Herman. “What I started to say back there in the barn, before all the commotion, is I don’t see why it wouldn’t work for you to stay on here with Gramps if you really want to, what’s one more mouth to feed?”

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

“I--I’m staying.”

I shall see the two of them forever in that moment, Herman looking like he was trying to catch his breath, Rags awarding himself a little grin before turning serious again. “Since you’re gonna stick around with us,” he said as if just making talk with me, “maybe that opens up something else.” Cocking an ear toward the kitchen where Mrs. Costello was clattering together the resemblance of a
meal. He rubbed his lean jaw a certain way. "Cook, did you say this sainted granny
is?"
The town of Gros Ventre was so far from anywhere that you had to take a bus to catch the bus. At that time, a homegrown enterprise with more name than vehicles, the Rocky Mountain Stage Line and Postal Courier, served remote locales like ours with 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 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? 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 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.
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 Williamson 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 approached the office down the wood-paneled hall. 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 opportune in the
Overwhelming as such concerns can be, whatever your age and station in life, I must have been better than I thought at hiding my double-edged fear. The chatterbox at my side seemed not to notice anything troubling me, imperturbably dishing out topic after topic in her chirpy voice. "Donal," she 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." A year younger 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.
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?”

“What the little boy shot at and missed,” she answered impassively, still dealing out green sheets.
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 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, I returned the suitcase to the baggage compartment as best I could, then as I headed
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 an Almond Joy 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 my Indian name, Red Chief! 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 started to buzz with questions about Indian life I could hardly wait to put to him.

"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 I wanted to ask him about.

*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. To be prepared, I extracted the autograph book 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 Almond Joys 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.” 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 Almond Joy 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 on a 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 from 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 Almond Joy. Maybe my luck would change at 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. 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 shouldn't 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, 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
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 ’skinners 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? The prisoner sent me a look of sympathy that didn’t
really help. “Here, see?” Frantically I dug out the autograph book from my jacket pocket and produced the slip of paper with the Wisconsin address.

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 I 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. 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, a handed-around orphan by any other name.

“Hell if I know what people are thinking any more, the things they do these days,” the sheriff muttered as he kept squinting at the piece of paper. 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
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.

“You pretty close to guessed it. Beaded moccasins.”
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, money, clothing, my entire trip, everything I foolishly was about to lose.
“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.

“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
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."

I didn't let on that a school picnic at the buffalo jump on the Two Medicine River amounted to my total knowledge of the kind of hunt shown in the book.

"Can I tell you something? It's Montana, not Montana."

"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." I perked up. Naturally I wasn't about to pass up a chance to repeat the tale I'd told the ex-convict about the classy moccasins having been
made for a great Blackfoot chief and so on, temperately leaving out the part about my having won them in a roping contest at 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.

“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 powwow 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.
“Carl, I’ll go with you on one condition. I serve my sentence, how much was that again--?”

“Forty-five days,” his step-brother lawman answered peevishly.

“Jeezus, for fightin’ in a bar?” Peerless objected, while others whistled in disbelief.

“Plus whatever the judge throws at you for jailbreaking,” Sheriff Kinnick plodded on, glaring around at the audience.

“--in your jail there in Glasgow,” Harv put his proposition “That way, Janie can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won’t need to bust out.” He gazed at the smaller man. “If you won’t do that for me, you’ll have to shoot me to take me.”

“That can be arranged, too, according to this pistol.”

The mention of a smoke wagon ooed the hoboes. Quietly, Skeeter had distributed pitchforks, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone. I itched to have one and Herman looked determined to take one if he had to. “Not them,” Highpockets directed. “Harv either.” Skeeter floated by the three of us as if we didn’t exist.

During this, the deputy sheriff had taken two steps back. “Kinnick, this getting out of hand. Unless he attacks you, I’m not in this.”

"Jonesie, c’mere by me,” Rags called softly. “Somebody’s got to to be witnesses if this 00 cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay.”

“Gladly,” the foreman said, sending Kinnick a murderous look.

“Maybe you ought to think about Harv’s offer a little more. Sounds like a more fair deal to me,” Rags chipped in, the crew armed with pitchforks backing him with noises of agreement.

Looking around furiously at man after man with a tool that could stab hay but more than that, too, Sheriff Kinnick had dropped a hand toward his gun butt,
but not quite touching it. He cast another glance around at the bunch of us, his
hand twitching, then let it fall to his side.

Breathing hard, he faced Harv. “I’ve got to put up with you under the same
roof just like when we was kids, do I,” he complained as if he’d been sentenced to
his own jail. “Okay, loverboy, Glasgow and Janie it is.” Trying to fluff himself
up, he turned to his fellow sheriff and growled, “That still leaves this pair.” He
jerked a thumb at Herman and me. “Something more than jailbreaking is involved
with them if I don’t make my guess. Let’s get at those posters, I kind of got a hunch
I’ve seen the four-eyed one’s puss before.”

I knew it. He was out to get us, was going to get us. Our life together, our
lives separately, was going to fizzle into separation and incarceration.

“Now let’s don’t get excited all over again here,” Rags drawled, stepping
in front of the pair of lawmen. “I have a better idea before you get to reading too
much into faces. J. Edgar, you and me need to palaver.” He jerked his head toward
the horse corral and ambled off toward it. Sheriff Kinnick’s face darkened, but he
pivoted to follow Rags, warning over his shoulder, “Don’t try to quit the country
while my back is turned, Harv.” With a straight face Harv responded he wouldn’t
think of escaping right out in the open. Actually, hightailing off into the sagebrush
was on my mind. Where we stood watching, though, Herman’s hand had resumed
its grip on my shoulder when he heard palaver. I wasn’t so sure any amount of
talking to the mean little sheriff could help us, dead-set as he was to haul Herman
off to whatever stony lonesome they threw enemy aliens into and clap me in the
orphanage.

Rags was speaking softly to the saddle horses and feeding them sugar cubes
by the time the sheriff joined him at the corral, and the soft drawl that the crowd of
us could not quite hear clearly now was directed at the sheriff. After a little of that,
the sheriff was the one rubbing his jaw. He edged closer to Rags and said
something so low we couldn’t catch it. Rags drew his head back and looked down
at him with not a favorable expression, but after a moment stuck his hand out.
They shook, and headed back to us, the sheriff strutting beside Rags’ long-legged
stride.

“Get your stuff and we’ll head for Glasgow, Harv,” he said as if it had been
his own idea all along. He turned to Herman and me with a sniff. “On second
thought, these yayhoos aren’t my worry.”

as Harv fetched his bedroll from the bunkhouse and shook hands all around
with the crew, all of them wishing him good luck and Skeeter assuring him forty-
five days was a jail term a person could do standing on his head.

“I dealt myself out of it on the WANTED situation, back there. But that don’t
mean you can’t take a peek at the posters and come back in a few weeks and--”

Harv interrupted. “Carl, let it go. Or I’ll sing ‘Indian Love Call’ day and
night in your own hoosegow.”

With a perfectly straight face, the deputy sheriff looked across the top of the
patrol car at the more or less brothers and addressed the one with a badge. “In the
name of peace and quiet, I think I’ll just let those posters of yours go home with
you. Let’s hit the road, shall we?”

Sheriff Kinnick swore and climbed in the front seat. The patrol car

“I have to go up and enter the bronc ridin’ at the Glasgow rodeo.” “And
beforehand, ride at the head of the parade through town right next with that peewee
sheriff to help his election chances.”

“Now let’s sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I’ve let on
the ranch. Come on up to the house.”

“I started to say back there in the barn that I don’t see why that wouldn’t
work. Jones won’t like it any too much, but he started it.”
“Cook, did you say this sainted granny is?”

He rubbed that lean jaw a certain way. “Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying, when she goes back to her natural talent for walloping clothes. And come roundup, we’re gonna need a bull cook, if the other lady didn’t mind being called that.”

“She won’t,” I breathed, 00

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, Herman and I stayed. And stayed and stayed. Joined, yes, by Gram and Letty, and as Skeeter would have said, by the grace of whatever ain’t unholy.

They came to Wisdom not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac, with Letty riding up front in the company of Rags, and Gram, no fool in these matters, perched in the back seat. I had started school, and I cannot begin to tell you how it elevated my standing when that big car pulled up

And Aunt Kate, who resembled Kate Smith but 00. I am convinced she knew. She somehow sensed or put two and two together and came up with the three of us. Yet she did not sic the law on Herman, perhaps out of family loyalty to Gram. Or debt she owed me. Or who knows, some 00 of human nature.

That, then, is the saga of the summer that went loco and ended up at a place called Wisdom. Although not quite the last word, because like Manitou walking the earth as a spirit in Herman’s telling, a story restlessly lingers on even after it is gone.

By that I mean there have been so many other chapters of my life that are hinged, page by page in memory, to that singular season when I experienced the
dog bus and all it took me to. Contrary to elderly grumbles, childhood is not wasted on the young. Rather, think of it as the onset of the history that attaches to each of us, the first letters of the signature on existence that we become. From that summer when I was a dippy kid making up yarns as fast as my imagination could go, memory possesses its own fleet way where silver greyhounds race everlastingly and in an instant, the red routes of remembrance lead to the three soldiers bound for Korea, and the ex-convict who did not quite outfox me and the phony minister who was foxier yet, and the daredevil van driver in the Twin Cities, and the generous Schneiders who even provided a tailormade name, and the Camp Winnebago boys who challenged me tooth and nail, and those whose names I only knew as Highpockets and Peerless Peterson and Midnight Frankie and Pooch and Shrkespeare and Jingy and the Jersey Mosquito. And at the beginning and the end, a wise woman speaks chapter and verse of the journey of a lifetime. “The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself.”

So it has been, that matter of staking out a place. I was merely a college kid overflowing with ambition when my first break came—you can bet that Rags Rasmussen put in a word with the hometown committee—and I was hired as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboos. From there, my career as the voice of the cowboy sport led up and up. Back there in our Manitowoc showdown, Aunt Kate was more right than either of us knew when she called me a storier, for at microphones from Wisdom to Madison Square Garden for decades now, I have told the tales of bucking horses that never were ridden and broncbusters who never were daunted, and of course the seenus joke a thousand times.

Television amplified it all, and still does. It also brings surprises such the one that brought this flood of memory. Those of us in the UltraSports Network
crew had pulled in to Reno for its Cowboy-O-Rama three-day show of the circuit’s top riders competing for far more prize money than Rags and his generation ever dreamed of. I had just stepped off the bus, in this case still a Greyhound but refitted into the luxury coach our announcing crew travels in, to stretch my legs before showtime when someone over in back of the bucking chutes called out, “Scotty! I mean, Mr.Cameron!”

I turned to find a good-looking young woman hurrying toward me from the stalls where the barrel racers kept their horses. I am well beyond an age of interest to buckle bunnies, so I knew this wasn’t that. Longlegged and coltish, in well-worn boots and jeans and practically fluorescent pink snap-button shirt that stood out in the right ways and fashionable Stetson blue as the sky, my visitor was the complete package of rodeo cowgirl these days. By the considerable mane of hair escaping from under the hat, I saw she was as redheadead as my own granddaughters. Freckles across her nose were another nice feature. I judged her to be still pretty much a kid, in her late teens, but an enterprising one for sure. Charging right up to me, she gave me a smile of the kind a man can’t help but respond to. “Can I get your autograph, please, please? It would mean a lot to me,” she coaxed, not that I needed any.

“Sure thing, ma’am,” I replied, sounding as flagrantly old-fashioned as a square dance dosie-doe even to myself. But at least it showed I have worked my way past calling young women of today “little lady” or anything close.

So it was that I smiled back at her and produced a pen, saying, “Ready and waiting, angel.” That last word slipped out, but she only gave me a sparkling look. No woman I had met yet, starting with those in my own family, seemed to mind being called something heavenly. This one proffered an immediate hand that had known ranch work and introduced herself as Mariah Rozier from the Two Medicine country.
“My mother was a barrel racer, too,” she rushed the news out during the handshake. “Lexa McCaskill, back then?”

There should be such a thing as a half question mark for the way young people speak today, but after all my years of lingo with Herman the German, who am I to talk? From somewhere back in the mists of all the rodeos I had put voice to, I was a little surprised at myself when I could honestly tell her, “I remember the name. Kind of distinctive.”

“She and Dad are in there,” she wrinkled her nose at the glitzy casino across the parking lot from the rodeo grounds, “until my go-round. They claim they’re going to pay for the trip playing the slot machines. The quarter ones?”

I laughed. “From my experience, you have a better shot at the prize money than they do. What have you got for me to do some penmanship on?” I was somewhat let down when she passed me a crumpled Cowboy-O-Rama program. “You don’t have an autograph album?”

“Oh, but I do.” She whipped out a palm-size smartphone with a glowing screen. “I’ll put you on here and scrapbook it.” I have given up trying to follow what her generation can perform with handheld gadgetry, and simply leafed on through the rodeo program to find the Event Results page for enough white space to write on.

Still high-spirited, she made a pretty good pass at flattering me with, “Know what? You look a lot better than that Believe It Or Not! cartoon of you in the Rodeo Hall of Fame. Graduation trip, my folks took me there.” She couldn’t help teasing me a little. “Fifty years at this and never missed any of the big shows on the circuit? Really? How many hundreds of rodeos have you called?”

“Just about enough,” I sighed. Starting to write from memory, I said offhandedly, “Maybe you’ll make it to the Hall yourself someday.”
“I’m setting out to,” she said with the total confidence of the young. “I start at Treasure State U in Great Falls this fall. Communications major.” With her complexion, when she blushed, as she did now, it went to the roots of her hair. Peeking at me to make sure I wouldn’t laugh, she confessed, “I want to be a big-time sports announcer, like you.” Emboldened when I seemed to take her seriously, she nodded toward the deluxe Greyhound with a sassy grin. “Maybe have a rig like that of my own?”

I followed her gaze to the fancily painted bus, my home on the road for more seasons than I wanted to count, with the bright red lettering emblazoned on its side where the silver dog used to run.

DEAN OF THE ARENA
SCOTTY CAMERON
BRINGS YOU THE WORLD OF RODEO
AN ULTRASPORTS EXCLUSIVE.

“I have to warn you, getting to be an oldtimer comes with it,” I told her, meaning it about being tagged as dean of anything.

To change the subject, I asked, “Hey, when are you up in the barrel racing? I’ll give you a big-time introduction, how about.”

“Awesome! The second go-round. Queen and I didn’t come all the way from Montana to lose,” she vowed without a trace of doubt.

“Queen! Now there’s a name for a horse.” Pausing in my inscribing, I was ready to go into the coincidence of a colossal work mare with that name drawn from a deck of cards and wonder if it was something the same with her pony.

Before I could get a word in edgewise, the confident racer breezed on.

“Sure is. I call her that after my favorite band. We are the champions,” she sang, doing a little dance, “of the world!” You know that Queen song?”
"No, but I knew one of those champions," I said huskily, overtaken by the thought of Rags Rasmussen in purple glory atop a mean bronc. I could see him rub his jaw at Cowboy-O-Rama, where a rider sliding into the saddle with a bucking horse under him has to wait out commercials for the casinoes sponsoring my television show. Some things change seemingly overnight in this spinning world, I reminded myself as every man since Adam has had to. While other pieces of the past timeless go on, like the Diamond Buckle hatband that still adorns my Stetson and the black arrowhead I wear in the clasp of my western bolo tie when I'm on camera in the announcing booth. I don't call it luck any more, but something that defies the odds drives those of us with rambunctious imaginations, change be damned. I could feel the ambition coming off this unlikely soulmate in her skyblue Stetson, in her flush of youth the princess of all that life had to offer, and concentrated on penmanship that had to say something from my years to hers.

She went up on tiptoes in her stirrup-scuffed boots, trying to peek. "Wow, what all are you writing?"

"You'll see. I learned it from somebody wiser than me."

When Herman finally did write in my autograph album, there on the last bus to Wisdom, he came up with something he wouldn't tell me the source of, except to say it was not the doings of Longfellow or Goethe. I fixed up his English as he translated aloud from German. As he labored the last of the lines into ink, he had taken on that expression of giving a little think and said, "Karl May is turning in his grave because he did not put eye-dea in book before us, I betcha, Donny," winking his glass eye.

Thus it was first written in Herman's hand, but I'm pretty sure it is my truest verse as well.

_When you take a look in your memory book_
Here you will find the lasting kind,
Old rhymes and new, life in review,
Roses in the snow of long ago.

When I was finished and gave back the rodeo program, the barrel racer setting out to be a winner in life had her smartphone at the ready to capture the inscription, but stopped to read it over more than once, freckles congregating as she crinkled her nose at herself. "That’s really nice, even if I’m not sure I get it all."

"Don’t worry, angel. Someday you will."

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

I nodded, not trusting my voice. "You are good boy." He looked off past me. "I must make sorry to Highpockets about not going with them."

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

A grin escaped despite his best effort. "Telled you the cows lived downstairs in Weilheim."

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

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

The barn was as quiet as it ever got, the workhorses standing idle in their stalls, straw on the floor absorbing the shifting of their hooves except for a whispery rustle. I was welcomed with some snorts and a neigh or two as I climbed to the haymow and forked alfalfa down into the manger in front of each horse.

I treated Queen and Brandy to a half an of oats.

"Queen, what am I gonna do?"

So tall I thought at first it must be Harv,
“What’s doing, buddy?”

“Rags! Sorry, I-- I didn’t know you were here, didn’t see your car.”

“It was raining like a cow taking a whizz on a flat rock when I pulled in about one this morning from the Helena fair, so I put the Caddy in the equipment shed.” “Something like Snag, do I remember you go by?”

“When I’m not Scotty. You know how the ho--the crew treats names.”

“I’m learning pretty fast.

“Came down to look over the saddles ponies. Thought I might ride up to the 00 line cabin, just to be on a horse that won’t try to throw me.

He stifled a yawn.

“I’m sort of caught between somethng....

“I don’t--” The whump of a car on the livestock crossing

“You happen to know anything about why we’re being honored by this visit?”

I confessed to him the crew had been in a little bit of a fight in town with the Tumbling T outfit. “Hell, that was last night, there out to be a statute of limitations,” he said mildly.

“Excuse me, I have to get over there.”

The deputy sheriff from Wisdom stepped out of the patrol car giving a sickly smile all around. “Sorry to disturb you, gents.” I should have seen what was coming when, on the passenger side, a big hat barely appeared above the top of the car.

Then the rest of him came into view It was the mean little sheriff from the first dog bus of all, back at the start of summer.

His first step out of the patrol car, he spotted Harv
“Well, if it ain’t the object of my affection,” Sheriff Kinnick made a mock simper. “Harv the Houdini of the stony loneseome. Took me a while to run you down, lunkhead, but here we both are, just like old times.”

“Howdy, Carl. You out seeing the country?” Harv materialized behind Herman at that moment, the rest of the crew fanned out behind him as they came drifting over from the horseshoe pit.

he stopped short and looked at me from under his load of hat, all too much recognition registering in the apple-doll face. “Huh, I thought you was going to see relatives, punkin. Back east someplace.”

Too flustered to think, I pointed at Herman. “Here’s--here’s one of those relatives, right here, see. He came west instead.”

“Did he now.” Sheriff Kinnick, as I couldn’t help but remember his name was, sized both of us up in our shabby work clothes. “More running around with no visible means of support, from the looks of you and him. Pretty close to bumming, if you ask me.”

As I watched in alarm, he strode over to Herman, taking care not to step into a cow pie with his dainty boots. “Just where do you fit into this, Bosephus?”

“Fritz,” Herman maintained, his good eye starting to tic. “Scotty’s grandpa, I am.”

“You sure sound like it, Scotch as all get out,” the sheriff said cynically. “Mallory,” he spoke over his shoulder to the local deputy sheriff standing to one side in all this, “you ever seen this mug before? Seems to me I’ve laid eyes on--”

“Hey, Johnny Law,” Highpockets spoke up, stepping in beside Harv and Herman. “What’s your beef? These fellas are with us,” he indicated Harv and Herman and me, with Skeeter and Peerless and Fingy and Midnight Frankie and
Shakespeare ranged around him nodding support. “Members of the human race in good standing.”

“I bet they are,” the shrimpy sheriff....Your type...

I could see it in their eyes, the pent-up rage and hate from years of railyard bulls and Palookaville sheriffs, the law

By now Rags had strolled up.

“What seems to be the diffewculty?”

“Somebody else here you better meet,” the other lawman introduced Rags.

“Thanks for nothing, Mallory,” the Glasgow sheriff rocked back on his pointy heels a little, taking in Rags. “You didn’t tell me this is his spread.”

“You didn’t seem to be in a frame of mind where it’d make any difference,” his counterpart from Widsom said sourly.

“Saw you ride at the Calgary Stampede,” the little sheriff told Rags as if that amounted to a private audience. “You do know how to stick on a horse.”

“It’s an honest living,” Rags replied, glancing at the badge on Kinnick’s narrow chest as if comparing not that favorably. He turned to the other lawman.

“What is this, Mike, a badge toters’ convention? Should I be charging rent?”

“Sheriff Kinnick’s from up at Glasgow. Seems like he’s here to arrest your man Harv.”

Jones meanwhile looked like he was going to explode. “Not our stack man, goddamn it! Mike, can’t this wait until we’re done haying in a few weeks?”

The deputy sheriff...“Not according to my colleague here.”

Rags looked at the runty lineman. “Aw, no. How about if we give you two or three other guys from the crew for Harv, straight across. A good stack man is hard to find.”

That broke the ice briefly in the tense gathering, but Sheriff Kinnick immediately turned frosty again. “I didn’t come this far for jokes. I been on the
track of this lamebrain"--he pointed an accusing finger at Harv, standing quietly
there looking like 00--"every chance I get all summer. Talked to bus drivers until
they was running out my ears, but I lost his trail in Butte. Then I got smart and
asked myself who else makes regular runs to burgs off the beaten path. Beer truck
drivers." The sheriff let out his mean little laugh. "You make sort of a conspicuous
hitchhiker, Harv."

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

Give it to Sheriff Kinnick, he didn't give ground, only chuckled that chilly
way. "Nice try," he said up into Highpockets' face, "but no hearing judge in his
right mind is gonna take the testimony of a hobo over the Wolf Point jailers who
had Harv for company days on end, when the fool wasn't busting out. Besides,
you get in court and there might be some natural curiosity about your own
propensity for law abiding or not."

Harv spoke up. "It's my 00, Pockets, thanks anyway."

The Glasgow sheriff forced a chuckle. "Let's get down to the pussy purr
here."

"You got a sheet of paper to back that up?" Rags asked. The sheriff
grumpily handed over the warrant and Rags read it all the way through, glancing up
when he got to the bottom. "What did I hear your name is?"

"They're brothers!" I blurted. "I heard them both say so."

"That right? Spit in your milk when you were kids, did he?"

"That don't matter."
“And you don’t have anything better to do than track me down across half the state.”

“He broke out of jail.”

“Told you he’s a hard worker,” Rags said mildly. “Harv, what were you in for?”

“Fighting in a bar.”

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

“That’s as may be,” the little sheriff muttered, glancing around the hostile ring of faces, “but none of you acted up like that in my jurisdiction. I’m only interested in this knothead. C’mon, Harv, let’s go get you some free board and room in lovely Wolf Point.”

Harv folded his arms on his chest. “Nope.”

“God damn it,” the sheriff exploded, “if you do the crime, you’re supposed to do the time! That’s practically in the Bible. Now get in the patrol car. Front seat. Leave room in the back for other customers,” he checked on Herman and me.

“Got some WANTED posters in my bag, Mallory, brought ’em for us to go through, just on the chance.”

“That’s real thinking,” the Dillon deputy sheriff muttered.

Off to one side, Highpockets said softly without moving his lips, “Skeeter, pass the toothpicks,” and the old hobo drifted off to the blacksmith shop where Herman sharpened things.

“Still nope,” Harv declared, not budging. “That jurisdiction you talk about so much—it maybe’s slipped your mind I busted out of jail in Wolf Point, and that’s not in your county, the way I see it.”
The Glasgow sheriff scowled. “You’re turning into a regular jailhouse lawyer, are you, all the experience you’re getting behind bars.” He poked his hat higher on his head to try to look taller as he faced Harv. “I’m taking you in for violating my custody, not once but twice when I packed you over there to the Wolf Point stony lonesome. Like I’m gonna do again, damn it.”

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

“Carl, I’ll go with you on one condition. I serve my sentence, how much was that again--?”

“Forty-five days,” his step-brother lawman answered peevishly.

“Jeezus, for fightin’ in a bar?” Peerless objected, while others whistled in disbelief.

“Plus whatever the judge throws at you for jailbreaking,” Sheriff Kinnick plodded on, glaring around at the audience.

“--in your jail there in Glasgow,” Harv put his proposition “That way, Janie can visit me when she gets off work at the supper club and I won’t need to bust out.” He gazed at the smaller man. “If you won’t do that for me, you’ll have to shoot me to take me.”

“That can be arranged, too, according to this pistol.”

The mention of a smoke wagon ooed the hoboes. Quietly, Skeeter had distributed pitchforks, tines gleaming fresh from the grindstone. I itched to have one and Herman looked determined to take one if he had to. “Not them,” Highpockets directed. “Harv either.” Skeeter floated by the three of us as if we didn’t exist.

During this, the deputy sheriff had taken two steps back. “Kinnick, this getting out of hand. Unless he attacks you, I’m not in this.”
"Jonesie, c’mere by me," Rags called softly. "Somebody’s got to to be witnesses if this 00 cuts loose on innocent men on their way to pitch some hay."

"Gladly," the foreman said, sending Kinnick a murderous look.

"Maybe you ought to think about Harv’s offer a little more. Sounds like a more fair deal to me," Rags chipped in, the crew armed with pitchforks backing him with noises of agreement.

Looking around furiously at man after man with a tool that could stab hay but more than that, too, Sheriff Kinnick had dropped a hand toward his gun butt, but not quite touching it. He cast another glance around at the bunch of us, his hand twitching, then let it fall to his side.

Breathing hard, he faced Harv. "I’ve got to put up with you under the same roof just like when we was kids, do I," he complained as if he’d been sentenced to his own jail. "Okay, loverboy, Glasgow and Janie it is." Trying to fluff himself up, he turned to his fellow sheriff and growled, "That still leaves this pair." He jerked a thumb at Herman and me. "Something more than jailbreaking is involved with them if I don’t make my guess. Let’s get at those posters, I kind of got a hunch I’ve seen the four-eyed one’s puss before."

I knew it. He was out to get us, was going to get us. Our life together, our lives separately, was gong to fizzle into separation and incarceration.

"’Now let’s don’t get excited all over again here," Rags drawled, stepping in front of the pair of lawmen. "I have a better idea before you get to reading too much into faces. J. Edgar, you and me need to palaver." He jerked his head toward the horse corral and ambled off toward it. Sheriff Kinnick’s face darkened, but he pivoted to follow Rags, warning over his shoulder, "Don’t try to quit the country while my back is turned, Harv." With a straight face Harv responded he wouldn’t think of escaping right out in the open. Actually, hightailing off into the sagebrush
was on my mind. Where we stood watching, though, Herman’s hand had resumed
its grip on my shoulder when he heard palaver. I wasn’t so sure any amount of
talking to the mean little sheriff could help us, dead-set as he was to haul Herman
off to whatever stony lonesome they threw enemy aliens into and clap me in the
orphanage.

Rags was speaking softly to the horses and feeding them sugar cubes by the
time the sheriff joined him at the corral, and the soft drawl that the crowd of us
could not quite hear clearly now was directed at the sheriff. After a little of that, the
sheriff was the one rubbing his jaw. He edged closer to Rags and said something
so low we couldn’t catch it. Rags drew his head back and looked down at him with
not a favorable expression, but after a moment stuck his hand out. They shook,
and headed back to us, the sheriff struttiing beside Rags’ long-legged stride.

“Get your stuff and we’ll head for Glasgow, Harv,” he said as if it had been
his own idea all along. He turned to Herman and me with a sniff. “On second
thought, these yahoos aren’t my worry.”

as Harv fetched his bedroll from the bunkhouse and shook hands all around
with the crew, all of them wishing him good luck and Skeeter assuring him forty­
five days was a jail term a person could do standing on his head.

“I dealt myself out of it on the WANTED situation, back there. But that don’t
mean you can’t take a peek at the posters and come back in a few weeks and--”

Harv interrupted. “Carl, let it go. Or I’ll sing ‘Indian Love Call’ day and
night in your own hoosegow.”

With a perfectly straight face, the sheriff from Dillon looked across the top
of the patrol car at the more or less brothers and addressed the one with a badge.
“In the name of peace and quiet, I think I’ll just let those posters of yours go home
with you. Let’s hit the road, shall we?”
Sheriff Kinnick swore and climbed in the front seat. The patrol car

"I have to go up and enter the bronc ridin’ at the Glasgow rodeo." "And beforehand, ride at the head of the parade through town right next with that peewee sheriff to help his election chances."

"Now let’s sort you two out. Find out what kind of desperadoes I’ve let on the ranch. Come on up to the house."

"I started to say back there in the barn that I don’t see why that wouldn’t work. Jones won’t like it any too much, but he started it."

"Cook, did you say?"

He rubbed that lean jaw a certain way. “Mrs. 00 is only with us through haying, when she goes back to her natural talent for walloping clothes. And come roundup, we’re gonna need a bull cook, if the other lady didn’t mind being called that.”

“She won’t,” I breathed, 00

At the end of haying, when Highpockets and the Jersey Mosquito and Blackie and the others were borne away by the dog bus to other harvests, other seasons, Herman and I stayed. And stayed and stayed. Joined, yes, by Gram and Letty, and as Skeeter would have said, by the grace of whatever ain’t unholy.

They came to Wisdom not by Greyhound, of course, that last dog bus having run its course, but in a purple Cadillac, with Letty riding up front in the company of Rags, and Gram, no fool in these matters, perched in the back seat. I had started school, and I cannot begin to tell you how it elevated my standing when that big car pulled up
And Aunt Kate, who resembled Kate Smith but00. I am convinced she knew. She somehow sensed or put two and two together and came up with the three of us. Yet she did not sic the law on Herman, perhaps out of family loyalty to Gram. Or debt she owed me. Or who knows, some 00 of human nature.

That, then, is the saga of the summer that went loco and ended up at a place called Wisdom. Although not quite the last word, because like Manitou walking the earth as a spirit in Herman’s telling, a story restlessly lingers on even after it is gone.

By that I mean there have been so many other chapters of my life that are hinged, page by page in memory, to that singular season when I experienced the dog bus and all it took me to. Contrary to elderly grumbles, childhood is not wasted on the young. Rather, think of it as the onset of the history that attaches to each of us, the first letters of the signature on existence that we become. From that summer when I was a dippy kid making up yarns as fast as my imagination could go, memory possesses its own fleet way where silver greyhounds race everlastingingly and in an instant, the red routes of remembrance lead to the three soldiers bound for Korea, and the ex-convict who did not quite outfox me and the phony minister who was foxier yet, and the daredevil van driver in the Twin Cities, and the generous Schneiders who even provided a tailormade name, and the Camp Winnebago boys who challenged me tooth and nail, and those whose names I only knew as Highpockets and Peerless Peterson and Midnight Frankie and Pooch and Shrkespeare and Fingy and the Jersey Mosquito. And at the beginning and the end, a wise woman speaks chapter and verse of the journey of a lifetime. “The dog bus gets all kinds, so you just have to plow right in and stake out a place for yourself.”

So it has been, that matter of staking out a place. I was merely a college kid overflowing with ambition when my first break came--you can bet that Rags
Rasmussen put in a word with the hometown committee—and I was hired as announcer at the Wisdom Roundup, the annual rodeo taking place within sight of the willows where Herman and I jungled up with the hoboos. From there, my career as the voice of the cowboy sport was straight up. Back there in our Manitowoc showdown, Aunt Kate was more right than either of us knew when she called me a storier, for at microphones from Wisdom to Madison Square Garden for decades now, I have told the tales of bucking horses that never were ridden and broncbusters who never were daunted, and of course the seenus joke a thousand times.

Television amplified it all, and still does. It also brings surprises such the one that brought this flood of memory. Those of us in the UltraSports Network crew had pulled in to Reno for its Cowboy-O-Rama three-day show of the circuit’s top riders competing for far more prize money than Rags and his generation ever dreamed of. I had just stepped off the bus, in this case still a Greyhound but refitted into the luxury coach our announcing crew travels in, to stretch my legs before showtime when someone over in back of the bucking chutes called out, “Scotty! I mean, Mr. Cameron!”

I turned to find a good-looking young woman hurrying toward me from the stalls where the barrel racers kept their horses. I am well beyond an age of interest to buckle bunnies, so I knew this wasn’t that. Longlegged and coltish, in well-worn boots and jeans and practically fluorescent pink snap-button shirt that stood out in the right ways and fashionable Stetson blue as the sky, my visitor was the complete package of rodeo cowgirl these days. By the considerable mane of hair escaping from under the hat, I saw she was as redheadead as my own granddaughters. Freckles across her nose were another nice feature. I judged her to be still pretty much a kid, in her late teens, but an enterprising one for sure. Charging right up to me, she gave me a smile of the kind a man can’t help but
respond to. "Can I get your autograph, please, please? It would mean a lot to me," she coaxed, not that I needed any.

"Sure thing, ma'am," I replied, sounding as flagrantly old-fashioned as a square dance dosie-doe even to myself. But at least it showed I have worked my way past calling young women of today "little lady" or anything close.

So it was that I smiled back at her and produced a pen, saying, "Ready and waiting, angel." That last word slipped out, but she only gave me a sparkling look. No woman I had met yet, starting with those in my own family, seemed to mind being called something heavenly. This one proffered an immediate hand that had known ranch work and introduced herself as Mariah Rozier from the Two Medicine country.

"My mother was a barrel racer, too," she rushed the news out during the handshake. "Lexa McCaskill, back then?"

There should be such a thing as a half question mark for the way young people speak today, but after all my years of lingo with Herman the German, who am I to talk? From somewhere back in the mists of all the rodeos I had put voice to, I was a little surprised at myself when I could honestly tell her, "I remember the name. Kind of distinctive."

"She and Dad are in there," she wrinkled her nose at the glitzy casino across the parking lot from the rodeo grounds, "until my go-round. They claim they’re going to pay for the trip playing the slot machines. The quarter ones?"

I laughed. "From my experience, you have a better shot at the prize money than they do. What have you got for me to do some penmanship on?" I was somewhat let down when she passed me a crumpled Cowboy-O-Rama program.

"You don’t have an autograph album?"

"Oh, but I do." She whipped out a palm-size smartphone with a glowing screen. "I’ll put you on here and scrapbook it." I have given up trying to follow
what her generation can perform with handheld gadgetry, and simply leafed on through the rodeo program to find the Event Results page for enough white space to write on.

Still high-spirited, she made a pretty good pass at flattering me with, “Know what? You look a lot better than that Believe It Or Not! cartoon of you in the Rodeo Hall of Fame. Graduation trip, my folks took me there.” She couldn’t help teasing me a little. “Fifty years at this and never missed any of the big shows on the circuit? Really? How many hundreds of rodeos have you called?”

“Just about enough,” I sighed. Starting to write from memory, I said offhandedly, “Maybe you’ll make it to the Hall yourself someday.”

“I’m setting out to,” she said with the total confidence of the young. “I start at Treasure State U in Great Falls this fall. Communications major.” With her complexion, when she blushed, as she did now, it went to the roots of her hair. Peeking at me to make sure I wouldn’t laugh, she confessed, “I want to be a big-time sports announcer, like you.” Emboldened when I seemed to take her seriously, she nodded toward the deluxe Greyhound with a sassy grin. “Maybe have a rig like that of my own?”

I followed her gaze to the fancily painted bus, my home on the road for more seasons than I wanted to count, with the bright red lettering emblazoned on its side where the silver dog used to run.

DEAN OF THE ARENA

SCOTTY CAMERON

BRINGS YOU THE WORLD OF RODEO

AN ULTRASPORTS EXCLUSIVE.

“I have to warn you, getting to be an oldtimer comes with it,” I told her, meaning it about being tagged as dean of anything.
To change the subject, I asked, “Hey, when are you up in the barrel racing? I’ll give you a big-time introduction, how about.”

“Awesome! The second go-round. Queen and I didn’t come all the way from Montana to lose,” she vowed without a trace of doubt.

“Queen! Now there’s a name for a horse.” Pausing in my inscribing, I was ready to go into the coincidence of a colossal work mare with that name drawn from a deck of cards and wonder if it was something the same with her pony.

Before I could get a word in edgewise, the confident racer breezed on.

“Sure is. I call her that after my favorite band. We are the champions,” she sang, doing a little dance, “of the world!” You know that Queen song?”

“No, but I knew one of those champions,” I said huskily, overtaken by the thought of Rags Rasmussen in purple glory atop a mean bronc. I could see him rub his jaw at Cowboy-O-Rama, where a rider sliding into the saddle with a bucking horse under him has to wait out commercials for the casinos sponsoring my television show. Some things change seemingly overnight in this spinning world, I reminded myself as every man since Adam has had to. While other pieces of the past timelessly go on, like the Diamond Buckle hatband that still adorns my Stetson and the black arrowhead I wear in the clasp of my western bolo tie when I’m on camera in the announcing booth. I don’t call it luck any more, but something that defies the odds drives those of us with rambunctious imaginations, change be damned. I could feel the ambition coming off this unlikely soulmate in her skyblue Stetson, in her flush of youth the princess of all that life had to offer, and concentrated on penmanship that had to say something from my years to hers.

She went up on tiptoes in her stirrup-scuffed boots, trying to peek. “Wow, what all are you writing?”

“You’ll see. I learned it from somebody wiser than me.”
When Herman finally did write in my autograph album, there on the last bus to Wisdom, he came up with something he wouldn’t tell me the source of, except to say it was not the doings of Longfellow or Goethe. I fixed up his English as he translated aloud from German. As he labored the last of the lines into ink, he had taken on that expression of giving a little think and said, “Karl May is turning in his grave because he did not put eye-dea in book before us, I betcha, Donny,” winking his glass eye.

Thus it was first written in Herman’s hand, but I’m pretty sure it is my truest verse as well.

*When you take a look in your memory book*

*Here you will find the lasting kind,*

*Old rhymes and new, life in review,*

*Roses in the snow of long ago.*

When I was finished and gave back the rodeo program, the barrel racer setting out to be a winner in life had her smartphone at the ready to capture the inscription, but stopped to read it over more than once, freckles congregating as she crinkled her nose at herself. “That’s really nice, even if I’m not sure I get it all.”

“Don’t worry, angel. Someday you will.”

###